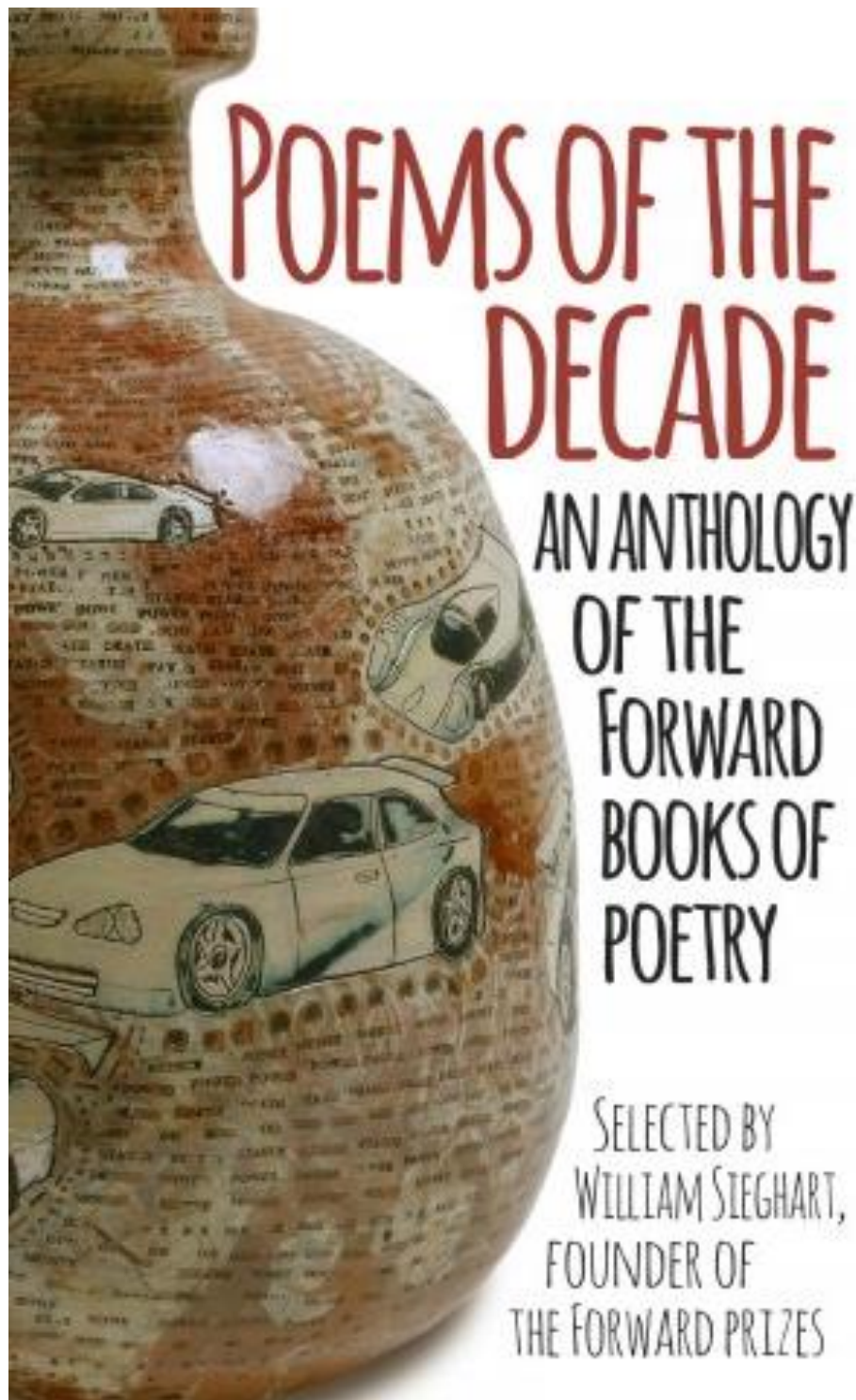


AS (Paper 1) and A Level (Paper 3) English Literature



Anthology of Named Poems and Study Guide

Please note that biographical detail is included for information purposes only, to support you with your knowledge and possible further reading on each poet. There is no expectation that you would refer to any such materials in your assessment at either AS or A level.

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Patience Agbabi, 'Eat Me'

Biography

Patience Agbabi (b. 1965) is as well known for her performances as her writing, blurring the boundaries between 'performance' poet and 'page' poet as she does with many other boundaries, including racial and sexual.

She was born in London in 1965 to Nigerian parents and fostered by a white English family in North Wales. Educated at Oxford University, she has appeared at numerous venues in the UK and abroad. *R.A.W.*, her ground-breaking debut collection of poetry, was published in 1995. Other notable collections include her contemporary re-workings of Chaucer, *Telling Tales* (Canongate Books, 2014) and *Transformatrix* (Payback Press, 2000). She combines experiments in performance – including being a member of Atomic Lip, poetry's first pop group – with a fascination with traditional poetic forms and the use of personae to explore her themes. She has undertaken many residencies, including Poet-in-Residence in 2005 at Eton College, has lectured in creative writing at several universities, and her work has been broadcast on television and radio. In 2004 she was named as one of the Poetry Society's 'Next Generation' poets.

Patience Agbabi, "Eat Me"

When I hit thirty, he brought me a cake,
three layers of icing, home-made,
a candle for each stone in weight.
The icing was white but the letters were pink,
they said, EAT ME. And I ate, did
what I was told. Didn't even taste it.
Then he asked me to get up and walk
round the bed so he could watch my broad
belly wobble, hips judder like a juggernaut.
*The bigger the better, he'd say, I like
big girls, soft girls, girls I can burrow inside
with multiple chins, masses of cellulite.*
I was his Jacuzzi. But he was my cook,
my only pleasure the rush of fast food,
his pleasure, to watch me swell like forbidden fruit.
His breadfruit. His desert island after shipwreck.
Or a beached whale on a king-sized bed
craving a wave. I was a tidal wave of flesh.
too fat to leave, too fat to buy a pint of full-fat milk,
too fat to use fat as an emotional shield,
too fat to be called chubby, cuddly, big-built.

The day I hit thirty-nine, I allowed him to stroke
my globe of a cheek. His flesh, my flesh flowed.
He said, *Open wide*, poured olive oil down my throat.
Soon you'll be forty... he whispered, and how
could I not roll over on top. I rolled and he drowned
in my flesh. I drowned his dying sentence out.
I left him there for six hours that felt like a week.
His mouth slightly open, his eyes bulging with greed.
There was nothing else left in the house to eat.

Key features/themes

'Eat Me' is an audacious dramatic monologue which examines an extreme kind of unhealthy relationship. Agbabi uses the relationship between 'feeder' and 'feedee' to explore issues of gender and power. That the concerns of the poem are not confined solely to sexual politics is hinted at through some of the language used to describe the woman's body: 'forbidden fruit', 'breadfruit', 'desert island', 'globe', 'tidal wave'. These suggest a post-colonial viewpoint in which the colonial authority – identified with the male protagonist – is ultimately overwhelmed by the power of the former colony.

However, this dimension is hinted at subtly. The power of the poem lies in the voice of the narrator and the vividness with which her situation is described: patterns of alliteration, assonance and repetition combine to convey a cloying sensuousness which mirrors the excess described. Read aloud, the reader can't help but be sensitised to the mouth and tongue. The rhyme/half rhyme scheme of aba further increases the sense of claustrophobia in the poem. In these ways the subject's physicality is enacted at the level of language.

The ending of the poem is quite shocking and worth thinking about in terms of the poet's attitude towards consumption – and where this eventually might lead.

Links to other poems

Reading Carol Ann Duffy's poem 'The Map Woman' alongside 'Eat Me' could open up discussions about representations of the female body.

Further resources

There is a useful overview of Patience Agbabi's career on the British Council literature website: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/patience-agbabi>

Simon Armitage, 'Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass'

Biography

Simon Armitage (b.1963) is one of the UK's best known and loved poets. He was born in the village of Marsden and lives in West Yorkshire. Until 1994 he worked as a probation officer in Greater Manchester.

Since his debut collection *Zoom* (Bloodaxe, 1989) was awarded a Poetry Book Society Choice, his work has gained a reputation and audience far beyond most contemporary poets. He is also a prolific writer: his many collections include *Kid* (Faber & Faber, 1992), *Book of Matches* (Faber & Faber, 1993), *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (Faber & Faber, 1997), *The Universal Home Doctor* (Faber & Faber, 2002) and *Seeing Stars* (Faber & Faber, 2010), alongside highly acclaimed translations.

His prose works include two novels and a best-selling memoir. *All Points North* (Penguin, 1998). He has also written extensively for radio, television, film and stage, including four stage plays and a dramatisation of *The Odyssey* for BBC Radio 4. His play for Radio 4, *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster*, about the true story of a teenager brutally set upon in a park by a gang for being a Goth, received unprecedented listener feedback.

His work has received numerous awards including being shortlisted five times for the T.S. Eliot Prize, the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year, the Keats Shelley Prize, and the National Book Critics Circle Award in the USA. He was awarded a CBE in 2010 for services to poetry.

Simon Armitage, “Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass”

It seemed an unlikely match. All winter unplugged,
grinding its teeth in a plastic sleeve, the chainsaw swung
nose-down from a hook in the darkroom
under the hatch in the floor. When offered the can
it knocked back a quarter-pint of engine oil
and juices ran from its joints and threads,
oozed across the guide-bar and the maker’s name,
into the dry links.

From the summerhouse, still holding one last gulp
of last year’s heat behind its double doors, and hung
with the weightless wreckage of wasps and flies,
moth-balled in spider’s wool...
from there, I trailed the day-glo orange power-line
the length of the lawn and the garden path,
fed it out like powder from a keg, then walked
back to the socket and flicked the switch, then walked again
and coupled the saw to the flex – clipped them together.
Then dropped the safety catch and gunned the trigger.

No gearing up or getting to speeds, just an instant rage,
the rush of metal lashing out at air, connected to the main.
The chainsaw with its perfect disregard, its mood
to tangle with cloth, or jewellery, or hair.
The chainsaw with its bloody desire, its sweet tooth
for the flesh of the face and the bones underneath,
its grand plan to kick back against nail or knot
and rear up into the brain.
I let it flare, lifted it into the sun
and felt the hundred beats per second drumming in its heart,
and felt the drive-wheel gargle in its throat.

The pampas grass with its ludicrous feathers
and plumes. The pampas grass, taking the warmth and light
from cuttings and bulbs, sunning itself,
stealing the show with its footstools, cushions and tufts
and its twelve-foot spears.

This was the sledgehammer taken to crack the nut.
Probably all that was needed here was a good pull or shove
or a pitchfork to lever it out at its base.
Overkill. I touched the blur of the blade
against the nearest tip of a reed – it didn't exist.
I dabbed at a stalk that swooned, docked a couple of heads,
dismissed the top third of its canes with a sideways sweep
at shoulder height – this was a game.
I lifted the fringe of undergrowth, carved at the trunk –
plant-juice spat from the pipes and tubes
and dust flew out as I ripped into pockets of dark, secret
warmth.

To clear a space to work
I raked whatever was severed or felled or torn
towards the dead zone under the outhouse wall, to be fired.
Then cut and raked, cut and raked, till what was left
was a flat stump the size of a manhole cover or barrel lid
that wouldn't be dug with a spade or prized from the earth.
Wanting to finish things off I took up the saw
and drove it vertically downwards into the upper roots,
but the blade became choked with soil or fouled with weeds,
or what was sliced or split somehow closed and mended
behind,
like cutting at water or air with a knife.
I poured barbecue fluid into the patch
and threw in a match – it flamed for a minute, smoked for a minute more, and went
out. I left it at that.

In the weeks that came new shoots like asparagus tips
sprang up from its nest and by June
it was riding high in its saddle, wearing a new crown.
Corn in Egypt. I looked on
from the upstairs window like the midday moon.

Back below stairs on its hook, the chainsaw seethed.
I left it a year, to work back through its man-made dreams,
to try to forget.
The seamless urge to persist was as far as it got.

Key features/themes

This poem is a real tour de force of physical description, with both the chainsaw and the pampas grass vividly personified. Patterns of imagery suggest a gender dimension to the confrontation: the adjectives used to describe the chainsaw and the way it operates are associated with traditional forms of male behaviour. By contrast, initially at least, the pampas grass is seen as decorative and passive. By the end of the poem it's the seemingly fragile pampas grass that continues to flourish; the chainsaw (and by inference the narrator) is reduced to impotence. Moreover, the power dynamic between what is a manmade piece of machinery and a natural, albeit cultivated, plant implies a broader struggle that reaches beyond the borders of a suburban garden. This wider context is hinted at in the shift in language in the last two stanzas which move beyond the earlier conversational swagger, tipping the balance towards a more lyrical tone ('daylight moon') and wider historical/cultural considerations ('corn in Egypt', 'count back across time').

As with many Armitage poems, how far the narrator is an invented persona is interesting to consider. Stylistically, the poem is convincingly conversational with its mixture of short and long sentences, its relaxed line and stanza lengths, and informal tone ('knocked back', 'gunned the trigger', 'I left it at that'). However, the poem is also a highly patterned and crafted piece of writing which deploys rich imagery and an extensive use of sound, including rhyme, alliteration and assonance, to convey emotional and physical aspects of the narrative.

Links to other poems

Comparing this poem with other poems written in the first person could be instructive and provide grounds for a debate on how far the 'I' of a poem can ever be identified with the poet. This poem might sit somewhere between a more personal poem, like 'Inheritance' by Eavan Boland, and Ian Duhig's 'The Lammas Hireling', which is clearly spoken by a fictional narrator.

Further resources

www.simonarmitage.com contains a useful biography and extracts from his books, both poetry, fiction and non-fiction.

His poem 'Birthday' is analysed brilliantly by Ruth Padel in her book *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem* (Chatto, 2002).

As well as a reading by Armitage, the Poetry Archive features a filmed interview with him:

www.poetryarchive.org/interview/simon-armitage-interview

Ros Barber, 'Material'

Biography

Ros Barber (b. 1964) was born in Washington D.C. to British parents, grew up in Essex, but moved to Brighton on the south coast of England at the age of 18. An academic, poet and novelist, she is well known as an expert on the Elizabethan poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe, the inspiration behind her verse novel, *The Marlowe Papers* (Sceptre, 2012) which re-imagines Marlowe as the pen behind the works of Shakespeare. She has written three collections of poetry, the most recent (*Material*, 2008) being a Poetry Book Society recommendation.

In 2013, *The Marlowe Papers* was awarded the Desmond Elliott Prize, jointly awarded the Author's Club Best First Novel Award, and long-listed for the Women's Prize (formerly Orange Prize) for Fiction. In 2011, pre-publication, it was joint winner of the annual Calvin & Rose G. Hoffman Prize.

Barber is a visiting research fellow at the University of Sussex, lecturer on the MA in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London, and director of research at the Shakespearean Authorship Trust.

For 12 years she taught creative writing for the University of Sussex on both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. She has been visiting lecturer at Brunel, Kent, and Notts Trent Universities. Since 2012 she has been teaching week-long residential courses for both the Arvon Foundation and the Ty Newydd Writers Centre in Wales.

Ros Barber, "Material"

My mother was a hanky queen
when hanky meant a thing of cloth,
not paper tissues bought in packs
from late-night garages and shops,
but things for waving out of trains
and mopping the corners of your grief:
when hankies were material
she'd have one, always, up her sleeve.

Tucked in the wrists of every cardi,
a mum's embarrassment of lace
embroidered with a V for Viv,
spittled and scrubbed against my face.
And sometimes more than one fell out
as is she had a farm up there
where dried-up hankies fell in love
and mated, raising little squares.

She bought her own; I never did.
Hankies were presents from distant aunts
in boxed sets, with transparent covers
and script initials spelling ponce,
the naffest Christmas gift you'd get –
my brothers too, more often than not,
got male ones: serious, and grey,
and larger, like they had more snot.

It was hankie that closed department stores,
with headscarves, girdles, knitting wool
and trouser presses; homely props
you'd never find today in malls.
Hankies, which demanded irons,
and boiling to be purified
shuttered the doors of family stores
when those who used to buy them died.

