



Working in the study that one of her four brothers lovingly constructed in the back garden, Finuala gets lost in her own world when she's writing: 'I'm quite difficult to disturb.' She is currently finishing off her second collection of poetry, to be published by Penguin this year.

So where or what is this desirable place that I inhabit? I think I know. It is the life I'm making for myself. Like a sand sculpture emerging on a beach to the wonderment of passers-by, you can at last see what it's going to be. The life of a writer.

Once you've decided you want to be a writer – what then? You won't find any ads advertising jobs for authors. It's not even cool to talk about your ambition: 'I'd like to be a writer' must be one of the world's saddest statements. Until you're published, you have to pretend to be something else, in my case, 'English lecturer'.

I was 23, had an MA from UCT where I'd studied all the writers I secretly envied, and some I didn't. It didn't help that the great JM Coetzee had given me my lowest ever mark for an essay (60 percent). He found my essay on Theodore Dreiser boring, he said.

But I was young and hopeful, and in love with a fellow postgraduate who'd just been appointed a lecturer at the University of Pretoria. I would go along with him and find a job. We'd go jolling in Johannesburg, see all the latest plays, befriend literary types, travel overseas, have lunch parties, go to art exhibitions, hang out in Rocky Street. And we did.

My fiancé, later husband, was already well-known as a public performer; and soon gained a reputation as a gifted arts reviewer and dramatist. The phone rang for him all the time. I looked up exotic recipes to impress his burgeoning fan club and kept the house clean and quiet: a nice place for him to write. I'd done what no aspirant author should ever do: attached myself as amanuensis, editor and supportive shoulder to a fellow writer.

This was probably the only period in my life when I had time to write, yet I did not. I'd come home from my job at Unisa and keep house, keep fit by swimming and walking, keep beautiful by napping and keep busy shopping for clothes. I kept my longing alive by reading all the books I wished I were writing. I published one solitary (not very good) short story.

Then I fell pregnant and something changed. It was as if a stopwatch had been set off. On a series of dreamy Pretoria winter afternoons, I wrote a short story for a literary competition with big prize money.

I came third but it might as well have been first. At the prize-giving ceremony at a trendy Joburg restaurant, little Beatrice slept in her carrycot beneath the table. I was bursting with pride and breast milk.

But in the next few years, I disappeared. The marriage became a god I didn't so much worship as nervously placate. I was convinced that if we moved away from the temptations and tensions of the city, my gregarious but volatile husband would settle down and become a family man.

The house we bought in the country had deep walls and wooden shutters, an authentic stoep out front with views of the Winterberg, and at the back, splendid out-buildings for every possible kind of creative project. I was surrounded by the sounds of farm life – my own beautiful Rhode Island Reds, the automatic shots fired to scare birds off the vines, tractors, even runaway horses galloping into my cobbled yard. It should have been idyllic. Yet it's a time of my life referred to in a poem that begins:

*When I was least happy in life
my daughter led me across the road
to a neighbour whom I did not know
with the purpose of a toddler
who does not see gates and fences
but the ducks and puppies
on the other side*

*You spoke to me in the same
low murmuring tones
you used for lame horses and bilious dogs.
Crops, flowers and poultry were our theme:
you made me tea and wiped the counter,
you said 'foeitog' and 'I don't hope so.'
You guessed.*

*You told me I was beautiful,
in the courtly way of an old man.*

But I didn't write like that then. I wrote a novel completely unrelated to my life. Alison

Lowry's rejection letter was so kind that I filed it and, 10 years later, sent *What Poets Need* to her.

Kept awake one night by the Boland heat and my allergies, I wrote another runner-up prize short story. It felt like a gasp of air in-between cooking, child care, doctorate chapters and listening to my husband extol the virtues of another woman.

One day my mother said, 'If you don't leave now I'm sending your brother with his bakkie.' I packed my life into my Renault 9, making a little nest for Beaty on the back seat between my hard drive and her nappy bucket. On the two-hour drive along the N7, I conceived a short story that is still anthologised today.

As we reached the scenic coastal drive that always makes my heart catch with the joy of homecoming, Beaty woke up from her pink-cheeked sleep and said, 'Mommy I love you.' It was 1996, the start of my new life, described in my poem *Green House*:

*I live in a large green house
with my daughter and three dogs.
Also here you may find sister,
certainly brother,
and mother (grand).*

*No husband,
and no cat.*

People sometimes ask about the cat.

In order to move to the country, I'd given up my permanent academic job. I was still quite overwrought about the divorce, and poor too. My family was wonderful, though. Just after 6am on Saturdays, I'd put Beaty and her picture books into bed with her granny and drive to Unisa's regional centre in Parow to tutor. 'But where is Parow?' she'd ask. My mother would lull her with an extended set of directions.

I took on anything – any work vaguely within my field, for as little or as much money as was offered. I researched Bessie Head's life for a film company, wrote and broadcast book reviews, edited books,

wrote ABET materials, literacy readers and loads of study guides. I wrote comic skits, too, performed in an old school friend's vegetarian restaurant in Kalk Bay.

Then I fell in love with someone who loved my writing. I became a better writer because suddenly I was writing for someone. After he said that our love could be no more than a correspondence, I was completely transfused. Writing stepped forward and took my arm. The poems came, three or four, then a dozen. I sent them to someone I could trust – a poet and the editor of a journal that publishes poetry. He published all but one.

Across the country, at the Grahamstown festival, Gus Ferguson read the journal and liked my poems. He published my heart-break poem, *Happy New Year 2001* and invited me to do my first public reading. After attending a reading at Olympia Bakery in Kalk Bay, he approached me and said he'd like to publish a collection of poems, and *I Flying* was born.

The best thing about *I Flying* was the reader responses. From the vast number of phone calls and letters, I realised that I had found 'my voice'. I'd had it all along – it was my own speaking voice – half funny, half sad – but I thought writers had to sound like, well, other writers.

With this new self-belief, I worked a double shift at all my freelance jobs in 2003, saving up enough money to take a three-month sabbatical. In the summer, while my sister was here from Jersey with her two children to keep Beaty company, I wrote *What Poets Need*.

It no longer feels embarrassing to say that I hope one day to support myself from writing. I still have to save up money to write, but there's been a nice advance from my publisher. One day (give me seven years) I'll be the poet/novelist who rises at 5am to work, then walks on the beach or swims, works some more, has coffee at Olympia with a friend, an afternoon nap, and gives an occasional evening reading. One day this sand sculpture will be complete. ■

Any given Sunday: Finuala's 12-year-old daughter, Beaty, shares her mother's passion for literature. Her mother, Eve, a retired actress and codes and cyphers officer during WWII, has difficult crosswords flown in by her many fans.

