# CAROL ANN DUFFY

WRITING POETRY

> **A good poem only seeks to add something to the world, something that wasn't there before.**

BBC MAESTRO

COURSE NOTES 2.0

# The Lessons



> “The poet must feel that they have something to give.

## ABOUT THIS COURSE

Every poem is its own little journey. This is what enchants me. I might start a poem with a line that has provoked me to go to the empty piece of paper, but I don't know where that poem is going to take me. It's almost as though the poet and the poem are collaborators, yet each not knowing what the other is doing. There is always something you learn through the writing of a poem. That learning may lead you into writing another poem, or thinking about the world or yourself differently. In this course I really want to share that magic with you and help you to relish the surprise and excitement of writing each new poem.

## HOW TO USE THESE COURSE NOTES

There is no right or wrong way to use these course notes, just as there is no right or wrong way to write poetry. What I have done is tell the story of my own journey as a poet, which might connect at some points with your own. I start at the beginning. I look at different ways of sourcing raw materials and build steadily towards construction. I show you how to refine what you have written, how to polish your work until the poem itself declares that it is finished and eager to come alive in the mouth and mind and heart of the reader. So it probably makes sense to work through these lessons in order. In doing so you will see that they are grouped in thematic clusters, which should make it easy to revisit those sections that interest or intrigue you most. I cite many poems – my own and those of other poets. I would urge you to dwell on these. Read them silently. Read them aloud. Absorb them. Assimilate them. Take them into yourself and make them part of who you are.

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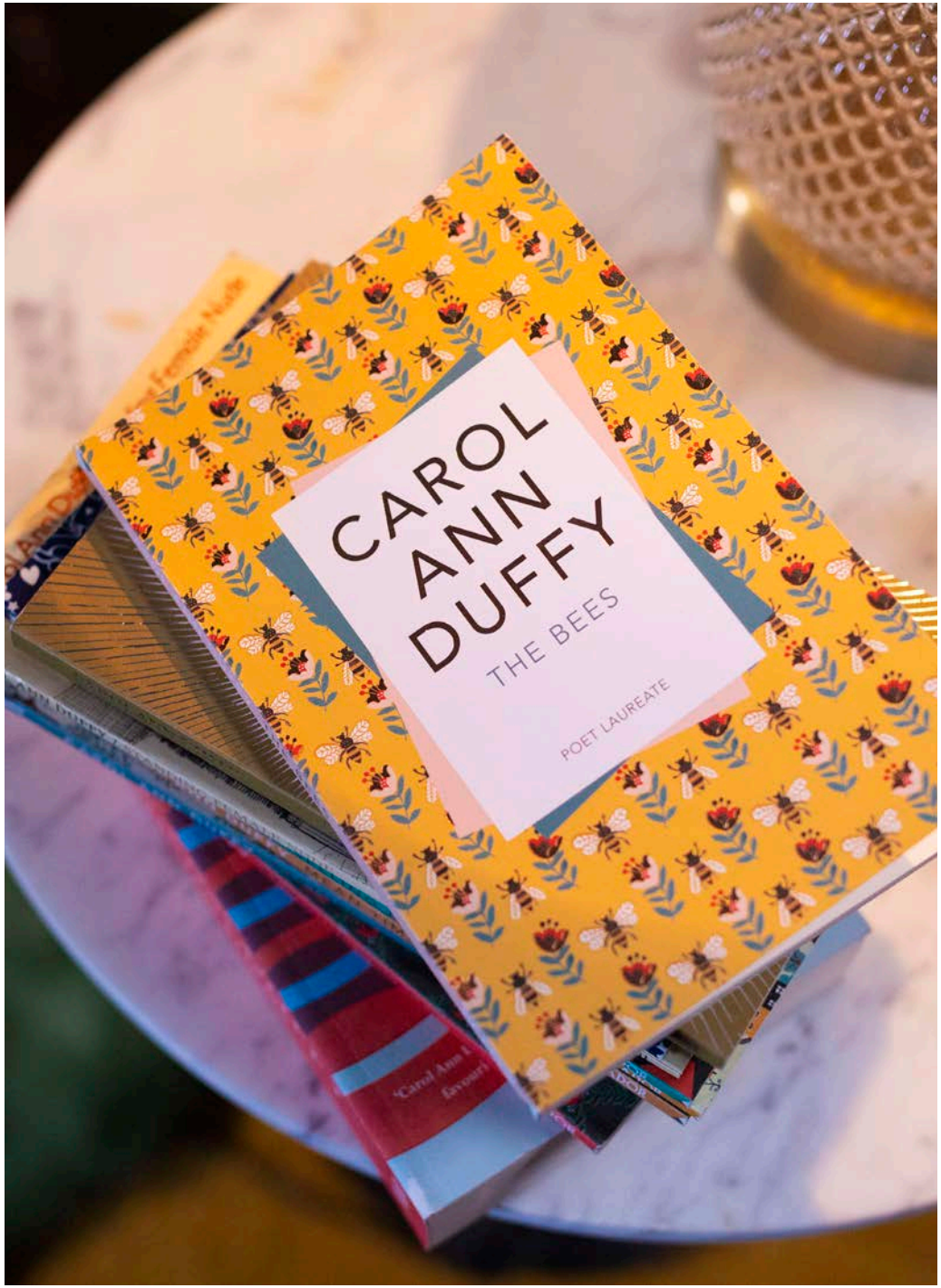
## WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- You will need your memory.
- You will need your interests.
- You will need the way you talk.
- You will need stories that you grew up with and stories that you are going to invent.
- You might bring the recollection of a love affair.
- You might bring the joy of being a parent.
- You might bring bereavement or celebration.

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# 01. Introduction

**MY NAME IS CAROL ANN DUFFY...**

...and I've been a poet for most of my working life. I'm going to be using my own journey as a poet to help set you off on your own. I hope you'll come away from this course not only with ideas for the subjects of your poems but also with methods for how to assemble them, how to work on them, and how to redraft them – all the practical things you can do to bring yourself to the page. I hope that you will learn to think about poetry in a fresh way. Why do you want to write it? Who are you writing it for? Where are you going to publish it? Are you going to publish it at all?

I've structured the course initially by ways of thinking. For example, we all share one resource, which is memory. So we'll start by going back to childhood, which is where I entered into poetry, and together we'll think about our own words, our own places, our own people.

I want you to think about your early relationship to language and words. Obviously, you will have a different background to my own. But if you think hard, there will be a moment in your life when you suddenly became aware that words were as important to the living of a life as food and drink. As we work through these lessons together, we'll find ways of using that first awareness of language in poems.

My parents weren't particularly bookish. I remember we had *Pears' Cyclopaedia* and *The Bible* and a gruesomely illustrated book on the Scottish martyrs that I certainly didn't read but used to be appalled by when looking at the pictures. So my relationship with books really started in school and I was very lucky all through my school life in that I had fantastic teachers. Very quickly, reading became my favourite thing to do.

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There were five children and two adults in my family but I was the only child who went to the library, which meant I had practically a playing-card-set-worth of library books. At the weekend, I would go two or three times. I would cycle down in the morning and come back with a *Just William* book, finish it by lunchtime, go back down again and get another one. I read all the time. When I became a teenager I had a Saturday job in a hairdressers, which is when I started going to the local bookshop.

Around the age of fourteen or fifteen I became interested in poetry and would use some of my Saturday job earnings to buy poetry books. In those days, the early Seventies, there was a wonderful series called *Penguin Modern Poets* and another called *Penguin Modern European Poets*. You could buy these books for what was then half a crown, or 12.5p. So they were cheap, but fabulous. You'd get three poets in each volume. In tandem with that I was now at big school and had two wonderful English teachers, whom I've written about. Miss Scriven in particular would lend me her own poetry books, things she thought I might be interested in.

My journey as a poetry reader wasn't scheduled or laid out in a logical way. It was random. It was messy. I would come across Pablo Neruda in the local bookshop. I would bring home John Keats from the local library. My English teacher would lend me Dylan Thomas. Some of the poems I read I didn't like. Some of them I loved. But it was always a relationship with poetry as a reader that fed into my love for it. So I want to talk as much about reading poetry as writing it.

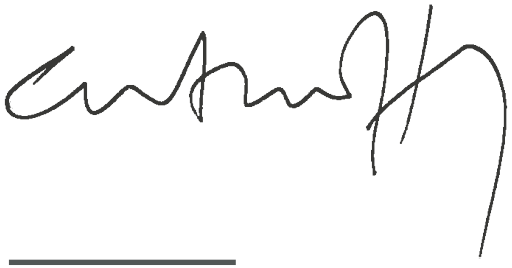
> It's almost as though the poem and the poet are collaborators, each not knowing what the other one is doing.

I want to ask and answer quite difficult questions. What is poetry? Wordsworth thought poetry was emotion recollected in tranquility. T. S. Eliot disagreed. Eliot thought a poem was an event. He didn't think it was tranquil or recollected. Samuel Taylor Coleridge thought poetry was the best words in the best order. But what are the best words? And what is order? For me, poetry is the music of being human. In these lessons I want to explore how I arrived at that conclusion.

But I also want you to think about your own answer to the question: *What is a poem?* As I talk about my journey in poetry, I want you to be thinking about your own journey. I will be talking about memory, going back as far as childhood. You might now be an adult but it could be that you too will find secrets and lessons in your childhood that can help in writing your poems. It doesn't matter how old you are. The beginning could be behind you.

One of the key things for me as a poet was reading poetry. We'll be talking about how we can read to write and what we can learn from other poets. And as the course progresses we'll come to actually putting words on the page and thinking about how we can structure them. This isn't going to be poetry by numbers. We won't be counting syllables. I'll only mention form when I think it's relevant, perhaps using my own work as an example. We'll look at drafting and redrafting and eventually we'll arrive at a point where you might be able to begin to assemble a collection of poems.

There will be times when I talk about the importance of learning a poem by heart. But what I don't intend to do is give you a set of rules, as though poetry were something that if you do this and then you do that and then finally you do this other thing, you'll end up with a poem. What I want to do is bring out your own creativity, your own words, your own unique voice. I want to help you have confidence in what's within you.



# 02. Memory As Imagination: Place

Poets have said many wonderful things about poetry. One of my favourites is from James Joyce, who as a young man actually started as a poet, in his book *Pomes Penyeach*. What Joyce said is 'all memory is imagination', and there's so much truth in that. Memory is something we all have in common, and in this lesson I want to explore how we can use 'memory as imagination' to write poems.

One of the most important things we remember is place. A poet like Seamus Heaney, for example: his first twelve years living on his father's farm in Bellaghy completely imprinted him as poet. He carried that place with him forever and, like Heaney, we all carry original places with us.

Here I want to focus on early places.

I have only shadowy memories of my very early years in the city of Glasgow. But the small market town of Stafford, where I grew up from the age of five until I went to university at eighteen, is very much embedded in me.

I remember when we arrived in Stafford from the big dark city with its sound of the ships on the river Clyde – which is a kind of grimy, dark memory in my mind. We were given a house on a pretty estate that was owned by my father's employers, English Electric. If you worked for them you had a house as part of your salary. At the back of the houses ran a wood, with silver birch trees, oak trees, all kinds of trees that I was yet to name and identify, coming as I did from the Gorbals.

As we went down on the train, north to south, my mum told us children that we were going to have our own wood. I took this literally. We arrived at the house and while unpacking was going on I went out the back door, down the little garden and out through the back gate – it was true, there was a wood! There were children playing in the wood – climbing the trees, throwing balls, chasing each other and I remember standing there and shouting: 'Go away, this is our wood!'. I thought they were trespassing and I had suddenly become a princess who'd inherited a kingdom that included her own forest. Of course, they laughed at me and chased me away. I went back inside and learned that it was a communal wood and a communal playing field and a communal pond. But for those few moments when I first arrived in this new country, I believed that I had my own wood and the intensity of that belief never left me.

I loved to read as a child, and one of my great pleasures was going out for the day with an apple and a book. I had a favourite tree that was in a more secret, hidden part of the wood and I would climb up into this tree, sit on a branch, eat my apple and read my book. I bonded with this tree. I felt it was mine and later on, I wrote a children's poem about it. All through my life in that town everything made an impression on me: the church we went to, the walk to school, the covered market. In those days, the Clean Air Act hadn't yet come in and sometimes we would walk to school in the fog with a torch. Another memory: I still remember the embarrassment – not only of the moment but of the phrase itself – of my mum asking for a bag of broken biscuits because they were cheaper. That phrase – 'broken biscuits' – is so meaningful to me as a poet.

I want to find ways of getting you to think of the early places in your own life that can become a resource for your own poems.

How do we access these early places for the purposes of writing poetry? Well, one thing I want everyone to do is to keep a notebook. I go everywhere with my notebook. I don't write on a laptop unless I'm right at the end of working on a poem and it is ready to be printed. In my notebook I'll put phrases, ideas, memories, things I overhear – and you must do this too. Don't let things disappear because then you will have forgotten or lost them.

So pick a place – it could be your childhood home, it could be where you went to university, it could be an incredible holiday – and write down what you remember. Later on we'll be looking closely at using the five senses but, to start with, simply make a list of things that are particular to the place you have chosen. These thoughts, memories, images will become the beginning of your poem.

I wrote my last collection, *Sincerity*, in exactly this way. I was remembering where I grew up and that it was Junction 13 on the M6. I actually remember that motorway being built. The M6 was the first motorway in England and we used to go on the bridge as children and count the cars. There were so few cars on that motorway that you could easily count them, so every day we'd go and see if we could get to more than twenty.

Here is the poem 'Junction 13', which is essentially memories of things that were true to the place. I feel a kind of emotion is coming through the memories. There was a sense of waiting in that town, certainly when I was a teenager. Not boredom but a kind of pause: when was life going to start?

**JUNCTION 13**

*There was nothing to do,*
*so we hitched to the airport;*
*ten years early for the flight.*

*We wore love-bites.*

*Nothing going on, so a youth noosed*
*six school ties round a horse,*
*but it fled up the new M6.*

*Timed each kiss.*

*What else, but roll the snow*
*up and down the estate*
*to a grubby moon.*

*A name on a metal comb.*

*Or move in bored pairs*
*through the Harvest Festival Tent,*
*switching the prizes.*

*It was all prose.*

*Nada; sat on hot leather seats*
*in the back of a Ford Cortina.*
*Are we nearly there yet?*

*Not yet. Not yet.*

*Nothing. Pocket dictionaries*
*with snide words highlighted in pink:*
*Prick. Ejaculate. Ball.*

*Played tennis with a wall.*

*There was nothing to do,*
*but limp for no reason;*
*speak in foreign accents to strangers.*

*Sunglasses made you famous.*

*Nothing happening. All summer*
*in the Spinney, building a bonfire*
*we were never permitted to light.*

*Everyone white.*

*What else, but smoke tea in a graveyard;*
*steal the flowers for our mothers.*
*Get skelped for it.*

*Bedtime in daylight.*

*Or hide in the wardrobe –*
*no one was looking for you –*
*or tell lies without purpose.*

*Walk home, trying out blindness.*

*Zilch; the world was not here.*
*It flowed away under the motorway bridge,*
*the world; it roared past the platform.*

*This is just where you start from.*

I end with the line 'this is just where you start from' because the place I'm writing about is where I started from and when I read the poem I'm reminded of details that are simply true. If we couldn't find someone to play with, we *did* play tennis on our own against a wall. And there *was* a great fashion for boys (I had four brothers) to have a metal comb with their name engraved on it and if they were going out with a girl, to give her their comb. It was a big prestige thing in school if a boy had given you his comb. I remember the horrible smell of car seats that would almost immediately provoke car sickness, even if you were stationary. Or getting out your Collins pocket dictionary and finding an ambiguously rude word like 'prick', using your pen to highlight it so it was a little dirty joke you could share. Walking round town limping, nothing wrong with your ankle, just to be dramatic. Meeting strangers and speaking in a foreign accent to pretend you were from France or Spain. Childhood was a hallucinatory experience, like a fictional world in a real place.

> If you're faithful to the imaginative memory of your place it will be true, and if it's true for your place, it will be true for all places.

Later I'll be talking about what I call *your own words* but this poem has some of mine, like 'skelped'. 'Skelped' is a Scottish word for 'smacked', which is what happened to us when we stole flowers from the graveyard. So although this poem is very simple it brings the place back to me and I hope it reminds the reader of their own places because all childhoods, in whatever country they belong, share the experience of play and exaggeration and boredom.

What I've been faithful to is the authentic experience of the place and how it made an impression on me. I feel I have the right words, the right images, the right details, the right behaviour. Your place will be different. Your place might not be a small market town; it might be the inner city, or by the sea, or in a different country. But if you are faithful to the imaginative memory of your place it will be true and it will be true for all places.

So when you write your poem, I want you to be really faithful to where you're writing about and to realise that if you are, then we'll all love to read it.

## TAKEAWAYS

- All memory is imagination.
- Keep a notebook of phrases, ideas, memories, things you overhear – and if possible, keep this notebook with you at all times.

## EXERCISES

### 'THIS IS JUST WHERE YOU START FROM'

Pick a place from your past and write down what you remember.

Make a list of things, however incidental, that are particular to that place: sounds, smells, local accents, words – broken biscuits, if you like.

These thoughts, memories, images will become the beginning of your poem.

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# 03. Memory As Imagination: People

If you've been keeping your notebook, you might have written down the phrase 'memory is imagination'. You might also have written down 'the music of being human'. These are two ways of thinking about poetry, and all three words in that second phrase apply to poetry: 'music', 'being', and 'human'.

In this lesson, I want to look at the human. We are human, and our primary interactions are with other humans.

I've written many poems about people. I've written about my teachers, my brothers, and my friends. I've written about mothers. I've written about politicians and I've written about the late Queen. Sometimes we write elegies* to remember people when they die. Sometimes we write love poems when we fall in love – whether or not we thought of ourselves as poets, we might have found ourselves driven by love into writing a poem for the first time.

Here I want to focus on people who mattered to us early in our lives.

The early people, the first people in our lives – parents, guardians, siblings, teachers, priests – are so important. I went to a convent school and the nuns made a big impression on me. I was about eleven when, I remember, a nun died in the middle of the night and the next day we had to go and say prayers over her dead body. It was the first time I'd seen someone dead. We had a bowl with holy water in it and a little brush and we sprinkled the holy water onto her while the prayers were being read. I remember how the water stayed on her face like beads and didn't roll down as it would on warm, living skin. That stayed with me and I wrote a poem about it.

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So I want you to think about the people from early in your lives, what you can remember about them, how you might celebrate them in a poem. How those people spoke is very important.

For example, we didn't have many books at home and my mother wasn't a reader but she would make up little poems and stories out of her head. So as well as nursery rhymes I would have these quirky little things spoken to me by my mum, who was Scots Irish, and that creativity and freedom she had with language, that way of being unembarrassed and nonsensical, almost eccentric, really went in and stayed with me. When I think of her I think of that, of how she talked, which was different to how English mothers talked. So if my mum was saying the word 'always' – as in, 'you've always been curious' – she wouldn't say 'always', she would say 'the day and ever': 'You've been curious since the day and ever you were born.' As an adult poet I just thought that was the most beautiful phrase and really summed my mum up. And instead of 'what's it like' she would say, 'what like is it' – I loved that, I loved the inversion of that phrase.

There will be something about your early person that made them who they were. It could be a word, a quirk of language, or it could be something else but you will know what it was and you will be able to write out of that memory.

My poem about my mother is called 'The Way My Mother Speaks'. I began writing it on a train from Edinburgh to London. It was a very long train journey and I had my notebook with me. We passed Stafford, my home town, but the train didn't stop and it was a sad feeling that I couldn't get off and go and visit my mum. Then I began to hear her voice in my head and started writing and had I not had my notebook I would have lost this poem.

### THE WAY MY MOTHER SPEAKS

*I say her phrases to myself*
*in my head*
*or under the shallows of my breath,*
*restful shapes moving.*
***The day and ever. The day and ever.***

*The train this slow evening*
*goes down England*
*browsing for the right sky,*
*too blue swapped for a cool grey.*
*For miles I have been saying*
***What like is it***
*the way I say things when I think.*
*Nothing is silent. Nothing is not silent.*
***What like is it.***

*Only tonight*
*I am happy and sad*
*like a child*
*who stood at the end of summer*
*and dipped a net*
*in a green, erotic pond.* ***The day***
***and ever. The day and ever.***
*I am homesick, free, in love*
*with the way my mother speaks.*

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I am reminded in looking back at this poem that poets are part of 'the tribe', as Ted Hughes would have it. They are not outside. They are not different or special. They give utterance to the families and communities they come from, they celebrate or question them. So wherever your place is and wherever your people are, that's what I suggest you write out of – paying attention to the use of words, dialect, accent, quirkiness but, above all, being a voice true to where you come from.

I am also reminded of a tiny poem about my father. It's only three lines long. We children were brought up Catholic so had to be confirmed and the most exciting thing about confirmation is that you get to choose an extra name. Instead of just being called 'Carol Ann Duffy' I could have another name, which I'd always wanted. I couldn't decide what name to choose because my favourite saint was Saint Francis. I loved him like all children do because he was kind to animals – but Francis was already the name of my brother, my father, and my grandfather.

So I asked my father what his confirmation name had been and this is what happened. The poem is called, 'In Which I Laugh At My Father's Confirmation Name'.

### IN WHICH I LAUGH AT MY FATHER'S CONFIRMATION NAME

*The back of his hand*
*then a week doing the dishes.*
*So: Aloysius.*

## TAKEAWAYS

- Poetry is the music of being human.
- Ted Hughes considered poets part of the tribe. They give utterance to the families and communities they come from. Wherever your place is, wherever your people are, that's what you should write out of.

## EXERCISES

### 'I SAY HER PHRASES TO MYSELF'

Think about the people from early in your lives. How might you immortalise them in a poem?

What can you remember about them? Begin with a detailed list.

How those people spoke is important. There will be something about them that made them who they were. It could be a word, a quirk of language, a gesture, or something else entirely, but you will know what it was. Write a poem out of that memory.

> **Whatever your place and people are, that's what I suggest you write out of.**

GLOSSARY*

**elegy**

*noun*

A poem of loss

*See also appendix.*

# 04. Your Own Words

A question I'm often asked is, does a poet need a huge vocabulary? Does a poet need to know lots of strange and unusual words?