And somehow, with the hanky's loss,
greengrocer George with his dodgy foot
delivering veg from a Comma van
is history, and the friendly butcher
who'd slip and extra sausage in,
the fishmonger whose marble slab
of haddock smoked the colour of yolks
and parcelled rows of local crab

lay opposite the dancing school
where Mrs White, with painted talons,
taught us When You're Smiling from a stumbling, out of tune piano:
step-together, step-together, step-together,
point! The Annual Talent Show
when every mother, fencing tears,
would whip a hanky from their sleeve
and smudge the rouge from little dears.

Nostalgia only makes me old.
The innocence I want my brood
to cling on to like ten-bob notes
was killed in TV's lassitude.
And it was me that turned it on and eat bought biscuits I would bake
if I'd commit to being home.

There's never a hanky up my sleeve.
I raised neglected-looking kids,
the kind whose noses strangers clean.
What awkwardness in me forbids
me to keep tissues in my bag
when handy packs are 50p?
I miss material handkerchiefs,
their soft and hidden history.

But it isn't mine. I'll let it go.
My mother too, eventually,
who died not leaving handkerchiefs
but tissues and uncertainty:
and she would say, should I complain
of the scratchy and disposable,
that *this is your material*
to do with, daughter, what you will.

Key features/themes

In this tightly rhymed poem, a single object (an old-fashioned lace hanky) becomes a way of invoking a vanished pre-decimal world of local shopkeepers, dance schools and family-run department stores. With great economy and the use of vivid detail, the narrator of the poem takes us back to her childhood and, in particular, her relationship with her mother. The poem moves from this past into the present and a consideration of the narrator's own role as a mother and how this differs from the experience of earlier generations.

The title has an interesting resonance in the light of these generational concerns, referring both to the actual material the hankies are made of (so different from modern disposable tissues) and how we are shaped by our mothers and shape our children in turn. The phrase 'raw materials' hovers behind the title, reminding us of the importance of nurture in creating character.

The poem is interestingly ambivalent about the lost world as symbolised by the hanky. The narrator recognises her own nostalgia for an era when community ties were stronger and mothers were stay-at-home homemakers with time for ironing and baking. But even back then, the poem implies, she was impatient with the formalities represented by the hankies, 'the naffest Christmas gift you'd get', and the social constraints of the period. It was a world with no room for individual creative expression where people, especially women and girls, had to 'step-together, step-together'. However, contemporary motherhood is still hard to square with self-hood, requiring the compromise of television and shop-bought biscuits to get the time to write.

The regular rhyme scheme of the poem – abcdbdefe – is suggestive of the more formal era the poet is evoking. It also perhaps suggests the constraints which the past still places on the narrator.

Links to other poems

Carol Ann Duffy's 'Map Woman' charts a similar kind of society, while 'Inheritance' by Eavan Boland also reflects on this theme, though using a very different approach and tone.

Further resources

Ros Barber's own website has a number of resources, including a biography, articles, and a blog:

<http://rosbarber.com>

Ros Barber reading her own poems: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB2_10atzfM&safe=active

Eavan Boland, 'Inheritance'

Biography

Questions of identity – as an Irish woman, mother, poet and exile – give rise to much of Eavan Boland's poetry. She is now recognised as one of the foremost female voices in Irish literature.

Eavan Boland (b. 1944) was born in Dublin, Ireland, on 24 September 1944. Her father was a diplomat and her mother an expressionist painter. At the age of 6, Boland and her family relocated to London where she first encountered anti-Irish sentiment. She later returned to Dublin for school and she received her BA from Trinity College in 1966. She was also educated in London and New York.

Boland's early work, such as *In Her Own Image* (Arlen House, 1980) and *Night Feed* (re-issued Carcanet, 1984), is informed by her experiences as a young wife and mother, and her growing awareness of the troubled role of women in Irish history and culture. Irish myth and history have remained important sources of inspiration, her poems offering fresh perspectives on traditional themes. Later collections include *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980–1990* (Carcanet, 1990), *In a Time of Violence* (Carcanet, 1994), *The Lost Land* (Carcanet, 1998) and *Domestic Violence* (Carcanet, 2007). *New Collected Poems* was published by Carcanet in 2005 to great acclaim.

She is also the author of many other books of essays and criticism including *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (with Mark Strand, W.W. Norton, 2000) and most recently *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet* (W.W. Norton, 2011), a collection of essays, which won the 2012 PEN Award. Other awards include a Lannan Foundation Award in Poetry, an American Ireland Fund Literary Award, and an honorary degree from Trinity. She has taught at Trinity College, University College and Bowdoin College, and is currently a professor of English at Stanford University where she directs the creative writing programme.

Eavan Boland, "Inheritance"

I have been wondering
what I have to leave behind, to give to my daughters.
No good offering the view
between here and Three Rock Mountain,
the blueness in the hours before rain, the long haze afterwards.
The ground I stood on was never really mine. It might not be theirs.
And gifts that were passed through generations –
silver and the fluid light left after silk – were never given here.
This is an island of waters, inland distances,
with a history of want and women who struggled
to make the nothing which was all they had
into something they could leave behind.
I learned so little from them: the lace bobbin with its braided mesh,
its oat-straw pillow and the wheat-coloured shawl
knitted in one season
to imitate another
are all crafts I never had
and can never hand on. But then again there was a night
I stayed awake, alert and afraid, with my first child
who turned and turned; sick, fretful.
When dawn came I held my hand over the absence of fever,
over skin which had stopped burning, as if I knew the secrets
of health and air, as if I understood them and listened to the silence
and thought, I must have learned that somewhere.

Key features/themes

The poet starts with the idea of wondering, which sets the tone for the poem's quiet, introverted quality. This is not a poem of dramatic gesture or noisy declamation. The informality of the poem's structure – the irregular stanzas, the relaxed sentences – contributes to the impression of someone thinking aloud.

While the poem is ostensibly personal, there is a political and historical dimension in its focus on specifically female forms of inheritance: prior to the Married Women's Property Act of 1870, a woman entering into marriage in the UK had to give up ownership of her personal property, which was automatically transferred to her husband who could choose to dispose of it as he wished. And of course poor people, whether men or women, have always struggled to accumulate any kind of physical property to 'leave behind'.

Boland refers to just such a 'history of want', focusing instead on other kinds of inheritance such as traditional craft skills and the anxieties of motherhood. The poem's moving closure acknowledges that, in the face of a child's illness, what connects her to mothers of previous generations is love, worry and powerlessness; the child gets better because the fever runs its course, not because she knows 'the secrets/of health and air'.

Links to other poems

Seamus Heaney's 'Out of the Bag' makes an interesting contrast with Boland's poem. Both consider the effect of the past on the present but the approach is very different, with Heaney choosing to focus on a specific family memory while Boland contemplates the past in more general terms.

Further resources

The Poetry Foundation has an expanded biography, links to some more poems, and articles both by and about Boland: www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/eavan-boland#poet
And here's an interesting interview with Boland which looks at her experience of both the American and Irish poetry worlds: www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/where-poetry-begins-eavan-boland-conversation

Sue Boyle, 'A Leisure Centre is Also a Temple of Learning'

Biography

Sue Boyle lives in Bath where she organises the Bath Poetry Café and the associated Café Workshops and Café Writing Days. Her work has been published in leading poetry magazines including *The Rialto*, *Acumen*, *Magma*, *Poetry Salzburg* and *The Interpreter's House*.

Her collection *Too Late for the Love Hotel* was a winner in the 2009 Book & Pamphlet Competition and was praised by the judge, Andrew Motion, for the 'humble attentiveness these poems pay to their subjects' and for 'the range and strangeness of the book's interests'.

Sue Boyle, "A Leisure Centre Is Also a Temple of Learning"

The honey coloured girl in the women's changing room
is absorbed in making her body more beautiful:
she has flexed and toned every muscle with a morning swim
and showered away the pool chemicals
using an aromatic scrub and a gentle exfoliant.
Lithe as a young leopard, she has perfect bone structure:
her secret cleft is shaved as neatly as a charlatan's moustache.
In dreamy abstractedness she moisturises then spray perfumes
every part that might be loved. Her long hands
move in rhythm like a weaver's at a loom –
tipped throat, underchin, the little kisspoints below her ears,
the nuzzle between her breasts, her willow thighs.
She brushes her hair so clean it looks like a waterfall.
A bee could sip her.
She is summer cream slipped over raspberries.
She is so much younger than the rest of us.
She looked around.
We twelve are the chorus:
we know what happens next.

Key features/themes

This poem brings together the modern and the ancient, the secular and the religious, in a surprising and witty way. The title encapsulates this lively dynamic: describing a leisure centre as a 'temple' is unusual and instantly intriguing.

For the majority of the poem the temple seems to belong to the young girl who is both goddess and worshipper combined. Modern references ('flexed and toned', 'chemicals', 'exfoliant') give way to language which is reminiscent of the Old Testament's Song of Songs/Song of Solomon – lavish, exotic and sensual. The girl is compared to all kinds of natural beauty – 'leopard', 'sand', 'willow', 'waterfall', 'listening bird', 'cream', 'raspberries'. This sense of exotic beauty is matched by her actions as she performs her elaborate cleansing ritual. In essence, the girl is worshipping her own body and its potential for love and sensual pleasure.

The main tonal shift in the poem comes in the last three lines which are blunt in their warning about 'what happens next'. Each line is end-stopped and stark in its effect. The focus shifts from an individual to a group of women who become the 'chorus'. In Greek drama the chorus form a single entity commenting on the dramatic action. They represent the general population of the particular story, in contrast to those characters taking centre stage which tend to be famous heroes, kings, gods and goddesses. The word might also refer to the chorus of the women or 'daughters' of Jerusalem who appear in the Song of Songs as an audience/witness to the sensual love of the protagonists. Finally, these lines also point to a post-Christian symbolism, the 12 women suggesting the 12 Apostles who followed Jesus.

While the theme of youth and ageing might be a serious one, the pleasure the poem takes in the language used to describe the girl, and the dark humour of its ending, give the poem a light and enjoyable touch.

Links to other poems

For a very different take on the gap between youth and experience, look at Helen Dunmore's 'To My Nine-Year-Old Self', where the relationships between observer and observed is more intimate.

Further resources

There's a nice statement by Sue Boyle about her poetic journey here (under the 'The work' tab): www.poetrybusiness.co.uk/sue-boyle

John Burnside, 'History'

Biography

John Burnside (b. 1955) is the author of 13 collections of poetry, as well as novels, short stories and a memoir, receiving wide critical praise across all these genres. His poetry has won many of the major poetry prizes, including the Whitbread Poetry Award in 2000 for *The Asylum Dance* (Jonathan Cape, 2000) – which was also shortlisted for the Forward and T.S. Eliot prizes – and the 2011 T.S. Eliot Prize for *Black Cat Bone* (Jonathan Cape, 2011). He was shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize once again in 2014 for his latest collection, *All One Breath* (Jonathan Cape, 2014).

Born in Scotland, Burnside moved away in 1965, returning to settle there in 1995. In the intervening period he worked as a factory hand, a labourer, a gardener and, for 10 years, a computer systems designer. He now lives in Fife with his wife and children and teaches creative writing, literature and ecology courses at the University of St Andrews.

Burnside's central concerns have remained remarkably consistent across his work, though his manner of investigating them has evolved over time. Intensely lyrical in style, his poems engage deeply with questions of the self and our relationship with the natural world. His poems often blur the boundaries between the self and the 'other' – whether that's the spirit, the animal world or the past. His poems are fraught with glimpsed presences; ghosts, angels, ancestors, our own un-lived lives.

John Burnside, "History"

St Andrews: West Sands; September 2001

Today as we flew the kites
- the sand spinning off in ribbons along the beach
and that gasoline smell from Leuchars gusting across
the golf links;
The tide far out
and quail-grey in the distance; people
jogging, or stopping to watch
as the war planes cambered and turned
in the morning light –
today
- with the news in my mind, and the muffled dread
of what may come – I knelt down in the sand
with Lucas gathering shells and pebbles finding evidence of life in all this
driftwork: snail shells; shreds of razorfish;
smudges of weed and flesh on tideworn stone.

At times I think what makes us who we are
is neither kinship nor our given states
but something lost between the world we own
and what we dream about behind the names
on days like this our lines raised in the wind
our bodies fixed and anchored to the shore
and though we are confined by property
what tether us to gravity and light
has most to do with distance and the shapes
we find in water reading from the book
of silt and tides the rose or petrol blue
of jellyfish and sea anemone
combining with a child's
first nakedness.

Sometimes I am dizzy with the fear
of losing everything – the sea, the sky,
all living creatures, forests, estuaries:
we trade so much to know the virtual
we scarcely register the drift and tug
of other bodies scarcely apprehend
the moment as it happens: shifts of light
and weather and the quiet, local forms
of history: the fish lodged in the tide
beyond the sands; the long insomnia
of ornamental carp in public parks
captive and hung in their own
slow-burning transitive gold jamjars of spawn
and sticklebacks or goldfish carried home
from fairgrounds to the hum of radio
but this is the problem: how to be alive
in all this gazed-upon and cherished world
and do no harm a toddler on a beach
sifting wood and dried weed from the sand
and puzzled by the pattern on a shell
his parents on the dune slacks with a kite
plugged into the sky all nerve and line
patient; be afraid; but still, through everything
attentive to the irredeemable.

Key features/themes

The dating of the poem sets the context, in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001. This event – History with a capital ‘H’ – casts its shadow over the whole poem.

Though the poem is called ‘History’, it begins with the word ‘today’. Throughout the poem, the big events – symbolised by the war planes – are set against the present moment – the beach, parents playing with their child, that child’s absorption in the physical world. The poem suggests that paying attention to the world’s transience and beauty might act as a kind of antidote to the hatreds that create ideologically motivated violence. However, the poem is not judgmental, acknowledging that our very presence in the world is a source of harm.

The poem ends on the word ‘irredeemable’ i.e. that which is lost or cannot be retrieved. The word also has a specific religious connotation – in the Christian tradition, Jesus is often referred to as ‘The Redeemer’ because he has saved mankind from sin. Burnside is aware of these resonances and his use of this word to close the poem is entirely fitting. It suggests that nothing described in the poem – natural or human – can ultimately be saved from history or time, but paying attention to the moment, as the poem does so beautifully, may at least bring us to a deeper appreciation of ‘all this gazed-upon and cherished world’.

The poem enacts its themes through both structure and language. The first 22 lines are fractured, intent on recording sense impressions, details caught and recorded. The first main verb is ‘knelt’, an action charged with spiritual meaning set in opposition to the threat of the war planes. The structure of the poem then shifts, the stanzas becoming intermittently more regular as observational detail turns to thought and an attempt to make some kind of sense out of what is happening in the world.

The poem is balanced between a number of opposing concepts which Burnside explores through complex strands of imagery. The setting of the beach is significant, poised between land and sea. Other opposites held in tension in the poem include: the human/natural world; innocence/guilt; pessimism/hope; earth/air/sea; freedom/captivity. Along with the line and stanza structure, these give the poem its sense of ebb and flow.

Links to other poems

Robert Minhinnick’s ‘The Fox in the National Museum of Wales’ is a similarly expansive poem touching on some of the same themes. The contrast in tone could hardly be greater, though, so these poems form an interesting pair to consider together, especially when thinking about what elements combine to create a poet’s distinctive voice.

Further resources

The British Council’s literature website has a useful critical overview of Burnside’s work and his importance as a writer: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/john-burnside>

Ciaran Carson, 'The War Correspondent'

Biography

Ciaran Carson (b. 1948) is from Belfast, Northern Ireland, the son of Liam Carson, a postman. He acquired his taste for language and storytelling very early. He recalls that when he was two or three, his father would tell his children stories in Gaelic every evening, and each story would continue (at least it seemed that way to the child) for weeks.

Carson was educated at Queen's University in Belfast, from which he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. From 1974 to 1975 he worked as a schoolteacher in Belfast, after which he became the traditional arts officer for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, also based in Belfast, a position he held until 1998.

