



**UA FANTHORPE  
(1929 – 2009)**

by R V Bailey

*“...among other things,  
England and Leicestershire  
and Richard III and hope,  
courage and gypsies...”*

Many readers will perhaps already know the outline of UA’s life: how she began as a teacher at Cheltenham, later becoming Head of English; and how (much to her mother’s dismay) she gave up this respectable career to become clerk-receptionist in a small neurological hospital. It was in this apparently unpromising ground that the poetry began. And it began – as poetry quite often does – in the collision between expectation and reality.

She’d applied for the job thinking all hospitals were like the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford, where she’d had to spend three months after a serious accident when she was an undergraduate, and where – once the difficult and painful bit was over – she’d rather enjoyed herself, convalescing along with other cheerfully recovering patients in the orthopaedic ward.

But a neurological hospital turned out to be a very much less benign sort of place, where the patients were often horribly damaged by disease or serious accidents. This was a totally new world, a world she had never imagined, of the epileptic, the obsessed, the brain-damaged, the violent, the helpless. The suffering she encountered, the courage and stoicism of the patients, and the insights she had into the ways the medical world worked moved her to write. ‘I was a witness’, she said, ‘and what I saw could not be described in prose... if I didn’t write about what I saw, nobody would know about it’. And she saw it all from the interesting perspective of an unregarded clerk. So her early poems were often about the patients and about the experiences of the hospital; her first title was, as you probably know, *Side Effects*. And the date of the very first poem was 18 April 1974. She went on, of course, during the next 33 years, to write about other things, but this was the original impulse.

From the first, UA’s work was popular with both critics and ordinary poetry readers, combining, as it did, deep seriousness with wit and accessibility. And in 1983 she was invited to become Arts Council Writer-in-Residence at St Martin’s College, Lancaster. Magically (it wouldn’t happen now), the hospital gave her leave of absence for a year, which turned – even more magically – into two years; and then, two years later, she was given leave again, to go to Newcastle and Durham in a similar capacity.

She was becoming increasingly well-known and increasingly in demand for the variety of roles poets occupy – teaching courses, giving readings, judging competitions, and so forth. So, eventually, she resigned from the hospital job to become a full-time free-lance writer. By this time the range and depth of her subject-matter had developed beyond the everyday concerns of her employment, as receptionist or as writer-in-residence. This development is perhaps most clearly hinted at in the collection *Consequences*, where the title sequence deals with

‘...among other things, England and Leicestershire and Richard III and hope, courage and gypsies. It also touches upon war and peace, second sight, and the arms trade, and the uses of language and architecture, and, being late twentieth century, it acknowledges the part played by money in determining what is important. Shakespeare, George Fox, Richard III, Torrigiano, the Master of

the Cast Shadow and Urania Boswell all have something to say on these topics. The title (the name of an old party-game) suggests that nothing happens in isolation from the past or the future.'

UA became FRSL in 1987, CBE (for services to poetry) in 2001, and she was awarded The Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2003. Several other collections followed *Consequences*, and the *Collected Poems 1978-2003* came out in 2005.

Her poems were – still are – used in schools and universities, and for examinations. She'd never have known this interesting fact if we hadn't had spies in the world of education, and it really alarmed her: she feared her poetry might remain, in the minds of thousands of teenagers, synonymous with boredom and drudgery – and even failure. She has quite often been on the radio, in various arts discussions, and on *Desert Islands Discs*, *A Good Read*, *With Great Pleasure*, and other programmes – and of course on *Poetry Please*. These are the bare facts of the Life and Works.

The world of UA's poems, though often witty, isn't a cosy one. From the beginning, from the hospital world of violently contrasting power and powerlessness, she was committed to telling the truth about what she saw. Someone once described her vision as 'a tough-minded clarity'. But her chosen way was if possible to work through laughter, which she felt disarmed the reader and made it easier to get the message home in a memorable way. And that message is often about the dispossessed, the marginalised, the underdog. Her poems are deceptively simple – but they can disconcertingly allow us to recognise ourselves.

