



The Festival Experience

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ONCE, AT A FESTIVAL SOMEWHERE in Europe, during a Spring holiday, I stepped from a reading onto a cobbled street where a carnival was taking place, fancy-dressed folk stilt-walking the avenue, inhabitants leaning through first-floor windows to scope out the floats, blow kisses at neighbours. Once, in northern Italy, I found myself trying to get into a prison, past a guard who looked me up on Wikipedia on his phone to check that I was really a poet, and once I was inside, I read poems about growing up in the Welsh Valleys, and they were translated into Italian for an audience of grinning prisoners.

Once, at a sheep festival in mid-Wales, I was halfway through a poem about a hippo, when a guy in a tweed cap grabbed the mike and said 'Sorry but, we gorra gerron with the judgin', and twenty sheep strolled into the marquee and took up residence. Once, at another farming festival, I wrote poems to order based on the life of farmers, and all the first day couldn't get a single customer, except for one man who cried when I read him his poem, and on the second morning my queue snaked down past the burger van and onto the showfield.

Once, at a reading in a Valleys Café as part of an arts festival, I was halfway through a poem about my mother, when the owner shouted 'Thass lovely, tharris, burrIgorra make a cappuccino', and turned on the milk steamer and it was like a train whistling in a tunnel. Once, at a festival in India, I banged and banged on the early morning door of a famous Welsh poet, so we could head to the airport and make the flight home, and found



him walking towards me down the corridor, just coming back from the night before.

Once, at a summer music festival, I was sandwiched between two world-famous poets in the programme, and as world-famous poet 1 switched to me, and as I switched to world-famous poet 2, the population movement out and into that tent was so huge that it could be picked up by satellites orbiting the Earth. Once, in a field somewhere in Somerset, I was walking from the complimentary burger tent to my reading when I passed my best friend, standing there, in budgie smugglers, staring up at the sky, looking for all the world like someone washed up on the shore of a desert island, and I said 'Hello, hello', and he didn't have a blind clue who I was.

Once, I drove 300 miles to a festival, and when I got there my reading was in a garden shed which was leaning slightly, and someone stood at the door to take tickets and I asked about an audience and he said 'Yes, I am one.' Once I slept in the top bunk at a youth hostel, and the snores from a Scottish novelist on the bunk beneath me were like the wind holding up my parachute, and standing between me and eight hours of freefall. Once, I woke early after a godawful reading and got in my car and drove home, throwing cassettes of *The Collected Dylan Thomas* out through the window and saying 'I'm damned if I'll do this anymore.' Once, after ten years of reading in the back rooms of pubs to one dog and its owner, I found myself at my first festival, in front of 500, introduced by a poet who I'd grown up loving, and I walked to the podium, and I opened my mouth.