Carson's first volume of poetry was *The New Estate* (Blackstaff Press, 1976), followed by *The Irish For No* (The Gallery Press, 1987) and *Belfast Confetti* (Bloodaxe, 1990). The Northern Ireland conflict, which raged for three decades between Protestant Loyalists and Catholic Republicans and was known as 'The Troubles', was a key theme in these early books. Using humour and satire, Carson, who was raised a Catholic, reflects on the violent situation in Belfast.

Later collections include *First Language* (Gallery Books, 1994), *Opera Et Cetera* (Bloodaxe, 1996) and *Breaking News* (The Gallery Press, 2003), which contains the seven poems that make up 'The War Correspondent'.

The longer lines of his earlier work, influenced by the American poet C.K. Williams, have gradually evolved into a sparer style, though wordplay and an intense focus on language and form remain central. His work has won many prizes including, in 1994, the first ever T.S. Eliot Prize 'for the outstanding book of poetry published in Great Britain' for his fourth collection, *First Language*. *Breaking News* was awarded the Forward Prize for best collection of poetry.

Carson has also published novels, memoir and translations. In 1998, Carson was appointed a professor of English at Queen's University Belfast. As of 2006, he was director of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry.

Ciaran Carson, "The War Correspondent"

1

Gallipoli

Take sheds and stalls from Billingsgate,
glittering with scaling-knives and fish,
the tumbledown outhouses of English farmers' yards
that reek of dung and straw, and horses
cantering the mewsy lanes of Dublin;

take an Irish landlord's ruinous estate,
elaborate pagodas from a Chinese Delftware dish
where fishes fly through shrouds and sails and yards
of leaking ballast-laden junks bound for Benares
in search of bucket-loads of tea as black as tin;

take a dirty gutter from a back street in Boulogne,
where shops and houses teeter so their pitched roofs meet,
some chimney stacks as tall as those in Sheffield
or Irish round towers,
smoking like a fleet of British ironclad destroyers;

take the garlic-oregano-tainted arcades of Bologna,
linguini-twists of souks and smells of rotten meat,
as labyrinth as the rifle-factories of Springfield,
or the tenements deployed by bad employers
who sit in parlours doing business drinking *Power's*

then populate this slum with Cypriot and Turk,
Armenians and Arabs, British riflemen
and French Zouaves, camel-drivers, officers, and sailors,
sappers, miners, Nubian slaves, Greek money-changers,
plus interpreters who do not know the lingo;

dress them in tur bans, shawls of fancy needlework,
fedoras, fezzes, sashes, shirts of fine Valenciennes,
boleros, pantaloons designed by jobbing tailors,
knickerbockers of the ostrich and the pink flamingo,
sans-culottes, and outfits even stranger;

requisition slaughter-houses for the troops,
and stalls with sherbet, lemonade, and rancid lard for sale,
a temporary hospital or two, a jail,
a stagnant harbour redolent with cholera,
and open sewers running down the streets;

let the staple diet be green cantaloupes
swarming with flies washed down with sour wine,
accompanied by the Byzantine
jangly music of the cithara
and the multi-lingual squawks of parakeets –

O landscape riddled with the diamond mines of Kimberley,
and all the oubliettes of Trebizond,
where opium-smokers doze among the Persian rugs,
and spies and whores in dim-lit snugs
discuss the failing prowess of the Allied powers,

where prowling dogs sniff for offal beyond
the stench of pulped plums and apricots,
from which is distilled the brandy they call “grape-shot”,
and soldiers lie dead or drunk among the crushed flowers –
I have not even begun to describe Gallipoli.

4

Balaklava

The Turks marched in dense columns, bristling with steel.
Sunlight flashed on the polished barrels of their firelocks
and on their bayonets, relieving their sombre hue,
for their dark blue uniforms looked quite black
when viewed *en masse*. The Chasseurs d’Afrique,
in light powder blue jackets, with white cartouche belts, scarlet
pantaloons, mounted on white Arabs, caught the eye
like a bed of flowers scattered over the valley floor.

Some, indeed wore poppies red as cochineal,
plucked from the rich soil, which bore an abundance of
hollylocks,
dahlias, anemones, wild parsley, mint, whitethorn, rue,
sage, thyme, and countless other plants whose names I lack.
As the Turkish infantry advanced, their boots creaked
and crushed the springy flowers, and delicate
perfumes wafted into the air beneath the April sky:
the smell of sweating men and horses smothered by flora.

Waving high above the more natural green
of the meadow were phalanxes of rank grass, marking the
mounds
where the slain of October 25th had found their last repose,
and the snorting horses refused to eat those deadly shoots.
As the force moved on, more evidences of that fatal day
came to light. The skeleton of an English horseman
had tatters of scarlet cloth hanging to the bones of his arms;
all the buttons had been cut off the jacket.

Round as the shot, the bullet-skull had been picked clean
save for two swatches of red hair. The remains of a wolfhound
sprawled at his feet. From many graves, the uncovered bones
of the tenants had started up, all of them lacking boots.
Tangled with rotten trappings, half-decayed horses lay
where they'd fallen. Fifes and drums struck up a rataplan;
so we swept on over our fellow men-at-arms
under the noon sun in our buttoned-up jackets.

Key features/themes

'The War Correspondent' consists of seven poems, all but one of which are set in the Crimea at the time of the Crimean War. This war took place between 1854 and 1856, and pitted a British and French alliance against Russia for influence in the Near East.

'Gallipoli' and 'Balaklava', two of the poems from the sequence, are named after two particularly infamous battles. 'Gallipoli' is the one poem in the sequence not set during the Crimean War, but the First World War. It is about the Dardanelles campaign of 1915–16 – a byword for military disaster – in which the Allied forces (Britain and British Empire forces and France) attempted to capture Constantinople, modern day Istanbul, from the Turks. The six-month campaign produced appalling casualties – almost half a million dead or wounded.

'Balaklava' recalls the famous incident in the Crimean War known as the Charge of the Light Brigade; due to a misunderstanding, a British cavalry charge was sent up a valley strongly held on three sides by the Russians. About 250 men were killed or wounded, and over 400 horses lost for no military purpose. The British poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson immortalised the battle in verse in his 'Charge of the Light Brigade'.

By juxtaposing two different conflicts 60 years apart, Carson makes a point about the world's ongoing addiction to war. The fact that in the First World War the great powers aligned themselves differently, with Russia now allied to Britain and France against the Turks and Germany, underlines the pointlessness of the earlier sacrifice.

In 'Gallipoli', Carson presents a narrator trying to capture an impression of a place, a teeming and chaotic environment. The crowdedness of the scene is enacted by the densely packed lines and stanzas which are full of rich sensory detail, conveying an overwhelming physicality. The place is a melting pot of races, of conflicting cultures and languages. The ethnic origins which Carson lists are a roll-call of European enmity over the past few hundred years, a reminder of the ever-present threat of war: England and Ireland; Britain and France; Turks, Arabs and Armenians; Turks and Greeks; Muslims and Christians.

The poem is also full of references to the human activity of buying and selling: farming, trade, markets, factories, the arms industry, mining, drugs and sex all reflect a world where everything is up for grabs, not least by the different Empires whose rivalries were a key catalyst for the First World War. No wonder that in the last line the narrator acknowledges that he's still at a loss to describe 'Gallipoli'.

'Balaklava' returns to the earlier conflict in the Crimea and describes an advance by Turkish and French troops, this time fighting on the same side. The living soldiers march over the ground where the Charge of the Light Brigade took place, and the narrator describes in graphic detail the state of the graves of the dead English cavalry men.

The contrast between the living and the dead is expressed vividly through the description of the uniforms under the hot sun: the gorgeousness of the Turkish and French uniforms versus the decay and degradation of the dead soldiers. However, the poem also suggests how quickly the living may turn into the dead: the scarlet trousers of the French cavalry are the same colour as the tatters of his slaughtered English counterpart. The point is underlined by the chilling details of the

missing boots and buttons – the dead have been plundered by the living, whose own lives may soon be lost.

The other key strand of imagery in the poem is connected to the beauty of the meadow flowers. The soldiers in their colourful uniforms are like a ‘bed of flowers’ but they are a destructive presence, crushing the meadow as they march. The landscape has already been polluted by warfare and the poem presents another tide of war, sweeping inexorably over this contested landscape.

Links to other poems

John Burnside’s poem ‘History’ is also shadowed by war. Taken together, the poems form an interesting dialogue about the nature of war, both historical and contemporary. They are also concerned with evoking a sense of place, using contrasting techniques to do so.

Further resources

This poem was Poem of the Week in the *TLS* in 2012: you can read an introduction to it here:

www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1088042.ece

This interview with Carson in the *Guardian* takes an informative look back at his career:

www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jan/17/poetry-ciaran-carson-belfast-ireland

Julia Copus, 'An Easy Passage'

Biography

Julia Copus (b. 1969) grew up in London in a house with three brothers who were learning to play musical instruments. Two of them later went on to be professional musicians, and Copus has said in an interview that in order to have quiet and a room of her own, she gave up her own trumpet lessons and moved into a caravan in the driveway while she was doing her exams. 'For the first time, I truly began to feel that with a notepad and pen I could make my own world; could be whoever – and wherever – I wanted to be.'

Her three full collections to date are *The Shattered Eye* (Bloodaxe, 1995), *In Defence of Adultery* (Bloodaxe, 2003) and *The World's Two Smallest Humans* (Faber, 2012). The complexities of family relationships and an interest in the 'what ifs' of life are recurring subjects. Her poems are often subtly and elaborately structured, one of her achievements being the creation of a new form of the specular or 'mirror' poem in which the second stanza repeats exactly the lines of the first, only in reverse. Her most recent collection contains a moving sequence, 'Ghost', about the experience of IVF treatment.

Copus has been shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the T.S. Eliot Prize, and won the 2002 National Poetry Competition with her poem 'Breaking the Rule'. She also writes for radio; her first play, *Eenie Meenie Macka Racka*, was awarded the BBC's Alfred Bradley prize. She is a lector for the Royal Literary Fund and in 2008 was made an honorary fellow at the University of Exeter.

Julia Copus, "An Easy Passage"

Once she is halfway up there, crouched in her bikini on the porch roof of her family's house, trembling, she knows that the one thing she must not do is to think of the narrow windowsill, the sharp drop off the stairwell; she must keep her mind on the friend with whom she is half in love and who is waiting for her on the blond gravel somewhere beneath her, keep her mind on her and on the fact of the open window, the flimsy, hole-punched, aluminium lever towards which in a moment she will reach with the length of her whole body, leaning in to the warm flank of the house. But first she steadies herself, still crouching, the grains of the asphalt hot beneath her toes and fingertips, a square of petrified beach. Her tiny breast rest lightly on her thighs. – What can she know of the way the world admits us less and less the more we grow? For now both girls seem lit, as if from within, their hair and the gold stud earrings in the first one's ears; for now the house exists only for them, set back as it is from the long, grey eye of the street, and far away from the mother who does not trust her daughter with a key, the workers about their business in the drab electroplating factory over the road, far too, most far, from the flush-faced secretary who, with her head full of the evening class she plans to take, or the trip of a lifetime, looks up now from the stirring omens of the astrology column at a girl – thirteen if she's a day – standing in next to nothing in the driveway opposite, one hand flat against her stomach, one shielding her eyes to gaze up at a pale calf, a silver anklet and the five neat *shimmering-oyster*-painted toenails of an outstretched foot which catch the sunlight briefly like the flash of armaments before dropping gracefully into the shade of the house.

Key features/themes

In the first line of this delicate poem, Copus uses the word 'halfway' to describe the position of a girl as she prepares to surreptitiously climb back inside her own house while her friend waits in the driveway below. This one word is suggestive of the poem's central concern, its exploration of that fleeting period between girlhood and womanhood.

This is a poem of balance and poise with the girl's physical situation – between up and down, indoors and outdoors – symbolising her stage in life. Throughout the poem, Copus uses opposites to create a sense of things being on the cusp: sun is contrasted with shade, the freedom of the young girls with the adult world of work, while the girl is described as being 'half in love' with her friend.

The use of tenses also informs the poem's structure: it's written in the present tense, but the reference to astrology and the presence of the older secretary, as well as the mention of the girl's mother, are reminders of what the future might hold in store. The sense of balance is further informed by the single question which comes almost exactly halfway through the poem in which the narrator, for the only time, comments directly on the action.

While the narrator remains unobtrusive for most of the poem, her point of view is important. The scene is viewed through her eyes as if through a movie camera, zooming in for close-ups on different characters and allowing us brief glimpses into their lives.

While the tone is broadly conversational – the longish, enjambed lines providing a naturally easy flow – there are subtle patterns of imagery which help bind the poem together. In particular, references to light and colour in describing the girls help to convey both their delicate physical presence and the fragility of this particular moment in time.

Links to other poems

Both Helen Dunmore's 'To My Nine-Year-Old-Self' and Leontia Flynn's 'The Furthest Distances I've Travelled' explore similar territory in looking back at youth from an older perspective. They form an interesting contrast to the Copus poem, though, as they both employ a more obviously personal voice in comparison with Copus' tender detachment.

Further resources

A short but informative analysis of a Copus poem can be found here: www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article1249590.ece

As well as reading her own poem on The Poetry Archive (www.poetryarchive.org/poet/julia-copus), Copus also gives a tour of her favourite poems featured in the archive, an interesting insight into her tastes and concerns as a poet.

Tishani Doshi, 'The Deliverer'

Biography

Poet, writer and dancer Tishani Doshi was born in the city formerly known as Madras, India, to Welsh and Gujarati parents. She earned a BA from Queens College in North Carolina and an MA from the Writing Seminars department at Johns Hopkins University. After working in the fashion-magazine industry in London, Doshi returned to India. An unexpected meeting with one of Indian dance's leading choreographers, Chandralekha, led Doshi to a career in dance.

As well as performing as a dancer all over the world, she is a freelance journalist and has published five books of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. Her first book of poetry, *Countries of the Body* (Aark Arts, 2006), won a Forward Prize for Best First Collection. Her second collection of poems, *Everything Begins Elsewhere* (Bloodaxe, 2013), was published simultaneously in the United States, England and India. Doshi's first novel, *The Pleasure Seekers* (Bloomsbury, 2010), was shortlisted for the Hindu Literary Prize and long-listed for the Orange Prize, and has been translated into several languages.

She currently lives on a beach between two fishing villages in Tamil Nadu with her husband and three dogs.

Tishani Doshi, "The Deliverer"

Our lady of the light convent, Kerala

The sister here is telling my mother
How she came to collect children
Because they were crippled or dark or girls.

Found naked in the streets,
Covered in garbage, stuffed in bags,
Abandoned at their doorstep.

One of them was dug up by a dog,
Thinking the head barely poking above the ground
Was bone or wood, something to chew.

This is the one my mother will bring.

*

Milwaukee Airport, USA

The parents wait at the gates.
They are American so they know about ceremony
And tradition, about doing things right.

They haven't seen or toughed her yet.
Don't know of her fetish for plucking hair off hands,
Or how her mother tried to bury her.

But they are crying.
We couldn't stop crying, my mother said,
Feeling the strangeness of her empty arms.

*

This girl grows up on video tapes,
Sees how she's passed from women
To women. She returns to twilight corners.

To the day of her birth,
How it happens in some desolate hut
Outside village boundaries

Where mothers go to squeeze out life,
Watch body slither out of body,

Feel for penis or no penis,
Toss the baby to the heap of others,

Trudge home to lie down for their men again.

Key features/themes

This uncompromising short sequence lays bare, in the starkest language, the infanticide of girl babies in India. While the language used is bald in the extreme, a troubling psychological depth is added by the complex relationships in the poem: between the narrator, her mother, the foster child and the baby's new parents in America. These unspoken relationships call into question the nature of family bonds. Take the word 'sister' in the first line, for instance, which refers to the nun but hints at a lost relationship between the narrator and the foster baby.

The use of the short sequence form enables the poet to explore this situation from different perspectives. It perhaps also suggests – in its shifts of time and place – both the invisible global connections which link West and East, the developed and developing world, and the fracturing of family relationships.

