



Alicia Sometimes

NEW COMMISSION

The Portico Poems

Alicia Sometimes is an Australian poet, writer and broadcaster based in Melbourne City of Literature. Her poetry collections include *Soundtrack* and *Kissing the Curve*. She is Director and Co-writer of the art/science planetarium shows, *Elemental* and *Particle/Wave*. Her TedxUQ talk in 2019 was about the passion of combining art with science. She is currently a Science Gallery Melbourne 'Leonardo' and is a 2021 City of Melbourne Boyd Garnett recipient.

In Spring 2021, Alicia Sometimes was appointed the first Virtual Writer in Residence at The Portico by Manchester Literature Festival and Manchester City of Literature for the inaugural Festival of Libraries. As part of her residency, she was commissioned to create a new series of poems inspired by the project, her research into the Portico's extraordinary collections and her conversations with the librarians.

Alicia read and discussed The Portico Poems in a special MLF DIGITAL event recorded with local writer and host Kate Feld in Autumn 2021. The event was available to watch from 1- 30 November 2021 on Manchester Literature Festival's Vimeo page.

www.manchesterliteraturefestival.co.uk

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About The Portico Poems

My intention was to create a suite of poems as a time-capsule, to go back and look at what someone would be reading in The Portico Library in the mid-nineteenth century. I knew it would be a difficult task as the Portico holds over 25,000 books. I read many science books to delve into the 'modern' knowledge at the time. What surprised me was how imaginative, informative and forward-thinking a great deal of these texts were. I also immersed myself in learning about the history of the library and Manchester. To learn about a place virtually has been bittersweet. I feel such a considerable attachment to Manchester so the desire to be there is immense. By reading, watching and listening I can pretend to be in an armchair at the Portico, flicking open any number of wondrous chronicles.

In these poems based on the books, I have included, in italics only, direct quotes to add a flavour of what was in the collections. I have explored the 'facts' as they saw them, whether it's the fascination with the 'ether', volcanoes on the moon or the 'electroid' nature of comets. I hope it gives readers a glimpse of how people viewed the universe in the 1800s.

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The Portico Library

Imaginings from far away

the swill of constellations
spinning wheel dome

features in my dreaming
refracted whispered light

swathes of stained glass

ridges and valleys of books
mantles of mountains

my longing is formless
ascending so I can

lounge in the warmth
of all your volumes

hymns of knowledge
the canvas of words

burning for the gaze

of everything you hold

Strangers Books

Two 19th-century logbooks were discovered in The Portico Library's archives. These 'Strangers Books' are hand-written records of all those who visited the Library on a temporary basis between the 1830s and the 1850s.

On the 7th of November 1840

Mr Jones of Chester

was signed into the library by two gentlemen, members of the Portico

Did he first look up at the saucer dome with its white curves enfolding plain glass and stop in the cloud of his thoughts? Did his friends gently tug his charcoal frock coat to move him along? Was he an attorney, hat maker, honourable physician, brewer? Were his friends local: Calico printers, cotton merchants, drysalters? Before he eased into

an armchair in the reading room did he open a book, running his fingers across wave-edged pages before he read one word? Did he glance at the news, *The Manchester Chronicle and Salford Standard* or *Manchester Guardian*? Did he lose himself in reports of textile tycoons, the push for freedom of commerce and trade, anti Corn Laws and the growing urgency to help underage children who worked in unregulated dangerous conditions? Did he sense

the afternoon sun fading as he read new monthly stories from Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong: Factory Boy* or the serial of *The Old Curiosity Shop* by Dickens? Did he arrive for Polite Literature or politics or history? Was he conversing with keen travellers, from Amsterdam, Naples, Paris, New York, Philadelphia or Prague? Did he search every wall, reaching out for ornithology or Mary Somerville's *On the Connexion of the Physical Sciences* so he'd have something to talk about that night? Did he drink tea as he elevated his oration about ideas and possibilities of the future? Did he

depart from his friends with reticence as he walked down the Regency steps onto the street? Did he go about his day undaunted, not realising the black ink of his signature would be seen 181 years later and we would think of him then, after

avidly reading in The Portico Library

a stranger leaving the land of books

The Moon: Considered as a Planet, a World, and a Satellite

Nasmyth, J. and Carpenter, J., 1874:

book held in The Portico Library, Manchester, UK

If the moon won't come to you
let us build it up crater by crater

the telescope has allowed keen
eyes on its palette and attributes

measured plaster models as re-enactment
geology of twenty-four woodburytypes

close ups of Valley of the Alps, Pico
Aristarchus and Herodotus, volcanoes

this new medium of photography
against the sharp black of cloth

the physiography of all contours
inclines of rock, contorted chasms
vast black yawning depths
illuminated summits of central cones
scratch marks and lines of movement

Practicing with the back of a hand
watching light pool in the skin
taking pictures of a shrivelled apple
to construct ranges on a shrinking globe

we are lunar cartographers
deciphering codes of terrain

witnessing a solar eclipse
how the sun filters through

Dr William Huggins was right
at the moment of its occultation
by the dark limb of the moon
we will be certain
our satellite has no atmosphere