There are two answers to that. First, I think it's so important to write in your own words – the words that you speak and think with. A poem is really only a poet talking to you. The voice that is true to you will be the voice that is true in your poem. Even Shakespeare's poetry is simply him talking to us across time. As this course goes on we'll talk about how important it is to hear a poem in your mouth, as well as follow it with your eye on the page.

I believe we should think of words the way a painter might think of the colours on their palette. Your own words are the bedrock of how you should write: the voice you talk in, the voice you hear in your head, is the voice you will rely on in your poetry. But that isn't to say – and this is the second of my two answers – that the words on your painter's palette will not and should not increase: they absolutely should. There are some poets whose favourite reading material is the *Complete Oxford English Dictionary*. It's often necessary, reading the wonderful Paul Muldoon, to go to the dictionary to look up some of the words he uses. Ted Hughes tells us that Sylvia Plath wrote with a thesaurus next to her and would put circles around words she came across that she liked and wanted to use. We must increase our resources as poets but we must not feel intimidated into thinking that we don't have a rich enough vocabulary to begin.

The words you use will mostly come from where you grew up, perhaps from a dialect, perhaps from other countries and languages, perhaps a mix of these things and more. All that matters is that they must belong to you and you must feel they are your raw materials. Once, when I was visiting my parents not long after I'd published my first book, I used the thesaurus because I wanted a word that fitted into my poem better than the word I had. My father saw me doing this and said: 'Are you cheating?' I said: 'What do you mean?' He thought that unless the words came straight from me it was somehow fraudulent. It was a very funny moment. We don't have all the words that we're going to have in our lives already in us. We'll acquire fresh words as we develop as poets but the words we use must always be our own words.

Keep a word hoard in your notebook. Spend some time one evening thinking of words that are important to you that you might have forgotten. I have Scots words in my hoard – like 'skelf' for 'splinter' and 'oose' for 'fluff' – and those little phrases that have meaning for me, like 'broken biscuits', 'the day and ever' and 'what like is it'. I remember my daughter once asked: 'How many sympathies did Beethoven write?' That misuse of the word pleased and amused me but also entered me and eventually I wrote a poem called 'His Nine Sympathies'. I had great fun playing around with that.

**HIS NINE SYMPATHIES**

*were for the mothers,*
*listening to flute scales stop and start;*

*and for the fathers,*
*whistling their tired ways home in the dark;*

*for younger brothers,*
*sent with the jingling cows to market;*

*or for eldest daughters,*
*hymned up the aisles till death did them part;*

*for orphans,*
*led by a piper out of a pretty park;*

*and for paupers,*
*scraping their fiddles for small change in a hat;*

*for old ones,*
*tapping their sticks on the twisting path;*

*for soldiers,*
*stamping their boots on a victory march;*

*and for the lovers,*
*the broken chords of their hearts.*

So words are in us already from our lives so far but we can also find new words and phrases by listening. A poet has to be an ear as well as an eye (we'll talk more about this as we go on through the course). Listen to the sounds and the music of everyday speech. If you're in conversation with friends or children, pay attention to the sounds that you're hearing. Don't be afraid to research words. Look at the root of a word: where does it come from? I called my last collection *Sincerity* for the reason that I wanted the poems, whether autobiographical or not, to be sincere. The root of that word is Greek and means 'without wax'. In ancient Greece, if sculptors made a mistake in their sculpture, rather than admitting it they would cover it up with wax so that you couldn't see the flaw. So 'sincerity' means the flaws are allowed to be seen and that's why I chose that word.

Part of your job is to gather words that you feel an affinity for, so your word hoard will grow. A common mistake is to think that there are intrinsically poetic words, as though there's a little drawer that you can open and there'll be all these poetic words in it that you can sprinkle over a poem like parsley. I don't think that's correct. I think words need to be living, not decorative.

I remember in my teens coming across *The Mersey Sound* in my local bookshop, when I was trying to read as much poetry as I could and it was all random – *what have they got on the shelf this week?* The book had an amazing Beatles-y cover. I took it home and was blown away by their language, which I suppose I thought modern and not far from my own life, like that of people you might meet in the pub. Later I came across the wonderful Glasgow poet Liz Lochhead who had been influenced by the Mersey poets and wrote as a modern young Scots woman, often in Scots. She used words that my mother might speak and was writing about going to nightclubs and dancing in a colloquial and accessible voice.

Liz Lochhead led me to other poets like Tom Leonard, who wrote a terrific poem about the six o'clock news read in a street-Glasgow accent, rather than the standard BBC English voice of the time. These discoveries were illuminating to me as a young poet. People were writing from Liverpool, from Glasgow, from all over the place: not the quite formal poetry that I'd been reading up till that point. Now we have Daljit Nagra, who writes across two languages, Zaffar Kunial who writes, with great love, about the embarrassment of being English-and-not-English. We have John Cooper Clarke, the bard of Salford, Ian McMillan, who writes from Barnsley, and great poets like the Jamaican-born, Brixton-based Linton Kwesi Johnson.

The confidence these poets display comes from using their own words.

Trusting our own words gives us a key into poetry. We know the music of our own accents, we know the music of our own cultures; we know how we shout, how we whisper, how we celebrate; we know how we grieve. It's out of those words that we can make the music of our poems, the music of being human, that will come from our voice on the page. Very often, being attentive to how we became aware of words, which will usually be very early in our lives, can make us think again, see differently, write something which teaches us something about ourselves.

I have a poem called 'Litany'. I probably chose that title because of my regular attendance at church, but I'm also thinking of litany* as a list, in this case a list of words that to me seem to symbolise a kind of repression, a state of unsaid events, particularly in my childhood. I'm aged around ten and my mum has got other mothers round to the house and they're buying things out of mail-order catalogues, and at the end of the poem, which is about words, I do something terrible.

**LITANY**

*The soundtrack then was a litany – **candlewick***
***bedspread three piece suite display cabinet** –*
*and stiff-haired wives balanced their red smiles,*
*passing the catalogue. **Pyrex**. A tiny ladder*
*ran up Mrs Barr's American Tan leg, sly*
*like a rumour. Language embarrassed them.*

*The terrible marriages crackled, cellophane*
*round polyester shirts, and then The Lounge*
*would seem to bristle with eyes, hard*
*as the bright stones in engagement rings,*
*and sharp hands poised over biscuits as a word*
*was spelled out. An embarrassing word, broken*

*to bits, which tensed the air like an accident.*
*This was the code I learnt at my mother's knee, pretending*
*to read, where no one had cancer, or sex, or debts,*
*and certainly not leukaemia, which no one could spell.*
*The year a mass grave of wasps bobbed in a jam-jar;*
*a butterfly stammered itself in my curious hands.*

***A boy in the playground**, I said, **told me***
***to fuck off**; and a thrilled, malicious pause*
*salted my tongue like an imminent storm. Then*
*uproar. I'm sorry, **Mrs Barr, Mrs Hunt, Mrs Emery,***
***sorry, Mrs Raine**. Yes, I can summon their names.*
*My mother's mute shame. The taste of soap.*

That poem came out of a conversation with another writer, where we were remembering what things were called in a Sixties' childhood. They didn't call a duvet a duvet when I was growing up, it was called a continental quilt. Tupperware, Pyrex, American Tan for tights, candlewick bedspreads, 'we've got a new three-piece suite': these words, or phrases, were symbols of something but I couldn't quite understand what. Marriage, probably. It was out of remembering these words that this poem was seeded.

In the poem, I say no one could spell 'leukaemia'. That's because if a word was considered impolite or frightening it would be spelt; so someone in the next street, for example, might have 'c-a-n-c-e-r'. It seemed safer to break or destroy the word than to say it. I say the butterfly was stammering in my hands, not fluttering. 'Stammering' is a verb we associate with speech, so it's as though even the butterfly wants to utter something. This entire poem came out of the language of my household, from listening and then probably deliberately saying the f-word. I knew it would cause carnage; it was a kind of resistance against the spelling of worrying words.

I suggested making a list of words in your notebook, and you have just read *Litany*, which came to me via exactly that process. So it might be interesting for you to follow that example: take your word hoard and use it to try and write a poem. I didn't know what my poem was going to be when I started with 'candlewick bedspread three piece suite display cabinet'; it was like those words were a spell, which suddenly became a key to opening up this true memory.

## TAKEAWAYS

- There is no drawer labelled 'poetic words'. All words can be part of the music of being human.
- Keep a word hoard in your notebook.
- A poem is really only a poet talking to you.

## EXERCISES

Think of the words you've gathered in your notebook as the paint on your palette. Try combining the different colours to see where they take you. You won't know where in advance, but you will discover something along the way. Maybe you will even find yourself entering your poem.

Pay attention to everyday speech in all its variety. Eavesdrop. Note down the words and phrases people say. List them, and listen to them. Do the relationships you set up between them lead you in a new direction?

Make a list of ten abstract nouns of which you already know the common meaning, such as 'sincerity'. Research the etymology of these words; find out where they came from. What new stories do they have to tell you? What ideas do they prompt?

GLOSSARY*

**litany**

*noun*

A long Christian prayer; by extension, a list

*See also appendix.*

# 05. Read To Write

One of the most important things you can do if you want to write a poem is read a poem. Read lots of poems. I believe it probably isn't possible to write a good poem unless you've read some good poetry.

Usually it will be a journalist who asks a poet why so many are put off poetry, why people are frightened of poetry. I simply don't agree with this assumption. I fell in love with poetry at school. It has been an invisible companion all my life. Like many poets I go into schools and, particularly in primary schools, children love poems. They love being told poems. Funny poems, silly poems, nonsense poems; we all love and remember rhymes from our childhood. My favourite was always 'Hey diddle diddle'. I loved that jangly beginning, followed by the cat and the fiddle… What?! And then, most wonderful of all – the cow jumped over the moon! When I heard those words they put a picture in my mind that has never left me, and I've often referred to that line and that image in my adult poetry. 'The little dog laughed to see such fun.' Of course she did! And then the dish ran away with the spoon! I don't think there's anything better written in the English language to be honest. Children love that and they love being encouraged to make their own versions of it.

So it's simple. The key, which is already within our grasp, is to carry on the reading that we either heard, or memorised, or were given in childhood. Poets, as I said earlier, are simply talking to us in their poem. They're noticing for us. They're telling us to stop, to listen, to look again. They're reminding us of feelings we have. They're putting into words things we weren't expressing. There are so many things that poets do. And the poets we love and return to become part of our consciousness as would-be poets.

We will often have a poem at a wedding. We will often, if not always, have poems at funerals. In Wales people write poetry for every occasion. The idea of the Bard is central to Welsh culture. They have a national laureate for one season in the English language, then the next season in the Welsh language. To read poetry is to take the hand of a guide.

Later I will talk about form, and anthologising, which is a big part of my work. A couple of years ago the Welsh Laureate, Gillian Clarke, and I put together *The Map and the Clock*, a series of poems that goes right back to medieval times and extends right up to the young poets of today. There's a wonderful 12th-century poem in it, translated from the anonymous Irish by the late Seamus Heaney. It shows that right from the beginning, poetry listened for us. It teaches that poets must continue the job of attentive witnessing. It's called 'Birdsong from a willow tree'.

> *Birdsong from a willow tree.*
> *Whet-note music, clear, airy;*
> *Inky treble, yellow bill –*
> *Blackbird practising his scale.*

Those who know Heaney's work will know that the blackbird went all the way through his writing. But I would suggest that this probably came firstly from his own listening as a boy and only secondly from the example of other poets writing about blackbirds.

It could be that you don't yet know the work of Seamus Heaney and you're thinking 'where do I start?' Getting hold of some good anthologies is a great idea. Find a range of poets to read, then choose one or two whose work really speaks to you. When I was first reading, there were hardly any women in the anthologies I was able to buy. So thirty years ago I decided to put together the kind of anthology that I would have loved to have read myself as a teenage girl. I called it *I Wouldn't Thank You for a Valentine*. It is dedicated exclusively to women poets, and includes the work of – among others – Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Jackie Kay, Audre Lorde, Mary Oliver, Nina Cassian, Valerie Bloom, Liz Lochhead, Vicki Feaver, Grace Nichols, Wendy Cope and Kathleen Jamie. This was very important for me to do as a poet because if you want to help people write then first you must encourage them to read.

I've mentioned my small local library where I used to go back and forth more than once a day on my bicycle using all my family's library tickets. That library is now closed and we know that, sadly, libraries are closing everywhere, certainly in the UK, but if you do have a local library, then you have the right to order books you'd like to read. It's not always possible to be able to afford to buy new books. If I'm passing a charity shop I always go in and see what poetry they have. You can find wonderful treasures in charity shops, like 16th-century love poems for just 10p.

I've said that a poem is simply a poet talking to us, and one of my all-time favourite poets in the world is John Donne. In his poem, 'The Flea', written in the seventeenth century, the poet is talking to his lover and trying to woo her, to seduce her, to get her to make love. He does this by noticing that a flea has bitten him and has also bitten her, so the flea has both their blood. When I first read this poem, and every time since, I can hear him talking. I can hear him saying:

> *Mark but this flea, and mark in this,*
> *How little that which thou deniest me is;*
> *It sucked me first, and now sucks thee,*
> *And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;*

What I find beautiful about this is not only the words and the very easy rhyme but the thought itself, the way of seeing, the way the poet makes an erotic appeal to his beloved out of the bite of an insect. So, as well as form and style which we'll come to later, the way a poet observes the world is important to us, as developing writers, to notice and understand. John Donne seeing the flea in that way made me as a poet think differently. It opened doors, and to use another cliché, made me think outside the box. There are so many things that poems can give us, and ways of seeing is one of the most important.

**Be attentive to the sounds of a poem as it makes itself again in your own voice.**

## TAKEAWAYS

- If you want to write a poem, then first you must read a poem. Lots of poems.

- Poetry can be regarded as a huge toolkit. Maybe some poet has made a hammer, which is exactly what you need, because you want to put a nail in. By all means look at poetry that way – but don't forget the joy Seamus Heaney felt in reading about the blackbird and don't forget my delight in John Donne's flea.

## EXERCISE

Make a reading list in your notebook: of single poems, volumes, poets; of things you want to read and things you've already read. You could even make a note of what you thought about the poem. Maybe you didn't like it. You could put: *name of poem, author of poem – didn't understand a word of it.* That's fine. What you are doing is engaging with the poem. You're thinking about it.

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# 06. Learning Poems By Heart

We have thought about the value of reading poetry to feed into our writing. There is also the practice known as learning a poem by heart. I have mixed feelings about this. I'm not someone who feels that school children should be forced into learning a poem, reciting it in the way that I remember having to do the times tables. Although I suppose I'm grateful now that I know seven eights are fifty-six without having to think about it!

But I do think there is a case for reflecting on that phrase 'by heart'. If something is in our heart, we love it. It suggests that we have taken that poem into the body, opened ourselves up to it and let it right in. If we know a poem by heart, we also feel it in our mouth. We utter it. We can say it. Its words mingle with our own words like the blood of Donne's lovers mingles in the body of the flea. I wouldn't say all poems should be learned by heart but I think some poems should and these should be poems that matter to you. For example, if you're choosing a poem at a wedding – the most common, I think, is Shakespeare's sonnet*: 'Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments. Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds' – then you could learn it by heart. You could say it, rather than simply read it.

A key poem in my early life, the first poem I ever learned by heart and the first that nudged me into writing a poem myself, was by W. B. Yeats, 'The Song of Wandering Aengus'. I can still remember it after all these years.

**THE SONG OF WANDERING AENGUS**

*I went out to the hazel wood,*
*Because a fire was in my head,*
*And cut and peeled a hazel wand,*
*And hooked a berry to a thread;*
*And when white moths were on the wing,*
*And moth-like stars were flickering out,*
*I dropped the berry in a stream*
*And caught a little silver trout.*

*When I had laid it on the floor*
*I went to blow the fire a-flame,*
*But something rustled on the floor,*
*And someone called me by my name:*
*It had become a glimmering girl*
*With apple blossom in her hair*
*Who called me by my name and ran*
*And faded through the brightening air.*

*Though I am old with wandering*
*Through hollow lands and hilly lands,*
*I will find out where she has gone,*
*And kiss her lips and take her hands;*
*And walk among long dappled grass,*
*And pluck till time and times are done,*
*The silver apples of the moon,*
*The golden apples of the sun.*

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What arrested me when I first read this poem was that I immediately understood what was happening. I have mentioned that when I first moved from Scotland to England we had a little wood at the back of the house and I would go and sit in a tree and eat an apple and read my book. But as a teenager, I would climb up into this tree with my notebook. I think a lot of poetry can start in childhood and adolescence. In adolescence you're a kind of ferment of feelings and emotions, desires and rebellions. So I understood this opening couplet* – 'I went out to the hazel wood, / Because a fire was in my head' – because that was me. The poem was speaking to me. The poet was talking to me in his poem. That feeling is a peculiarly intimate thing.

Initially, all those years ago, I thought the poem was about searching for love, following the glimmering girl in pursuit of the ideal. Which was true of Yeats; he did love hopelessly in real life. Now, I see it as a poem about poetry and the constant search for the perfect poem. It's a very simple poem that uses rhyme and metre* and it has wonderful textures within it: 'hollow land and hilly land' – that lovely echo just with a single vowel change; then the moon's silver apples and the sun's golden apples – that lovely final image. It's a poem that has meant a lot to me in my life. It's not the most amazing of poems. It's not T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. But it's a pure lyric* that entered into me and that I got by heart.

I've just said that when I was younger the poem meant one thing and now I'm older it means another. I think that's part of the magic of poetry that is present in our lives: how poems change their meaning as we change. They walk alongside us at some point in our life, and then run a way up the road – years ahead up the road to wait for us – and suddenly appear from behind a tree. The good poem will contain many meanings and many shifts, just as we ourselves do, and we can experience that intimately if we know a poem well.

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As well as a way of loving the poem, learning a poem by heart and having it within us so that we can utter it almost as though we wrote it ourselves, also serves as a kind of teaching mechanism for us as writers of poems. We will come to notice the assonance* in the poem. We will come to be aware of where the rhyme is falling. We will come to hear the music. All these things will be teaching us without us knowing it. It's a very important thing, especially for new poets, to be attentive to the sound of a poem as it makes itself new again through your own voice.

## TAKEAWAYS

- When we learn a poem by heart, its words mingle with our own words and the tools it offers us come more readily to hand.
- Poems change their meaning as we change.

## EXERCISES

Find a poem you can connect to as I did to 'The Song of Wandering Aengus'.

Relate to the poem. Feel the poem speaking to you. Let it enter into you and learn it by heart. Feel it in your mouth.

Speak it out loud.

GLOSSARY*

**sonnet**

*noun*

A poem of fourteen lines using rhyme and metre

**couplet**

*noun*

A pair of rhyming lines of similar length

**metre/meter**

*noun*

The rhythmic structure of a line of verse

**lyric**

*noun*

A brief poem that expresses emotion

**assonance**

*noun*

A resemblance of sound between syllables of different words; linked to internal rhyme

*See also appendix.*

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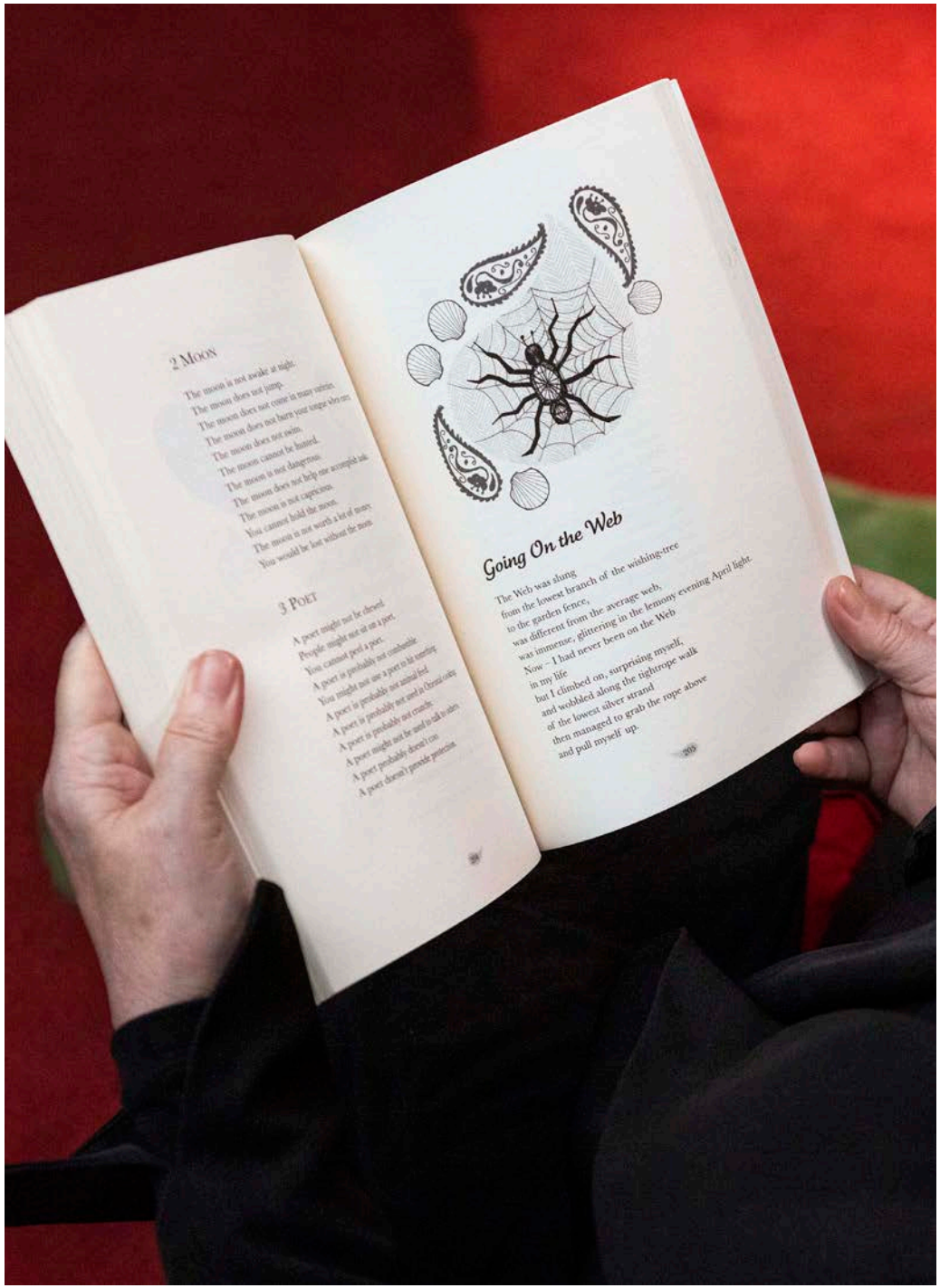

# 07. Finding Inspiration: Art

Inspiration for poetry doesn't always come from within. It would be remarkable if memory were a constant, non-drying-up source.