The lack of figurative or descriptive language contributes to a flatness of tone, expressive of the bleakness of the situation. Single syllable verbs thud through the lines with a brutal emphasis on the physical. The potential of new life is reduced to something less than a body: to wood, bone, garbage. The one outburst of emotion – 'We couldn't stop crying' – takes place in America. Back in India, the women who 'Feel for penis or no penis' cannot afford to confront their experience – the language returns to a kind of numbness as they go through the terrible motions of sex and birth.

Grim though the events described are, the poem does not lay easy blame. The women who display such apparent heartlessness towards their girl babies are seen, in the final part, to be at the mercy of a society which privileges male children. They are victims, too. Even the men they 'lie down for', the poem hints, are trapped – by cultural and economic pressures.

Links to other poems

In its complex exploration of guilt and its use of stripped down language, Roderick Ford's 'Giuseppe' is close in spirit to Doshi's poem.

Further resources

Doshi's own website contains a range of useful resources including videos, biography and links to articles: www.tishanidoshi.com

This interview from 2007 on the Poetry Society website gives an interesting insight into the background to Doshi's first collection and the influence dance has had on her poetry:

www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/publications/poetrynews/pn07/tdprofile

Carol Ann Duffy, 'The Map Woman'

Biography

In 2009 Carol Ann Duffy (b. 1955) became the UK's first female Poet Laureate. Her poetry is both popular and critically acclaimed, and she is one of the most influential poets of recent decades. A prolific writer, she has published eight poetry collections as well as plays and children's poetry, and has edited several anthologies.

She was born in Glasgow in 1955 to a Scottish father and an Irish mother. Raised Catholic, she grew up in Staffordshire an ardent reader and an elder sister to four brothers. Her mother would invent fairy tales for her, a form whose archetypes she has always found seductive. Encouraged to write from the age of 10 by an inspirational teacher at her convent school, Duffy went on to study Philosophy at Liverpool University, graduating in 1977. She won the National Poetry Competition in 1983, an Eric Gregory Award in 1984 and her first collection, *Standing Female Nude* (Anvil Press Poetry, 1985) was met with acclaim. Robert Nye in *The Times* declared the book, 'The debut of a genuine and original poet.'

Subsequent collections include *Mean Time* (Anvil Press Poetry, 1993), which won the Whitbread Poetry Award and the Forward Poetry Prize, *The World's Wife* (Anvil Press Poetry, 1999), *Feminine Gospels* (Picador, 2002) and the T.S. Eliot Prize-winning *Rapture* (Picador, 2005), which traced the arc of a love affair with painful tenderness and formal rigour. Her most recent collection, *The Bees* (Picador, 2011), was also shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize and won the 2011 Costa Poetry Prize. Other awards include an OBE in 1995 and a CBE in 2001, and she became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1999.

Duffy's poetry is both accessible and subtle, using conversational and colloquial language to great effect. She is a brilliant creator of voices, often using dramatic monologue to explore her themes. These include subverting female archetypes and challenging stereotypical gender roles, an empathy with the social outsider, the politics of language and, following the birth of her daughter Ella in 1995, motherhood. Her poems can be witty and toughly humorous, but are also capable of lyrical beauty and great tenderness. She is also highly versatile, writing in a range of traditional forms, such as the sonnet for her book *Rapture*.

Carol Ann Duffy currently lives in Manchester and is creative director of the Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Carol Ann Duffy, "The Map Woman"

A woman's skin was a map of the town
where she'd grown from a child.
When she went out, she covered it up
with a dress, with a shawl, with a hat,
with mitts or a muff, with leggings, trousers
or jeans, with a an ankle-length cloak, hooded
and fingertip-sleeved. But - birthmark, tattoo -
the A-Z street-map grew, a precise second skin,
broad if she binged, thin when she slimmed,
a précis of where to end or go back or begin.

Over her breast was the heart of the town,
from the Market Square to the Picture House
by way of St Mary's Church, a triangle
of alleys and streets and walks, her veins
like shadows below the lines of the map, the river
an artery snaking north to her neck. She knew
if you crossed the bridge at her nipple, took a left
and a right, you would come to the graves,
the grey-haired teachers of English and History,
the soldier boys, the Mayors and Councillors,

the beloved mothers and wives, the nuns and priests,
their bodies fading into the earth like old print
on a page. You could sit on a wooden bench
as a wedding pair ran, ringed, from the church,
confetti skittering over the marble stones,
the big bell hammering hail from the sky, and wonder
who you would marry and how and where and when
you would die: or find yourself in the coffee house
nearby, waiting for time to start, your tiny face
trapped in the window's bottle-thick glass like a fly.

And who might you see, short-cutting through
the Grove to the Square - that line there, the edge
of a fingernail pressed on her flesh - in the rain,
leaving your empty cup, to hurry on after
calling their name? When she showered, the map
gleamed on her skin, blue-black ink from a nib.
She knew you could scoot down Greengate Street,
huddling close to the High House, the sensible shops,
the Swan Hotel, till you came to the Picture House,
sat in the musty dark watching the Beatles

run for a train or Dustin Hoffman screaming
Elaine! Elaine! Elaine! or the spacemen in 2001
floating to Strauss. She sponged, soaped, scrubbed;
the prison and hospital stamped on her back,
the park neat on her belly, her navel marking the spot
where the empty bandstand stood, the river again,
heading south, clear as an operation scar,
the war memorial facing the railway station
where trains sighed on the platforms, pining
for Glasgow, London, Liverpool. She knew

you could stand on the railway bridge, waving
goodbye to strangers who stared as you vanished
into the belching steam, tasting future time
on the tip of your tongue. She knew you could run
the back way home - there it was on her thigh -
taking the southern road then cutting off to the left,
the big houses anchored behind their calm green lawns,
the jewels of conkers falling down at your feet,
then duck and dive down Nelson and Churchill
and Kipling and Milton Way until you were home.

She didn't live there now. She lived down south,
abroad, en route, up north, on a plane or train
or boat, on the road, in hotels, in the back of cabs,
on the phone; but the map was under her stockings,
under her gloves, under the soft silk scarf at her throat,
under her chiffon veil, a delicate braille. Her left knee
marked the grid of her own estate. When she knelt
she felt her father's house pressing into the bone,
heard in her head the looped soundtrack of then -
a tennis ball repeatedly thumping a wall,

an ice-cream van crying and hurrying on, a snarl
of children's shrieks from the overgrown land
where the houses ran out. The motorway groaned
just out of sight. She knew you could hitch
from Junction 13 and knew of a girl who had not
been seen since she did; had heard of a kid who'd run
across all six lanes for a dare before he was tossed
by a lorry into the air like a doll. But the motorway
was flowing away, was a roaring river of metal
and light, cheerio, au revoir, auf wiedersehen, ciao.

She stared in the mirror as she got dressed,
both arms raised over her head, the roads
for east and west running from shoulder
to wrist, the fuzz of woodland or countryside under
each arm. Only her face was clear, her fingers
smoothing in cream, her baby-blue eyes unsure
as they looked at themselves. But her body was certain,
an inch to the mile, knew every nook and cranny,
cul-de-sac, stile, back road, high road, low road,
one-way street of her past. There it all was, back

to front in the glass. She piled on linen, satin, silk,
leather, wool, perfume and mousse and went out.
She got in a limousine. The map perspired
under her clothes. She took a plane. The map seethed
on her flesh. She spoke in a foreign tongue.
The map translated everything back to herself.
She turned out the light and a lover's hands
caressed the map in the dark from north to south,
lost tourists wandering here and there, all fingers
and thumbs, as their map flapped in the breeze.

So one day, wondering where to go next,
she went back, drove a car for a night and a day,
till the town appeared on her left, the stale cake
of the castle crumbled up on the hill; and she hired
a room with a view and soaked in the bath.
When it grew dark, she went out, thinking
she knew the place like the back of her hand,
but something was wrong. She got lost in arcades,
in streets with new names, in precincts
and walkways, and found that what was familiar

was only facade. Back in her hotel room, she stripped and lay on the bed. As she slept, her skin sloughed like a snake's, the skin of her legs like stockings, silvery, sheer, like the long gloves of the skin of her arms, the papery camisole from her chest a perfect match for the tissuey socks of the skin of her feet. Her sleep peeled her, lifted a honeymoon thong from her groin, a delicate bra of skin from her breasts, and all of it patterned A to Z; a small cross where her parents' skulls grinned at the dark. Her new skin showed barely a mark.

She woke and spread out the map on the floor. What was she looking for? Her skin was her own small ghost, a shroud to be dead in, a newspaper for old news to be read in, gift-wrapping, litter, a suicide letter. She left it there, dressed, checked out, got in the car. As she drove, the town in the morning sun glittered behind her. She ate up the miles. Her skin itched, like a rash, like a slow burn, felt stretched, as though it belonged to somebody else. Deep in the bone old streets tunnelled and burrowed, hunting for home.

Key features/themes

The power of this poem partly lies in its combination of an impossible premise with detailed realism. The underlying metaphor – that we are indelibly marked by our own past, by our origins – is made literal by Duffy to disquieting effect.

Throughout the poem physical details pile up, bringing the woman's predicament vividly to life. Layers of imagery mirror the woman's different levels of self, working inwards through the course of the poem: it begins with clothing which tries to hide the map, moves onto her skin and an exploration of geography and location, before ending beneath the skin with a disturbing image which turns the woman's body into earth 'tunnelled and burrowed' by the past. The relief of her new blank skin is short-lived, suggesting that the idea of 'starting again' is an illusion because we carry our past inside us.

Cultural references such as The Beatles and the Picture House locate the past Duffy so effectively captures to the post-war era of the 50s and 60s. She creates a kind of English Everytown from that period, with its motorways and sensible shops and its strict social hierarchies – mayor, councillors, teachers. The poet uses its geography to explore the social expectations and assumptions of that time, neatly summarised by the list of English heroes after whom the more affluent streets are named. The poem hints that it's a society against which the woman chafed: images of boundaries – the river, the motorway, the trains 'pining' for the big cities – all suggest her sense of constraint.

The whole poem has a restlessness to it which reflects the woman's attempts to escape her past. The prevalence of lists gives the poem a galloping tempo, as does the predominantly anapaestic rhythm. The poem's sense of barely contained energy is also conveyed through Duffy's extensive use of irregular rhyme and half rhyme. It's perhaps significant, then, that the poem ends on an almost-couplet of 'bone' and 'home' – a sense of closure which, combined with the imagery, suggests the inescapable nature of the past.

Links to other poems

Stylistically, Simon Armitage's 'Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass' has interesting similarities with the Duffy poem and could prompt an interesting discussion around how social expectations are experienced differently by men and women. 'Effects' by Alan Jenkins provides a contrast in technique, exploring some of the same territory in a more realistic way.

Further resources

This recent interview with Duffy sees her reflecting on the Poet Laureateship halfway through her time in office and has some interesting insights: www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/27/carol-ann-duffy-poet-laureate-interview

While this interview in the *Telegraph* from 2010 provides some candid insights into her life: www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7692436/Carol-Ann-Duffy-interview.html

The British Council's literature website has a succinct overview of her career: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/carol-ann-duffy>

Ian Duhig, 'The Lammas Hireling'

Biography

Ian Duhig (b. 1954) was the eighth of eleven children born in London to Irish parents with a liking for poetry. He worked for 15 years with homeless people and has subsequently held fellowships at Lancaster, Leeds, Durham and Newcastle Universities. He first came to prominence in 1987 when his poem 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' won the National Poetry Competition, a feat he repeated with 'The Lammas Hireling' in 2000. In 1994 Duhig was named as one of the Poetry Society's 'New Generation' poets.

Since 1991 he has published six collections of poetry. His first, *The Bradford Count* (Bloodaxe, 1991), was shortlisted for the Whitbread Poetry Award and the Forward Poetry Prize (Best First Collection). Other collections have been shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize three times, including *The Lammas Hireling* (Picador, 2003) which was also shortlisted for the Forward Poetry Prize (Best Poetry Collection of the Year). His latest collection, *Pandorama*, was published by Picador in 2010.

Duhig is particularly known for his inventive use of language and wide-ranging knowledge of world literatures, culture and history. This gives his poems incredible diversity and range. He often uses traditional forms but in unexpected ways, while subversive wit and irreverence is a hallmark of much of his work.

He has also written libretti, music adaptations and a stage play written with Rommi Smith, *God Comes Home*, which was performed at West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2009. Ian Duhig currently lives in Leeds.

Ian Duhig, "The Lammas Hireling"

After the fair, I'd still a light heart
And a heavy purse, he struck so cheap.
And cattle doted on him: in his time
Mine only dropped heifers, fat as cream.
Yields doubled. I grew fond of company
That knew when to shut up. Then one night,

Disturbed from dreams of my dear late wife,
I hunted down her torn voice to his pale form.
Stock-still in the light from the dark lantern,
Stark-naked but for the fox trap biting his ankle,
I knew him a warlock, a cow with leather horns.
To go into the hare gets you muckle sorrow,

The wisdom runs, muckle care. I levelled
And blew the small hour through his heart.
The moon came out. By its yellow witness
I saw him fur over like a stone mossaing.
His lovely head thinned. His top lip gathered.
His eyes raised like bread. I carried him

In a sack that grew lighter at every step
And dropped him from a bridge. Here was no
Splash. Now my head's elf-shot. I don't dream
But spend my nights casting ball from half-crowns
And my days here. Bless me, Father, have sinned.
It has been an hour since my last confession.

Key features/themes

Considered a contemporary classic, this poem, the title poem of Duhig's fourth collection, won the National Poetry Competition in 2000. While the poem has a number of allusions and dialect words which require glossing, the best way to approach it is probably not to worry exactly what everything means, but to listen to the sound the poem makes and the atmosphere it creates. There is enough in the poem to provide a basic narrative before moving on to think about what exactly is going on and how this might be interpreted. Intentional ambiguity is one of the key features of the poem, so it's a good example to discuss when demonstrating that a poem isn't a code that can be broken to provide a single meaning.

The poem is a dramatic monologue telling the story of how the narrator – a farmer – came to hire a young man to help with his cows. The title and the action of hiring a labourer at a fair takes us back to a rural world that dates back at least 100 years, if not longer. It has echoes of a Thomas Hardy novel and this archaic quality continues as the poem progresses. The new hired hand proves uncannily good with the cattle: 'Yields doubled' and the cows only give birth to the more valuable heifers. In his affinity with the beasts he tends, the hireling has an almost magical quality.

All seems well until the ominous 'Then one night' at the end of the first stanza. The break generates tension as we look to see what happens next. Suddenly the narrator reveals he is a widow. He dreams of his wife, wakes and goes to see the hireling. In a nightmarish scene, the boy suddenly appears like a figure from witchcraft, naked, with a fox trap on his ankle, as if interrupted in the middle of a dark rite. The narrator 'knew him a warlock', that is a male equivalent of a witch.

Horried, the narrator shoots him through the heart. By the light of the moon he watches the body of the hireling transform itself into a hare, one of the most magical creatures in British folklore. His body grows lighter as the narrator takes him in a sack and dumps him into the river. Since the murder, the narrator's luck has run out, his cattle are cursed and he is haunted by guilt. He passes his time using the metal from coins to create shot for his gun, and in confessing his sins, in all likelihood to a Catholic priest.

While this summarises what happens in the poem, the motivations of the narrator, his exact relationship with the hireling, and his relative guilt or innocence are all deeply ambiguous. The ending with its direct plea 'Bless me, Father' puts us in the role of the priest. But how are we to judge him when he isn't telling us the full story? In Catholic tradition, to be absolved of your sins your confession needs to be full and made with a 'firm purpose of amendment'. The narrator's confession is only partial and maybe that's the reason that 'It has been an hour since my last confession' i.e. he feels compelled to repeat his story again and again.

What is it that the narrator isn't telling us? Was he sexually attracted to the hireling? The image of a cow with leather horns, as well as being an old description for a hare, combines the male and the female, as does the strange image of the narrator tracking down his wife's 'torn' voice to the hireling's 'pale form'. Is it the hireling's company he is so 'fond of', especially as he knew 'when to shut up'? Does the narrator's desire for the hireling surface in the word 'lovely'? What, when it comes to it, happened to the wife? Was she really 'dear' to the narrator? Is the narrator in sound mind or has his subconscious, disturbed by his feelings, conjured up a demonic image of the hireling?