We can become surveyors
an imaginary lunar traveller
every mountain backlit casting shadows
while we daydream touching dust
a silver-margined abyss of darkness
standing on the surface as it glistens

we have for you in monochrome
the powdery alchemy of observance

**Spectrum Analysis in its Applications to Terrestrial
Substances: and the Physical Constitution of the Heavenly Bodies**

*Heinrich Schellen, Translated and revised by Jane and Caroline Lassell, 1872:
book held in The Portico Library, Manchester, UK*

Light is sleek and wordless filling the intervals and pores
of space, travelling without impediment, propagating

in the body of the universe —an immeasurable sea
of highly attenuated matter, imperceptible to the senses

Although the theory of light is now so completely understood
there are many ways to see clearly in this *ether*

the spectra not a *ghostly apparition* but all colours
united in a woven prism, belts of absorption lines

dark marks, where light is restrained or absent
luminous vapours in shades revealing composition

we view the voltaic arc spiking an *electric spark*
between metal poles in the stratum of air

Foucault's electric lamp, currents jumping
gaps between two end-to-end carbon rods

or brightness as the Bunsen battery
produces much discomfort to the eyes

elements touching so their ends glow sharply
or incandescent lighting, as the *electricities* attract

Geissler and Plücker's tubes or a rainbow
in rectangular parallelepiped bars of glass

limelight of the flickering stage, calcium
oxide burning, a caged opera of glimmer

noticing the swirls of planetary nebula
or bursts of splendour with *gas-streams in the sun*

balls of fire seen through a telescope, the importance
of illuminating our past so we can explore

directly in front of us, who knows
what light we can shine into the future

**Views of the Architecture of the Heavens,
In a Series of Letters to a Lady**

J. P. Nichol, 1837: book held in The Portico Library, Manchester, UK

To Miss Ross of Rossie:

These Letters Are Respectfully Inscribed

Madam —

Dear Public

I cannot deliver you all astronomy
only paint the awe and sum of magnitude

motions of clusters in possibly infinite skies
the formations and expanse of space
our firmament, the entire mass of stars

Trace your finger around the line
of the Milky Way as it branches in two
the shape and dimensions of this cluster
elongated as outlines are finally lost
a *diffused starriness* in the ribs of galaxies

the intervals between each brightness
hollow-black, *external and obscure vacancies*

Are the different suns isolated or related?
 patterned from the womb of nebulae
their effulgence softening in the distance

we study with the power of new telescopes
 mapping and harvesting the future
charting boundaries, pinpointing radiance

the filmy or Nebulous fluid shining of itself
the birth of all things, gravity in firm control
 endless diversities of character and contour

Here on earth, we are infinitesimal
The Great Book of the Universe
comprehends so much more in comparison
—this book then *must seem sibylline, often incoherent*
 but we are not fragmentary

I can only hope to detail and share—
immensities, illumination or phenomena

and the unity of all celestial things

Mysteries of Time and Space

Proctor, Richard A., 1883:

book held in The Portico Library, Manchester, UK

'What is there beyond the starry vault?'

Louis Pasteur

Even in the epoch of Tycho Brahe
we thought the stars were fixed

everything is in constant motion

one day the moon will pack up its things
receding into the shivery sheets of space
*(fractured off from the earth and assumed
the dignity of an independent body)*
this sleepy satellite, waterless and airless
will again retreat alone from any binds

the moon a *she* / the sun a *he* / the earth *ours*

the sun with its orb-life lustre
sways the planets by its attraction
it holds no perpetual energy
mortal and resplendent
in full eclipse with its streamers
a white halo and shining nimbus
the corona is a true solar appendage

the tenuity of comets leaving cold hazy trails
electric-oid action of some kind
not portents of catastrophe but keys to knowledge

Mars in transit reflecting brightness
nine of the seas... have this peculiar shape...bottle-necked

these five stages of any world's life:
glowing vaporous, fiery youth
life-bearing middle age, a measure
of decrepitude, then ultimate death

when our home finally resigns
radiating iron will simmer
clouds brooding in thick atmosphere

*the universe as we know it, tends to an end —
which may be the beginning of new forms of existence*

these stories of unhurried movement
become the dynamic narrative of time

State Library of Victoria's Dome

La Trobe Reading Room

Winter impulses lure me deeper
 into the sharp lip of books
afternoons tethered to the multitude
of narratives or non-fiction revelations
 the sun curling itself into vowels
so it can ribbon its way onto my notebook
Those times have I stood out front
 on cold grey stairs waiting for friends
taupe columns welcoming the ceremony of day
the anticipation of opening an Atlas or tracing
 inscriptions in the leaves of pages
Walking into the dome with its skin arched
the radial panopticon plan, plum with the dais
 once a place where a librarian sat staring
as readers were immersed or skimming
 the dexterity and quilt of words
green lamps light runways into the centre as
the eye spins up into the starlit octagonal delight
flickers of vertigo if you glance up too quickly
 34.75 metres in diameter and height
 its oculus nearly 5 metres wide
this geodesic structure resilient to stresses
a kaleidoscope of knowledge open to the light
the compressions and observances of language
are like rafts tumbling wildly in our minds
 this room, draped in secrets
 encased in the lyric of hope