Two of my favourite sayings about creativity come not from a writer but from the painter, Picasso. One is his stipulation that the artist must both *refer and inaugurate**, acknowledge and invent, an idea which I will no doubt return to many times during this course. The other is that inspiration will come but must find you working. I say that to myself every week and it's interesting that this advice should come from a painter because I want to suggest the visual arts as a source of inspiration.

I've always loved art galleries. Wherever I am, I'll find the gallery and go and see what they've got. You may have other interests that could be a source of inspiration but for this lesson I'd like to think about paintings. I would suggest that you take your notebook with you when you visit a gallery. When I was putting together my first collection, I found that I'd written a number of poems that derived from my gallery visits. So I called the book *Standing Female Nude*, which sounds like – and is – the title of a painting.  I wanted to acknowledge the source of the inspiration, which was an artwork, but also I felt it announced me as a young woman poet.

The source for my poem 'Standing Female Nude' came from the cubist* movement in art, to which Picasso and Georges Braque were central. I had been to a retrospective at the Pompidou Centre in Paris and they had some nudes by Braque, one of which was Standing Female Nude. This was a beautiful painting but since the cubists used triangles and circles and squares to represent the subject it looked nothing like a female nude. I began to wonder who the model was, so I did some research.

It's always a good thing to research the subject if you're writing outside of yourself and your own life. What I found was that one of the models Braque used was a sex worker whose job on the side was posing as a life model. Then I began to think of the anonymity of women in history, art and literature. This led me on a whole other journey and I decided to write a poem in the unheard voice of the anonymous model in this painting. I found it so liberating that it didn't have to be my voice. It was like I was wearing a mask. I stayed truthful to the voice that I imagined and that I'd researched and heard in my head and it gave me a freedom I hadn't had before in my poetry. This led me to write other poems that came from paintings or artworks.

The second collection I wrote had as its source a painting by the wonderful surrealist* artist, Max Ernst. I think this is the only one of my poems that has made me laugh out loud and because you've been with me over these lessons you'll understand why. The painting was of the Madonna and baby Jesus. I'd grown up with religious imagery at school and in church but in this painting the baby was upside down on the mother's knee and she was spanking him. Meanwhile his little halo had rolled off, which drew the eye to a window, where there were people watching this – as my mother would have called it – chastisement*. The sheer audacity of it made me laugh and I found myself wondering what Jesus would have been like as a toddler. The point of view of the people looking through the window gave me the entry to the poem. It allowed me to be playful and subversive while staying true to the idea that this was indeed God.

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**THREE PAINTINGS**

2. THE VIRGIN PUNISHING THE INFANT

*He spoke early. Not the **goo goo goo** of infancy,*
*but **I am God**. Joseph kept away, carving himself*
*a silent Pinocchio out in the workshed. He said*
*he was a simple man and hadn't dreamed of this.*

*She grew anxious in that second year, would stare*
*at stars saying **Gabriel? Gabriel?** Your guess.*
*The village gossiped in the sun. The child was solitary,*
*his wide and solemn eyes could fill your head.*

*After he walked, our normal children crawled. Our wives*
*were first resentful, then superior. Mary's child*
*would bring her sorrow… better far to have a son*
*who gurgled nonsense at your breast. **Googoo. Googoo.***

***But I am God.** We heard him through the window,*
*heard the smacks which made us peep. What we saw*
*was commonplace enough. But afterwards, we wondered*
*why the infant did not cry. And why the mother did.*

This poem came from a painting which entertained me – shocked me, if you like – but it also allowed me to access memories from my own life, to take a fresh look at the religious iconography* that I'd grown up with and that was familiar to me.

For some years I very much enjoyed writing poems that came out of looking at paintings. I wrote one inspired by Toulouse-Lautrec and another inspired by the war photographer Don McCullin. More recently I've written about the work of Tracey Emin. I've given space and respect in my poetry to this big interest in my life.

A poem needs to find a reader in order to come alive. To find that reader, it needs to connect to the world to get its spark of life. It can't be abstract. For the attentive poet who is alert to the world, everything is an inspiration. The great Australian poet, Les Murray, wrote a wonderful poem about growing broad beans. William Carlos Williams wrote a much-imitated poem about a red wheelbarrow in the rain. Edward Thomas wrote a poem about nettles.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Picasso says that the artist must both *refer* and *inaugurate*, acknowledge and invent.
- Research the subject if you are writing outside of yourself and your own life.

## EXERCISE

Go to an art gallery with your notebook. Look at the paintings. Find a painting that speaks to you, that perhaps unlocks something you'd forgotten, and write about it. If you are stuck, simply use it to expand and enrich your word hoard.

> **Inspiration, as Picasso said, will come but it must find you working.**

GLOSSARY*

**inaugurate**
*verb*
To begin or introduce

**cubist**
*adjective, from the noun, Cubism*
Relating to an early 20th-century school of abstract art

**surrealist**
*adjective, from the noun, Surrealism*
Relating to an early 20th-century cultural movement that prioritises expression of the unconscious

**chastisement**
*noun*
Punishment, verbal or physical, with Biblical overtones

**iconography**
*noun*
The conventional images or symbols associated with a particular subject

# 08. Finding Inspiration: Story

Another external source of inspiration is story.

Whatever culture we come from, we all have stories in our background. I still love Grimm's fairy tales. They're quite dark, not the Disney kind we've become used to. I also loved the Greek myths – all those epic adventures, heroes, gods and punishment. One key book in my school days was Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where everything and everyone is subject to magical change. That's where, aged nine or ten, I first came across the story of King Midas and learnt that everything he touched would turn to gold. It was probably my favourite of all the stories in *Metamorphoses*. I was transfixed by the idea that you could turn something to gold by touching it. I even remember playing games where I would pretend that was happening.

Poets have traditionally used story in their poetry. Perhaps the greatest of all the Irish poets, Yeats, was obsessed with Irish fairy tale and folklore. He actually believed in fairies. Sylvia Plath was also interested in myth and story. Take her poem 'Lady Lazarus', for instance, which obviously has its source in the Bible story of Lazarus rising from the dead. Ted Hughes retold Ovid's tales in later life. Many poets take something old, finding a point of empathy that allows them to enter the story and plunder it for something new.

I fell into doing just this when I wrote a poem in the voice of Mrs Midas. In the poem I imagine what it would be like to be married to the man with the deadly ability to turn everything to gold. As I wrote, I found something in the story that I wanted to say about being in a relationship where the other person is selfish, where they neglect the relationship in favour of more avaricious* pursuits. I so enjoyed doing this and was so excited by it that I decided I would do another and another and another. Before I knew it, I was halfway through what was to become a collection called *The World's Wife*. I wrote in a woman's voice and managed to enter all these stories at different angles.

I wrote a poem in the voice of Little Red Cap, which is the original name of Little Red Riding Hood and one in the voice of Queen Herod, drawing on that terrible story from the Bible where King Herod kills all the children under two. I borrowed from cinema, and wrote a poem in the voice of Queen Kong, imagining how the story would have been different if that huge gorilla had been female (I imagined it would be less violent). I borrowed from news and history. The children of my generation had been traumatised by the Moors murders – the first shadow over childhood – and I had been fascinated thereafter by Myra Hindley, who was convicted for the crimes. I could never understand why she wanted to get out of prison and remind people of the terrible suffering she was guilty of, rather than take her punishment as she should. I wrote a very dark series of poems exploring that kind of evil.

I wasn't trying to make the women in the stories better. I wanted to be truthful and look at all aspects of female humanity. I wrote a poem reframing the Kray twins as ruthless pseudo-feminists. I am 'tongue-in-cheek' and obviously my instincts are feminist but I'm more playful, more imaginative in the poem than I would be if I was simply being interviewed about feminism. I found out that Elvis Presley had been born a twin but his twin had died, so I made the twin live and be a nun, exploring in her silence the polar opposite of a global pop star. What came out of these poems, and what I hope might emerge from a similar task for you, is my sense of humour, my interests, my ideas, my politics – my life, if you like. I put these elements of myself alongside, or into, the original story in order to find a new truth – perhaps my own truth – in the story.

This poem is told from the point of view of Shakespeare's wife.

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**ANNE HATHAWAY**

'ITEM I GYVE UNTO MY WIFE MY SECOND BEST BED…'
(FROM SHAKESPEARE'S WILL)

*The bed we loved in was a spinning world*
*of forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas*
*where he would dive for pearls. My lover's words*
*were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses*
*on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme*
*to his, now echo, assonance; his touch*
*a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.*
*Some nights, I dreamed he'd written me, the bed*
*a page beneath his writer's hands. Romance*
*and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.*
*In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,*
*dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –*
*I hold him in the casket of my widow's head*
*as he held me upon that next best bed.*

You will notice that I used lots of writerly terms. I describe the bodies as rhyming, or as having assonance between them, I describe the lover's act of touch as a verb, the woman's part of the body as a noun, and show how a verb can bring something to life. The speaker in the poem conceives of the bedsheet as a page, the hands of the lover as the hands of a writer. Everything is connected both to language and to the physical. As Shakespeare was a great poet, in this poem I'm bringing these things into joint play, to fuse the elements that I find in the story. I describe the best bed as the place where houseguests might stay. When I say that they are 'dribbling' their prose, there is a sense that prose is inferior to poetry – which, of course, I would never dream of saying.

Many of the original stories I've chosen to retell – to revisit, reenergise, challenge or subvert – are familiar to the readership I will find in the UK, which provides us with a shared ground. But you might be writing out of a different culture to mine and have stories that your audience aren't familiar with. That's exciting. If you're bringing stories from another country, I want to hear them. It's broadening my experience of narrative and your retelling will be fascinating. So I don't think we need to worry, for instance: does everyone already know this story or, is it too obscure? The fact that Sylvia Plath has a poem called 'Lady Lazarus' didn't stop me writing my own poem called 'Mrs Lazarus', about how a wife might feel if suddenly her husband came back from the dead. In my poem this is a horrifying event, not a celebratory one. We just have to be confident and trust in our engagement with that story wherever it may come from and however known or unknown it may be.

I've always thought that the shorter, darker days of winter are a fantastic time to sit down and engage with story. So for the past ten or eleven years I've written a poem at Christmas. One of those Christmas poems picks up on the central conceit of *The World's Wife*. It is called 'Mrs Scrooge', taking the much-loved Dickens story, *A Christmas Carol*, and reimagining Scrooge as a woman. My Mrs Scrooge is in fact Scrooge's widow and her meanness and penny-pinching comes from being an idealistic recycler who doesn't believe in waste, so it's a different way of looking at not spending money. In other poems I revisit the story of Good King Wenceslas, the Irish tradition of boys going out on St Stephen's Day (Boxing Day) to try to capture a wren and the First World War event where the British and German armies played football on No Man's Land. So maybe this Christmas you would like to try something similar.

If you want to revisit a story in a poem, I don't think you'll have to go far to find it. You'll have your own collection of inherited stories, stories from growing up and stories from the world around you. Which isn't to say that you can't be proactive and seek out more stories from reading. There's nothing to stop you from dipping into Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales. There will be something you feel or see in those old stories that others haven't, that you can share with me and your reader.

I see each poem or each series of poems as a journey, or a climb, that leads me to a new place. At the end of writing the story-poems of *The World's Wife*, for instance, I was further along the road, or higher up the mountain, so that what I could see around me was different. That book led directly to me writing another: from retelling old stories from a female point of view to making up my own new myths and fairy tales. *The Feminine Gospels* was a wildly imaginative collection. For example, I made up a woman who had the map of her childhood home tattooed on her whole body, using my own childhood home as the model.

You can actually read my poem, 'The Map Woman', and go around Stafford using the text as a literal guide. I invented another woman who one day started growing tall and never stopped, so she was as tall as the planet, and yet another who became louder and louder and louder till her voice filled the universe. These were all kinds of unlikely new stories in which I could find a truth, something I wanted to say that perhaps I hadn't been able to say in a simple lyric poem. In order to say quite big things I needed the range, the vastness and the magical possibilities of making up new stories.

Perhaps you will travel a road that is the same but different, coming up with your own retellings of old stories and then moving on to create new ones. And if you do, I think you will find that it's very exciting.

> **It's incredibly liberating to stand behind another persona, another voice.**

## TAKEAWAY

- Story poems are a conduit for your sense of humour, your interests, your ideas, your politics – your life. Putting these elements of yourself alongside, or into, the original story can help you find a new truth – perhaps your own truth – in the story. What is your truth and where will you find it?

## EXERCISE

You'll have your stories from growing up and stories from the world around you, but try dipping into Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales. There will be something you feel or see in those old stories that others haven't, that you can share with me and your reader. Find it and explore it and use it.

GLOSSARY*

**avaricious**

*adjective*

Displaying an extreme desire for material gain

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# 09. Finding Inspiration: Your Own Interests

I've talked about finding inspiration outside of oneself, for example in art and story, but don't overlook more personal, and indeed incidental, interests. You'll find plenty of material there.

My interests are pretty unremarkable. I love football and I've written several poems about that, including what was for me a quite important elegy for the victims of the 1989 Hillsborough Stadium disaster, so not a straight take on football but the more serious subject of tragedy. I'm also interested in history and I've written many poems about historical events, trying to find my own quirky angle that is truthful to me. Currently, probably as a prolonged effect of lockdown, I'm writing a lot about my garden. I seem to have spent a year in the garden with my notebook watching things grow, and I put in a pond so I'm writing about a pond.

At one point I was very interested in the history of jewellery, mainly because I had a friend who was an expert. I remember her telling me that in the nineteenth century if you were a very rich woman you would have a lady's maid and the procedure was that, before she put them on, the rich woman would give her string of pearls to her servant. The servant would warm them by wearing them. Apparently, the heat of the body improves the lustre of the pearl. I know I was being told this story as a critique of class – how outrageous for one woman to use another woman in this servile way – but to my ear it felt erotic. The excitement of how I heard it planted the seeds of a poem I'd like to share with you called, 'Warming Her Pearls'.

Had I not been attuned to the world with an ear half-cocked and one eye looking, as poets must always be, this would have passed me by as merely a piece of social commentary, but because I was behaving in the way a poet should – like a spy, even when not writing, waiting to report on something – this poem emerged pretty quickly from that conversation. It's in the voice of the lady's maid, who loves, but can never speak of her desire for, her mistress.

**WARMING HER PEARLS**

*Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress*
*bids me wear them, warm them, until evening*
*when I'll brush her hair. At six, I place them*
*round her cool, white throat. All day I think of her,*

*resting in the Yellow Room, contemplating silk*
*or taffeta, which gown tonight? She fans herself*
*whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering*
*each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope.*

*She's beautiful. I dream about her*
*in my attic bed; picture her dancing*
*with tall men, puzzled by my faint, persistent scent*
*beneath her French perfume, her milky stones.*

*I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,*
*watch the soft blush seep through her skin*
*like an indolent sigh. In her looking-glass*
*my red lips part as though I want to speak.*

*Full moon. Her carriage brings her home. I see*
*her every movement in my head…. Undressing,*
*taking off her jewels, her slim hand reaching*
*for the case, slipping naked into bed, the way*

*she always does…. And I lie here awake,*
*knowing the pearls are cooling even now*
*in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night*
*I feel their absence and I burn.*

I suppose my most prevalent interest is human behaviour, or what I call the music of being human. And although in that poem I'm writing in the invented, imaginary voice of a 19th-century lady's maid, I too am in that poem: it's me writing a love poem in that character using that voice. Listening to how we speak to one another, as well as to the voices in our own heads, is very important if you're going to write poetry now, in the twenty-first century. You have to use the language of your time, no matter how heightened or refined you make it; the speech in that poem is mine, but the truth it conveys spans the difference between the centuries, I think.

Another of my fascinations for a while was bees. In my childhood most of the gardens had bees. There was a lot of honey in Stafford where I grew up. Then I became fascinated by bees all over again because of the climate crisis. Bees are like the canaries that used to be sent down the mines to see how much oxygen there was; they are right on the frontline of the destruction we are causing the planet. So I began to write about bees simply because I was interested in them but eventually they formed the heart of a collection I wrote, called *The Bees*.

You will have your own fascinations and interests. Some poets have written about fishing because they love fishing. The poet Sean Borodale wrote a whole book in the kitchen, writing as he cooked. Look at any poet you like and you will find that their interests surface in their poems. The same will be true for you.

## TAKEAWAYS

- There is no drawer labelled 'poetic subjects'. Your job is to find the poetry in the human everyday.
- Use the language of your time, no matter how heightened or refined you make it.
- Keep attuned to the world with an ear half-cocked and one eye looking, as poets must always be.

## EXERCISE

Think about where your mind settles and what you like doing. See if you can marry that with a new poem or poems of your own.

# 10. Coming To Your Senses:
## Looking, Smelling, Listening, Tasting, Touching

It's important when we write to bear in mind that we are not only writing out of our memories, our emotions, our imaginations, our cultural backgrounds, our sense of art or landscape or history, but we're also writing out of our bodies. One reason I've asked you to keep a notebook is that it's important to me to think of you holding a pen in your hand, turning the page with your other hand, and the words coming from your actual, physical body rather than flashing up on the screen of a computer.

If I look at my anthology *The Map and the Clock*, which stretches from 1200 right up to 2020, the poems are alive with the five senses: what those poets could see, what they could hear, what they could taste, what they could touch, what they could smell. This makes a poem alive in a human, physical way as well as a cerebral way. As well as moving us emotionally, it helps to place us within the poem, because the five senses have not changed since the beginning of human history.

Flicking through at random I come across a wonderful poem by Christopher Smart, famous for a long encomium* dedicated to his cat Jeoffry. In this poem he is looking at flowers and the lines, here for example, are alive with physical sensation.

> *For the doubling of flowers is the improvement of the gardeners talent.*
> *For the flowers are great blessings.*
> *For the Lord made a Nosegay in the meadow with his disciples*
> *and preached upon the lily.*

The poet makes us see the flowers he is looking at. Similarly, here is an extract from a short piece, 'Pleasant Sounds' from John Clare, a marvellous poet of the countryside, of childhood, of the senses.

> *The rustling of leaves under the feet in woods and under hedges;*
> *The crumpling of cat-ice and snow down wood-rides, narrow lanes,*
> *and every street causeway; Rustling through a wood or rather rushing,*
> *while the wind halloos in the oak-toop like thunder;*
> *The rustle of birds' wings startled from their nests or flying unseen*
> *into the bushes;*

A little further on I find 'On the Grasshopper and Cricket' by John Keats, which starts with the gorgeous line: 'The poetry of earth is never dead.' He is saying that with all its sounds, sights and smells, the earth itself is a poem.

> *The poetry of earth is never dead:*
> *When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,*
> *And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run*
> *From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;*
> *That is the grasshopper's.....*

Keats knows this because he has taken the time to listen. Next up is Edward Thomas, with 'Adlestrop', one of the greatest short lyric poems in the English language, much loved. The poet is on a train which slows and stops at a station called Adlestrop. He looks out of the window and the moment enters him. Later, it returns through his body, through his hand, through his pen and onto the page as a poem.

> **ADLESTROP**
>
> *Yes. I remember Adlestrop –*
> *The name, because one afternoon*
> *Of heat the express-train drew up there*
> *Unwontedly. It was late June.*
>
> *The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.*
> *No one left and no one came*
> *On the bare platform. What I saw*
> *Was Adlestrop – only the name*
>
> *And willows, willow-herb, and grass,*
> *And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,*
> *No whit less still and lonely fair*
> *Than the high cloudlets in the sky.*
>
> *And for that minute a blackbird sang*
> *Close by, and round him, mistier,*
> *Farther and farther, all the birds*
> *Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.*

Thomas was only able to give English poetry the gift of that sublime poem because he used his senses. He was a poet on a train that stopped at a platform. He looked and he listened and he recorded without words, just with his senses, everything that he could see, hear, perhaps even smell. He knew that he could be transformed by his relationship with his senses and the outside world, and that is something I think we as poets – we as mammals with language – should constantly be aware of. Even when we are not writing, we should attend to the work that our senses do for us on behalf of our poems.

At the beginning of my own journey as a poet, I don't think I was conscious of the advice I'm giving you now. When one is young, poetry tends to come in a rush, from emotion – perhaps a teenage love poem, or a university student's political protest. But as I read more – and this is why it's so important to read in order to write – I became aware of how important the senses are in poetry. I became aware that a heartbreak happens at a bus stop, that a bereavement will happen in a particular kind of weather. It could be ironic weather, the height of a beautiful summer, when you lose someone you love. Those things are important because they bring the world into the poem, as well as our humanity, an awareness of our place as physical animals in that world.

I became more and more attentive to my senses as I developed as a poet. I became conscious that I wanted to use my looking and my listening and my smelling in my words. In fact I wrote one poem that did this deliberately in looking back at school. Schools are fascinating organisations. There are the pupils who become friends or enemies and the teachers who change or ruin our lives. I had one terrific teacher called Mrs Tilscher whose classroom was very creative. She would put our drawings and poems up and bring things in to share with us, all kinds of glamorous things, it seemed to me as a child. I thought I would recreate that classroom: firstly as a tribute, because from the age of eleven I never saw Mrs Tilscher again, and secondly, to use my senses consciously in a poem, to see what that would reveal to me.

