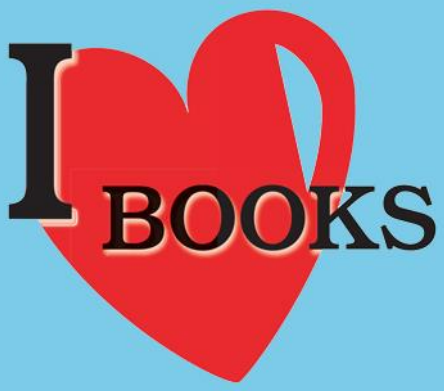


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Opening extract from

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Brian Moses

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INTRODUCTION

A question I'm asked at almost every poetry performance for children is, 'What's your favourite poem?'

I find it impossible to answer. Would it be a poem that always seems to go down well in a performance, or a poem that means something special to me, or a recent poem that I'm excited about? I just don't know.

So in this book, and with the help of Gaby Morgan, who has been my editor at Macmillan since 1993, I've collected together one hundred or so poems that might be contenders for the label 'My favourite poem'.

Included are poems that I'm always being asked to read – 'The Ssssnake Hotel', 'Billy's Coming Back', 'Shopping Trolley', 'What Teachers Wear in Bed' and 'Walking with My Iguana'. These are what I call 'performance poems', and I often accompany their reading with percussion instruments to underpin the rhythms.

Then there are poems that I hope are more thoughtful, because poetry shouldn't just make us smile or laugh – it should make us think and wonder; it should make us feel sad or frightened. Poetry touches every emotion. I couldn't think of putting together a 'Best of' selection without including poems such as 'A Feather from an Angel', 'Lost Magic', 'Playing with Stars', 'White Horse', 'Days' or 'Space Dog'.

Then there are some new poems too, that may well

become favourites as time passes. But as to which of my poems could be my all-time favourite, I just don't know.

Really I'm much keener to find out what *your* favourite poem is.

What I do know is that each poem here points to a particular time in my life, and I remember where most of them were written and what inspired them.

They are all signposts along the road that I've travelled since 1988 when I became a professional writer.

I hope you enjoy the collection as much as I enjoyed compiling it.

Brian Moses

A FEATHER FROM AN ANGEL

Anton's box of treasures held
a silver key and a glassy stone,
a figurine made of polished bone
and a feather from an angel.

The figurine was from Borneo,
the stone from France or Italy,
the silver key was a mystery
but the feather came from an angel.

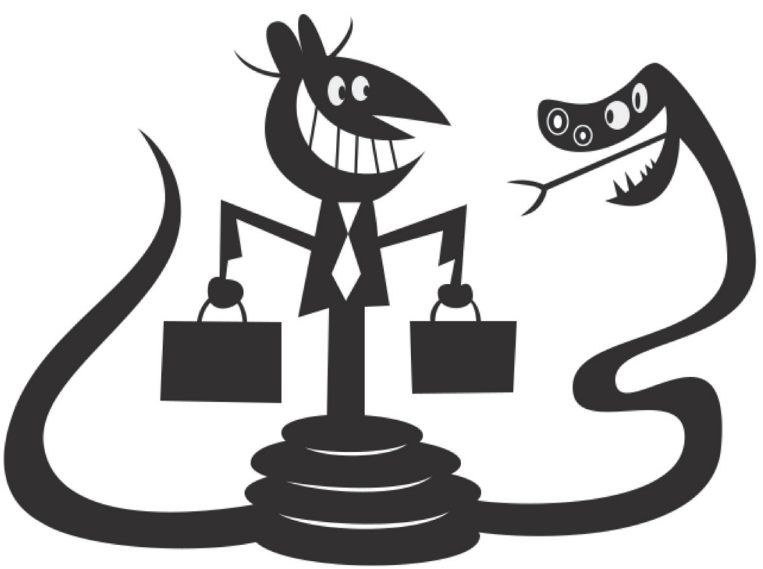
We might have believed him if he'd said
the feather fell from a bleached white crow
but he always replied, 'It's an angel's, I know,
a feather from an angel.'

We might have believed him if he'd said,
'An albatross let the feather fall,'
But he had no doubt, no doubt at all,
his feather came from an angel.

'I thought I'd dreamt him one night,' he'd say,
'But in the morning I knew he'd been there;
he left a feather on my bedside chair,
a feather from an angel.'

And it seems that all my life I've looked
for that sort of belief that nothing could shift,
something simple yet precious as Anton's gift,
a feather from an angel.

AN INDIAN PYTHON WILL WELCOME YOU . . .



THE SSSSNAKE HOTEL

An Indian python will welcome you
to the Ssssnake hotel.
As he finds your keys he'll maybe enquire
if you're feeling well.
And he'll say that he hopes you survive the night,
that you sleep without screaming
and don't die of fright
at the Ssssnake hotel.

There's an anaconda that likes to wander
the corridors at night,
and a boa that will lower itself on to guests
as they search for the light.
And if, by chance, you lie awake
and nearby something hisses,
I warn you now, you're about to be covered
with tiny vipery kisses,
at the Ssssnake hotel.

