



**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](http://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.

Alicia Sometimes

## **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 7<sup>th</sup> 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