## IN MRS TILSCHER'S CLASS

*You could travel up the Blue Nile*
*with your finger, tracing the route*
*while Mrs Tilscher chanted the scenery.*
*Tana. Ethiopia. Khartoum. Aswân.*
*That for an hour, then a skittle of milk*
*and the chalky Pyramids rubbed into dust.*
*A window opened with a long pole.*
*The laugh of a bell swung by a running child.*

*This was better than home. Enthralling books.*
*The classroom glowed like a sweet shop.*
*Sugar paper. Coloured shapes. Brady and Hindley*
*faded, like the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake.*
*Mrs Tilscher loved you. Some mornings, you found*
*she'd left a good gold star by your name.*
*The scent of a pencil slowly, carefully, shaved.*
*A xylophone's nonsense heard from another form.*

*Over the Easter term, the inky tadpoles changed*
*from commas into exclamation marks. Three frogs*
*hopped in the playground, freed by a dunce,*
*followed by a line of kids, jumping and croaking*
*away from the lunch queue. A rough boy*
*told you how you were born. You kicked him, but stared*
*at your parents, appalled, when you got back home.*

*That feverish July, the air tasted of electricity.*
*A tangible alarm made you always untidy, hot,*
*fractious under the heavy, sexy sky. You asked her*
*how you were born and Mrs Tilscher smiled,*
*then turned away. Reports were handed out.*
*You ran through the gates, impatient to be grown,*
*as the sky split open into a thunderstorm.*

When I started that poem, I had no idea where it was going to end. I knew I wanted to use my senses to recreate this classroom, so I started with the kind of map reading where you would put your finger on the map and trace – in this case – a river. The teacher would shout out the name of the place your finger was passing: 'you're going past Ethiopia, you're going past Khartoum'. Then suddenly, it's playtime.

So what do I remember? I remember the free milk we got that looked like skittles, the classroom windows that had to be opened with a long, hooked pole, the clanging sound of the school bell rung in the playground for lunch. I remember the ugly greyish smudge that rubbing out a word in pencil makes. But the smudge, a mistake, then reminds me of the spoiling of childhood that was caused by the Moors murders, which happened around that time and that image allows a truthful darkness or foreshadowing to come into the poem. I remember a boy telling me the facts of life and then going home and asking my mum if it was true. 'Well yes,' she said, 'but you're a bit young to know that.' Then because there were five children in the house, I said to my mother: 'You mean you've done this five times?!'

This example shows how the images that came from my five senses led to things underneath the poem that I had never planned to write about and didn't know I was going to write about, right up to the end of the poem, which pushes me over the cliff-edge of puberty into sexual awareness.

## TAKEAWAYS

- A poem must be alive in a physical way as well as a cerebral way.
- Attend to the work that our senses do for us on behalf of our poems.
- Bring the world into the poem: an awareness of our place as physical animals in that world.

## EXERCISE

Pick a classroom you remember well. If a classroom doesn't feel right, then pick another familiar room or location, and write through it using your five senses. What could you see there, what could you hear, what could you smell? What could you touch? See where those five senses lead you – you'll be surprised at where you end up using that process. Be open to the dark as well as the light.

GLOSSARY*

***encomium***

*noun*

A speech or piece of writing that praises highly

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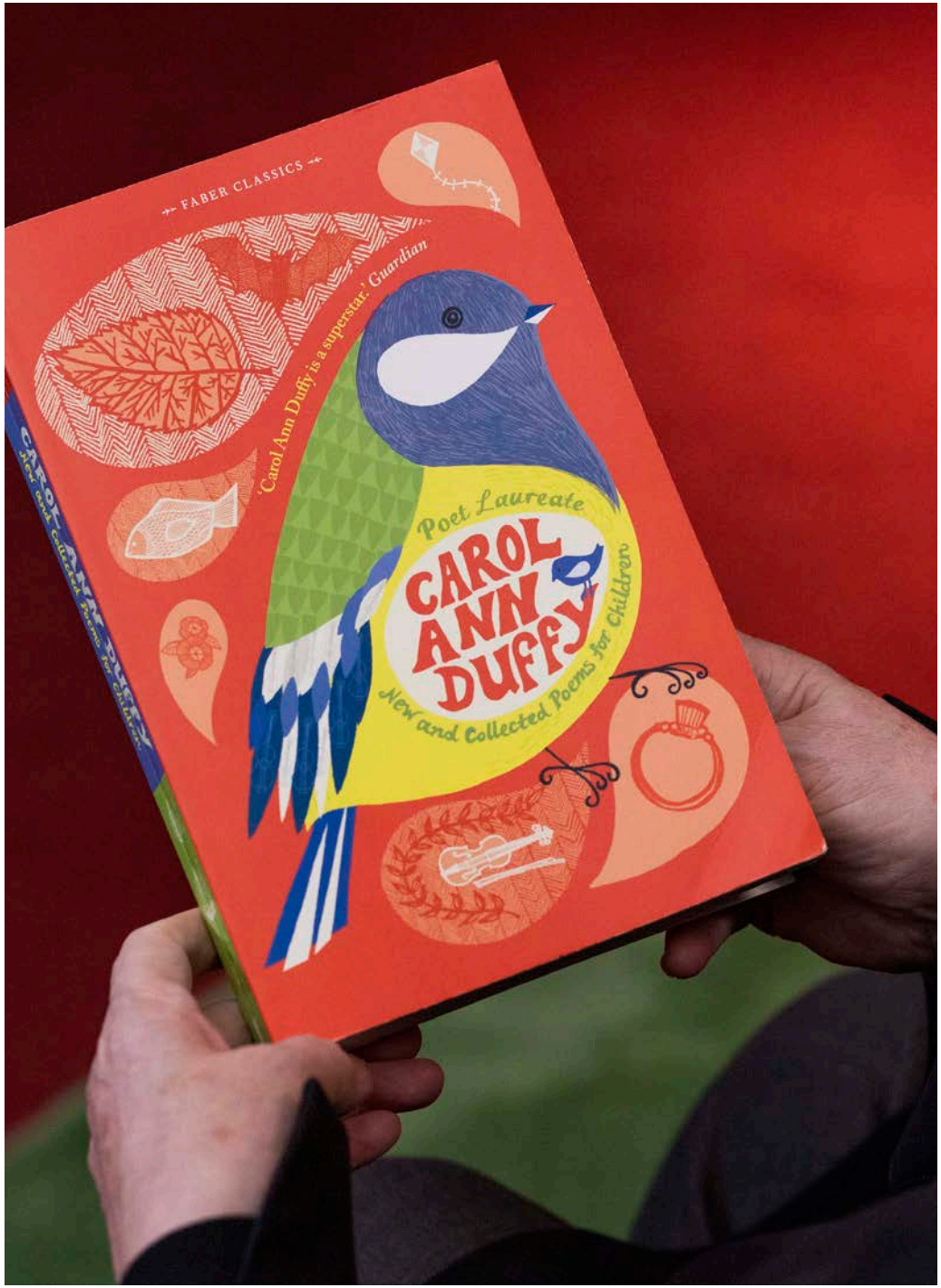

# 11. Coming To Your Senses: Weather

We've been talking about the necessity of using our five senses when we write poems. One thing our senses are always aware of is the weather.

Nothing happens nowhere. It matters what the weather is like when we are splitting up with our partner, for example. It would probably be more hurtful if it was a beautiful day and we were standing in sunshine with rainy hearts. Again, I want to suggest that we learn from our teachers, who are other poets, and again I turn to my anthology *The Map and the Clock*, simply because it covers so many centuries. Every one of the writers who features in it is aware of the weather.

Here, from a translation by James Carney of an early Irish work, is an extract from a poem called 'Writing Out of Doors', which is always a good idea.

> *A wall of forest looms above*
> *and sweetly the blackbird sings;*
> *all the birds make melody*
> *over me and my books and things.*

We can tell it's a nice day. There's the sweet song of a blackbird, the poet is outdoors under the canopy of the forest.

> *The Frost performs its secret ministry,*
> *Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry*
> *Came loud – and hark, again! loud as before.*
> *The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,*
> *Have left me to that solitude…*

Because he's alone in his solitude, pondering, the poet attends to the weather outside. I imagine that by the 'secret ministry' of the frost he means the patterns, the holdings and moments that the frost creates as it settles and chills on things.

One of my favourites of all the poems I know is 'Snow', by the marvellous Northern Irish poet, Louis MacNeice. I have this, as a Poems on the Underground poem, framed on my kitchen wall at home, simply because it means so much to me.

> **SNOW**
>
> *The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was*
> *Spawning snow and pink roses against it*
> *Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:*
> *World is suddener than we fancy it.*
>
> *World is crazier and more of it than we think,*
> *Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion*
> *A tangerine and spit the pips and feel*
> *The drunkenness of things being various.*
>
> *And the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world*
> *Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes –*
> *On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands –*
> *There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.*

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There's so much mystery in that poem. It has mysterious phrases. 'World is suddener than we fancy it.' What does the poet mean by that? I think he means the contradiction between the snowflakes and the pink roses, which we associate with finer weather. Why is the world crazy? Is it because of that juxtaposition, or the moment he becomes aware of the juxtaposition? He's heightened to his own multi-observational presence, *incorrigibly plural*. There's so much to notice and when he reaches the end of the poem he tells us how he experiences the world: on the tongue, on the eyes, on the ears, in the palms of one's hands, and then the almost mystical conclusion, 'there is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses'. What do you read into that?

There are so many poems that use the weather: W. H. Auden's famous 'Thank You, Fog', where he is at a house-party weekend and doesn't want to go back home on the Sunday night. Then, miraculously, the house is isolated by fog and no one can leave. Or Don Paterson's 'Rain', where he celebrates rain in the movies but goes deep into his own feelings, exploring sadness and melancholy.

Weather is hugely important to the writing of a poem. I often write outdoors like the anonymous medieval poet I quoted earlier. I take my notebook outside and I sit and write. It makes me aware not only of where I am – the birdsong around me and the aeroplanes annoying me overhead – but also of the air on my body and the clouds moving in the sky. These things enter into me and sometimes, perhaps, they come out through a poem. Sometimes we can find that the weather itself becomes a metaphor for what we want to write about. So rather than writing head on, we can write from within weather, or use weather to inform our words. This is a poem of mine, simply called 'The Rain', which is in fact a poem about getting older, and being bereaved.

**THE RAIN**

*That time will come*
*when it starts to rain*
*in your quiet room,*
*grief researching you;*
*its curious, small thumbs on your closed eyes,*
*on your pulse;*
*or smudging the ink of this,*
*or dipping into that glass of wine.*
*The moment stammers.*

*Too intimate,*
*relentless biographer*
*poring over your ruined books,*
*persistent, till every surface is soaked*
*as though you lamented, night and day,*
*for a lifetime;*
*or were penned, invented.*
*Leave the room to the rain…*

*the clock's hands float*
*on its drowned face*
*and photographs swim from their frames*
*and hours are sorrow, rain, rain, sorrow…*
*why climb the stairs to lie down there,*
*be drenched, tasted, known*
*by the pitiless rain?*
*You have dead parents.*

The poem is an elegy.

The world speaks to us without words. One way it does so is through weather. We don't have to always go to books, dictionaries and other poems to learn, although that's part of it: we can learn from the world itself. We can attend to what the weather is telling us.

At the moment, one only has to turn on the news to see that the weather is warning us. The weather is saying: 'Stop!' Whether we attend to this, or listen to these warnings, is a whole other matter. But as individual poets, we should be aware that the weather is a language of the world. We can listen to it. We can learn from it. And we can find words with which to answer.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Nothing happens nowhere. Be attentive to the presence of place.
- The world speaks to us without words. Be attentive to what the weather has to say.

## EXERCISE

Take your notebook outside. Be aware not only of where you are – the sounds around you, engaging or annoying – but also the air on your face, the clouds moving in the sky. Let these things enter you. Make notes. Do those disparate impressions begin to cohere? Do they speak only of themselves, or of other things too?

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# 12. Coming To Your Senses: Love Poems

Nowhere are our senses more acute than when we fall in love. We undergo a chemical change in our bodies. We produce oxytocin, or the love hormone. The poetry equivalent of oxytocin is the love poem.

Poets are probably best known and sought out for the love poems they've written. I myself have produced two collections of love poetry. The first was the anthology *Hand in Hand*, for which I asked around sixty poets to choose a poem written by another poet as their touchstone, or starting point. This was prompted by my discovery that one of the most famous love poems in the English language, 'How Do I Love Thee?', had been written by Elizabeth Barrett to her then lover and fellow poet, Robert Browning. So it was a female poet writing to a male poet that gave me the idea for this project.

When we fall in love it's often to our poets that we turn, sending a book of poems to the beloved. In the Woody Allen movie *Hannah And Her Sisters* the adulterous husband carefully copies out the e. e. cummings poem 'somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond', which ends with the entrancing line, 'nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands'. Poets often begin by writing love poems, just as I did as a teenager. For others, conversely, it's the crowning of their work, as we saw earlier with Donne and his extraordinary poem, 'The Flea'.

My second collection of love poems was a more autobiographical project called *Rapture*, which I wrote over the course of a year and which tells the story of a love affair from its beginnings right through to its end. There are fifty-two poems and each has a one-word title, such as 'You', 'Text', 'Name', 'Forest', 'River', 'Our', 'Rain', 'Absence', 'World', 'Row', and 'Tea'. The reason for this is that I wanted each poem to be focused on a single moment. For me, a poem is like a pearl in an oyster. A little bit of grit enters the poetic consciousness, and works and worries away until the pearl of the poem is produced. So this is a deeply personal collection. I don't name the sexes of the two lovers or place the poetry in any recognisable landscape. Instead I use mythic settings – a forest, a river, the moon. Sometimes I point out the difficulty of writing. In 'Syntax', I start the poem with 'I want to call you thou'. In the twenty-first century this is something we can't do, but we can still yearn for a heightened language to match the heightened experience of love.

I think the love poem is the most challenging to write, because there's always the danger of tipping into sentimental song lyric – 'I love you, yeah, yeah, yeah.' So how do we avoid cliché? Firstly, be aware of it. Be conscious of your words (in a later lesson we will focus on drafting and redrafting). Scrutinise your poems. Don't go for the obvious, the first phrase that comes to mind, or if you do use a cliché, revitalise it.

There's a tiny poem by Roger McGough called 'Love poem to a married woman'. That's the title, and this is the whole poem:

> *Your finger*
> *sadly*
> *has a familiar*
> *ring about it.*

McGough uses a cliché – 'familiar ring' – but makes it live again through the pun of a wedding ring on the woman's finger. So being alive to the words you're

using to construct the poem is essential. It doesn't matter how particular the incident you mention, as long as you feel confident that all lovers could relate to that poem. An example from *Rapture* is the poem 'Tea', which is simply about the everyday act of making a cup of tea for the beloved. When we're in love, the most ordinary things seem miraculous. In the same collection I write about seeing the person I'm in love with and the way that even the air around them seems famous – we bestow upon the beloved a glamour and magic that they don't actually possess but in our heightened state of adoration, they seem to do so.

> **TEA**
>
> *I like pouring your tea, lifting*
> *the heavy pot, and tipping it up,*
> *so the fragrant liquid steams in your china cup.*
>
> *Or when you're away, or at work,*
> *I like to think of your cupped hands as you sip,*
> *as you sip, of the faint half-smile of your lips.*
>
> *I like the questions – sugar? milk? –*
> *and the answers I don't know by heart, yet,*
> *for I see your soul in your eyes, and I forget.*
>
> *Jasmine, Gunpowder, Assam, Earl Grey, Ceylon,*
> *I love tea's names. Which tea would you like? I say,*
> *but it's any tea for you, please, any time of day,*
>
> *as the women harvest the slopes,*
> *for the sweetest leaves, on Mount Wu-Yi,*
> *and I am your lover, smitten, straining your tea.*

The reader can be in no doubt that I, as the writer of the poem, am smitten but I put all my smitten-ness into the image of making a cup of tea. I push it to the limit. I make a litany of names – Jasmine, Assam – and make them prayer-like, spell-like, blessing-like. I go further. I imagine where the tea is picked on a mountain. I picture the women who are picking the leaves for this tea. I go beyond the banal to impose on making a cup of tea the electric feeling of being in love.

Perhaps one reason love poetry is difficult to write is because of its long history, its motifs and associations. We think of the moon. We think of flowers. We have Burns saying 'my love is like a red, red rose'. Yet we also have Shakespeare saying his mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun. Shakespeare is clearly aware of the dangers of the easy love poem. I think sometimes we write with a kind of self-critic next to us, a person who's our poetry policewoman, if you like. If we're droning on about how divine the beloved is, we're being interrogated by a voice in our head saying, *cliché, boring*, and we know we need to make it new, make it fresh.

If you want to write a love poem, I would advise you to think hard about the pitfalls of cliché. Which is exactly what I did in my poem, 'Valentine'.

I wanted to write a Valentine poem but also to surprise myself with it – never mind whoever was going to receive the poem. On this particular day I happened to be writing at the kitchen table, thinking of the tokens and greetings cards people exchange on Valentine's Day, when my eye fell on a bowl of onions. I picked one up. As I did so I remembered a line from Shakespeare, 'mine eyes smell onion; I shall weep anon'. Something clicked in my mind.

I cut the onion in half, peeled it and looked at it. I thought about how Shakespeare says onions can make us cry. But sometimes alas, so can love. Love isn't always smooth and happily-ever-after. I thought the onion would be the perfect, truthful, Valentine's gift.

**VALENTINE**

*Not a red rose or a satin heart.*

*I give you an onion.*
*It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.*
*It promises light*
*like the careful undressing of love.*

*Here.*
*It will blind you with tears*
*like a lover.*
*It will make your reflection*
*a wobbling photo of grief.*

*I'm trying to be truthful.*

*Not a cute card or a kissogram.*

*I give you an onion.*
*Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,*
*possessive and faithful*
*as we are,*
*for as long as we are.*

*Take it.*
*Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding-ring,*
*if you like.*
*Lethal.*
*Its scent will cling to your fingers,*
*cling to your knife.*

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So we have tea, an onion and in John Donne's poem, a flea, an insect that bites you and sucks your blood. These aren't romantic images but they show the mind of the poet, alert to everything that can come to the service of love. That awareness, a willingness to see everything as available to the cause of the poem, is one vital way of guarding against cliché.

As poets, we come to the poem because we feel deeply. We assume that our readers will share these feelings and want them expressed in words. We must also realise that as both writers and readers, we experience the world physically. We must never forget to bring our senses into our language.

## TAKEAWAYS

- A poet must see everything as available to the service of writing poetry.
- Avoid cliché or over-used phrases which may sound too familiar or tired.
- To write a love poem, you don't have to use the word 'love'.

## EXERCISE

Write a love poem. Be conscious of the words you choose. Scrutinise your poem. Don't go for the obvious, the first phrase that comes to mind, or if you do use a cliché, revitalise it. Remember that love is best expressed through your loving attention to detail.

# 13. The World We Live In: Up Close

In previous lessons we have gathered our resources – memory, imagination, experience, physical senses – including our notebooks, where these resources have been amassed but, at some point, all poets have to come to the page.

What do we need to put on that page? We need words which will make a poem. We need to think of the texture of our words. Imagine a set of old-fashioned weighing scales. The subject of the poem is in one scale and alongside it is an empty scale to which we must add our language. It must balance as closely as possible, so that there is equivalence between content and form.

In this lesson I am going to focus on getting up close to our subject, taking the work of Elizabeth Bishop as the first of three examples.

Bishop might be perceived as the poet's poet, read widely by poets for her powers of observation. Here is an extract from her poem, 'At the Fish Houses'. I have never been to a fish house. I have no knowledge or experience of what she is writing about. But all of that changes when I read these lines.

*The air smells so strong of codfish*
*it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.*
*The five fish houses have steeply peaked roofs*
*and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up*
*to storerooms in the gables*
*for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.*
*All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,*
*swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,*
*is opaque, but the silver of the benches,*
*the lobster pots, and masts, scattered*
*among the wild jagged rocks,*
*is of an apparent translucence*
*like the small old buildings with an emerald moss*
*growing on their shoreward walls.*
*The big fish tubs are completely lined*
*with layers of beautiful herring scales*
*and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered*
*with creamy iridescent coats of mail,*
*with small iridescent flies crawling on them.*

What Bishop does here, near the beginning of this poem, is to detail what she can see and smell around her. The language she uses brings the scene to life as if it were a painting or a photograph.

Getting up close to your subject is a different way of seeing. You're not standing apart, or separating yourself from it. It's almost as though you are looking through a microscope. You can see more and the more you see the more you will go on into that subject and perhaps then out the other side of it. If you have time, read the whole of Bishop's poem. It ends in a spiritual revelation too long to go into here but you'll see her journey through the poem. As we all must be, she is precise and careful with her language. She chooses the right words for colour. She makes her eyes water with the smell of the fish. She observes the slimy green moss on the walls. These are physical ways of using language. A painter will apply paint, not only choosing the colour but deciding how thick it will be on the canvas and whether or not to scumble* it. In the same way, the subject here is recreated in the words selected by the poet.

We'll come later to ways of shaping these words. Bishop effectively organises her observations in a list, which is in itself a form. Other poets choose vessels to pour their words into: a sonnet, or quatrain*, or couplet. That choice will depend on what the poet feels the subject needs to contain it. For now, we are thinking about looking closely and finding the right words for that fine observation.

When we write up close it teaches us to think more carefully about the words we use, as Bishop did, in seeking out the fishiest words for her poem. That may encourage us to think of the best vocabulary for all our subjects, not only the up-close ones. Which in turn may help us find what we poets are always looking for: freedom – an imaginative leap beyond the words. An example is a wonderful poem by Edwin Morgan, one of my favourite poets. He was so inventive. You must get your hands on his *Collected Poems*, just to see the range of his work.

Morgan was a Scottish poet. He lived in Glasgow. He once said that the national beast of Scotland is the midge and he was correct. Anyone who's ever been to Scotland will know that you can be plagued by midges. But I think having made that kind of joke led him to look at the midge itself and write a poem. He goes further than Bishop did. Bishop is looking closely but Morgan looks so closely that he enters the midge and is able to write as the queen of the midges. Here is the beginning of this very funny poem.