And should you hear a chorus of groans
coming from the room next door,
and the python cracking someone's bones,
please don't go out and explore.
Just ignore all the screams
and the strangled yells
when you spend a weekend
at the Ssssnake hotel.

GOING SOUTH

Word gets round
by word of mouth
or word of beak,
'We're going south.'

And everyone gathers
on telephone wires,
on tops of trees
on roofs or church spires.

No security checks,
no passport, no cases.
No border controls
closing off places.

The skies are ours,
we go where we please,
away from the damp
and the winter freeze.

And even though
they've only just come,
a party of swifts
on runway number one

are given priority
so everyone waits
while there's last minute preening
or chatting with mates

till the skyway clears
and it's time to go,
'See you in Spain,'
'Meet you in Rio.'

We went there last year,
we know where we're going,
stretch out, lift off,
feel the air flowing.

Over the mountains,
the buildings and trees,
we're going south
on the pull of the breeze.

WALKING DOGS, CHRISTMAS DAY

(Yorkshire Moors, 2009)

One dog guides us through the fields
on a route she's followed for years.
No matter the track has disappeared
under layers of snow, Old-timer Charlie
still knows which way to go.

Fern just wants to play, to bullet herself
through drifting snow. Six months old,
she's never seen the fields white out
like this before. Suddenly her world becomes
a wet and wacky playground she can't ignore.

Lucy wants to confide in us.
She knows this place, has seen it change,
summer gold to winter white.
She holds us spellbound, hints at secrets
only dogs discover, closer to the ground.

Bruno cracks us up, part dachshund
part terrier, long narrow face
like Uncle Bulgaria, barely bigger
than the depth of snow, squeezes his shape,
cartoon-like, into spaces he shouldn't go.

But Scampi stays at home, snug in her own
small hiding hole. Nothing we say
can persuade her to come, the snow too deep,
the ice too cold. She'll hibernate
till old bones feel a warmer season unfold.

MISSING - GREY-AND-WHITE CAT, ANSWERS TO THE NAME OF FREDDY

Why is it
I find it hard to believe
that Freddy will come
when you call?
Even if you threw open your windows
and bawled out his name,
not once, not twice,
but for a full fifteen minutes
of neighbourhood fame,
I just don't think that Freddy
will answer.

Cats roam, we know.
Cats find a welcoming mat
on the sunnier side of the road.
He'll have his paws
tucked under someone else's table
by now.
Or maybe he's eloped
with some cat he duetted with
on the corner one night.
Maybe she turned his head,
poor Fred, he's hooked by now,
couldn't come back
if he wanted to.

So it's no good
you putting up posters
all over Camden Town
for even if you bawl and yell
each night for a week,
you may find an Eddie
or even a Teddy
trying your cat flap for size.

But whatever answers
won't be Freddy.
You can bet nine lives
that Freddy's gone
till he's ready
to stroll back home.

WALKING WITH MY IGUANA

(Words in brackets to be replaced by another voice or voices)

I'm walking (I'm walking)
with my iguana (with my iguana)

I'm walking (I'm walking)
with my iguana (with my iguana)

When the temperature rises
to above eighty-five,
my iguana is looking
like he's coming alive.

So we make it to the beach,
my iguana and me,
then he sits on my shoulder
as we stroll by the sea . . .

and I'm walking (I'm walking)
with my iguana (with my iguana)

I'm walking (I'm walking)
with my iguana (with my iguana)

Well if anyone sees us
we're a big surprise,
my iguana and me
on our daily exercise,

till somebody phones
the local police
and says I have an alligator
tied to a leash

when I'm walking (I'm walking)
with my iguana (with my iguana)

I'm walking (I'm walking)
with my iguana (with my iguana)

It's the spines on his back
that make him look grim,
but he just loves to be tickled
under his chin.

And my iguana will tell me
that he's ready for bed
when he puts on his pyjamas
and lays down his sleepy (Yawn) head.

And I'm walking (I'm walking)
with my iguana (with my iguana)

still walking (still walking)
With my iguana (with my iguana)

with my iguana . . .

with my iguana . . .

and my piranha

and my chihuahua

and my chinchilla,

with my groovy gorilla

my caterpillar . . .

and I'm walking . . .

with my iguana . . . . . .

ELEPHANTS CAN'T JUMP

Elephants can't jump, and that's a fact.
So it's no good expecting an elephant to jump for joy
if you tell him some good news.
You won't make an elephant jump
if you sound a loud noise behind him –
elephants can't jump.
You won't see an elephant skipping or pole-vaulting.
It wasn't an elephant that jumped over the moon
when the little dog laughed,
and contrary to popular belief
elephants do not jump when they see mice.
Elephants, with their great bulk,
don't like to leave the ground.
Elephants and jumping do not go well together.

And perhaps it's all for the best,
for if elephants did jump, just think
of all the trouble they'd cause.
If all the elephants in Africa linked trunks
and jumped together,
their combined weight on landing
would cause a crack in the Earth's crust.
Just think if elephants were jumping for joy
every time they won the lottery
or welcomed baby elephants into the world,
they'd probably have a knock-on effect
and all the rest of us would shoot skywards
when they landed.

I'm rather pleased to discover that elephants can't
    jump . . .
The world suddenly seems that tiny bit safer.