Like her poems, UA was both witty and serious, courteous and humane. All her life she'd been in love with words, and she'd take infinite pains to find the one right word for what she wanted to say. One of our great celebratory days was when (I think it was in a copy of *Private Eye* that I was reading on the train) I came upon an advertisement for a cut-price (it had just been computerised) complete *Oxford English Dictionary*, all twenty volumes of it. We'd always had the *Shorter Oxford*, but this was the real thing, the chance of a lifetime, and we instantly bought it. All reference books were welcome in our library, because UA was always wanting to look up details of one sort or another. Wotton under Edge, despite its delights, isn't the centre of the Information World (and we hadn't, of course, a computer in those early days), so often a trip to Colindale or the Bodleian was needed. Most of her poems were based on very thorough and painstaking research, though you'd seldom guess this from the simplicity of the final product. After the first few exciting months, when she'd come home every evening with a new poem or two, written (in pencil, on the backs of thrown-away hospital lists, in the spider-infested redundant caravan in the hospital grounds) during her forty-minute lunch-hour, most of her poems took a long time to write. One poem famously took four years. There was always a population of small vital notebooks lying around the house, and the disappearance of any one of them (and they all seemed to have legs) would be a far worse disaster than the loss of anything else we owned – apart, of course, from our dog and cat. There were always at least three pens in her pockets: you could never be sure when the Muse might strike. Driving home from work in Bristol we often had to stop precipitately under the nearest street-lamp to write down something essential. Perhaps it was just three words, but they were the *right* three words, and she might have been waiting for them all day long.

A born teacher, UA loved tutoring courses at Arvon or at Ty Newydd. She liked people, and she enjoyed watching them progress later from 'keen writer' to 'well-known poet'. One of the happiest times of her life, I think, after the first few alarming weeks, was her two years at Lancaster. She was suddenly delivered from the world of the hospital into the world of the young and bright and healthy, and this was very invigorating. Like Gaul, her job was officially divided into three: work with the students, work with the local writers, in the town and beyond, and her own writing. These three parts fed into each other freshly and productively. She made many friends in Lancaster, and their warm hospitality and endless kindness made the whole experience one of delight.

Behind all the seriousness of her work – and she *was* serious, particularly about her love of England, her past and present, her language, her people – lay a gift for laughter. She was always a welcome presence in an audience; her well-timed chuckles could set everyone else laughing. But for UA it was laughter *with*, never laughter *at*; her irony was delicate, never cruel, never at the expense of human sympathy.

As a recent correspondent wrote, her untimely death was ‘a bright sword sheathed’. That brightness, I believe, will not be forgotten in the history of English poetry.

## R V Bailey

### With You

I stand with you in the garden  
The birds’ surprising madrigals  
Rise through the roar of bees.

I stand with you in the kitchen  
Dear damaged long loved over-used  
Pans and pots protect us.

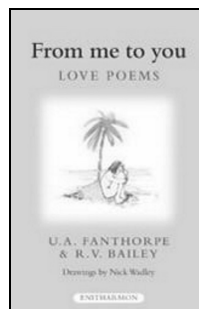
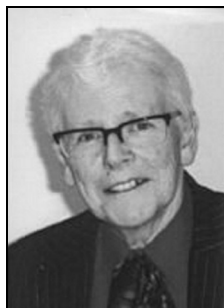
I stand with you in the hallway  
With the deep oak tick of the clock  
And the turning stair.

We sit by books in the lamplight  
Importunate nondescript dog and cat  
Surround us warmly.

We lie in the lofty bedroom  
The church clock through the window  
Quartering Gloucestershire silences.

Without you, no garden.  
Sunshine withers on the plum tree  
House shrinks derelict into dust.

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R V Bailey was born in Northumberland and has worked as a cafeteria assistant, librarian, information officer, teacher, counsellor, and latterly as director of undergraduate courses in Humanities at the University of the West of England, Bristol. She is the other voice in poetry recordings by U A Fanthorpe (*Awkward Subject, Double Act, Poetry Quartets 5*), and has published a pamphlet, *Course Work* (Culverhay Press, 1997) and a full collection with Peterloo, *Marking Time* (2004). Her latest collection, jointly with U A Fanthorpe, is *From Me to You, Love Poems*, 2007, Enitharmon Press in association with Peterloo Poets, £8.95, 978-1-9046345-5-3.