**MIDGE**

*The evening is perfect, my sisters.*
*The loch lies silent, the air is still.*
*The sun's last rays linger over the water*
*and there is faint smirr, almost a smudge*
*of summer rain. Sisters, I smell supper,*
*and what is more perfect than supper?*
*It is emerging from the wood,*
*in twos and threes, a dozen in all,*
*making such a chatter and a clatter*
*as it reaches the rocky shore,*
*admiring the arrangements of the light.*
*See the innocents, my sisters,*
*the clumsy ones, the laughing ones,*
*the rolled-up sleeves and the flapping shorts,*
*there is even a kilt…*

Here, Morgan surely enters truthfully the psyche of the midge. The midges see us walking towards them. They are delighted at the shorts – easier access to the blood – and delighted at the sight of a kilt – easier to crawl up and suck away. I think that could only have been written by getting close, perhaps even by being bitten by midges and suffering for one's art, but the poet then takes a leap of faith – a leap of great bravado – to write a quite extraordinary poem in the voice of a midge.

Some might say that it's difficult now to write about the natural world with the innocence of the past because we face a real crisis. Today, there are terrible things happening all over the world. Poetry about the natural world shouldn't be a fantasy. It should speak the same harsh truths as does the natural world itself. Indeed the history of poetry reflects our history in general. After the catastrophe of the First World War, for example, poetry began to fracture in sympathy with the brokenness of the world. We saw the development of Modernism*, because the idyll of earlier poetry no longer served to engage with modern reality.

But naming remains important. Like Bishop, whose senses brought her to the page, we are bearing witness. We are saying, yes: I've noticed, I've listened. I've been still and haven't written anything but now I must come to the paper and find the words that do justice to what I'm looking at.

In 1783 a volcano erupted, darkening the skies all over Europe so that there was a permanent night. In those days it would have been perceived as a disaster on the scale of one we face now. A ten-year-old boy, called Luke Howard, was appalled and terrified by the effects of this volcano and spent his days looking up at the sky. Eventually, he would have seen the sun come back and the light return but his fear developed in him a habit of observing, and through doing so he became the first person to name the shapes of clouds. We poets can think of Luke as an example. He didn't write anything, he simply looked and looked. But eventually, he came to his page and he wrote.

I wrote this little poem just about him.

### LUKE HOWARD, NAMER OF CLOUDS

*Eldezar and Asama Yama, 1783,*
*erupted violently; a* ***Great Fogg***
*blending incredible skies over Europe.*
*In London, Luke Howard was ten.*
*The sky's lad then.*

*Smitten,*
*he stared up evermore; saw*
*a meteor's fiery spurt,*
*the clamouring stars;*
*what the moon wouldn't do;*
*but loved clouds most –*
*dragons and unicorns;*
*Hamlet's camels, weasels and whales;*
*the heads of heroes;*
*the sword of Excalibur, lit*
*by the setting sun.*
***Mackerel sky,***
***mackerel sky, not long wet,***
***not long dry.***

*And knew*
*love goes naming,*
*even a curl of hair – thus, Cirrus.*
*Cumulus. Stratus. Nimbus.*

The phrase ‘love goes naming’ expresses what I feel about poetry. Love goes naming, and that is what poetry seeks to do. It seeks to name, however difficult the naming is, and however challenging it might be. Poetry is love in language, a form of love in words.

How do these examples help us as we sit in front of our blank piece of paper? With her scales, Bishop found a visceral* language that painted in words. I could smell the fish houses. Morgan finds a language that not only describes his subject but allows him to enter into it and to speak in the voice of a midge. In my poem, written out of a natural disaster in the eighteenth century, a young boy begins for the first time to find names for the shapes of clouds.

All three examples use language in different ways and we will continue to find ways of using language on that empty page, in the next lesson focusing not on the natural world but rather on where most of us live: in towns and cities.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Poetry is love in language, a form of love in words.
- In poetry there should be an equivalence between form and content.

## EXERCISE

Bishop sought out the fishiest words for her poem. Choose a subject to write about. Then seek out the vocabulary to match it. Look closely. Research. Find the exact shade, sound, texture. Make a list. Be particular. Do not write in a general way. Use specific, concrete terms. Start your poem...

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> “At some point, all poets have to come to the page.

GLOSSARY*

**scumble**

*verb*

To soften the colour or outline of a painting by applying a thin layer of opaque coating

**quatrain**

*noun*

A verse of four lines, often rhyming in alternate lines

**Modernism**

*noun*

The ideas and methods of modern art, especially from the 1920s onwards

**visceral**

*adjective, metaphorical*

Relating to a response based on emotion or instinct rather than thought

# 14. The World We Live In: Towns & Cities

Most of us live in towns or cities not the idyllic, pastoral landscapes of the past, which arguably are scarce to find in the twenty-first century. I live in Manchester. Before that I lived in London and before that, Liverpool, so the city is my background as a poet.

Wordsworth started his famous poem 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' with the line: 'Earth has not any thing to show more fair.' I suggest that it would be impossible to write that poem now. We know our rivers are polluted. We can't even look at a river without thinking of what we are doing to the environment. Perhaps idealising or celebrating the perfection of nature simply isn't possible anymore. Take this simple quatrain by Adrian Mitchell, where love provides consolation in the ugliness of the city:

> **CELIA, CELIA**
>
> *When I am sad and weary*
> *When I think all hope has gone*
> *When I walk along High Holborn*
> *I think of you with nothing on.*

I said in the last lesson that poetry changed radically after the First World War. Not only did the poets of that War tell the truth about what it was like to be gassed or to see men dying, choking on their own blood, but poetry itself intuited that it must fracture in accordance with the fracturing of the world such as in T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. In this lesson too we are thinking about putting the right kind of language on our balancing scales to match the subject matter.

Eliot began to use the city as a way to think about the dislocation that was occurring in the world. The opening lines of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' express a despair that emanates from the city. The poet's feelings must find the right words with which to balance the scales.

> *Let us go then, you and I,*
> *When the evening is spread out against the sky*
> *Like a patient etherised upon a table;*
> *Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,*
> *The muttering retreats*
> *Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels*
> *And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:*
> *Streets that follow like a tedious argument*
> *Of insidious intent*
> *To lead you to an overwhelming question…*

The world we live in now is barely intelligible. I don't know, for example, where my food comes from. I don't know how my mobile works. If I send a text I don't know how it gets to the other phone within seconds. Our poetry needs to find language that reflects that strangeness, the trauma of living in the modern world.

One might well ask how our language can make any sense of this world, let alone allow us to write about it. To which I would respond with the word 'streetwise'. The urban landscape is lively and challenging and in writing from the city, of the city, we need to bring that liveliness into our vocabulary, our syntax, our rhythms. We need to bring all that clamour and glamour into the music of the poem.

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The music of being human in the city is very different from the music of a poem that arises out of a rural landscape. As always, we need to find the right words to put down on our page. It doesn't matter if those words are slang, it doesn't matter where they come from. We simply have to find the rhythms that will give the city life on the page.

In this poem 'Bagpipe Muzak, Glasgow 1990', Liz Lochhead is writing about when Glasgow became the UK City of Culture and the ensuing commercialism, with everyone trying to make a buck out of it.

> *When A. and R. men hit the street*
> *To sign up every second band they meet*
> *Then marketing men will spill out spiel*
> *About how us Glesca folk are really* ***real***
> *(Where once they used to fear and pity*
> *These days they glamorise and patronise our city –*
> *Accentwise, once they could hear bugger all*
> *That was not low, glottal or guttural,*
> *Now we've 'kudos', incident'ly*
> *And the Patter's street-smart, strictly state-of-the-art,*
> *And our oaths are user-friendly).*

This is 1990. The words that Liz was putting down on her empty page, such as 'kudos', were new words in a poem, just as her extended aside about how the Glasgow accent used to be disparaged was new content. All of it, absolutely right for her subject matter. So if we are looking for guides among our poets, then we should also attend to the relatively recent explosion of poetry that is coming out of cities.

There is no room here for hierarchical value judgements about the jangly city being inferior to the more tranquil countryside. Poetry seeks always to add to the world. No poem is without its elements of celebration and language is always changing. Shakespeare spoke in the language of his time but he also invented words – it is to Shakespeare that we owe the word 'flibbertigibbet'*, for example. So we must never think that street language is somehow less. There is no drawer of words labelled 'poetic'. Of course street language is poetic. It is part of our raw material. One of the paints on our palette. You can and will make your poem out of whatever language you choose to put on that page. Nor need we look far to find poets indivisible from their industrial towns and cities: Philip Larkin in Hull and Coventry, Roy Fisher in Birmingham (who once famously said that 'Birmingham is what I think with'), Linton Kwesi Johnson in London, Simon Armitage in Huddersfield and Jackie Kay in Glasgow – all of them dedicated to finding words to put on the page for what they know of their city.

I lived in Liverpool for over ten years and I used to go to watch Liverpool play at Anfield. I was in Liverpool the weekend of the Hillsborough Stadium disaster. I remember the great bell of the Anglican cathedral ringing once every minute ninety-six times for those who had been lost. Yet it wasn't until twenty-five years later that a Hillsborough poem surfaced in my mind, when the bereaved families finally achieved a verdict in court which ruled that their loved ones had been unlawfully killed. This poem had been lying in wait to be written. It took time for me to find the right words for the city to weigh in my scale.

**LIVERPOOL**

*The Cathedral bell, tolled, could never tell;*
*nor the Liver Birds, mute in their stone spell;*
*or the Mersey, though seagulls wailed, cursed, overhead,*
*in no language for the slandered dead…*

*not the raw, red throat of the Kop, keening,*
*or the cops' words, censored of meaning;*
*not the clock, slow handclapping the coroner's deadline,*
*or the memo to Thatcher, or the tabloid headline…*

*but fathers told of their daughters; the names of sons*
*on the lips of their mothers were prayers; lost ones*
*honoured for bitter years by orphan, cousin, wife –*
*not a matter of football, but of life.*

*Over this great city, light after long dark;*
*and truth, the sweet silver song of the lark.*

I'll talk about form in another lesson but it's worth mentioning in passing that this poem is a sonnet. I chose that form, which has rhyme and metre in it, because I think sonnets are easy to memorise, a bit like prayers, which felt right for the subject matter.

Look up close to find the words for what you see. You may well be in a town or city but then again you could be on a ship. If you're on a ship, you need a briny word palette in your notebook, and something airy if you're on an aeroplane. The words you choose to put on your page have to fit with where you are and what you're looking at so closely.

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## TAKEAWAYS

- The music of the city is different to the music of the country, but one is not inferior to the other.
- The poet's feelings must find the right words with which to balance the scales.
- It may take time for a poem to surface. Stay tuned.

## EXERCISE

Treat the urban with the same respect as you would the rural and seek out the language that fits it best. Look closely. Research. Find the exact sound, smell and texture of the streets. Make a list. Be particular. Do not write in a general way. Use specific, concrete terms. Where are you? Make your reader feel what it's like to be there. Start your poem…

GLOSSARY*

**flibbertigibbet**
*noun*
A frivolous, flighty, person

See also appendix

# 15. Time: Receiving The Baton

I keep using this phrase 'the music of being human' to offer some idea of my definition of poetry. The word 'being' itself is very important. Arguably, most people write poems to understand or explain their own being, like an interrogation of being alive.

I also keep emphasising that in order to write, we must read, and that's because every poet offers something distinct. Each poet will have a different back story. Each poet will have different concerns, different music, different beings – and different approaches to being human.

Shakespeare's famous sonnet, 'Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day', ends with this couplet:

> *So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,*
> *So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

What he is saying is not only that the woman or man celebrated in the sonnet will live on in the words of the poem hundreds of years after the death of the lovers but also that the poem itself is living. 'So long lives this': the lines of his sonnet will live on. In this way dead poets speak to us across time through their poems, and they particularly speak to other poets, who are engaged in that same endeavour and business of trying to make a poem.

I'd like to introduce you to another wonderful poem by Elizabeth Bishop, whom we first met at the Fish Houses. This poem is in the form of a villanelle*. There are probably two very famous villanelles that most people who read poetry know. One by Dylan Thomas to his father, 'Do not go gentle into that good night', and Bishop's 'One Art'. A villanelle repeats lines and weaves them throughout the three-line verses of the poem in a kind of pattern. Bishop talks about her life, her lived life, and what she has lost in that life and blames herself for some of those losses. It might be a relationship or a house or a country; she's trying to find a way to endure that loss. If you look at the end of her poem, just as Shakespeare intimates at the end of his sonnet, her way of coping, like his, is to write a poem.

> **ONE ART**
>
> *The art of losing isn't hard to master;*
> *so many things seem filled with the intent*
> *to be lost that their loss is no disaster.*
>
> *Lose something every day. Accept the fluster*
> *of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.*
> *The art of losing isn't hard to master.*
>
> *Then practise losing farther, losing faster:*
> *places, and names, and where it was you meant*
> *to travel. None of these will bring disaster.*
>
> *I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or*
> *next-to-last, of three loved houses went.*
> *The art of losing isn't hard to master.*
>
> *I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,*
> *some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.*
> *I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.*
>
> *– Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture*
> *I love), I shan't have lied. It's evident*
> *the art of losing's not too hard to master*
> *though it may look like (**Write** it!) like disaster.*

The villanelle is a fun form to practise. It's not one that I've used particularly in my work, probably because I could never come up with two good enough lines, but it is often set in workshops and certainly worth having a go at.

I'm saying two things here, to you as a poet. One is to be aware of your responsibility to time, because what are you writing about if not your own journey through time? Everything we've talked about, all the ammunition we've been amassing as material for poetry – memory, autobiography, the senses, place, where we live and looking closely – has to do with and is steeped in the passage of time. There isn't much else to write about other than how you've responded to the events of your own life. The second is to be aware of your responsibility to the poets who preceded you, and who will come after you. For my own part, I would hope that something I've written might one day be of use to a young poet yet to come to the blank page. Poetry to me is like a baton passed down through the centuries, so we not only learn the shapes and experiments of other poets, but also that we too have a responsibility to be inventive. Or as Picasso put it: refer and inaugurate.

I was reading an interview with the brilliantly inventive Irish poet, Paul Muldoon, who now lives and teaches in New York. He was saying that if he already knows what he's doing when writing a poem, then the reader also will know what he's doing, so what's the point? I agree with that: a poem must be its own journey that surprises even the writer. There would be no point in my writing a sonnet in the manner of Shakespeare because I don't have anything to add to the work of that towering genius. There would be a point, however, in my taking the form of the sonnet and doing something fresh with it, roughing it up a bit, perhaps, to discover what might happen if I break those old rules. I need to embark on the mystery of the poem, not knowing where the first line is going to take me, before I can add anything new to poetry through time.

In 2014, I put together an anthology to mark a hundred years since the First World War. I approached it by doing exactly what I'm now encouraging you to do: I asked contemporary poets to choose a First World War text and respond to it across time. Simply that: to respond. The poem I chose was by Wilfred Owen, perhaps the greatest of the First World War poets, about men going off to war and being waved off by their families, by women and children, and ending with only a handful of these men returning. My response to that poem is about time. Our understanding of time as humans is linear, so that we only ever experience, as Shakespeare would put it, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. We can remember yesterday but we can't live time in any way other than forwards.

The truth is, I think time is stranger than that. I wouldn't be able to scientifically describe what I mean but in the poem below I am trying to work out what I mean when I say time is stranger than simply linear. So although I didn't know it when I wrote it, the poem taught me something, which is what you should be looking for in your own writing of poems. You want to be able to discover something, not only in the time it takes to write the poem and redraft it but in the poetic journey you make that takes you somewhere unexpected.

My response to Wilfred Owen is called 'An Unseen'. An unseen is what we call a poem in an examination, like an A-level or GCSE examination, where the student has to talk about a poem that they have never seen before, but I also mean 'unseen' in relation to time and 'unseen' in relation to how my poem is going to end.

**AN UNSEEN**

*I watched love leave, turn, wave, want not to go,*
*depart, return;*
*late spring, a warm slow blue of air, old-new.*
*Love was here; not; missing, love was there;*
*each look, first, last.*

*Down the quiet road, away, away, towards*
*the dying time,*
*love went, brave soldier, the song dwindling;*
*walked to the edge of absence; all moments going,*
*gone; bells through rain*

*to fall on the carved names of the lost. I saw*
*love's child uttered,*
*unborn, only by rain, then and now, all future*
*past, an unseen. Has forever been then? Yes,*
*forever has been.*

In a previous lesson I discussed my poem, 'Liverpool', about the Hillsborough Stadium disaster and explained that although I had been in the city the weekend of that tragedy the poem didn't surface for a further two decades. It was as though the experience had entered me but needed time to settle, to embed itself in my human and poetic memory and was finally prompted into being by the families' persistence in getting, as near as they could, a fair result from the inquest. In other words, a current event provoked a poem about a past event. Few poems are written on the hoof. You often don't write immediately in response to what's happening to you, or what's happening to other people, or where you've been, or what's on the news. Poetry isn't journalism. It isn't twenty-four hour rolling news. Poetry uses language in an altogether different way from prose, from news, from radio. Although it uses common speech, and must do so, poetry distils.

That said, of course many poets will want to respond to circumstances urgently and immediately. I have done so myself. I've seen something that so traumatises or outrages me that I've written poems quickly, all in a rush. Such poems are valid too. The bottom line is that there are no rules, no 'you can do this' and 'you can't do that'. What I am trying to explore here is simply the relationship of poetry to time, whether in the here-and-now or reaching back into the depths of the past.

It is not just the writing of poems that is defined by time but the reading too. As I said in an earlier lesson, 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' meant one thing to me as a teenager and something quite different forty years later. Poems change just as we change and we are many selves. I'm not the same person I was when I was sixteen. I'm not the same person I was when I was thirty-five. I am the person I am now. Things have happened to me, relationships have come and gone, I became a parent, I lost my own parents. I'm not the same person but I must always write out of the person I am at this time, now.

I know I have also said that I can write looking back in time, and that I can write about times I have no experience of, that I can look back at a moment in history that speaks to me and write about it. This is not a contradiction. Subjects can reach out across time and fascinate the poet, but the poet will still engage with those subjects by writing from the perspective of the person they are now. After all, there is no other way for us to write.

## TAKEAWAY

- Be aware of your responsibility to the poets who preceded and will come after you.

## EXERCISE

Each time you read a poem that you enjoy, pause to reflect on what you might write if called upon to answer, to engage in dialogue with that poet, your predecessor. Jot down a few ideas in your notebook.

GLOSSARY*

**villanelle**

*noun*

A lyrical poem with only two rhymes with lines repeated throughout

See also appendix.

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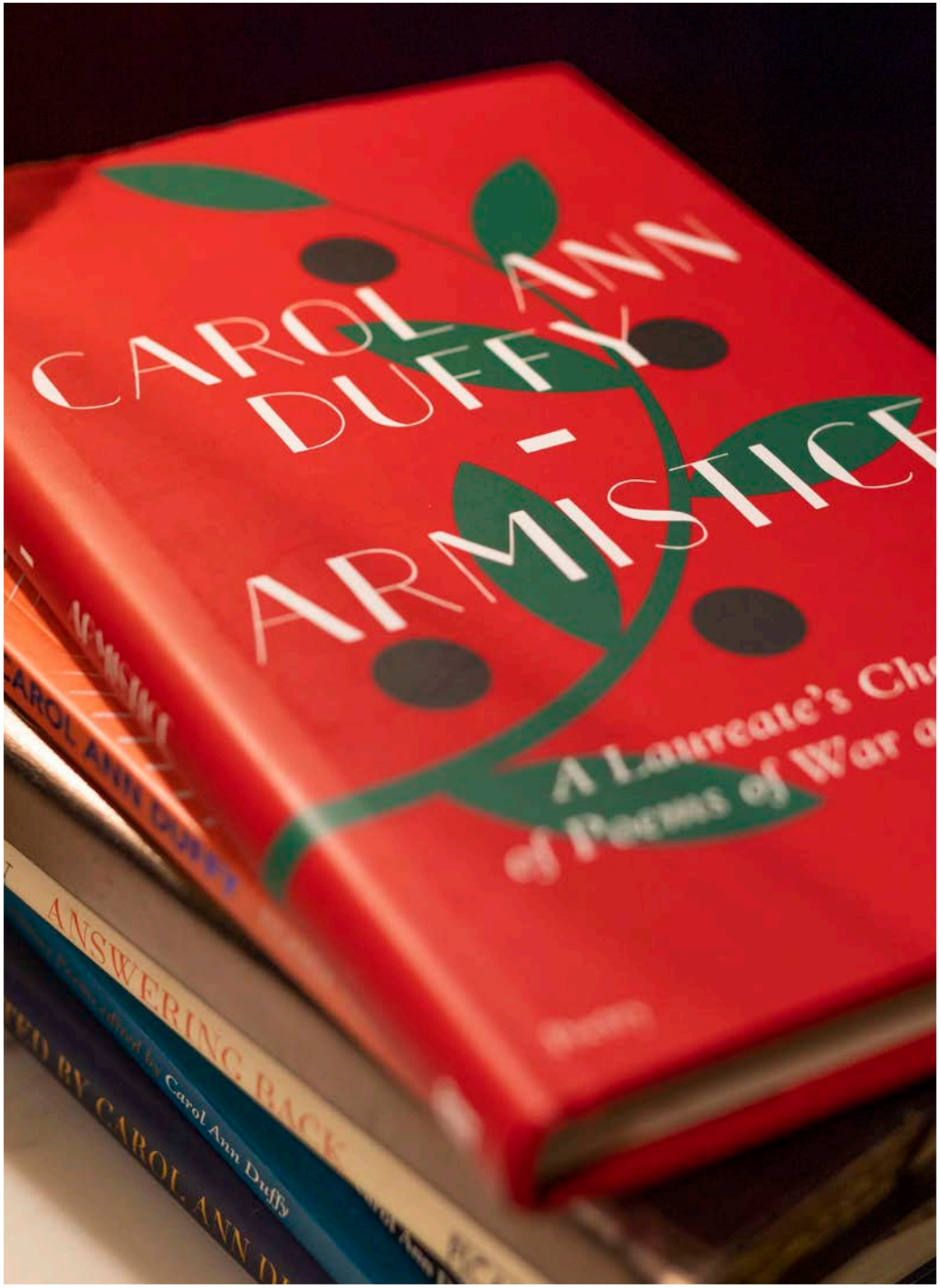

# 16. Time: A Year In Your Life

So far we've been thinking mostly about your journey into poetry: the things you can gather around you, and think about, and read, and keep in your notebook. But now we are beginning to plan your journey into the individual poem. To better equip you for this, we are going to look at ways of thinking about time.

