



## My Most Treasured Moments as a Writer

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**W**RITING WITH WOMEN in the library of Low Newton prison; running through the fountains at Alnwick Garden early one morning before the gates were officially open to the public; doing a poetry reading at the New School, New York; riding a fire appliance en route to a 999 call while party-goers in Newcastle waved from the pavements and, in some cases, pulled up their tops.

Taking part in residencies, commissions, teaching et cetera has given me treasured moments like these. Writing is a solitary activity but being a writer opens you up to the world, to many worlds. As poet in residence at Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service, I was given a bib with the word 'observer' on it (lest someone mistake me for a genuine member of the emergency services). I feel I am wearing that bib a lot of the time anyway, as a poet, and people are generally kind enough to let me rubberneck.

At sixteen, I sat on a stationary luggage trolley at York train station waiting for my connection to Hebden Bridge. I'd won a writing competition in the local paper and my prize was a 'Starting to Write' course at the Arvon Centre in Lumb Bank. I was part terrified, part elated. It struck me suddenly how weird it was that writing in the privacy of my bedroom had led to this visceral, physical experience; the cold luggage trolley beneath me, the butterflies. It was the first time I felt the disparity between the desk world and the public world it can lead to. It strikes me now how weird it is that, as a writer, I have the opportunity to remember that moment and to tell you about it.



All writers need time and space and they are lucky if they have a life that affords it. But, for me, writing in solitude is only half of the equation. I need to get out there otherwise I risk arranging and rearranging my paperclips, and writing poems about paperclips.

I was back in York a couple of years ago to see my poems trundle past on buses. I was taking part in a project that gave me many such treasured moments working with older people with mobility issues. Visiting a care home one day as part of the brief, I overheard a harassed member of staff say to her colleague sotto voce 'What am I supposed to do with the poet?' It's a question I ask myself a lot of the time: *What am I supposed to do with myself as a poet?* On that day, the answer was to read poems aloud to Pat in her bedroom while she knitted and to spend time with Edna who used to work in the British Library and was in the early stages of dementia. I was granted a brief, privileged window into their lives. The solitude of writing makes me treasure these moments all the more. I return to my desk energised and deeply appreciative.