



The Writing-Life Balance

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FOR NEARLY THIRTY YEARS I juggled writing with a career and family life. I was balancing precariously on three horses – poet, academic and mother – hoping I wouldn't fall off. As a single parent (and carer) the precarious income of a freelance writer was not something I felt I could chance. I would have to risk the three-horse circus ride instead.

So when it was my daughter's turn to provide the cakes at parties, I would bash shop-bought buns to make them appear home-made, slip them secretly from their packaging into a vintage tin. At work I concealed poems in committee papers, made surreptitious edits. At poetry readings I'd find my mind wandering to unplanned lectures and academic projects. This jumbling of writing, career and mothering was necessary, I told myself, to hold my balance.

If there is any truth in Cyril Connolly's observation that 'There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall' then it is surely also the case that the sonnet in the notebook is a rival to good motherhood and academic research. I might have done a fair impression of riding my three horses but they were hardly galloping.

I'd been promoted to Principal Lecturer but was never going to achieve 'Professor'. The time I should have devoted to producing academic papers had been spent writing poetry. I'd managed to publish three collections of poems alongside my academic career but had been too busy working and caring for children to build on my writing achievements.



Riding three slow-moving horses, it seemed to me, was not so much a daring circus trick as spreading myself too thinly. I could have been a better poet, could have been a better academic, could have been a better mother. My attempt to combine writing, career and motherhood had led to unrealised aspirations in all three.

I considered my situation. Not writing wasn't an option. Children were a lifelong commitment but was there an alternative way of parenting perhaps? Academia was a drain on my time and creativity but could I quit my job? It would mean living on a tiny pension. What was the worst thing that could happen, I asked myself? And what might be the best?

A sonnet in my last poetry collection opens: 'I want to lose my balance; go somewhere uncertain'. Last year I took a risk, threw balance to the wind, and did just that. Instead of juggling poems with a career and the rest of my life, I'm focused entirely on writing now.

It's still early days, but the worst and best may already have happened. I didn't anticipate a cost-of-living crisis when I resigned my full-time job, but neither did I expect so many new publications in such a short time: twelve poems and a new collection accepted by editors, far more than I might have hoped for previously. Most importantly, I'm writing again. This balance sheet supports my writing-life unbalancing act. I have no regrets.