The poem deals in transgression, exploring the boundary between the real and the supernatural, the animal and the human, male and female, guilt and innocence, life and death, waking and sleeping, sanity and madness. The narrator uses the word 'Disturbed' at the start of the second stanza and it's certainly the case that the poem itself has a disturbing power, the unreliability of its narrator drawing us back again and again, as in the best ghost stories, to try and work out what actually happened.

The shifts in mood are brilliantly underpinned by the sound and imagery of the poem, transformation and transgression taking place at the level of individual words. Trace, for instance, the word 'light' through the poem: how it starts out as an expression of cheer before becoming the light from the 'dark lantern' by which he sees his vision of the naked hireling, before re-emerging as the queasy yellow light of the moon which is witness to the murder, then finally transforming back into a reference to weight, this time associated with the hireling's dead body. Similarly, the literal – and perhaps proverbial – heaviness of the narrator's purse in the first stanza has, by the end, become the weight of guilt and endless confession. Or take any of the vowel sounds in the poem and how they chime and shift as the poem progresses – the long 'l' of light for instance. Or the dance between the pronouns of 'I' and 'him' which enact the central relationship of the poem which ends in such violence. Add in alliteration and other sound echoes and you have an incredibly densely woven poem which, nevertheless, manages to retain its impression of a voice talking to us.

Poem footnotes:

Lammas – the festival of 'loafmass', 1 August – traditionally a time for hiring help with the harvest
"a cow with leather horns" – Irish riddle meaning 'hare'

"muckle" – dialect word meaning 'much'

"elf-shot" – cursed

"casting ball" – the process of making shot for a shotgun. Gamekeepers often made their own

Links to other poems

There are several poems in this selection which share with Duhig's poem a dramatic first person narrator – Patience Agbabi, Tishani Doshi and Roderick Ford in particular. Considering the similarities and differences of approach in using this technique could be a useful exercise.

Further resources

You can hear Duhig's introduction to this poem and his reading of it on The Poetry Archive:

www.poetryarchive.org/explore/browse-poems?ff0=field_poet:192396

S.T. Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is an obvious reference point for Duhig's poem, with its guilt-haunted narrator who feels compelled to tell his tale of supernatural damnation.

Ruth Padel provides a more detailed analysis of this poem than is possible here in *The Poem and the Journey: 60 Poems for the Journey of Life*.

The British Council's literature website has a useful general critical perspective:

<http://literature.britishcouncil.org/ian-duhig>

Helen Dunmore, 'To My Nine-Year-Old Self'

Biography

Helen Dunmore (b. 1952) is an acclaimed poet and best-selling novelist whose work in both genres has won much praise and popularity. Born in Yorkshire, the second of four children, and with a large extended family, Dunmore grew up surrounded by stories, fairy tales, ballads – an early grounding that would prove influential.

She studied English at York University and then taught for two years in Finland. Her debut collection, *The Apple Fall*, was one of the first titles published by Bloodaxe Books. Her second, *The Sea Skater*, won the Alice Hunt Bartlett Award. Her fiction career began with short stories before her first novel was published in 1994: *Zennor in Darkness*, set during the First World War when D.H. Lawrence lived at Zennor in Cornwall, won the McKitterick Prize.

Since then Dunmore has become one of our most acclaimed literary figures, winning many prizes including the inaugural Orange Prize for Fiction and The Signal Poetry Award for children's poetry. Her eight poetry collections for adults have been awarded the Poetry Book Society Choice and Recommendations, while *Bestiary* (Bloodaxe, 1997) was shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize and the title poem of *The Malarkey* (Bloodaxe, 2012) won the National Poetry Competition. She is a fellow of the Royal Society for Literature.

Her writing, in both prose and poetry, is known for its lyrical intensity which can be both delicate and piercing. Her language is sensual and exact, recreating scenes for the reader that lodge in your mind. Many of her poems have the mysterious, compressed quality of a short story. Her writing demonstrates more public concerns, too, in particular threats to the natural environment and a fascination for history – many of her novels are set in the past.

Helen Dunmore, "To My Nine-Year-Old Self"

You must forgive me. Don't look so surprised,
perplexed, and eager to be gone,
balancing on your hands or on the tightrope.
You would rather run than walk, rather climb than run
rather leap from a height than anything.

I have spoiled this body we once shared.
Look at the scars, and watch the way I move,
careful of a bad back or a bruised foot.
Do you remember how, three minutes after waking
we'd jump straight out of the ground floor window
into the summer morning?

That dream we had, no doubt it's as fresh in your mind
as the white paper to write it on.
We made a start, but something else came up –
a baby vole, or a bag of sherbet lemons –
and besides, that summer of ambition
created an ice-lolly factory, a wasp trap
and a den by the cesspit.

I'd like to say that we could be friends
but the truth is we have nothing in common
beyond a few shared years. I won't keep you then.
Time to pick rosehips for tuppence a pound,
time to hide down scared lanes
from men in cars after girl-children,

or to lunge out over the water
on a rope that swings from that tree
long buried in housing –
but no, I shan't cloud your morning. God knows
I have fears enough for us both -
I leave you in an ecstasy of concentration
slowly peeling a ripe scab from your knee
to taste it on your tongue

Key features/themes

By using the form of a dialogue with her childhood self, Dunmore brings the process of growing older into sharp relief. She addresses directly the young girl she once was and, although her younger self doesn't speak, it is her physical presence which makes the most vivid impression on the reader.

Her vitality and spontaneity are conveyed in a wealth of sensory detail: more than anything the girl lives through her body, a string of active verbs demonstrating her energy and confidence. This contrasts with Dunmore's characterisation of her adult self and the physical frailties she's now subject to.

This physical contrast between the two is symbolic of the deeper attitudinal change that Dunmore/the narrator has undergone. The girl's unthinking eagerness has been replaced by a more fearful, pessimistic frame of mind which Dunmore is concerned will 'cloud' the young girl's summer morning. However, the poem ends with a brilliant image of absorption in the world of the body and sensation which suggests that, even if this imagined dialogue could take place, the child would not be able to understand the adult's perspective.

The shifting pronouns in the poem chart this sense of division between the child and the adult she will become. The unifying 'we' keeps breaking down into 'I' and 'you', culminating in the statement in the last stanza: 'I leave you.' It's impossible, the poem's ending suggests, for the two realities to co-exist – time inevitably cuts us off from our younger selves, even when, as in Dunmore's case, we can re-create the past briefly, poignantly, through language.

Links to other poems

The poem in the anthology which most obviously connects to Dunmore's in its concerns is Julia Copus' 'An Easy Passage'. Looking at Burnside's evocation of childhood in 'History' could also be interesting, as both writers use sensory impression to re-create the child's absorption in the physical world.

Further resources

Dunmore's author page at Bloodaxe gives some critical feedback on her most recent poetry collection, and also a video of her reading two of her best-known poems:

www.bloodaxebooks.com/titlepage.asp?isbn=1852249404

Her own website has an extended biography written in the first person, plus extracts from her books: www.helendunmore.com/index.asp

Many of the articles on Dunmore online focus as much on her fiction as her poetry. The connections between the two and her creative process are touched on in this article from The Independent: www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/helen-dunmore-a-poet-in-need-of-her-space-776576.html

U.A. Fanthorpe, 'A Minor Role'

Biography

U.A. Fanthorpe's death in 2009 was felt as a genuine loss by the many fans of her clear-eyed, humane poems, including Carol Ann Duffy who described her as 'an unofficial, deeply loved laureate'.

U.A. Fanthorpe (b. 1929) spent her earliest years in Kent. She attended St Anne's College Oxford, afterwards becoming a teacher and ultimately head of English at Cheltenham Ladies' College. However, she only began writing when she turned her back on her teaching career to become a receptionist at a psychiatric hospital, where her observation of the 'strange specialness' of the patients provided the inspiration for her first book, *Side Effects* (Peterloo Poets, 1978).

Following that relatively late start, Fanthorpe was prolific, producing nine full-length collections, including the Forward Prize-nominated *Safe as Houses* (Peterloo Poets, 1995) and the Poetry Book Society Recommendation *Consequences* (Peterloo Poets, 2000). She was awarded a CBE in 2001 and the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2003.

Talking of her war-time childhood, Fanthorpe said, 'I think it's important not to run away', and on the surface her poetry seems to encapsulate those traditional, stoic English values we associate with the period. Certainly England and Englishness are central themes in her work, but such a reading misses the wit and sly debunking of national myth which mark Fanthorpe's sensibility.

UA Fanthorpe, "A Minor Role"

I'm best observed on stage,
Propping a spear, or making endless
Exits and entrances with my servant's patter,
Yes, sir. O no, sir. If I get
These midget moments wrong, the monstrous fabric
Shrinks to unwanted sniggers.

But my heart's in the unobtrusive,
The waiting-room roles: driving to hospitals,
Parking at hospitals. Holding hands under
Veteran magazines; making sense
Of consultants' monologues; asking pointed
Questions politely; checking dosages,
Dates; getting on terms with receptionists;
Sustaining the background music of civility.

At home in the street you may see me
Walking fast in case anyone stops:
O, getting on, getting better my formula
For well-meant intrusiveness.

At home,
Thinking ahead: *Bed? A good idea!*
(Bed solves a lot); answer the phone,
Be wary what I say to it, but grateful always;
Contrive meals for hunger-striker; track down
Whimsical soft-centred happy-all-the-way-through novels;
Find the cat (mysteriously reassuring);
Cancel things; pretend all's well,
Admit it's not.
Learn to conjugate all the genres of misery:
Tears, torpor, boredom, lassitude, yearnings
For a simpler illness, like a broken leg.
Enduring ceremonial delays. Being referred
Somewhere else. Consultant's holiday. Saying *Thank you*
For anything to everyone

Not the star part.
And who would want it? I jettison the spear,
The servant's try, the terrible drone of Chorus:
Yet to my thinking this act was ill advised
*It would have been better to die**. No it wouldn't!

I am here to make you believe in life.

Key features/themes

At the core of this moving poem is a concern about how we speak truthfully in the face of life's most difficult moments. The metaphor of the stage and the narrator's minor role within a play is used to explore ideas of social pretence: in the face of serious illness, the narrator carries on acting. Fanthorpe establishes a dual perspective; not only is the narrator an actor but she is also a member of the audience watching as the action unfolds. 'Observed' is a key word in the first line, implying distance and a sense of perspective, a stance the narrator retains up until the last line.

The poem, through analysing the narrator's reluctance to acknowledge her illness head on, suggests a wider refusal in society to look dying and death in the eye. These concerns are enacted through Fanthorpe's use of direct speech in the poem, alongside references to socially appropriate forms of language. For much of the poem, the narrator and the people around her deal in euphemism and false cheerfulness. While these conventional exchanges help to keep 'the monstrous fabric' of daily life intact, they fail to communicate her predicament truthfully.

There is an ambivalence in the poem which is not entirely dismissive of 'the background music of civility' but, in the end, speaking personally and directly wins out in the power of that final line – set on its own to emphasise the importance and urgency of its message.

The tension between truth-telling and evasion is also present in Fanthorpe's use of verbs. Much of the poem is written in the imperative – 'Cancel things. Tidy things. Pretend all's well.' The effect is of someone giving themselves a talking to, trying to keep a lid on emotion. The other predominant feature is Fanthorpe's use of the *-ing* form for verbs, particularly in the second and third stanzas, which captures the endless, awful processes of being seriously ill, allowing no time for pause or reflection.

Links to other poems

How to speak truthfully in the face of societal pressure is also a key theme of Adam Thorpe's moving poem about his mother, 'On Her Blindness', while Ciaran O'Driscoll's poem 'Please Hold', although very different in tone, is also concerned with empty forms of language.

Further resources

This obituary in the Guardian provides a good overview of Fanthorpe's life and summary of her qualities as a poet: www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/02/obituary-u-a-ua-fanthorpe
Not many poets make it to Desert Island Discs, but U.A. is one of them. You can hear her programme on the Radio 4 archive: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00938f0
The Poetry Archive contains an interview with U.A. Fanthorpe, as well as recordings of her reading her poems: www.poetryarchive.org/interview/u-fanthorpe-interview

Vicki Feaver, 'The Gun'

Biography

Vicki Feaver (b. 1943) grew up in Nottingham 'in a house of quarrelling women', an emotional inheritance which finds later expression in her poetry. She studied music at Durham University and English at University College, London, and worked as a lecturer in English and creative writing at University College, Chichester, becoming emeritus professor.

Her three collections have been highly praised. The second, *The Handless Maiden* (Jonathan Cape, 1994), included both the Arvon International Poetry Competition finalist 'Lily Pond', and 'Judith', winner of the Forward Poetry Prize for Best Single Poem. The same collection was also given a Heinemann Prize and shortlisted for the Forward Prize. Her most recent collection, *The Book of Blood* (Jonathan Cape, 2006) was shortlisted for the 2006 Costa Poetry Award.

Her dark and sensual re-workings of myth and fairy tale have been termed 'domestic gothic' by fellow poet Matthew Sweeney. While her poems incorporate objects from everyday life, Feaver often grafts them on to the transgressive power of these old tales, allowing her a space to explore emotions and desires which women are not usually allowed (or don't allow themselves) to express. A central concern of her work is female creativity and its repression, and how this can find an outlet in violence.

Vicki Feaver currently lives in South Lanarkshire, Scotland.

Vicki Feaver, "The Gun"

Bringing a gun into the house
changes it.

You lay it on the kitchen table,
stretched out like something dead
itself: the grainy polished wood stock
jutting over the edge,
the long metal barrel
casting a grey shadow
on the green-checked cloth.

At first it's just practice:
performing tins
dangling an orange string
from trees in the garden.
Then a rabbit shot
clean through the head.

Soon the fridge fills with creatures
that have run and flown.
Your hands reek of gun oil.
And entrails. You trample
fur and feathers. There's a spring
in your step; your eyes gleam
like when sex was fresh.

A gun brings a house alive.
I join in the cooking: jointing
and slicing, stirring and tasting –
excited as if the King of Death
had arrived to feast, stalking
out of winters woods,
his black mouth
sprouting golden crocuses.

Key features/themes

This poem's audacious relish of the physical acknowledges the thrill of connection between sex, death and life.

The opening stanza is dramatic, shocking even; a line – literal and metaphorical – has been crossed. The house is traditionally associated with life and family, a place where we feel safe. What enters into this sanctuary is a potential threat, a means of taking life.

The atmosphere of violence is sustained throughout the poem, particularly through the sound of the language and the structure of the lines and stanzas. In the second stanza, for instance, short lines and disruptive line breaks combine with hard, consonantal sounds to give an angular, edgy feel to the description of the gun. It's as if the gun's explosive potential is embedded in the sound the poem makes.

Enjambment, the running on of units of sense over two or more lines, also has the effect of shining a small spotlight on those words at the end and start of a line. 'The Gun' is full of such examples e.g. 'a rabbit shot/clean through the head' or 'Your hands reek of gun oil/and entrails. You trample/fur and feathers.' In this way the line breaks enact the violent encounter between the human and animal worlds.

The poem also breaks contemporary liberal taboos around hunting and valuing the natural world, as well as gender roles: the narrator is seen as complicit in the gun's use but in a traditional female role, cooking what the man has brought her.

By exploring the primitive thrill of hunting and its connection to our most basic instincts, Feaver prepares the ground for the extraordinary last stanza. At this point we move into a world of ancient rites and pagan beliefs with the appearance of the King of Death. The poem's contention that death brings life more starkly into focus is beautifully expressed in the last image of the King's mouth 'sprouting golden crocuses'.

Links to other poems

Patience Agbabi's 'Eat Me' forms an interesting counterpoint to Feaver's poem. It's also about appetite but the gender roles play out very differently, though the poems share a highly sensual approach to language.