In the same way that poets must be somewhere and their poems situated in place, so too must they be *somewhen*, and situated in time. We have to think about when as well as where. Time is a complicated and important subject in the writing of a poem.

For me, the essence of poetry is this relationship with time, which probably also defines the overriding arc of my work.

I had a public role as a poet for ten years as Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom and when Queen Elizabeth II had been on the throne for sixty years, which was practically the whole of my life, I wondered how to commemorate that. The easy option would have been simply to write a poem myself; job done, box ticked. Instead, I invited sixty poets to contribute an original poem to an anthology called *Jubilee Lines*, allocating each poet a designated year according to their age – there was no point giving 1962 to a 25-year-old poet. In fact, 1962 went to Brian Patten, one of the Liverpool Poets, who transformed British poetry in the Sixties by bringing to it that sense of pop music and rock'n'roll in the way the Beat Poets had done with jazz in America.

Brian was sixteen in 1962 and what I noticed, reading this twelve-line poem, is that already as a poet he is aware of other poets. Already as a teenager in Liverpool he is thinking of poems from the past – in this case, specifically, the Spanish poet Lorca – as providing him with maps for his own poetic journey.

**1962**
**SIXTEEN**

*Sixteen, Rimbaud and Whitman my heroes*
*'PS I Love You' playing in the loud cafés*
*In a Canning Street basement Adrian Henri*
*Painting* ***The Entry of Christ*** *into Liverpool*

*Adrift in an attic, in an ark buoyant with longings,*
*A map drawn by Garcia Lorca open before me*
*There was nothing that was not possible*
*Nothing that could not be reinvented*

*Ah poetry, at sixteen*
*Words smelled of tulips and marigolds*
*Their fumes made sentences*
*That the bees stole for themselves*

Not only does Patten recognise that the poets and poems of the past are our guides, he also apprehends that in poetry there is nothing that could not be reinvented. I think that is remarkable in a teenage poet.

So what I want to suggest is that you too might choose a year from your own life. You could go back to your teenage years, or your childhood, for something personal, or consider something more recent, and perhaps public. Consider, for example, Thomas Hardy's great poem, 'The Convergence of the Twain', written in 1912 about the Titanic, with the iceberg and the ship fated to collide, a metaphor of Hardy and his wife heading for a collision in their relationship. Or 'Easter,

1916’ by W. B. Yeats, who was so deeply affected by the Irish Republican uprising against British rule. Or the moving and elegiac ‘The Names’, by the darkly humorous American Poet Laureate, Billy Collins, composed in response to 9/11, which closes with the tragic line: ‘so many names, there is barely room on the walls of the heart’.

Remember how I said that the most successful poetic journeys take you to a place different to the one you set out from? I’m fairly certain that when Hardy wrote his poem about the Titanic he wasn’t anticipating that it would shadow the tragedy of his marriage and that when Billy Collins was required to memorialise 9/11 he didn’t know he would arrive at the walls of the heart. So be open to where your poem takes you. Surprise yourself. And if you surprise yourself, you will also surprise your reader.

## TAKEAWAY

- Nothing happens *nowhen*. Be aware of your responsibility to time.

## EXERCISE

Choose a year from your own life. You could go back to your teenage years or childhood for something personal, or consider something more recent, perhaps public. Be open to where your poem takes you. Surprise yourself – surprise your reader.

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# 17. Time: Writing Backwards

I sometimes find it useful to think of poetry in terms of cinema. If we go to the movies we're so literate at watching a film that we don't blink at a flashback, or a fast-forward, or parallel narratives, or split screens. We are skilled readers of film because it's something we do a lot of, whether going out to a movie theatre or watching television at home. The same applies to poetry. The more we read, the more literate and skilled we will become.

Poetry can use some of the same techniques as cinema. You can have a flash-back in a poem. A poem can span centuries from one verse to the next and if you are used to reading poetry – as you soon will be if you continue this journey – you don't think twice about it. You don't think 'oh, that didn't join up', or, 'there isn't a sign here saying, "fifty years later"'… You trust yourself in the way that you do in the cinema.

So I want us to think about different ways of approaching time. You might already know, or find it useful to read, *Time's Arrow* by Martin Amis. It's a very short novel in which he writes of the Holocaust but backwards: an incredibly powerful piece of prose, made the more powerful because bodies rise from the ovens of the concentration camps and get up and return to their lives. Somehow that makes it emotionally much more moving than a linear narrative.

As Poet Laureate I had cause to write a public poem about the First World War and decided to approach the subject in reverse. My first line was: 'if poetry could tell it backwards, begin'. That was the only line I had. Then I went into the poem backwards, so that in writing of the soldiers I said: 'all those thousands dead are shaking dried mud from their hair and queuing up for home, freshly alive'.

> **Poetry to me is often like a baton that's passed on through the centuries.**

I didn't know where my poem would end in doing this but it turned out to be a poem that celebrated being alive. Without me spelling it out explicitly the poem communicated, through its images, the message that what I want is peace.

Later I wanted to write an elegy about my mother's death but had been made silent by bereavement. The way I found my voice again was by using that same technique of writing time backwards, which expressed so much more than I could ever have said had I simply written about how I felt.

For me, this poem, which I called 'Premonitions', was a resurrection in language. It was an almost magical experience to write, rewrite and then finally read on the page. In it I imagine that the very first time I ever met my mother was at the moment of her death. I don't know her, I just meet her as she dies, when I was with her, and then we go backwards together through the poem.

**PREMONITIONS**

*We first met when your last breath*
*cooled in my palm like an egg;*
*you dead, and a thrush outside*
*sang it was morning.*
*I backed out of the room, feeling*
*the flowers freshen and shine in my arms.*

*The night before, we met again, to unsay*
*unbearable farewells, to see*
*our eyes brighten with re-strung tears.*
*O I had my sudden wish –*
*though I barely knew you –*
*to stand at the door of your house,*
*feeling my heartbeat calm,*
*as they carried you in, home, home and healing.*
*Then slow weeks, removing the wheelchair, the drugs,*
*the oxygen mask and tank, the commode,*
*the appointment cards,*
*until it was summer again*
*and I saw you open the doors to the grace of your garden.*

*Strange and beautiful to see*
*the flowers close to their own premonitions,*
*the grass sweeten and cool and green*
*where a bee swooned backwards out of a rose.*
*There you were,*
*a glass of lemony wine in each hand,*
*walking towards me always, your magnolia tree*
*marrying itself to the May air.*

*How you talked! And how I listened,*
*spellbound, humbled, daughterly,*
*to your tall tales, your wise words,*
*the joy of your accent, unenglish, dancey, humorous;*
*watching your ash hair flare and redden,*
*the loving litany of who we had been*
*making me place my hands in your warm hands,*
*younger than mine are now.*
*Then time only the moon. And the balm of dusk.*
*And you my mother.*

It's strange. It's not often I read a poem that I've written where I can feel something of the original emotion that impelled the poem. Some of the love poems I've written don't mean anything to me now. I can't even remember what I was thinking when I was in this or that relationship, younger. But that poem, I think because of the power of looking at time from the wrong end of the telescope, manages to stir in me those feelings I had when I lost my mother.

Maybe there is a poem you want to write where you can work this magic too, by simply looking at time from a different angle.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Poetry can use some of the same techniques as cinema.
- Poetry need not obey the laws of physics. It can move backwards as well as forwards in time.

## EXERCISE

Write a poem where you run time backwards.

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# 18. Choosing A Form

I hope that over the course of these lessons you have plucked your grapes, pressed them, and put them in their big vats. Now you need to have your wine tasted. You have to pour it. You can't pour it onto the table. It will spill. You need a container. This is where form comes into poetry: the shape of the words on the page.

By this stage you should have noticed the shapes on the page of the poems you've read and the poems you like. You should be beginning to notice rhyme when it comes, whether at the end of the lines, or inside them, or both. Assonance is important in poetry. This is the half-rhyme, where you change the vowel sound in a word, as in weed/wood, or the consonants, as in weed /scream/receive. Assonance gives the words a musical chime.

Sometimes poems need to be longer, perhaps if you're telling a story. I think of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', which I first read in school. It uses long pages of quatrains, in ballad form, to tell the tale of the old man and the albatross.

From a very early age, as I've said before, we are used to hearing nursery rhymes and playground rhymes, the things our mothers chant to us. We still remember those little poems by heart because they often have rhyme or rhythm or metre. In a sense, the best poetry is always memorable and closely related to song. We learn the words of hymns, chants and Christmas carols because they are easily remembered and often repeated. We don't need the words of *The First Noël* or *Silent Night* or *O Come All Ye Faithful*, for example; we can go from house to house as children, singing these Christmas poems. The exquisitely beautiful carol *In the Bleak Midwinter* was initially a 19th-century poem by Christina Rossetti.

I have found, in writing poetry, that I don't know the shape when I start. I think that's because writing a poem is like giving birth to a child. You often don't know, until it comes out, whether it's male or female, big or small, pleasant or crying (or at least we didn't before the days of modern technology). Often we don't quite know the name we are going to give a child. Often a poem will be finished and you're thinking, what am I going to call it? But the poem itself will often reveal to you its name.

So how do we choose the shape that our poem will take? How do we know if we are going to use rhyme? How do we know if we are going to use a particular metre, as a sonnet does? 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' The whole of Shakespeare's renowned 'Sonnet 18' is written in a particular metre, technically known as iambic pentameter*. We also speak in that kind of rhythm, 'I think it's time we had a cup of tea' has the same metre as 'shall I compare thee to a summer's day'. There is a music built into the ordinary language that we speak and the natural language of English tends towards the iambic pentameter.

I think it's essential that you make yourself familiar with the forms and shapes of poetry (there is an appendix with brief definitions at the end of these notes). When I was younger, for example, I tried a villanelle in the mode of Elizabeth Bishop, where the first and third lines of each verse and the rhyme follow a pattern throughout. It didn't work for me but at least I went through the process of being able to recognise it, test it out and see that it didn't work.

Your reading will make you familiar with shape and form. Your poem will tell you what shape it wants to be. Some poems want to be longer. Some poems want to be taken in, memorised in the way that a carol can be. I have often

found the sonnet to be the perfect form for that. Sometimes I've chosen to write a near-as-dammit formal sonnet, in the way Shakespeare did. Other times I might merely touch base with the form. So my poem might be fourteen lines long but choose not to use regular rhyme.

Reading, and familiarity with poetry, will give you an instinct for what shape your poem should take. Let's look at a couple of examples. The first is 'Prayer', from the end of my collection, *Mean Time*.

My early background was Catholic but my adult self wavers on the compass between agnostic and atheist. This personal trajectory has led me to regret that I no longer pray. Prayer is a very particular construction of language. It not only gives one the sense of being heard but also of being listened to. I wanted to explore this idea by constructing a prayer for those of us – like myself – who don't have faith or belief.

When I got my first line down on the page, which was 'Some days, although we cannot pray', I suddenly thought, I want this poem itself to be a prayer. I want the images to come not from the sacred world, not from the church and the ceremonies of religion but from the everyday world, the spiritual moments we can experience sitting in a park, riding on the top of a bus, walking down a city street. Suddenly we can feel a revelation, or consolation from the world, from simply being in the world. Next, I thought, what form feels to me like prayer? The answer came, a sonnet. It is easily learnt by heart, as prayer is. So that was how I reached a decision about form. I couldn't take that decision, I couldn't know what form my poem would be, until I'd written that first line. When that form revealed itself to me I recognised it because I have read many poems and have come to know their shapes.

You too will develop this instinct as you continue to fill your notebook and work towards a first pamphlet of poetry.

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**PRAYER**

*Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer*
*utters itself. So, a woman will lift*
*her head from the sieve of her hands and stare*
*at the minims sung by a tree, a sudden gift.*

*Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth*
*enters our hearts, that small familiar pain;*
*then a man will stand stock-still, hearing his youth*
*in the distant Latin chanting of a train.*

*Pray for us now. Grade 1 piano scales*
*console the lodger looking out across*
*a Midlands town. Then dusk, and someone calls*
*a child's name as though they named their loss.*

*Darkness outside. Inside, the radio's prayer –*
*Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.*

I do a few different things in the poem. It's quite formally constructed but I hope the rhymes aren't banging out at you. I hope the voice sounds like a poet speaking softly in your ear but the rhymes are there: 'prayer, lift, stare, gift'; 'truth, pain, youth, train'; 'scales, cross, calls, loss'; 'prayer' and 'Finisterre'. I want this poem to be both memorable, because you know the rhymes are coming, but also speakable, as a prayer is, because the rhymes are subtly achieved. I also hint at the litany of the shipping forecast – Rockall, Malin, Dogger, Finisterre – with a list that could have gone on, but is abbreviated to fit with the rhythm of this poem.

Another thing that I've come to rely on in my own work is voice. I've often written – particularly in a collection like *The World's Wife* – in different voices. Some are jaunty, some are dark, some are erotic; all are female voices, all are aspects of me. In those poems, I allow the music of the voice, the rhythm of the voice – the long lines, the short lines and the single words of speech – to dictate how my poem appears on the page.

Experimenting with form is part of your apprenticeship. We should certainly have a go, as I did, at a villanelle. We should certainly have a go, as I have, at a sestina*. This is a complicated form where you have six words that go always at the end of the line and those words, in a kind of weave, are sustained right throughout the poem; always the same six words, in a different order. These are necessary exercises for a poet and will come out of your own reading. You will find a poem that you seek to imitate in form, pouring your own wine into that tried-and-tested vessel. You will learn from the patient teaching of the poems of the past.

But there is no point in merely imitating. As Picasso said, we must refer and inaugurate – both be aware of the past, and make new. Once we are familiar with the old patterns and forms and shapes, we can begin to rough them up; but we can only break the rules because we know what they are.

Another form I'm very fond of is the haiku*. If the sonnet is a solemn glass of port, then the haiku is a shot of whiskey. Most people know the haiku because it's very commonly taught when children first have a go at writing poem. It is a Japanese form consisting of just seventeen syllables; five in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third. The haiku captures a moment, almost like the old polaroid used to do, a quick, fleeting impression, something otherwise transient but with profound resonance. It isn't quick to write because you have so few syllables that you have none to waste and every word needs to work very hard.

The haiku is perhaps the shortest of forms but I used it cumulatively to construct the long poem, 'Dorothy Wordsworth's Christmas Birthday'. Dorothy was born on Christmas Day. She was the sister of William Wordsworth and spent a lot of time with him and their friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge. She was devoted to them both but she also wrote a journal herself, including a tiny bit of poetry, which gave me the idea of the haiku as the best form in which to write about her and tell the story of her birthday. The intensity of the haiku mirrors the intensity of her character and used in series form is the reading equivalent of a few nips of whiskey you might take to keep you warm on a cold Christmas Day.

Here is the end of the poem, the three haiku drawing her birthday to a close, signing off my contemplation of these three characters, releasing them again to the past, yet also holding them still present in the timeframe of this poem.

> *All in each other,*
> *Miss Wordsworth and the poets,*
> *bawling the chorus;*
>
> *their voices drifting,*
> *in 1799,*
> *to nowhen, nowhere…*
>
> *but Winter's slow turn,*
> *and snow in Dorothy's hair*
> *and on her warm tongue.*

The most common form of poetry written now is free verse. In *The World's Wife*, I made a decision to use the natural music of the human voice. For me, this natural voice was shaped by the fact that I come from a different country. I was aware not only of different words but also of a different mouth music, from both England and Scotland and also going back to my Irish grandparents. But with my poet's ear I listen for the particular human voice that I'm trying to capture, and in *The World's Wife* this was thirty different female voices, comic, dark, erotic, melancholy, celebratory.

Through reading, listening, practice and imitation, you will become confident in recognising the forms that work for you. You will sense the path that a particular poem needs to travel – long or short, straight or winding – as it begins to take shape in its first draft on the page.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Make yourself familiar with the forms of poetry (see also the appendix at the end of these notes).
- Read many poems. Pay attention to their shape. Through reading, listening practice and imitation, you will become confident in recognising the forms that work best for you.

## EXERCISE

Experimentation is part of your apprenticeship. Have a go at a villanelle, a sonnet, a sestina and a haiku. Find a poem to imitate, pouring your own wine into that tried-and-tested vessel. You will learn from the patient teaching of the poems of the past.

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> See what you discover by looking at time from a different angle.

GLOSSARY*

**iambic pentameter**

*noun*

A line of verse in a regular pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables, usually comprising five metrical groups or feet

**sestina**

*noun*

A poem of six six-line verses with a rotating pattern of rhyme, ending with a three-line verse

**haiku**

*noun*

A Japanese form consisting of seventeen syllables in lines of five, seven, and five syllables each

*See also appendix.*

# 19. Drafting & Redrafting

If you now find yourself in the fortunate position of having something down on that intimidating blank sheet of paper, it's time to begin making decisions. Particularly when teaching teenage poets, I warn them not to rush for the finishing line. I remember when I first began to write, just being pleased I had got to the end of something and thinking it was finished. When I was fourteen or fifteen I could write a poem a day and fill notebooks very quickly. Of course, this helps to build fluency but there is a point at which you must begin working on the craft of the poem.

Study that first draft on your page. You will begin to detect a shape in it. It might be that you've written an opening verse of four lines, unrhymed. Then your second verse might be five lines and your third, four like the first. So ask yourself, why are the lengths of those verses uneven? Is there a case for them to be made even, or to shape those lines a little more?

A method I have found very useful is to think of the page as a kind of canvas, defined by a regular number of lines in each verse, which gives me an edge and a shape to contain my words and forces me to be selective. Once that decision is made, if I have settled on an eight-line verse, for instance, I know that if I have come up with a nine-line verse I have to lose something. This makes me scrutinise what I've written and give rigorous thought to whether each word is necessary. Am I being lazy or clichéd or repetitive or slack? This means that the second draft mostly involves losing what isn't needed.

Sometimes, of course, your poem won't suit such a regular shape. I've written poems that start with a couplet of two lines but the poem turns out to be about something growing, or coming into being, or an idea forming and getting larger. So I've written verses of two lines, then three lines, then four, five, and six and then the poem visually grows on the page in step with the idea. I've done the opposite too. I've started with a ten-line verse and then pruned and reduced, down through nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, and ending with an asterisk as though the poem is dwindling and disappearing. Again, there will be a reason I'm doing that, something inherent in the subject matter of the poem.

It might take two or three drafts before I get to the right shape but when I see it I recognise it, even if it is the first time that shape has presented itself to me. I know, because of my reading and my apprenticeship and the thought I've given to making it, that this is what the poem wants to be. It's almost as though the poem is instructing me in how it wishes to be dressed.

Another thing to pay attention to in the redrafting process is your choice of verbs. I think of the verb in a line of poetry as a battery. It gives the poem energy or light and very often the first verb we select will be the lazy or obvious one. I have an example for you from my poem 'The Christmas Truce', which is about soldiers in the First World War, on both sides of the conflict, playing football with each other during the briefest of lulls in the fighting. The night before this impromptu football match, which is Christmas Eve, the soldiers are looking out at the dead and wounded lying in No Man's Land between the two armies, facing the tragic task of having to go out and bring those bodies back. I used the word 'rime' to refer to the spiky frost that outlines shapes when it's cold; the idea had come from a photograph, I think, and the line was 'Glittering rime on unburied sons has frozen stiff their hair.'

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The poem was composed as a canvas of five-line verses, which had been the focus of my first redraft. When it came to the third redraft, which focused exclusively on verbs, I picked up on the word 'frozen' and changed it to 'treasured': 'Glittering rime on unburied sons treasured their stiff hair.' That was a piece of poetic luck that came out of redrafting. Those boys couldn't be treasured. No one could stroke their hair. So it's a bleak and poignant image but equally, because of the ice and moonlight, their hair was silver and sparkled. To me, it signified that those boys would also always be treasured. With just one verb the line is transformed and with its battery-burst of energy, that line transforms the whole verse, the whole poem.

I would suggest that you make many drafts of your poem. The process needn't be laborious and time-consuming. It can happen quite quickly if you are able to set aside time, especially if you become used to a fairly systematic procedure, checking first for shape, then redundancy, then verbs.

Here is a four-line poem called 'Drone' – tiny, as befits its subject, which is a bee. Read it aloud and listen to what I do with the last word of each line.

> **DRONE**
>
> *An upward rush on stairs of air*
> *to the bliss of nowhere, higher,*
> *a living jewel, warm amber, her,*
> *to be the one who would die there.*

With this combination of words I am creating texture in the poem through sound – 'stairs, air, nowhere, higher, amber, her, there' – and that is something that is enjoyable in itself, pleasurable, even. It is a form of sensual play: the putting together not only of ideas and memories and images but also of sounds, how they jostle and echo within the music of the poem.

Along with sound comes silence. The one cannot exist without the other and both have power and purpose in writing poetry. For my part, I have learned to value long periods of thinking, reading and contemplating, with just occasional jotting in my notebook. I've learned when to abide in silence and when it is time to come to the sheet of paper, when the inkling or sense of a poem prods me into position. What I don't do, or no longer do, is write for a bit and then think: oh, *this isn't working*; it's going in a drawer. I do all that this isn't working before I even come to the page. All that rejection happens before I even pick up the pen. Instead of rushing to the page and worrying at it, I let the poem gestate within me until it is ready to emerge.

I think of my poet self as a kind of burglar. The silence is me casing out a neighbourhood, walking up and down the streets, looking for a way to get in, through a window or up a drainpipe. It's a very anarchic image but true for me – so true that I wrote a poem about this process of beginning and writing and rewriting and finishing. Perhaps it may be of some use as you think about your own process, if only to define yourself in opposition – 'I'm nothing like Carol Ann Duffy'.

