

ISLAND and other poems by

Mary Horton

with music by Edward Lee

Readers: Frances Lee, Lily Drake, (At the time Lily was 11 years old)

Singers: Jan North, Frances Lee

Musicians: Edward Lee (guitar), Kevin Drake (guitar), Sergio Biseo (string bass)

Electronic music and recording: Edward Lee, Laurence Lee (percussion tracks)

Edward Lee writes:

Mary Horton was born in Jersey and lived there through the German Occupation. She described how, as a child, she was able to move about more freely. This gave her the chance to pass on news of the War, broadcast by the BBC. Her parents listened to BBC broadcasts illegally on the radio.

Mary came to live in Elm Village, Camden, in the 1980s, and for many years we only knew her as a good neighbour and member of the community – she had a very strong social sense and concern of justice. I remember returning from a walk, and her coming up and anxiously asking “Is there any news from Tiananmen Square?”

At a certain point it became clear that we had many things in common and that she was a very informed and interesting person – she was a lecturer in Social Psychology at the University of Hertfordshire and had a very good knowledge of the Philosophy of Science. But she also liked to relax and chat over a glass of wine.

It was on one such occasion in late 2003 that she let slip that she “used to write a bit of poetry”, I asked to see some, and it was immediately obvious that she wasn’t just someone who scribbled down a few words now and then. The poems were tightly written, in one way perfectly accessible, but also with layers of meaning. In fact several had been published in reputable magazines.

After creating *Gargoyle*, I was always on the lookout for projects and she agreed to let me work on them. I decided to get together a new version of our words and music group, Sounds Like.

Her excitement about poetry was revitalised and we went and read some of them publicly. When I introduced her to how we would record, she was fascinated - microphones, mixers, instruments and readers who gave strong interpretations were a new and exciting world to her. She agreed to record some things herself, and we fixed an evening at six o’clock for her to begin, to be followed by a sociable drink.

On the dot, she arrived, but bleeding a the mouth. She had rung for an ambulance and went into hospital, where she died after three weeks.

At the request of her relatives we completed the recording and put on a performance of the work. We made a CD and a booklet, but then things moved on. Now in 2018, reviewing past work, I came to the CD and realised that much of that CD still stood up, and the strength of Mary's poetry. This compilation is the result. The readers, singers and musician are named above; all the music is mine.

Frances is by far the most prominent of the readers. This is appropriate because it gives a sense of the voice of Mary, speaking to us, which is a characteristic effect of the poems, even though they are mostly observational rather than written in the first person.

The album:

Track 1: Island

Reader : Frances

This evokes Jersey, where Mary grew up. But it also conveys an unsatisfiable yearning for the past, and perhaps also a vision of beauty which can never really be realised.

Track 2: The sky for present

Readers: Lily, Frances

Again the first half is set in Jersey, where a 15 year old Mary, roams along the cliffs, a lonely child, but lifted by a world of imagination. The second half is Mary at 30, with a strongly evocative picture of the Thames at sunset. Though the original island beauty has been lost, there is still much to move us, even in London at that time (the 1950s and 1960s) when the Thames was still a busy dock area, and the water was very polluted.

Track 3: The Gulls

Reader: Edward

Musicians: Edward (guitar) Sergio (string bass)

An exciting but disturbing poem which hovers between dream and reality. The metaphors can be interpreted in various ways, and in particular give a sense of threat from the outside, which is often lurking below the surface of the other poems. The theme suggested to me a wild interpretation, a little reminiscent of *Landscape of a Dream* on the *Gargoyle* CD. The other pieces on the CD are electronic (except for some piano), but this was created live with Sergio's bass underpinning stabbing electric guitar chording. The result is a driving vitality.

Track 4: Song of the Insider

Reader: Frances

Mary was very attracted by exploring the way in which a person can be locked in themselves, unable to communicate or to be part of the wider group. This poem creates such a situation very concisely.

Track 5: The Execution

Reader: Edward

This is a witty little story, with a twist in the tail. It can be seen as a metaphor of oppression by a state or community of the person individuality. Or again the theme can be the way in which a person can be locked into their situation.

Track 6: Scapegoat

Reader: Frances

Mary was not religious, but at one level this can be seen as a retelling of Christ's Crucifixion. It also reflects Mary's deep commitment to social and political issues. But again there is the theme of being an outsider, and, as in *Market Price* (Track 9), someone who is acting out a role before being confronted with reality.

Track 7: Kangaroo

Readers: Lily, Edward, Frances

The poem can be taken literally, as a criticism of the keeping of animals in zoos, but it is also clearly metaphorical. Again we have characters who are trapped, imprisoned, unable to escape from their situation and find their true natures.

Track 8: Spring in two cities

Readers: Frances, Lily

Mary was a great lover of France and in fact had bought a tiny flat metres from the River Rance, near St Malo. The first half is dryly perceptive of young people on the Parisian Left Bank, the second of a young woman in elegant Eaton Square. But the basic tone is affectionate towards young people and their responses to Spring.

Track 9: Market Price

Reader: Frances

This has a prelude, a piano piece called *Valentine's Day*, which came before the poem, in a later performance by Sounds Like, called *Love Is*. It seemed to be so fitting a lead into the poem, that I made it a part of this piece. The themes of insincerity, role playing and alienation underlie what is again a perfectly simple poem at a first reading.

Track 10: The Quarrel

Reader: Edward

Piano: Edward

This poem appeared in Mary's volume *I Write to Kill* (Outposts Press, 1964). When I read it, I found it a quite chilling creation of a bitter and cold protagonist in a quarrel. There is a postlude, which is in fact the A section of a piece written for the original recording and performance. It was originally performed on electric guitar and bass, but I felt that the jangly piano complemented the sourness of the mood.

Track 11: Poem

Reader: Frances

Singers: Jan, Frances

Musicians: electric guitar – Ed, Kevin; acoustic guitar Kevin; string bass: Sergio; bongo patterns created from samples by Laurence Lee

I find this poem to be deceptively simple, a simplicity which can only come from great poetic skill and sensitivity. For me it is one of the most perfect love poems I know.

I have created a lightly exotic rhythm section, which includes string bass, acoustic and electric guitars. First the poem is read – almost whispered – befitting the content. The same words are then used as the lyrics of a song. I find it rare that a piece really fits both functions.

In the original concert we did not have the services of Jan, but her rendering of the song is so strong, that it was impossible to leave it out of this updated collection.