Further resources

This is an interesting and wide-ranging interview from earlier in Feaver's career:

www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=3900

Hear Feaver's introduction to this poem and her reading of it on The Poetry Archive:

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/gun>

A *Guardian* review of *The Book of Blood*, from which 'The Gun' is taken, sets the poem in context with the broader themes of Feaver's recent work:

www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/30/featuresreviews.guardianreview22

This article from leading poetry magazine, *Magma*, is interesting as it shows Feaver taking inspiration from an earlier poet, Edward Thomas, to create a poem of her own:

<http://magma-poetry.com/archive/magma-54-2-2/articles/presiding-spirits-vicki-feaver-talks-to-judy-brown/>

Leontia Flynn, 'The Furthest Distances I've Travelled'

Biography

Leontia Flynn (b. 1974) is one of the most acclaimed poets in a new generation of Northern Irish writers. She was born in County Down and has an MA in English from Edinburgh University. She went on to complete a PhD thesis on the poetry of Medbh McGuckian at Queen's University, Belfast.

Her three collections to date have all won critical plaudits. Her first, *These Days* (Jonathan Cape, 2004), won an Eric Gregory Award in manuscript and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. It was shortlisted for the Whitbread Poetry Prize, and Flynn named as one of 20 'Next Generation' poets by the Poetry Book Society in 2004. This was followed by *Drives* (Jonathan Cape, 2008) and *Profit and Loss* (Jonathan Cape, 2011), which was a Poetry Book Society Choice and shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize. She has also received the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature and a major Individual Artist Award from the Arts Council Northern Ireland.

Her work is known for its quicksilver wit and irreverence. While a sophisticated writer, steeped in literary traditions from Chaucer to Wordsworth to contemporary poetry, her poems wear their learning lightly, even when dealing with darker subjects such as her father's Alzheimer's. She has also written articles, reviews and essays, and is currently writer in residence at the Bloomsbury Hotel, London.

Leontia Flynn, “The Furthest Distances I’ve Travelled”

Like many folk, when first I saddled a rucksack,
feeling its weight on my back –
the way my spine
curved under it like a meridian –

I thought: Yes. This is how
to live. On the beaten track, the Sherpa pass, between
Krakow
and Zagreb, or the Siberian white
cells of scattered airports,

it came clear as over a tannoy
that in restlessness, in anonymity:
was some kind of destiny.

So whether it was the scare stories about Larium
– the threats of delirium
and baldness – that lead me, not to a Western Union
wiring money with six words of Lithuanian,

but to this post office with a handful of bills
or a giro; and why, if I’m stuffing smalls
hastily into a holdall, I am less likely
to be catching a greyhound from Madison to
Milwaukee than to be doing some overdue laundry
is really beyond me.

However,
when, during routine evictions, I discover
alien pants, cinema stubs, the throwaway
comment – on a Post-It – or a tiny stowaway
pressed flower amid bottom drawers,
I know these are my souvenirs

and, from these crushed valentines, this unravelled
sports sock, that the furthest distances I’ve travelled
have been those between people. And what survives
of holidaying briefly in their lives.

Key features/themes

Journeys, physical and emotional, are at the heart of this lovely, rueful poem about growing up. It charts the shift from the freedom of a student traveller to the more mature perspective of the present-day narrator. In doing so it acknowledges that our emotional geography is as significant to who we are as the physical journeys we undertake.

Part of the poem's appeal lies in its honesty: the narrator's younger self thinks she has the answer, stating 'This is how/to live.' At the end of the poem she is still on the move, though this time the distances travelled are through the lives of others. The narrator offers no conclusion about the best way to live: life remains provisional, unsettled. While once this lack of stability represented freedom and adventure, now there is a sadness that things do constantly change, as well as nostalgia for the lost exhilaration of life on the open road. The names of remote places conjure up this lost excitement but now moving on means leaving people behind. These memories might be 'throwaway' but they are also 'souvenirs' and 'valentines'.

The poem's exploration of the nature of freedom is reflected in Flynn's use of the rhyming couplet. However, instead of full rhyme, she often uses half rhyme. The line lengths also differ wildly; in the most extreme example a word is split over two lines to clinch the rhyme. It's as if the poem is kicking against its own constraints, and this is partly what gives the poem its sense of freewheeling energy. The tone only shifts in the final stanza when the couplets finally settle into full rhyme with lines of similar length.

Links to other poems

For a different treatment on ageing and the shifts in perspective it brings, Sue Boyle's 'A Leisure Centre is Also a Temple of Learning' makes for an interesting comparison.

Further resources

This disarmingly frank article by Flynn charts a shift in her work from a post-modern reluctance to acknowledge individual identity to a more open accommodation of the self: <http://edinburgh-review.com/extracts/article-leontia-flynn/>

Hear Flynn reading this poem on the Poetry Archive:

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/furthest-distances-ive-travelled>

The Guardian's review of her most recent collection, *Profit and Loss*, explores and amplifies many of the qualities found in 'The Furthest Distances I've Travelled':

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/sep/02/profit-loss-leontia-flynn-review>

Flynn's own website has a range of other articles and resources: <http://leontiaflynn.com/>

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Roderick Ford, 'Giuseppe'

Biography

Born in Swansea, Roderick Ford has lived a nomadic life, experiencing many different cultures which have informed his work. He was taken to Australia as an infant and then when he was eight his parents moved to England. Growing up in the 1960s he embraced the counterculture of the time, living and working around the world including in West Africa and the Persian Gulf. After spending most of the 1980s in Bristol, he moved to Paris. This marked a shift away from the experimental prose works which had been his creative focus to a life dedicated to reading, studying and writing poetry. Using Paris as a base, he travelled in Europe and lived for long periods in Amsterdam, Venice, Stockholm and Svartsö (a wooded island in the Baltic). These engagements with different cultures informed and deepened his poetry. In 1999 he visited Ireland for the first time and decided to make it his permanent home.

Ford has published two poetry collections, *The Shoreline of Falling* (Bradshaw Books, 2005), which was shortlisted for a Glen Dimplex first book award, and *The Green Crown* (Bradshaw Books, 2010). Individual poems have been successful in many competitions: in 2005 he won the Listowel Single Poem prize, in 2006 he was shortlisted for the Strokestown English language prize, and in 2007 he won the Francis Ledwidge Award. He has also been shortlisted in the Keats–Shelley Prize in 2008 and the Bridport Prize in 2009, and was commended in the National Poetry Competition. He currently lives in Dublin.

Roderick Ford, "Giuseppe"

My uncle Giuseppe told me
that in Sicily in World War Two,
In the courtyard behind the aquarium,
where the bougainvillea grows so well,
the only captive mermaid in the world
was butchered on the dry and dusty ground
by a doctor, a fishmonger, and certain others.

She, it, had never learned to speak
because she was so simple, or so they'd said.
But they priest who held one of her hands
while her throat was cut,
said she was only a fish and can't speak.
But she screamed like a woman in terrible fear.

And when they took a ripe golden roe
from her side, the doctor said
this was proof she was just a fish
and anyway an egg is not a child,
but refused when some was offered to him.

Then they put her head and her hands
in a box for burial
and someone tried to take her wedding ring,
but the others stopped him,
and the ring stayed put.

The rest they cooked and fed to the troops.
They said a large fish had been found on the beach.

Starvation forgives men many things,
my uncle, the aquarium keeper, said,
but couldn't look me in the eye,
for which I thank God.

Key features/themes

This disturbing poem blends historical realism with a fairy tale element to explore the darkest corners of human behaviour.

The eerie effect of the poem is partly achieved through the contrast between what happens and the tone in which it's described. The language is deliberately flat and factual, concentrating on actions without comment. Even a word like 'butchered', which we might expect to carry a moral judgement, is revealed as being an accurate description of the mermaid's dismemberment. Figurative language is almost entirely absent: there are only two adjectives ('golden' and 'large') and one simile ('But she screamed like a woman in terrible fear').

This one simile has tremendous power, however, going to the heart of the poem: what is it that makes us human? Under the pressure of war, is there any innate moral compass that can keep us on the right side of horror? In this context, the mermaid can be said to be symbolic of any outsider or enemy. By making her a creature from legend, Ford allows us to look more clearly at the protagonists' behaviour.

Their strategy is to deny her any humanity. They talk of 'proof', using her physical difference and supposed mental incapacity as an excuse for what they do. In this they recall the arguments set forth by the Nazi regime and other totalitarian authorities throughout history, bent on establishing racial superiority.

However, the poem undermines their arguments at key points and demonstrates the perpetrators are lying to themselves: the doctor won't eat the roe offered to him. Most disturbing is the revelation that she was married, that she had crossed into the human world of love and might have expected protection from harm. No one can quite bring themselves to remove her wedding ring, despite the desecration of her body.

What the poem demonstrates succinctly is the lasting effect of atrocity on a community, for this is an event in which an entire village is implicated. While the violence is carried out by key members of the community – most disturbingly, perhaps, the doctor – no one else, including the narrator's uncle, tried to intervene. This collective guilt, the poem implies, is seeping into the next generation: we can sense it in the compulsion of the narrator to tell his uncle's story and in their inability to look each other in the eye. The poem ends on the word 'God', reminding us of how far the protagonists have moved outside moral boundaries.

Links to other poems

In its deliberate flatness of tone in dealing with atrocity, the poem is similar to the strategy used by Tishani Doshi in her sequence 'The Deliverer', while the ambiguity of Ford's narrator could be interestingly compared with the narrator of Duhig's 'The Lammas Hireling'.

Further resources

There's not a huge amount about Ford on the web, but here's an expanded biography compared with the one offered above: www.literaturewales.org/writers-of-wales/i/130216/desc/ford-roderick/

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Seamus Heaney, 'Out of the Bag'

Biography

Seamus Heaney (1939–2013) rose from humble beginnings as a County Derry farm boy to become one of the giants of 20th-century poetry. Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, his work is known and loved around the world.

The eldest child of nine, Heaney grew up in County Derry, Northern Ireland. The memories, people and landscapes of his early years were an inspiration he returned to time and again in his poems. His academic career began with a scholarship to St Columb's College, Derry, and led him to Queen's University, Belfast and then on to distinguished posts at Harvard and Oxford, where he was Professor of Poetry.

Heaney wrote over 20 books of poetry and criticism. Key early collections include his first, *Death of a Naturalist* (Faber and Faber, 1966), *Door into the Dark* (Faber and Faber, 1969) and *North* (Faber and Faber, 1975). Of his later collections, *Electric Light* (Faber and Faber, 2001) and *District and Circle* (Faber and Faber, 2006) were both shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize, as was his final collection *Human Chain* (Faber and Faber, 2010) which also won the Forward Prize for Best Collection. He was also a celebrated translator whose version of *Beowulf* (Faber and Faber, 1999) became an unlikely bestseller, winning the Whitbread Book of the Year Award.

His poetry is informed by his wide learning and knowledge of literature, but never overwhelmed by it. Rather, he roots his work in the specific, alert to the miracles of ordinary happenings. Allied to a rich music of consonant and rhythm influenced by the cadences of his native Northern Irish accent, these qualities mean his poetry appeals as much to the ear and the heart as to the mind. It's perhaps these aspects of his work which have made him a genuinely popular poet, one of the few that people beyond the poetry world have heard of.

The contentious history of Northern Ireland and its eruption into 'The Troubles' also influenced his work, though he refused a simple stance of pro-Republican propaganda, his poetry insisting on the complex realities of the situation. This refusal to become a cheerleader for the Catholic cause drew criticism from some quarters at the time, and partly prompted his later move over the border to the Republic of Ireland. Gradually, however, the integrity of his vision won recognition, culminating in his Nobel citation which praised his work for its 'lyrical beauty and ethical depth'.

When Seamus Heaney died in 2013, tributes flooded in from around the world. The UK Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, spoke for many when she said that for his 'brothers and sisters in poetry, he came to be the poet we all measured ourselves against and he demonstrated the true vocational nature of his art for every moment of his life. He is irreplaceable.'

Seamus Heaney, "Out of the Bag"

All of us came in Doctor Kerlin's bag.
He'd arrive with it, disappear to the room
And by the time he'd reappear to wash

Those nosy, rosy, big soft hands of his
In the scullery basin, its lined insides
(The colour of a spaniel's inside lug)

Were empty for all to see, the trap-sprung mouth
Unsnibbed and gaping wide. Then like a hypnotist
Unwinding us, he'd wind the instruments

Back into their lining, tie the cloth
Like an apron round itself,
Darken the door and leave

With the bag in his hand, a plump ark by the keel...
Until the next time came and in he'd come
In his fur-lined leather collar which was also spaniel coloured

And go stooping up to the room again, a whiff
Of disinfectant, a Dutch interior gleam
Of waistcoat satin and highlights on the forceps.

Getting the water ready, that was next -
Not plumping hot, and not lukewarm, but soft,
Sud-luscious, saved for him from the rain-butt

And savoured by him afterwards, all thanks
Denied as he towelled hard and fast,
Then held his arms out suddenly behind him

To be squired and silk-lined into the camel coat.
At which point once he turned his eyes upon me,
Hyperborean, beyond-the-north wind blue,

Two peepholes to the locked room I saw into
Every time his name was mentioned, skimmed
Milk and ice, swabbed porcelain, the white

And chill of tiles, steel hooks, chrome surgery tools
And blood dreeps in the sawdust where it thickened

At the foot of each cold wall. And overhead

The little, pendent, teat-hued infant parts
Strung neatly from a line up near the ceiling –
A toe, a foot and shin, an arm, a cock

A bit like the rosebud in his buttonhole.

2

Poeta doctus Peter Levi says
Sanctuaries of Asclepius (called asclepiions)
Wee the equivalent of hospitals

In ancient Greece. Or of shrines like Lourdes,
Says Poeta doctus Graves. Or of the cure
By poetry that cannot be coerced,

Say I, who realised at Epidaurus
That the whole place was a sanatorium
With theatre and baths,

A site of incubation, where “incubation”
Was technical and ritual, meaning sleep
When epiphany occurred and you met the god.

Hatless, groggy, shadowing myself
As the thurifer I was in an open-air procession
In Lourdes in '56

When I nearly fainted from the heat and fumes,
Again I nearly fainted as I bent
To pull a bunch of grass and hallucinated

Doctor Kerlin at the steamed-up glass
Of the scullery window, starting in to draw
With his large pink index finger dot-faced men

With button-spots in a straight line down their fronts
And women with dot breasts, giving them all
A set of droopy sausage-arms and legs

That soon began to run. And then as he dipped and laved
In the generous suds again, miraculum:
The baby bits all came together swimming

Into his soapy big hygienic hands
And I myself came to, blinded with sweat,
Blinking and shaky in the windless light.

3

Bits of the glass I pulled I posted off
To one going in to chemotherapy
And one who had come through. I didn't want

To leave the place or link up with the others.
It was midday, mid-May, pre-tourist sunlight
In the precincts of the god,

The very site of the temple of Asclepius.
I wanted nothing more than to lie down
Under hogweed, under seeded grass

And to be visited in the very eye of the day
By Hygeia, his daughter, her name still clarifying
The haven of light she was, the undarkening door.

4

The room I came from and the rest of us all came from
Stays pure reality where I stand alone,
Standing the passage of time, and she's asleep

In sheets put on for the doctor, wedding presents
That showed up again and again, bridal
And usual and useful at births and at deaths.

Me at the bedside, incubating for real,
Peering, appearing to her as she closes
And opens her eyes, then lapses back

Into a faraway smile whose precinct of vision
I would enter every time, to assist and be asked
In that hoarsened whisper of triumph,

'And what do you think
Of the new wee baby the doctor brought for us all
When I was asleep?'

Key features/themes

In this sequence, Heaney blends personal memory with his deep knowledge of the classical world of ancient Greece to interrogate myths of origin. The poem itself acts like a bag, its contents slowly revealed by the poet. The movement of the poem, from the Heaney household to the Catholic shrine at Lourdes to the Greek archaeological site at Epidaurus, and then back to the room where his mother gave birth, gives it a sense of enclosure. The poem's travels demonstrate both how far the poet has come from his start in life, and how important that start remains in his psyche and poetic practice. Through its different registers of language and imagery, the poem also explores ideas of class, faith and gender.

Central to these concerns is the remarkable figure of Dr Kerlin. He is part of Heaney's childhood mythology in which each new baby in his family was brought by the doctor in his bag. It's a story the adults collude in and the children believe. It turns the doctor, already their superior in terms of wealth, education and social status, into something approaching a god. He is treated with reverence, each visit accompanied by time-honoured rituals. The first poem ends with Heaney's childhood self-imagining a glimpse into the realm where the doctor lives, a frightening place which demonstrates his power over life and death.