**BURGLING**

*Not easy, burgling silence;*
*that old house at the edge of town*
*where time takes solace on its own; miser.*

*But it's better than grafting at the noise factory;*
*so I wait for the gloaming,*
*stake it out, concealed in the overgrown garden.*

*It can take days, weeks, all weathers;*
*a vow of intent to commit…*
*hoping for an opening, a loose latch.*

*Once in, there's a holiness to it;*
*everything paused, made precious, pearled,*
*by the brief absence of time.*

*I steal a silver sonnet and leave sharpish;*
*snapping off a wet black bough*
*with petals on it.*

Some of you might recognise that last image, which is burgled, stolen, lifted from Ezra Pound ('In a Station of the Metro'), who delighted in imagery in his early work. That, for me, is what happens when I write. It's as though I've come to steal language from silence and from time itself. Once I'm inside the poem I'll draft and redraft as much as necessary but it's the getting in that is the moment I relish. And for me, once I'm in, I'll finish it.

How do I know a poem is finished? The poet Paul Valéry once said that poems are never finished, but abandoned. The way I see it, the poem tells you when it's finished. Your recognition of this moment comes from instinct. The poem simply comes to the end of itself and there is no room for anything more. There may be room for changes – swapping out one word for another, adding or removing a comma – but there's nothing more to be said. If a poem succeeds on its own terms – by which I mean its shape, language, image, assonance, form, rhyme, metaphor, all the things that you have put into the crafting of it – then that poem will not need you to add anything.

It's worth pointing out, indeed essential to point out, that this process need not be quick. Most poets have jobs. Most poets have family and work commitments, they have to travel, go to festivals, earn a living, run workshops in schools or work behind a bar, which I did when I was starting out. So when I urge you not to stop until the poem is finished, what I mean is to give the poem your time when you can. If, for example, I started a poem on a Monday afternoon and had four hours, I would give the poem those four hours. Then I might have to get a train from Manchester to London, in which case I would take my draft with me and attend to it on my journey. After that I might be working for two days and not have any time to give to the poem but as soon as I'm able to – by now it could be Friday, going into a weekend – I will return to it. The unfinished poem is like an invisible companion waiting to be dressed in its finery.

I'm not suggesting you abandon life in service of the poem but you must also find ways of making time for it, just as you would in any loving relationship. Some poems come relatively quickly but that has nothing to do with length. More likely, it has to do with the swiftness or simplicity of the thought. A haiku, for example, is very short but usually carries some significant freight of thought and you may spend a disproportionate amount of time finding the right seventeen syllables distributed across the right words to carry that freight.

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> I've found in my journey in poetry that I don't know the shape before I start.

More complicated poems, like my own 'The Laughter of Stafford Girls' High', a poem that is several pages long and celebrates the kind of girls' school I went to, can take months to write. In a riff of fantasy I invented an epidemic of laughter in the school that eventually closed it down but although I gave it whatever time I had whenever I had it, the ambition and narrative scope of the poem meant it required many months. I said earlier that writing a poem is like giving birth to a child and this one, in fact, was nine months in the making.

What I want you to take from this lesson is the understanding that you have to craft a poem. It might be original in thought and/or moving in autobiographical content and/or darkly funny, because something lived is coming out through your words on your page, but you have to do your very best for that poem. You must stick with it from drafting and redrafting, through thinking and more thinking, to typing and printing. That final stage is important. You must see the shape of your poem in print and when you do your poem will be as finished as it can possibly be.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Make many drafts of your poem. Check first for shape, then tired language, then verbs.
- Read your poem aloud and listen to what this tells you about its form, or what its form needs to be.
- A poem will let you know when it is finished.

## EXERCISE

Look at what you believe to be your finished poem. Is there a better word you might use? Is the punctuation working to guide your reader accurately? Are the verbs doing their job as batteries? Is your title the best title for the poem? Look again at shape, language, image, assonance, form, rhyme, metaphor – all the craft you have invested in your writing. Is the poem satisfied? Or does it demand that more work be done?

# 20. Writing For Occasions: The Personal

Poetry accommodates both the personal and the public. Both can involve writing to a deadline, which is a disturbing kind of word when you think about the separate parts of it.

It might be that you are the poet in your family. It might be that you are one of the poets in your community. We remember Ted Hughes's idea that the poet is *the voice of the tribe*, which is recognised by the fact that the UK has a Poet Laureate, as does the US, while Wales has a National Poet, Ireland a Professor of Poetry and Scotland a Makar – a word I really like because it takes us back to the original idea of making the poem.

So what does it mean to write to order? We know that when people get married they'll often have a wedding poem or epithalamium*. Poems are read at funerals and offered as gifts when babies are born. Jackie Kay, who was the Scots Makar, arranged for a poem to be put in the baby box that the Scottish government gave to every newborn child. The sharing of poetry at such ceremonial moments is a lovely and time-honoured tradition.

What I want to suggest is that you give yourself an occasion to write for. It could be for a funeral, an elegy for someone you've lost, it could be for a newborn baby or a wedding, or it could simply be a love poem to give a loved one on an anniversary. Whatever the task you set yourself, you must also set yourself a deadline, which in any case is normally built into such life events.

Here is an elegy I wrote for Simon Powell, founder and director of the transformative GCSE Poetry Live programme designed to bring poetry to a broader range of students. I worked for Simon, and with him, and became a friend. His surname, 'Powell', is Welsh, and in my poem I've picked up words that chime with it. Try reading it aloud yourself and listen to the rhymes and half-rhymes.

**SIMON POWELL**

*What was your appeal, Simon Powell?*
*Your silver smile;*
*how you held your face aloft,*
*a trophy, when you laughed.*
*You had style,*
*swooping towards Swansea*
*on your Moto Morini,*
*brave, **bravo!**, pale rider.*

*Whom did you beguile, Simon Powell,*
*on that ferry in Liverpool?*
*A poetry girl. Well, well,*
*you were always poetry's proud pal;*
*she was bound to chime with you,*
*eventually,*
*vowel to pure vowel –*
*poetry and Simon Powell.*

*Our days continue to delight us, or appal,*
*like yours: the birth of sons,*
*the death of Sîan;*
*then to your Indian wedding on a horse,*
*your thousand nights; blessed, you told us,*
*Simon Powell, in your wives,*
*the seeded futures of your three boys' lives;*
*as we by thee, dear Simon; Simon Powell.*

Although this includes autobiographical elements about my friendship with Simon and some information about his life, like getting married in India on a horse, it gives you an idea of how you might elegise someone close to you that you love. In choosing an elegy built around the person's name you allow it to be read by anyone. At the same time, the person you have lost is somehow restored and retained within the poem. The assonance I used – Powell, smile, style, pale, beguile, Liverpool, pal, eventual, vowel, appal – weaves a tapestry of sound like a cloth to cover his name.

A contrasting example is by the poet Imtiaz Dharker. Her elegy is only five lines long and she doesn't name the person but chooses the title 'Say his name', so that any of us may enter this poem.

> **SAY HIS NAME**
>
> *Not standing by graves.*
>
> *Say his name in conversation,*
> *at tables where glasses are raised.*
>
> *Say his name where you live,*
> *in the company of friends.*

This poem is artlessly, disarmingly simple, yet anyone could be proud to read these words at a funeral. It even leaves open the possibility of changing the pronoun; a wonderfully inclusive poem.

## TAKEAWAY

- A poet can speak for others, finding the right words in times of personal joy and sorrow.

## EXERCISE

Assume responsibility. Think of a person in celebration or mourning. Set yourself a deadline. And give the poem the time it takes to meet that deadline for that special person.

GLOSSARY*

**epithalamium**
*noun, classical*
A song or poem celebrating a marriage

*See also appendix.*

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# 21. Writing For Occasions: The Public

I have more experience than most in writing for public occasions perhaps, having served for ten years as Poet Laureate. This used to be a lifetime appointment but thankfully it was shortened to a more reasonable ten years, so that one didn't have to endure the horrible sensation of other poets waiting for you to die!

When I was Poet Laureate I wanted to see if I could write public poems – which sometimes had to be written irrespective of personal interest or sympathies – that somehow intersected with my own being as a poet. I wanted to write with integrity. That was quite challenging. It meant that sometimes, when I was asked to produce something to a deadline and struggled to find a point of entry to the poem, I would refuse particular commissions. I didn't want to write something that might feel dead on the page. I didn't want to be forced to the page but, instead, to run to it eagerly.

Not everyone feels the same way. My dear friend Gillian Clarke, who was National Poet of Wales, came from that proud bardic tradition where the poet is honoured and celebrated, whether at community level or on a national scale. Her attitude differed from my reticence. She would take any commission and be proud to do so. She could always find an entry point to the poem. Whereas I, although also a National Poet, was more dependent on identifying some juxtaposition between the commission and my abilities and interests as a poet. I didn't feel capable of responding every time with a poem that would live on the page. Perhaps this difference between us has something to do with the different cultures we grew up in?

Another way I have engaged in writing for the public is by producing a new poem each Christmas. Published first as a series of little illustrated books, I now have ten years of Christmas poems collected in a single volume. This is something I enjoyed and am continuing to do. I have to get them to the publisher in August, so they can be illustrated and printed in time for me to sign them before they are delivered to bookshops. This means I am likely to find myself having to write about Christmas at the height of summer, maybe from deep in the south of France, which can be very difficult. This is probably why one of my Christmas books is called *Pablo Picasso's Noël*. I was near where Picasso lived, trying desperately to think of Christmassy images. Then I just thought, I love Picasso, I'll write about him having Christmas in France. So that's what I did. It's an example of meeting an externally imposed commitment by marrying it with my own life and interests and attitudes.

One of the public poems I most enjoyed writing as Poet Laureate was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, for a special event in honour of William Shakespeare. I'd like to share it with you. Not just because it's a commission written to a deadline, which is something I would like you to experiment with yourself, even if only as an exercise, as part of your apprenticeship, but also because it brings the love I feel for Shakespeare to the poem as well as something of what he himself gave us.

**SHAKESPEARE**

*Small Latin and less Greek, all English yours,*
*dear lad, local, word-blessed, language loved best;*
*the living human music on our tongues,*
*young, old, who we were or will be, history's shadow,*
*love's will, our heart's iambic beat, brother*
*through time; full-rhyme to us.*
*Two rivers quote your name;*
*your journey from the vanished forest's edge*
*to endless fame – a thousand written souls,*
*pilgrims, redeemed in poetry – ends here, begins again.*
*And so, you knew this well, you do not die –*
*courtier, countryman, noter of flowers and bees,*
*war's laureate, magician, Janus-faced –*
*but make a great Cathedral, genius, of this place.*

It seems that poetry can fill a gap that nothing else can. When – to use a cliché, but to use a cliché meaningfully – words fail us. Such gaps tend to open up, in my view, at moments of extreme sorrow, such as bereavement, or extreme joy, such as weddings or the arrival of children. The fact that people go to poetry at these moments, even write it for the first time in their lives, tells us that in both private and public domains there is sometimes a need for poetry.

In return, the poet must also feel that they have something to give. I believe that every time a good poem arrives in the world, it adds to the world. 'Adlestrop' by Edward Thomas, for example, is a treasure that simply did not exist until he wrote it. It may be that you are not always able to help practically in times of sadness or celebration, yet you may find you have the words in a poem that can add something to those times, whether the need is personal or public.

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> **In Scotland, the National Poet is called the Makar, a word I really like because it takes us back to the original idea of the poem being made, the poet being a maker.**

**TAKEAWAY**

- A poem adds to the world. It exists to be picked up by others in times of need. It can fill a gap that nothing else can.

**EXERCISE**

Whether a tribute to a beloved public figure ('Shakespeare') or to mark a collective loss ('Liverpool'), think about the challenge of writing a poem that everyone can share. Note that the sonnet suggested itself as the appropriate form in both these cases.

# 22. Anthologies & Answering Back

I've been asking you to keep a list of poems you've come across that you like and can learn from. A big part of my life as a poet has been making anthologies.

An anthology is a collection of poems by many poets, with a unifying idea to tie it together. Most commonly this is a timespan but also very often a theme. An approach I especially enjoy is that of inviting living poets to engage with poems from the past, just as I am encouraging you to do.

In this lesson, I'll begin with an anthology of lunar poems called *To The Moon*. You already know about my love for the cow who jumped over the moon: that very early rhyme has stayed with me all my life. One day when I was looking at the moon it occurred to me that I was looking at the very same thing that Shakespeare had looked at. I found this realisation both incredible and deeply moving. Right then I decided that I would collect poems about the moon from very early times to the present day.

Here are the first lines of some of those poems.

*Off in the twilight hung the low, full moon* ~ **Sappho**, 570BC

*With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the skies* ~ **Sir Philip Sidney**, 1550s

*So we'll go no more a roving / So late into the night, / Though the heart be still as loving, / And the moon be still as bright* ~ **Lord Byron**, early 1880s

*What have you looked at, Moon, / In your time* ~ **Thomas Hardy**, 1860s

*I looked up from my writing, / And gave a start to see, / As if rapt in my inditing, / The moon's full gaze on me* ~ **Thomas Hardy**, again

*It comes with the force of a body blow, / that the moon is a place one cannot go* ~ **Thomas Hardy**, and again

*The moon is like a ping-pong ball* ~ **Robert Service**, early 1900s

*Moon, worn thin to the width of a quill* ~ **Sara Teasdale**, early 1900s

*She is wearing coral taffeta trousers* ~ **Vita Sackville-West**, early 1900s

*Groping back to bed after a piss / I part thick curtains, and am startled by / The rapid clouds, the moon's cleanliness* ~ **Philip Larkin**, 1960s

Every poet is looking at the same thing in this anthology, from a different time and place, sometimes writing about it in different languages from the one I'm using (in translation) but they all have something fresh to say. That, for me, is the joy of an anthology, to gather together poets across time and space and read them for pleasure, for delight, and for instruction.

The most recent anthology I edited is called *Empty Nest*. I compiled this during the Covid lockdown. It came about after I'd written an autobiographical poem about my experience of the empty nest. By which I mean that time when our children leave home and start their own lives, whether by going to university or getting their own flat or having a job. It struck me that this isn't something that's much talked about in ordinary conversation yet I was positive there would be poems about it. So I began my research and found many poems hidden in single collections, in magazines, in other anthologies but as far as I'm aware this is the first gathering of poems around that one subject. Here is the poem that kicked it all off.

**EMPTY NEST**

*Dear child, the house pines when you leave.*
*I research whether there is any bird who grieves*
*over its empty nest.*

*Your vacant room*
*is a still-life framed by the unclosed door;*
*read by sunlight, an open book on the floor.*

*I fold the laundry; hang your flower dress*
*in darkness. Forget-me-nots.*

*

*Beyond the tall fence, I hear horse-chestnuts*
*counting themselves.*
*Then autumn; Christmas.*
*You come and go, singing. Then ice; snowdrops.*

*Our home hides its face in hands of silence.*

*I knew mothering, but not this other thing*
*which hefts my heart each day. Heavier.*
*Now I know.*

*

*This is the shy sorrow. It will not speak up.*

*I play one chord on the piano;*
*it vanishes, tactful,*
*as dusk muffles the garden; a magpie staring from its branch.*
*The marble girl standing by the bench.*

*From the local church, bells like a spelling.*
*And the evening star like a text.*
*And then what next…*

Never think, on dipping into a themed anthology, that everything that can be said on that theme has already been said and there is no room left for you. If anything, a themed anthology should encourage in you the understanding that there are as many different ways of writing a poem about something as there are poets writing.

But rather than piling up examples of anthologies and overloading you, I'd like to draw your attention to one in particular called *Answering Back*, where living poets reply to the poetry of the past. This is a challenge I will also set for you. In this book we have U. A. Fanthorpe replying to Walt Whitman, Colette Bryce replying to Louis MacNeice, Roy Fisher replying to Thomas Hardy, Theo Dorgan replying to Constantine Cavafy, Owen Sheers replying to John Donne and Vicki Feaver replying to Philip Larkin. Each poet chose a poem that arrested them, that they either admired or had argument with, so wanted to answer back to.

Probably my favourite, in terms of rebuke, is Carol Rumens replying to Philip Larkin. Larkin has a couple of very famous short poems. One of them is 'Annus Mirabilis' and the other is called 'This Be the Verse', which infamously begins:

> *They fuck you up, your mum and dad.*
> *They may not mean to, but they do.*
> *They fill you with the faults they had*
> *And add some extra, just for you.*

I never really agreed with the gloomy, negative sentiment in that poem and felt much more sympathetic to the winning response in a competition run by the *New Statesman*. It proposed the idea of finding an accidental typo in a poem, suggesting that Larkin's poem should rightly begin: 'They tuck you up, your mum and dad.'

Here is Carol Rumens' response to Larkin, in her own poem titled 'This Be the Verse'.

> *Not everybody's*
> *Childhood sucked:*
> *There are some kiddies*
> *not up-fucked*
>
> *They moan and shout,*
> *Won't take advice.*
> *But – hang about –*
> *Most turn out nice –*
>
> *If not better*
> *Than us, no worse.*
> *Sad, non-begetter*
> *That ain't the verse.*

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> **That for me is the joy of an anthology – to gather together poets of different times, read them for pleasure, for delight.**

## TAKEAWAYS

- Anthologies set up conversations across time and space between different poets and poems.
- Never think that everything that can be said on a theme has already been said and that there is no room left for you. There are as many different ways of writing a poem about something as there are poets writing.

## EXERCISE

Find a poem by a dead poet, from any period, from any culture, even a poem in translation, and reply to it as a living poet from where you are now. Let's see what you come up with.

# 23. Writing Poetry For Children

It still surprises me that I had published five collections of poetry, including *The World's Wife*, and was forty years old before I wrote any poetry for children. It hadn't occurred to me or interested me to do so until I became a mother myself. Then one evening, when I was reading a bedtime story or poem to my own child, I suddenly thought: I'm a writer – I should be writing for her, not buying books and relying on other writers. That was my entry into the very thought of writing for children.

I found, as I began to do so, that the experience was like a Venn diagram, where my daughter's childhood not only reminded me of mine but the two overlapped in the middle. It was like a revisiting of childhood. Perhaps that explains why one of the children's collections I wrote is called *The Oldest Girl in the World*. That's me, writing the poems.

One of the things we do for children, particularly at bedtime, is to reassure them. For instance, they might be afraid of the dark. This is probably one of the first poems I wrote as an adult poet, specifically for a child. It's called 'Don't Be Scared'.

**DON'T BE SCARED**

*The dark is only a blanket*
*for the moon to put on her bed.*

*The dark is a private cinema*
*for the movie dreams in your head.*

*The dark is a little black dress*
*to show off the sequin stars.*

*The dark is the wooden hole*
*behind the strings of happy guitars.*

*The dark is a jeweller's velvet cloth*
*where children sleep like pearls.*

*The dark is a spool of film*
*to photograph boys and girls,*

*so smile in your sleep in the dark.*
*Don't be scared.*

This poem is written in simple couplets, two lines for each little verse. I used rhyme throughout – bed/head, stars/guitars, pearls/girls. Children like rhyme. They recognise it. If you've ever read to a child and you try and skip a bit out they'll immediately pounce on you and say: 'You missed the bit about…' Rhyme for children is a sort of metronome. It pins the poem down and helps them become accustomed to its patterns. Likewise repetition: 'don't be scared', 'the dark is only'. The images are safe too: the moon's blanket, your own cinema, that nice round hole in a guitar, pearls on a jeweller's cloth.

Soon I began to enter into a child's sense of play, introducing silliness and puns, riddles, jokes and jingles. Sometimes children get their words wrong, or they get things back-to-front, which we find cute or endearing. Once when my daughter was about four and we were travelling, she said: 'Why is the moon following me?' Another time I bought her a helium balloon of an elephant at London Zoo. As we left she let go of the string and we watched the balloon disappear. Instead of being upset, she said: 'Do balloons know where they're going?' The child's use of language and wonder and innocence about the world is perfect for poetry.

Many poets think children are the best poets because they are not self-conscious and their senses are completely fresh. In 'The Oldest Girl in the World', I'm lamenting the loss of my acute senses. I say: 'Children, I remember how I could hear / with my soft young ears / the tiny sounds of the air.' I go on to list the freshness of hearing and end with: 'Can't hear a sniff of it now.' Then I say: 'Truly, believe me, I could all the time see / every insect that crawled in a bush, / every bird that hid in a tree, / individually.' Yet if we are poets, we must try very hard to continue using our senses acutely as poet-spies. So for me, poetry for children is very close, although different in style and content, to the vocation of being a poet at all.

One thing children do is ask questions all the time. It's something you sign up to a decade of when you become a parent, or if you are a relative or guardian or teacher. Questions all the time. So naturally I began to collect real questions and answers, but also to invent them. Some of my question-and-answer poems are very long. One is called 'The birds, the fish, and the insects'. Here is just a short extract from it.

> *Which is the most communicative of the birds?*
> *Is it the Blackbird?*
> *No, for the Blackbird is the most nosey of the birds.*
> *Is it the Wren?*
> *No, for the Wren is the most architectural of the birds.*
> *Then is it the Coot?*
> *No, for the Coot is the most camp of the birds.*

Although this is playful question-and-answer for a child, there is also something going on for the adult. I say the wren is the most architectural of the birds because I'm thinking of Sir Christopher Wren, who designed the current St Paul's Cathedral and I'm being very naughty by saying that the coot is camp. Later on, the question is, 'Perhaps it is the grouse?' and the answer is, 'No, for the grouse is the most aristocratic of the birds.' Grouse is shot traditionally in palaces and stately homes. So from the reality of the child's question and the adult's answer, I took that and ran with it and extended it and played with it.

> **The child's use of language and wonder, and innocence about the world, is perfect for poetry.**

What I have found is that adult poetry is like swimming in the sea and can be quite dangerous. If we look at the late poems of Sylvia Plath, for example, they go right to the edge of death, they are terrifying in their truthfulness and their suicidal impulse. Love poems can also be painful and dark. When I started writing for children, it was like paddling at the edge of the sea. It reminded me of the childhood of poetry. It didn't have that deep, gasping breath of entering into dangerous waters that adult poetry had. I took joy from writing these poems.

