

# Three Poems

by

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Commissioned by the University of Cumbria &  
supported by a residency at Rydal Mount



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## Instructions on Painting by Numbers

Make sure to pick a gentle brush.

Mix the colours so they blur and don't bleed.

Begin with the zig zag brown gold of the hills. Add  
a smudge of moss green and tobacco smoke.

Become a child. Mimic the shudder and shiver  
of the lakes. Dip your eye deep into its grey blue heart.

Step back. Raise your face to the sky.

Feel the shadow of a passing osprey's wing.

Take into account

the unending hide and seek of shade and light.

Don't overlook

the clouds of white elephants marching above.

Try and capture their rumble.

Notice the trees.

The gleeful folly of them.

Their writhing limbs, aflame with the ache of summer.

Step back and then move forward. Firmly.

Stride across the field.

No need to blend in or cower.

Paint yourself in the middle of this landscape.

Standing proud like a flag.

## A Map of Trees and Birds

Sometimes not knowing the name of things is a gift.

In Dora's Field you stop and smell the flowers- they could be pearls or teardrops.

All you know is their quiet breath is the scent

your mother wears –a mix of jasmine and talcum on her wrist.

You stumble on a tangle of roots.

Laugh embarrassed and look around.

Only the birds have noticed. And they are your friends.

They flit from tree to tree, their beaks and bellies full of song.

They could be robins or crows, blackbirds or doves, you don't know.

You shut your eyes and you're back

to your long ago self.

An old man had come, knocking at the door

his wicker basket swinging with captive birds. *Buy one, please*, he said.

And your father had bought the entire lot

and set them free.

Hand in hand, you giggled and clapped watching them

fly high like balloons.

Their song was the same.

The memory comes back as you sit on the moss marked steps of Dora's Field.

Who is Dora? Did she skip down these steps, hand in hand with her father?

And suddenly it does not matter that you don't have the alphabet

for the world that's around you. The map of trees and birds.

You've tumbled back into your childhood. And that is enough.

## Rydal Mount

At Rydal Mount

the evening is a piano playing its song.

William and Dorothy seat me down

the best chair in their fine drawing room.

They have kind hands that can coax

flower and shrub out of ground.

Dorothy leans forward and offers me tea.

It's her favourite china cup.

Their eyes are searchlights on my face.

They say, *have you come from afar?*

Where do I begin?

Would it sound impertinent and rude

To tell them that I grew up with their daffodils

and walked around Tintern Abbey

in my tropical, distant youth.

That they feel like friends, not distant portraits

staring out of books.

They say, *and how do you find our Rydal Mount?*

Where do I begin?

The days here start and end with clouds.

The murmur of trees whispers inside these walls.

Outside, the petals of fallen rhododendrons

crimson the garden steps.

From my bedroom window

the distant hills look like smudged fingerprints

of passing gods.

William and Dorothy smile. *Any favourites?* They ask.

I point to the Sycamore tree at the bottom.

It has a wise head. This grandfather tree.

I press my cheek against its chest and hear a lullaby  
echo somewhere deep within myself.

There are so many ways to connect and belong.

*And do you feel at home here?* They ask.

It may take generations to grow into a place.

To claim a space as your own

without looking over your shoulder

afraid of trespassing

of making a mistake.

But everything begins with the first step.