In the second and third poems, Heaney's later perspective as a highly educated poet takes over. He self-consciously displays his classical learning by going back to the origins of medicine and the cult of the Greek god of healing, Asklepios. However, despite his knowledge, Heaney also presents himself as essentially powerless. At Lourdes he was merely the priest's helper at a Catholic service, nearly fainting in the heat, a reaction he suffers from again as he bends to pick some grass in the grounds of the Greek temple. All he can do in the face of the illness of friends is send them tokens from the gods' site, and lie down hoping his goddess daughter will appear.

By contrast, the vision of Dr Kerlin is once again full of decisive energy and a god-like power. The phrase 'Poeta Doctus' reveals some of the ambivalence in the poem. While Heaney has achieved the status of a poet who is also versed in classical learning, the phrase also leads us to question the power of poetry in the face of suffering. Can poetry effect any kind of cure? Is it just another form of superstition, a matter of faith?

In the final poem, Heaney is once again the passive observer, allowed into the inner shrine of his mother's bedroom. Movingly, the mystery Heaney reveals at the heart of giving life is not a goddess, but his mother. The poem acknowledges his mother's power but the poignancy lies in the fact that she doesn't feel able to claim the triumph of giving birth for herself. The social constraints of the time – the taboo against talking about the female body, the deference of the working class to the educated class – mean she doesn't take any credit. Her voice at the end, with its sweet colloquial tone, contrasts with Heaney's erudition, and acts as a final dramatisation of the tensions which run through the poem.

Poem footnotes:

*Hyperborean: in Greek mythology these were people who lived a perfect existence 'beyond the North wind'

*Peter Levi: Poet and critic who was Oxford Professor of Poetry 1984-89

**Poeta Doctus*: an erudite poet based on classical models, who marries the art of poetry with learning.

*Sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidaurus: Asklepios was the Greek God of medicine. The huge temple complex dedicated to the God at Epidaurus is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

*Lourdes: famous Catholic shrine in France where the faithful go in the hope of a cure

*Hygieia: Asklepios' daughter, the goddess of good health from whose name we derive the word "hygiene"

*Thurifer: The person who carries the thurible in Catholic ceremonies, a metal censer suspended from chains

Links to other poems

Ruth Padel's 'You, Shiva and My Mum' also looks at issues of motherhood, faith and culture.

Further resources

The Poetry Foundation provides an authoritative overview of Heaney's career and its significance:

www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/seamus-heaney

The obituaries which followed his death in 2013 attempted to sum up his achievements:

www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/books-obituaries/10276008/Seamus-Heaney.html

RTE, the national radio and television broadcaster for the Republic of Ireland, has a whole online 'exhibition' devoted to Heaney, with broadcasts of him throughout his career talking about his life and poetry: www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1982-seamus-heaney/

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Alan Jenkins, 'Effects'

Biography

Alan Jenkins was born in Surrey in 1955 and brought up in London, where he has lived most of his life. He studied at the University of Sussex and has worked for the *Times Literary Supplement* since 1981, as poetry and fiction editor, then deputy editor. He was also a poetry critic for *The Observer* and the *Independent on Sunday* from 1985–1990.

His poetry collections include *In The Hot-House* (Chatto & Windus, 1988); *Greenheart* (Chatto & Windus, 1990); *Harm* (Chatto & Windus, 1994), which won the Forward Poetry Prize (Best Poetry Collection of the Year); *The Drift* (Chatto & Windus, 2000), a Poetry Book Society Choice, shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize; and *A Shorter Life* (Chatto & Windus, 2005), which was shortlisted for the Forward Poetry Prize (Best Poetry Collection of the Year). *Drunken Boats*, containing his acclaimed translation of Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau ivre', was published in 2007; the French symbolist poets were an early, major influence. He received an Eric Gregory Award in 1981, a Cholmondeley Award in 2006, and he is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Jenkins has said that one of his poetic 'elders and betters' once told him, 'Your subject is loss. Stay with that' – and the treatment of loss appears as a significant theme throughout his work. In earlier collections the loss was focused on love, particularly in the painful central sequence of his book *Harm* about the aftermath of a love affair. Later work has included many elegies for friends and his parents. Known for their confessional tone, Jenkins' poems are also formally brilliant, his scrupulous structures and sharp wit helping to shape the intense emotions he lays bare.

Alan Jenkins, "Effects"

I held her hand, that was always scarred
From chopping, slicing, from the knives that lay in wait
In bowls of washing-up, that was raw,
The knuckles reddened, rough from scrubbing hard
At saucepan, frying pan, cup and plate
And giving love the only way she knew,
In each cheap cut of meat, in roast and stew,
Old-fashioned food she cooked and we ate;
And I saw that they had taken off her rings,
The rings she kept once in her dressing-table drawer
With faded snapshots, long-forgotten things
(scent-sprays, tortoise-shell combs, a snap or two
From the time we took a holiday "abroad")
But lately had never been without, as if
She wanted everyone to know she was his wife
Only now that he was dead. And her watch? –
Classic ladies' model, gold strap – it was gone,
And I'd never known her not have *that* on,
Not in all the years they sat together
Watching soaps and game shows I'd disdain
And not when my turn came to cook for her,
Chops or chicken portions, English, bland,
Familiar flavours she said she preferred
To whatever "funny foreign stuff"
Young people seemed to eat these days, she'd heard;
Not all the weeks I didn't come, when she sat
Night after night and stared unseeing at
The television, at her inner weather,
Heaved herself upright, blinked and poured
Drink after drink, and gulped and stared – the scotch
That, when he was alive, she wouldn't touch,
That was her way to be with him again;
Not later in the psychiatric ward,
Where she blinked unseeing at the wall, the nurses
(Who would steal anything, she said), and dreamt
Of when she was a girl, of the time before
I was born, or grew up and learned contempt,
While the TV in the corner blared
To drown some "poor soul's" moans and curses,
And she took her pills and blinked and stared

As the others shuffled around, and drooled, and swore...
But now she lay here, a thick rubber band
With her name on it in smudged black ink was all she wore
On the hand I held, a blotched and crinkled hand
Whose fingers couldn't clasp at mine any more
Or falteringly wave, or fumble at my sleeve –
The last words she had said were *Please don't leave*
But of course I left; now I was back, though she
Could not know that, or turn her face to see
A nurse bring the little bag of her effects to me.

Key features/themes

The first action of the poem – the narrator holding his dead mother’s hand – releases a flood of memories, a rich, poignant vein of recollection that recreates the life which has just come to an end.

The poem’s syntax is central to its impact: written in one long block of text containing only two sentences, it suggests an unstoppable flow of thought and feeling. The poem unfolds through a complex structure of clauses and sub-clauses. Each new detail the narrator notices about his mother’s hand triggers further memories.

The life remembered through the hand is typical of the mother’s class and era. It is conservative with a small ‘c’, limited in terms of education and experience, a life lived at a time when foreign holidays were beyond the reach of ordinary people, food meant plain, English dishes, and a woman’s place was in the home. By contrast the narrator/son is educated, and this has opened up a physical and emotional distance between him and his mother that her death has now made painfully permanent.

The poem’s power lies partly in the narrator’s sense of regret for the judgemental attitude of his younger self, impatient with the limitations of his parents and background. Too late, he has come to understand that his antipathy towards her reflects a lack of compassion: it’s only now she’s dead that he finally holds her hand when it can no longer provide any comfort. The closing image of the small bag of effects is a touching indication of how little she has to leave behind.

The poem is tightly but irregularly rhymed, with some rhymes occurring as much as 14 lines apart, while couplets are also scattered throughout the poem. This oscillation between closeness and distance mirrors the nature of the central relationship. The pattern changes towards the end of the poem with the rhymes becoming denser and more frequent until we reach the three-rhymed lines at the end. In this shift it’s possible to discern, perhaps, the narrator’s growing sense of the reality and finality of his mother’s death.

Links to other poems

The complexities of class and inheritance are also explored in Ros Barber’s ‘Material’, which also focuses on the narrator’s relationship with her mother. Hands are also the central image of Sinead Morrissey’s ‘Genetics’, a poem very different in tone and form.

Further resources

The British Council’s literature website has a critical overview which references this poem:
<http://literature.britishcouncil.org/alan-jenkins>

Robert Minhinnick, 'The Fox in the National Museum of Wales'

Biography

Described by *The Times* as 'the leading Welsh poet of his generation', Robert Minhinnick (b. 1952) is also a novelist, essayist and leading environmentalist. He was born in Neath, South Wales, and grew up near Bridgend. He studied at the universities of Aberystwyth and Cardiff, then after working in the environmental field he co-founded Friends of the Earth (Cymru) and became the organisation's joint co-ordinator for some years. He is adviser to the charity Sustainable Wales and edits the international quarterly, *Poetry Wales*.

His passion and concern for the environment runs through much of his literary output. His book *Watching the Fire Eater*, which combines environmental and literary interests, was named Welsh Book of the Year in 1993, a feat he repeated in 2006 with *To Babel and Back* which, among other things, researched the use of depleted uranium in modern weapons, following a deadly trail from the uranium mines of the USA into Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

The recent Iraq wars also feature in his poetry, with his poem 'Twenty-Five Laments for Iraq' winning the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem. These political and environmental concerns are married in his poetry to lyrical narrative, dense with imagery. He is a master of the long poem, often drawn to sequences to explore his subject matter. While rooted in his native Wales, Minhinnick is genuinely a world poet, his poems outward looking and engaged in many different cultures.

His poetry collections include *A Thread in the Maze* (C. Davies, 1978), *Native Ground* (Triskele, 1979), *Life Sentences* (Poetry Wales, 1983), *The Dinosaur Park* (Poetry Wales, 1985), *The Looters* (Seren, 1989) and *Hey Fatman* (Seren, 1994). *Selected Poems* was published by Carcanet in 1999. In 2003, the same publisher issued his translations from the Welsh, *The Adulterer's Tongue: An Anthology of Welsh Poetry in Translation*. His latest books are both poetry collections: *The Keys of Babylon* (Seren, 2011), shortlisted for the 2012 Wales Book of the Year Award, and his *New Selected Poems* (Carcanet, 2012).

Robert Minhinnick lives in Porthcawl, South Wales. His debut novel, *Sea Holly*, was published in 2007 and shortlisted for the 2008 Ondaatje Prize.

Robert Minhinnick, "The Fox in the National Museum of Wales"

He scans the frames but doesn't stop,
this fox who has come to the museum today,
his eye in the renaissance
and his brush in the Baroque.

Between dynasties his footprints
have still to fade, between the Shan and the Yung,
the porcelain atoms shivering at his touch,
ah, lighter than the emperor's breath, drinking rice wine from
the bowl,
daintier than the eunuch pouring wine.

I came as I could
but already the fox had left the Industrial Revolution behind,
his eye has swept the age of atoms,
the Taj Mahal within the molecule.

The fox is in Photography and the Folk Studies Department.
The fox is in the flux of the foyer,
the fox is in the flock,
the fox is in the flock.

Now the fox sniffs at the dodo
and at the door of Celtic orthography.
The grave-goods, the chariots, the gods of darkness,
he has made their acquaintances on previous occasions.

There, beneath the leatherbacked turtle he goes,
the turtle black as oil drum,
under the skeleton of the whale he skedaddles,
the whalebone silver as bubblewrap.

Through the light of Provence moves the fox, through
the Ordovician era and the Sumerian summer,
greyblue the brush on him, this one who has seen so much,
blood on the bristles of his mouth,
and on his suit of iron filings the air fans like silk.

Through the Cubists and the surrealists
this fox shimmies surreptitiously,
past the artist who has sawn himself in half
under the formaldehyde sky
goes this fox shiny as silver
fox in his fox coat,
for at a foxtrot travels this fox,
passing the lambs at the feet of Jesus,
through the tear in Dante's cloak.

How long have I legged it
after his legerdemain, this fox
in the labyrinth, this fox that never hurries
yet passes an age in a football, this fox
from the forest of the portrait gallery
to Engineering's cornfield sigh?

I will tell you this.
He is something to follow,
this red fellow.
This fox I foster –
he is the future.

No one else
has seen him yet.
But they are closing
the iron doors.

Key features/themes

In this tour de force of a poem, Minhinnick creates, in the figure of the fox, an ambiguous guide to the culture housed in the museum. On the one hand he is a vivid presence, the essence of the living animal. The verbs used to describe him convey his physical energy: he 'doesn't stop', he 'skedaddles', 'shimmies', 'trots'. But the fox also has a symbolic quality to him, drawing on his place in folklore. This element is less benign, recalling to mind the fox's cruelty and cunning as a predator. That the narrator sees him as a threat is clear from his pursuit of him through the museum and his repeated cry, 'The fox is in the flock.' This is underlined by the image of the blood on the bristles around his mouth.

As the narrator 'chases' the fox through the poem, we are taken on a whistle-stop tour of human history. While the title refers to the National Museum of Wales, the cultures represented in it range across the world, from the dynasties of China to India, to the ancient civilisation of the Sumerians, now part of modern-day Iraq, to Wales's own distant Celtic and more recent industrial past. In doing so, the poem suggests, perhaps, that a single nationality never exists in isolation but is always connected in complex ways to the wider world. A similar point is made by the range of disciplines represented: there is art (modern and contemporary), archaeology, industrial and social history, science and natural history – the full range of human endeavour.

So what are we to make of the threat the fox poses? One possible interpretation is that the fox, as the poem itself states at one point, 'is the future'. This is what makes him 'something to follow' and why the narrator can never catch up with him. If that's the case, what kind of future might the fox represent? The last line of the poem suggests a dark conclusion: iron doors closing on human history. This undertow of darkness is born out in images of extinction. Those once-powerful civilisations mentioned in the poem are long gone, as dead as the proverbial dodo referenced in stanza five. In addition, there are hints of the kind of environmental trouble we are storing up for ourselves: the use of 'oildrum' and 'bubblewrap' to describe specimens in the natural history section, the reference to 'brugmansia', a plant now extinct in the wild, and the beautiful metaphor 'cornfield sigh' to describe the effects of 'engineering'. All these suggest a future where the very idea of civilisation may be threatened, undermining the title's pride in the concept of a 'National Museum'.