Right at the beginning of this course I described how, when we moved from Scotland to England, I was told that we were going to have a wood. Only it wasn't our wood but a communal wood and there was me, aged six, ordering these English children to get out of my forest and being told quite bluntly that it wasn't mine. I also told you that I had a tree in a corner of this wood where I would go and write poems and eat an apple. I haven't ever written an adult poem about that. I think I probably wouldn't know how to but writing for children, I suddenly found myself able to write truthfully and exactly about that experience, almost as the child I was. The poem is called:

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### GIRL AND TREE

*A girl fell in love with a tree*
*and a tree with a girl.*
*Holding the tree in her arms, the girl said*
***Tree, I love you best in the world.***
***Why,** said the tree, **do you love me so?***
***Because of the green of your leaves,** said the girl.*

*The girl climbed up into the tree*
*and sat on a branch, dangling her legs.*
***Girl, girl, I love you best, believe me please,***
*whispered the tree.*
***Why,** said the girl, **do you love best me?***
***Because of your cherry-red dress,** said the tree.*

*Then the wind blew and the tree's green sails*
*breathed and gasped and filled with air*
*and the wood of the tree creaked like a ship*
*and the girl was Captain there.*

*Only the moon, agog with light,*
*saw the girl and the tree that night*
*when the whole town, in full pursuit,*
*came with dogs and searched the woods*
*where a smiling girl in a cherry-red dress*
*slept in the arms of a tree, like fruit.*

I was so thrilled to write that poem. I put the same amount of care and attention into redrafting it as I would into an adult poem. It wasn't any less work or quicker or easier. It was just a poem in a different register, a poem played on a different instrument.

I think poetry for children might come more light-heartedly to the table. There's more freedom to be humorous and more permission to be playful. There's a delight in riddling, in inventing tall stories and strange characters, in bringing the natural world into the poem by having magical talking creatures. Animals can do anything in a poem, as we learned from the cow jumping over the moon.

Light-hearted and playful does not mean dumbed-down or facile. I would always actively seek to expand a child's vocabulary in my poems. I would never not use a word because I thought it was too difficult – quite the opposite. It's important that children learn the habit of loving words, and through loving, that they should also learn the habit of looking words up. I want to share with them my enjoyment in using the dictionary. Here, by way of example, is a selection of words from 'The birds, the fish, and the insects': lachrymose, haughty, solicitous, imaginative, officious, gullible, insolent, materialistic, contradictory, insecure, tricksy, charitable, enchanted, maternal, punitive. I respect my readers, whatever age they are. I honour my readers by relishing the language and hoping they will relish it in return. I trust them to investigate new words in a dictionary or by asking a teacher or an adult or using Google.

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## TAKEAWAY

- If you want to write poetry for children, or indeed adults, don't forget the child you once were.

## EXERCISES

Here are some practical ideas to help you write a poem for a child.

Try writing an acrostic*. Take a name – it could be the child's name – and begin each line with a letter of that name, taking each letter in order. So if your child is called John, the first word of the first line will begin with 'J' and the next with 'O', followed by 'H' and finally 'N'. It can be a little poem, based on the first name only, or a longer one including middle and last names but make it describe that particular child: Jolly… Outrageous… Happy… Naughty… Or maybe: Jocular… Observant… Hopeful… Nimble… Or even: Jubilant… Optimistic… Helpful… Noisy… This is a great way to collaborate with a child, as is the question-and-answer form.

We need more nursery rhymes. Try writing your own and see if you can come up with something to rival the sheer exuberance of 'Hey diddle diddle'.

GLOSSARY *

**acrostic**

*noun*

A poem in which certain letters in each line, usually the first letter, form a word or words

*See also appendix.*

# 24. Building A Collection

Now feels like the right time to talk about bringing together the poems that you've been writing. In my own case, I started with a pamphlet.

A pamphlet is different from a collection. A collection will usually include forty to sixty poems. The collection will have a spine with a title on it. A pamphlet is a much slimmer publication. It will probably not be chunky enough to have a spine with a title and the author's name running down it. A pamphlet is useful because you will want to give poetry readings and you will want to have something that your audience can take home with them, or buy afterwards. You need something tangible to offer when some lovely person comes up to you and says: 'Oh, I love that particular poem!'

A pamphlet announces the arrival of a new poet. I produced three pamphlets of between twelve and twenty-four poems before I arrived at work that I thought was strong enough to form a collection. If I come across these pamphlets now I feel mortified. They are very early apprentice poems but still I think it's a necessary step to begin in a small way when you first publish and build a following. It's rare that a poet will burst on to the scene with a magnificently achieved full collection.

That pamphlet signifies an end to the first stage of your journey as a new poet. You will have travelled from your period of contemplation, during which you marshal your thoughts and materials, to your notebook, where you set those thoughts down and then on to the empty page, where you lay out a first draft of your poem and then work on it until you can do no more. Then one day, depending on how quickly you work – some poets are quick, some need more time – there will come a point when you have a gathering of poems, maybe a dozen or more.

The first thing to do is to sit down and read them and celebrate your achievement thus far.

It is possible, even likely, that when you read through your gathering of poems, you will begin to discern common themes or points of connection between them. This might prompt you to shuffle them around and read them again in a new order, not necessarily the order in which they were written. It may be that the poem you choose to put first will be the last poem you wrote and that the first poem you wrote may turn out to have some kind of relationship to the last. This sifting and reordering and placing of poems in relation to one another could be shaped by a story the poems tell, by autobiography, or by exploration of theme. As you engage in this process you will begin to see whether or not you have enough substance for a pamphlet, or whether something is still lacking and there is more work to be done.

I meet many new poets who want to go straight to being published by a major publisher. For that to happen would be very unusual. The apprenticeship I've been talking about in these lessons applies not only to writing and redrafting but also to publishing. Even before you have enough poems to gather into a pamphlet you may be sending individual poems to poetry magazines, of which there are many. Nothing exceeds the thrill of seeing, for the first time, a poem in print with your name on it.

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I have published nine full collections of poems. *Standing Female Nude* includes poems about paintings but also love poems and poems of childhood. *Selling Manhattan*, my second collection, brings in ideas of the environment but also politics. There isn't always an overriding theme. That came only after I wrote *The World's Wife*, in which I was consciously putting together a collection around a particular focus. It was the same with *Feminine Gospels*, a book of new myths and then again for *Rapture*, which is the story of a love affair. At the start of *Rapture* I explicitly signal this intention to the reader with a quote from Shakespeare: 'Now no discourse, except it be of love; Now can I break my fast, dine, sup and sleep, / Upon the very naked name of love.'

The first of these volumes was published in 1985. So that's nigh on forty years to produce nine collections and I haven't been remiss in my devotion to the craft or vocation of poetry – but I have done other things.

I've compiled anthologies. I've written for children. I'm now working on a tenth collection, which will probably take another year and a half to complete. Looking at the careers of other contemporary poets I can see that, by and large, most poets – if they're lucky – publish a collection once every three years on average.

In short, the assembling of poems is a slow process.  It therefore makes sense to start with magazines. You can see your work alongside that of other poets as you set out on your publishing journey. It's a way of laying down a marker.

As part of your apprenticeship I would advise you to subscribe to some poetry magazines. In some cases you might look through a magazine and think, I don't understand or, simply, I don't like these poems. That in itself will tell you that this is not the right home for your poem. Other magazines, you will love. You will think, I want to be in there, I would feel comfortable, I want to be at that party. Those are the magazines to which you should send your first poems. Not all are print magazines, of course, there are many online.

Do your research. There are poetry libraries in Manchester, Edinburgh and London, as well as the fabulous Northern Poetry Library in Northumberland. Remember to research the small presses too, with a view to finding the right fit for your first pamphlet. Look out for competitions to enter, like the one run by The Poetry Business in Sheffield, which holds an annual competition to publish four new pamphlets by four new poets every year.

> **It's very rare that a poet will burst on the scene with a magnificently achieved, full collection.**

## TAKEAWAY

- By all means dream big. But start small, work hard and build steadily. It takes time to assemble a collection.

## EXERCISES

Research magazines and competitions online and through shops and libraries. Take out a few subscriptions and familiarise yourself with the marketplace. Find some magazines you like and begin to submit your poems. Do not be put off by any rejections you may receive. We all get those.

Read through your gathering of poems. Look for common themes or points of connection. Shuffle them around and read them again in a new order, not necessarily the order in which they were written. Is there enough substance to put together a pamphlet? Do you have more work to do?


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# 25. Don't Give Up Your Day Job

We've come to the end of my **BBC Maestro** course on writing poetry. But I thought it might be both interesting and informative to share this 'don't give up your day job' conversation with my friend and colleague, Maura Dooley.

**CAROL ANN DUFFY:** I've been talking about publishing in magazines or bringing out a pamphlet. What was your own journey into publishing? How did you begin?

**MAURA DOOLEY:** I began by entering poetry competitions while I was still at school. My first poem was published in the *Bristol Evening Post* and I was thrilled. It gave me permission to think it might be something I could do.

**CAD:** How did it go from there?

**MD:** It was harder than it is now. Now there is so much online that is easily accessible. I started sending my work to small magazines. I got lots of rejections, which is an important thing to remember.

**CAD:** Like Samuel Beckett says: fail again, fail better.

**MD:** Exactly. You just have to go on trying. Eventually you'll find somewhere you fit in.

**CAD:** Did you start with a pamphlet?

**MD:** Yes. A magazine called *Argo* was about to set up a pamphlet scheme. I sent something in and they sent it back saying, 'We've decided not to publish pamphlets after all, but Bloodaxe Books might.' And they did. I didn't think I would ever get anything published with Bloodaxe.

**CAD:** When we met in the Eighties you were director of the Ted Hughes Arvon Centre at Lumb Bank. I think it would be interesting for both new and continuing poets to hear about that.

**MD:** The Arvon Foundation started up before universities and colleges began teaching creative writing and is more community-based. It offers weeklong working holidays, which I had the job of organising, to anybody interested in writing. There is a different focus each week, with different writers hosting. You don't have to provide any work to show you are 'good at writing'. You just book and come along.

**CAD:** So if it's a poetry course, recognised poets run workshops, look at your work, and offer criticism. Your fellow students also look at your work and it becomes a way of life for a week: thinking and talking about poetry. How valuable do you think it is to spend concentrated time with people who are also interested in writing poetry?

**MD:** I think it's very valuable. Great friendships are made which sustain you afterwards. Like these lessons, it gives you an entry point to move on from, encouraged by the support of others. Because writing is essentially lonely. It's just you in the end – just you with your pen and your notebook.

**CAD:** And the blank page. I've referred to the blank page a lot in this **BBC Maestro** course. How valuable do you think exercises are, simply to get something down on that page? I've tried some that don't work for me, then others that suddenly open a door. Do you think it's worth persisting with exercises in poetry?

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**MD:** I think they're really important, because very often there's a poem lurking around in your head that's waiting to be written and the exercise, no matter what it is, can spur it into being.

**CAD:** Have you ever had the experience of beginning a poem and having to abandon it?

**MD:** I have abandoned a poem, but only temporarily. I'll always come back to it. Sometimes years later. I'll think, now I know what to do with that, because all the time you are learning through writing, learning through life.

**CAD:** If you return to it months later, where in the meantime do you keep it? Is it in a notebook? Is it in a drawer? Where is it?

**MD:** I keep it in a notebook. I think a notebook is essential, but I'm very bad at having it with me. So I might bring back the old till receipt I've written on and stick it in my notebook. That way I've got all my jottings in one place.

**CAD:** So it's kind of half scrapbook, half notebook. I remember you also worked at the Southbank Centre, organising poetry readings and gatherings.

**MD:** Writers often have to find other kinds of work. I've been lucky, because at the Arvon Foundation I met a great many writers. Then at the Southbank Centre I once again learnt a huge amount by listening to other people talking about writing. I was privileged to be at the centre of that.

**CAD:** You were there in the Nineties, before the explosion in performance and internet poetry, which is now probably the predominant medium for young people delivering their poems. What do you think the relationship between poets and audience was like back in those days? What can we tell people doing this course about a poetry reading?

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**MD:** There's a special excitement to being with a group of people who have the same kind of interest and curiosity that you have, to having the writer in your presence and being able to speak to them afterwards. But it's developed hugely since then. There are readings in bookshops and libraries and all sorts of places, so writers are much more accessible than they used to be.

**CAD:** We both now teach at universities. I'm the creative director of the writing school at Manchester Metropolitan University, helping MA students to redraft their manuscripts and build towards publication. What about you?

**MD:** I do the same at Goldsmiths' College in London. The MA is only a one-year programme, so it goes by quickly and is very much practice-based.

**CAD:** Will you offer prompts in your lessons?

**MD:** Yes. We talk about other writers' work and there's usually such excitement in the room as the students get to know each other. It quickly moves on to them supporting each other as much as talking to us.

**CAD:** I've found that lifelong friendships have developed among students, regardless of age. I had one group of students who set up their own small press and began to publish each other.

**MD:** They also organise their own readings, which are a mixture of spoken word poets and what we might call page poets, or 'quieter poets', all working together. That's a terrific thing to see.

**CAD:** I'm the kind of poet who writes for the page, who wants to be in a book rather than in front of a rock band. How important do you think it is for a poet, no matter how shy they may be, to know how to read their poems in front of a small audience?

**MD:** I think it's very useful in a number of ways. It's important to read your work aloud so you hear how it falls on the page, and that's the first step towards reading in public. I also think it's important to be able to communicate, to look out at somebody who's listening and include them in that relationship of the poem. You have to make room for that.

**CAD:** We both started publishing in the 1980s. When I began there were so few anthologies that included women poets and I've since tried to remedy that in my own anthologies. Is there anything you wish you'd had or known when you started your journey?

**MD:** I wish I'd kept better records of it. I've so often sat listening to people and failed to write down something they said which I knew was going to be valuable to me. Sometimes you remember – but more often you forget.

**CAD:** Let's finish by talking about how poets earn a living. The poetry reading usually has a small fee attached to it. If you publish in a magazine you might get a fee for that. You certainly get an advance if you publish a collection of poems – but I've never been able to make my living out of poetry. Have you?

**MD:** No, and I think most poets cannot. So if poetry is your vocation, one of the most important things to learn is that you need to find the kind of work that still allows you time to take it seriously.

**CAD:** Yes – a lifestyle that lets you carve out a few hours a week to spend reading or writing but not abandon the desire to write a poem altogether.

**MD:** I think if someone takes poetry seriously it's a hard thing to abandon. So it's a question of somehow managing to keep the poetry going alongside the day job.

**CAD:** To keep it as part of life.

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# Appendix

## INDEX OF POETS MENTIONED

Here are some poets whose work you might want to explore. Dip in, see what you like, move on, find your own favourites. Read as widely as possible, it is a vital part of our lives as writers.

**Simon Armitage**
**W. H. Auden**
**Elizabeth Barrett Browning**
**Elizabeth Bishop**
**Valerie Bloom**
**Sean Borodale**
**Jean 'Binta' Breeze**
**Robert Browning**
**Robert Burns**
**Lord Byron**
**Nina Cassian**
**John Clare**
**Gillian Clarke**
**Samuel Taylor Coleridge**
**Billy Collins**
**John Cooper Clarke**
**Wendy Cope**
**e. e. cummings**
**Imtiaz Dharker**
**John Donne**
**Maura Dooley**
**T. S. Eliot**
**Vicki Feaver**
**Roy Fisher**
**Thomas Hardy**
**Seamus Heaney**
**Ted Hughes**
**Jackie Kay**
**Rudyard Kipling**
**Linton Kwesi Johnson**
**Kathleen Jamie**
**James Joyce**
**John Keats**
**Zaffar Kunial**
**Philip Larkin**
**Tom Leonard**
**Liz Lochhead**
**Audre Lorde**
**Louis MacNeice**
**Roger McGough**
**Ian McMillan**
**Adrian Mitchell**
**Edwin Morgan**
**Paul Muldoon**
**Les Murray**
**Daljit Nagra**
**Pablo Neruda**
**Grace Nichols**
**Mary Oliver**
**Wilfred Owen**
**Don Paterson**
**Brian Patten**
**Sylvia Plath**
**Ezra Pound**
**Simon Powell**
**Christina Rossetti**
**Carol Rumens**
**Vita Sackville-West**
**Sappho**
**Robert Service**
**William Shakespeare**
**Sir Philip Sidney**
**Christopher Smart**
**Ken Smith**
**Sara Teasdale**
**Dylan Thomas**
**Edward Thomas**
**William Carlos Williams**
**William Wordsworth**
**W. B. Yeats**

## INDEX OF POEMS MENTIONED

by CAROL ANN DUFFY

'Anne Hathaway'
'An Unseen'
'The birds, the fish, and the insects'
'Burgling'
'The Christmas Truce'
'Don't Be Scared'
'Dorothy Wordsworth's Christmas Birthday'
'Drone'
'Empty Nest'
'Girl and Tree'
'His Nine Sympathies'
'In Mrs Tilscher's Class'
'In Which I Laugh At My Father's Confirmation Name'
'Junction 13'
'The Laughter of Stafford Girls' High'
'Litany'
'Liverpool'
'Luke Howard, Namer of Clouds'
'The Map Woman'
'Mrs Scrooge'
'The oldest girl in the world'
'Pablo Picasso's Noël'
'Prayer'
'Premonitions'
'The Rain'

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by CAROL ANN DUFFY (cont'd)

'Shakespeare'
'Simon Powell'
'Standing Female Nude'
'Syntax'
'Tea'
'Three Paintings: 2. The Virgin punishing the infant'
'Warming her pearls'
'The way my mother speaks'

by OTHER POETS

'Adlestrop' ~ **Edward Thomas**
'Annus Mirabilis' ~ **Philip Larkin**
'At the Fish Houses' ~ **Elizabeth Bishop**
'Bagpipe Muzak, Glasgow 1990' ~ **Liz Lochhead**
'Birdsong from a willow tree' ~ **anon.**
'Celia, Celia' ~ **Adrian Mitchell**
'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' ~ **William Wordsworth**
'The Convergence of the Twain' ~ **Thomas Hardy**
'Do not go gentle into that good night' ~ **Dylan Thomas**
'Easter, 1916' ~ **W. B. Yeats**
'The Flea' ~ **John Donne**
'Frost at Midnight' ~ **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

by OTHER POETS (cont'd)

'Hey diddle diddle' ~ **anon.**
'How Do I Love Thee?' ~ **Elizabeth Barrett Browning**
'If' ~ **Rudyard Kipling**
'In the Bleak Midwinter' ~ **Christina Rossetti**
'Lady Lazarus' ~ **Sylvia Plath**
'Let me not to the marriage of true minds…', 'Sonnet 116' ~ **Shakespeare**
'Love poem to a married woman' ~ **Roger McGough**
'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' ~ **T. S. Eliot**
'The Names' ~ **Billy Collins**
'One Art' ~ **Elizabeth Bishop**
'On the Grasshopper and Cricket' ~ **John Keats**
'Pleasant Sounds' ~ **John Clare**
'Rain' ~ **Don Paterson**
'Say his name' ~ **Imtiaz Dharker**
'Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day...', 'Sonnet 18' ~ **Shakespeare**
'Sixteen' ~ **Brian Patten**
'Snow' ~ **Louis MacNeice**
'somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond' ~ **e. e. cummings**
'The Song of Wandering Aengus' ~ **W. B. Yeats**
'Thank You, Fog' ~ **W. H. Auden**
'This Be the Verse' ~ **Philip Larkin**
'This Be the Verse' ~ **Carol Rumens**
'The Waste Land' ~ **T. S. Eliot**
'Writing Out of Doors' ~ **anon.**

## INDEX OF BOOKS MENTIONED

by CAROL ANN DUFFY

COLLECTIONS

*The Bees*
*Feminine Gospels*
*Mean Time*
*The Oldest Girl in the World*
*Rapture*
*Selling Manhattan*
*Sincerity*
*Standing Female Nude*
*The World's Wife*

ANTHOLOGIES

*Answering Back*
*Empty Nest*
*I Wouldn't Thank You for A Valentine*
*Jubilee Lines*
*The Map and the Clock*
*To the Moon*

by OTHER POETS

*The Mersey Sound* ~ **Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, Brian Patten**
*Pomes Penyeach* ~ **James Joyce**

## OTHER BOOKS MENTIONED

*Time's Arrow* ~ **Martin Amis**
***Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tales***
*A Christmas Story* ~ **Charles Dickens**
*Fairy Tales* ~ **The Brothers Grimm**
*Metamorphoses* ~ **Ovid**

> There are no rules.

## DEFINITIONS OF POETIC FORM

**The Villanelle** is a nineteen-line poem of five three-line stanzas followed by a four-line stanza. There are two refrains and two repeating rhymes. The first and third line of the first stanza repeat alternately at the end of each subsequent stanza until the last stanza, which includes both repeated lines.

**The Haiku** is a Japanese form consisting of just seventeen syllables; five in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third. The haiku captures a moment and traditionally contains a reference to the seasons.

**The Sestina** is a form consisting of six stanzas of six lines each and a three-line final stanza (sometimes called 'the envoy'). The six end-words of the first stanza are repeated in a different order as end-words in each of the subsequent five stanzas. The three-line closing envoy contains all six words, two per line, placed in the middle and at the end of the three lines.

**The Sonnet** is a fourteen-line poem with a variable rhyme scheme originating in Italy and brought to England in the sixteenth century. Literally a 'little song', the sonnet often explores a single sentiment, with a clarification or 'turn' of thought in its concluding lines. There are many different types of sonnet and it remains one of the most popular forms of poetry.

**Free Verse** is poetry written in lines that do not rhyme but which closely follow the natural rhythms of speech. There may be a regular pattern of sound or rhythm in the lines but the poet does not stick to a metrical plan in composition.

## GATHERING FURTHER INFORMATION

The best sources of up-to-date and relevant information are our poetry libraries and the Poetry Society. Poetry Foundation, in the USA, also provides useful information. Look them up online and if you can, visit and involve yourself with their many, varied activities: readings, competitions, news of new opportunities for publication and advice on how to go about it. Sign up for their newsletters. They will have details of events both in person and online; information that can be useful wherever you may live.

**THE POETRY SOCIETY**

**POETRY FOUNDATION (USA)**

**THE NATIONAL POETRY LIBRARY**

**THE MANCHESTER POETRY LIBRARY**

**THE SCOTTISH POETRY LIBRARY**

**THE NORTHERN POETRY LIBRARY**

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