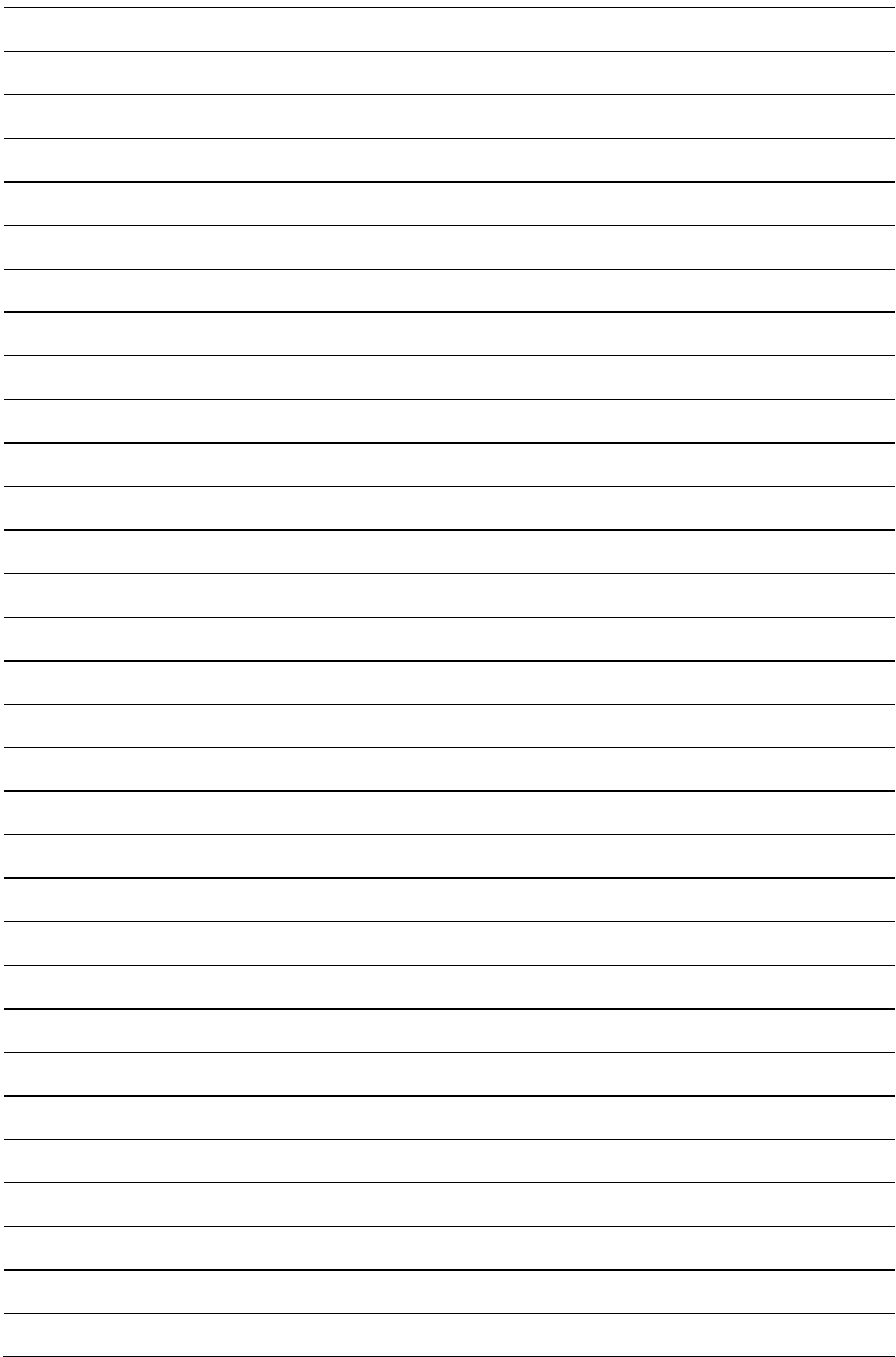
The overall effect of the poem is, however, far from downbeat. The sheer vitality of the fox, and the language used to describe him, defies the logic of the poem's conclusion. Heavy use of alliteration in particular gives the poem a driving momentum – we may be approaching the end game rapidly but there is still the sheer pleasure of sound and movement to enjoy on the way. This ambiguity is expressed in the contents of the museum itself, which epitomise both humanity's destructive and creative impulses.

Links to other poems

National identity is also treated irreverently in Daljit Nagra's 'Look We Have Coming to Dover!', while the two poems share a kind of manic energy in the sound they make. 'The War Correspondent' by Ciaran Carson makes for an interesting comparison – both poems are ambitious in their attempts to use a huge sweep of human history to hint at contemporary issues.

Further resources

The poet's own site contains a blog and film performances of Minhinnick reading his own poetry: <http://robertminhinnick.com/>



Sinéad Morrissey, 'Genetics'

Biography

Sinéad Morrissey (b. 1972) grew up in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and was made the city's inaugural Poet Laureate in 2013. Educated at Trinity College, Dublin, she has travelled widely and lived in Japan and New Zealand, experiences that left a mark on her early poetry. She returned to her birthplace in 1999. In 2002 she was appointed writer in residence at Queen's University, Belfast, and she is currently reader in creative writing at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's.

She has published five collections of poetry, the last four of which were shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize which she finally won in 2013 with her most recent collection, *Parallax* (Carcanet, 2012). Other accolades include the Patrick Kavanagh Award (of which she was the youngest ever winner), the Michael Hartnett Prize, and the Irish Times/Poetry Now Award. In 2007 she took first prize in the National Poetry Competition with 'Through the Square Window', the title poem of her fourth collection which was also shortlisted for the Forward Poetry Prize for Best Poetry Collection.

Wide-ranging in their subject matter, Morrissey's poems are beautifully controlled with a literary sophistication which does not preclude tenderness. Her poems encompass historical imaginings and domestic scenes, and are appreciative of worldwide cultures while always being firmly rooted in Northern Ireland.

Sinéad Morrissey, "Genetics"

My father's in my fingers, but my mother's in my palms.
I lift them up and look at them with pleasure –
I know my parents made me by my hands.

They may have been repelled to separate lands,
to separate hemispheres, may sleep with other lovers,
but in me they touch where fingers link to palms.

With nothing left of their togetherness but friends
who quarry for their image by a river,
at least I know their marriage by my hands.

I shape a chapel where a steeple stands.
And when I turn it over,
my father's by my fingers, my mother's by my palms

demure before a priest reciting psalms.
My body is their marriage register.
I re-enact their wedding with my hands.

So take me with you, take up the skin's demands
for mirroring in bodies of the future.
I'll bequeath my fingers, if you bequeath your palms.
We know our parents make us by our hands.

Key features/themes

Morrissey's choice of the villanelle expresses beautifully the dance of separation and togetherness which runs through the poem. A villanelle requires two repeated lines which alternate as the end line of each stanza, and the whole poem is constructed from only two rhymes. The parents' relationship with each other and their child is beautifully expressed by this structure, form and meaning in the poem becoming one. The interlacing of words and rhyme suggests the complex inheritance of genetics as revealed in the narrator's hands. The villanelle is also a circular form, coming back in the final couplet to where it began. It forms a ring, echoing the imagery of marriage in the poem.

However, Morrissey's use of the form is even more subtle: just as genetics doesn't result in a carbon copy of the previous generation, so the rhymes and repetitions in the poem aren't exact. The key rhyme, out of which the rest of the poem grows is 'palms'/'hands' – a half, not a full rhyme. The words echo each other (as do the words 'mother' and 'father'), they 'touch' both in meaning and in sound, but they are not the same. The narrator has inherited physical likeness from both parents but these combine to create a new, individual identity.

The fact that the parents are no longer together makes their presence in the narrator's body all the more, literally, touching. The Christian marriage ceremony speaks of the couple becoming 'one flesh': now the narrator's hands are all that's left of that commitment to each other.

The last stanza introduces another relationship into the poem. A 'you' is suddenly addressed as the narrator looks to her own future and the possibility of having a family of her own. So while the poem does return to its start, it also marks a fresh chapter: continuity and change are again brought together.

Links to other poems

'Inheritance' by Eavan Boland is an obvious poem to look at alongside 'Genetics' in terms of subject matter, while George Szirtes' 'Song' also demonstrates the musical power of highly patterned poetry, and how small modulations can carry the meaning of a poem.

Further resources

The *Belfast Telegraph* has a nice chatty article about Morrissey and her life and work:

www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/life/features/dr-sinead-morrissey-poetry-in-motion-29523952.html

Hear Morrissey reading this poem on the Poetry Archive:

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/genetics>

This interview is more in-depth about her formation as a poet and subsequent development:

www.stingingfly.org/sample/sin%C3%A9ad-morrissey-interview

Andrew Motion, 'From the Journal of a Disappointed Man'

Biography

Professor Andrew Motion (b. 1952) was born in London but grew up in rural Essex, a background which gave him an abiding love for the English countryside. These early years were formative in other ways: he was introduced to poetry by a supportive school teacher, while the early loss of his mother through a riding accident shadows much of his work. Motion read English at University College, Oxford where he was taught by W.H. Auden. He went on to teach English at the University of Hull (1976–81) where he met the poet Philip Larkin, another abiding influence. He was editor of *Poetry Review* (1981–83) and was poetry editor and editorial director at London publishers Chatto & Windus (1983–89). He has been professor of creative writing at the University of East Anglia and now holds this post at Royal Holloway, University of London. An acclaimed poet (and champion of poetry), critic, biographer and lecturer, Motion succeeded Ted Hughes as Poet Laureate in 1999.

His work has been recognised by many awards including *The Mail on Sunday*/John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for *Dangerous Play: Poems 1974–1984* (Salamander Press, 1984), the Dylan Thomas Award for *Natural Causes* (Chatto & Windus, 1987), and the Somerset Maughan Award and the Whitbread Biography Award for *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (Faber and Faber, 1993). Other key collections include *The Price of Everything* (Faber and Faber, 1994); *Salt Water* (Faber and Faber, 1997) and *Public Property*, a collection of poems he wrote as Poet Laureate (Faber and Faber, 2002). His latest collection of poems is *The Cinder Path* (Faber and Faber 2009), shortlisted for the 2010 Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry.

His poetry is characterised by an interest in narrative and an understated, meditative style which links him to an English tradition that can be traced through Edward Thomas, Thomas Hardy and back to Wordsworth. He often uses fictionalised narrators and historical events to explore his themes. While possessing an accessible clarity, his poems are powerful for what they omit as much as for what they contain, suggesting undercurrents of emotion that his narrators are either unaware of or unwilling to disclose.

Andrew Motion, "From the Journal of a Disappointed Man"

I discovered these men driving a new pile
into the pier. There was all the paraphernalia
of chains, pulleys, cranes, ropes and, as I said,
a wooden pile, a massive affair, swinging

over the water on a long wire hawser.
Everything else was in the massive style
as well, even the men; very powerful men;
very ruminative and silent men ignoring me.

Speech was not something to interest them,
and if they talked at all it was like this –
"Let go", or "Hold tight": all monosyllables.
Nevertheless, by paying close attention

to the obscure movements of one working
on a ladder by the water's edge, I could tell
that for all their strength and experience
these men were up against a great difficulty.

I cannot say what. Every one of the monsters
was silent on the subject – baffled I thought
at first, but then I realised indifferent
and tired of the whole business.

The man nearest to me, still saying nothing
but crossing his strong arms over his chest,
showed me that for all he cared the pile
could go on swinging until the crack of Doom.

I should say I watched them at least an hour
and, to do the men justice, their slow efforts
to overcome the secret problem did continue –
then gradually slackened and finally ceased.

One massive man after another abandoned
his position and leaned on the iron rail
to gaze down like a mystic into the water.
No one spoke; no one said what they saw;

though one fellow did spit, and with round eyes
followed the trajectory of his brown bolus
(he had been chewing tobacco)
on its slow descent into the same depths.

The foreman, and the most original thinker,
smoked a cigarette to relieve the tension.
Afterwards, and with a heavy kind of majesty,
he turned on his heels and walked away.

With this eclipse of interest, the incident
was suddenly closed. First in ones and twos,
then altogether, the men followed. That left
the pile still in mid-air, and me of course.

Key features/themes

The key to this poem lies in the contrast between the narrator and the workmen he is observing. Throughout the poem there is little or no interaction between observer and observed. The poem does not comment on but dramatises the distance and difference between the two.

One obvious contrast is the physical strength and activity of the workmen as opposed to the passivity of the narrator/observer, a difference compounded by their use of language. The title of the poem, with its learned tone recalling works of fiction from the 18th and 19th centuries, suggests the narrator is a man who understands literary heritage. He is a 'man of letters' whose own language is full of long words and complex references, very different from the silent workmen who, when they speak, do so with functional simplicity.

Though it purports to be a journal entry, the poem offers very little by way of insight into the thoughts and emotions of the narrator. His feelings about the workmen are only hinted at in the metaphors he chooses to describe them. These are the only figurative language in the poem and suggest an ambivalent attitude: 'monsters', 'mystic', 'original thinker', 'majesty'.

Through this juxtaposition, the poem seems to offer the reader two alternative versions of masculinity. However, by the end of the poem it seems that neither kind of man has an answer to the 'secret problem'. The old Soviet-era heroism that might once have attached to this scene of 'the working man' dissipates into listlessness. They are engaged in a hopeless task which defeats them, and leaves them just as much observers as the narrator. The final image of the pile hanging uselessly in mid-air seems symbolic of the whole enterprise, the narrator tacitly acknowledging that he too is a 'spare part'.

The task they're engaged in – repairing a pier – might have further symbolic significance. Piers are structures that literally don't go anywhere. They are also remnants of the Victorian and Edwardian eras, a period of remarkable feats of engineering, expressive of a broader confidence in progress. By contrast, neither the workmen nor the narrator are able to offer a way forward. This takes us back to the disappointment of the title which applies, in different ways, to both sets of men.

Links to other poems

In its concern with contemporary masculinity and its sense of defeat, Motion's poem has an interesting parallel in Simon Armitage's 'Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass'. Both poems also have narrators whose exact relationship to the poet is blurred – they are not clear-cut dramatic monologues but, in the evasions and ambiguities of their voice, they imply a constructed character.

Further resources

This interview in the *Guardian* gives an insight into Motion's formative years – his childhood and early education – which were central to his later poetic development:

www.theguardian.com/education/2005/dec/13/highereducationprofile.highereducation?INTCMP=SRCH

In 1998, Motion was the guest on Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*. You can listen to the edition via the programme's archive: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00943h0

Andrew Motion's 'Top 10 tips for being a successful poet' can be read here:

www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-29538180

Daljit Nagra, 'Look We Have Coming To Dover!'

Biography

Daljit Nagra (b. 1966) was the first poet to win the Forward Prize for both his first collection of poetry, in 2007, and for its title poem, 'Look We Have Coming to Dover!', three years earlier. His second collection, *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!* (Faber and Faber, 2011) was shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize and was the *Guardian* and the *Independent's* Book of the Year. His third collection, *Ramayana* (Faber and Faber, 2014) is a retelling of the ancient Indian myth about Rama's quest to recover his wife Sita from her abduction by Raavana, the Lord of the Underworld.

Nagra was born and raised in West London, then Sheffield. He currently lives in Harrow with his wife and daughters and works in a secondary school.

Nagra's first collection gained a lot of media attention for its brilliant and irreverent exploration of the experience of British-born Indians. Driven by the energies of this culture clash, his poetry often employs 'Punglish' – English spoken by Indian Punjabi immigrants. He is as concerned with British-ness as Asian-ness, especially the points where these two conditions collide. While dealing with serious issues, including the racism he experienced growing up, the poems are characteristically upbeat, charming and humorous, with a formal dexterity as inventive as his language.

Daljit Nagra, "Look We Have Coming to Dover!"

'So various, so beautiful, so new...'
Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach'

Stowed in the sea to invade
the lash alfresco of a diesel-breeze
ratcheting speed into the tide, brunt with
gobfuls of surf phlegmed by cushy come-and-go
tourists prow'd on the cruisers, lording the ministered waves.

Seagull and shoal life
Vexing their blarnies upon our huddled
camouflage past the vast crumble of scummed
cliffs, scrambling on mulch as thunder unbladders
yobbish rain and wind on our escape hatched in a Bedford van.

Seasons or years we reap
inland, unclocked by the national eye
or stab in the back, teemed for breathing
sweeps of grass through the whistling asthma of parks,
burdened, ennobled - poling sparks across pylon and pylon.

Swarms of us, grafting in
the black within shot of the moon's
spotlight, banking on the miracle of sun -
span its rainbow, passport us to life. Only then
can it be human to hoick ourselves, bare-faced for the clear.

Imagine my love and I,
our sundry others, Blair'd in the cash
of our beeswax'd cars, our crash clothes, free,
we raise our charged glasses over unparasol'd tables
East, babbling our lingo, flecked by the chalk of Britannia!

Key features/themes

The poem's title alerts us to concepts of England and Englishness which are gleefully dismantled in the rest of the poem. Grammatically incorrect, the title sets the context of a speaker for whom English is a second language. The mention of Dover, one of the key entry points into the UK for immigrants, legal and illegal, provides a further clue as to the narrative voice. Dover is also a deeply resonant English location, its famous white cliffs a cultural shorthand for the country's history as an island power. It also has a powerful literary heritage as the epigraph reminds us: Matthew Arnold's 'On Dover Beach' is a famous poem written in 1851 which expresses society's growing anxiety about the modern secular world. Nagra's poem also echoes Arnold's in the implied presence of a beloved to whom the poem is addressed. In contrast to Arnold's poem, however, the title's exclamation mark is expressive of an energetic optimism which sets the tone for what follows.

The story this voice discloses is one of hardship and poverty. In comparison to the 'cushy' tourists, the narrator and his kind have very little power – economic or otherwise. They are 'huddled', 'hunched', 'burdened', 'grafting', out of sight and mind. But despite this the narrator can imagine a future where they've won their way to prosperity. The poem ends where it began, with a reference to the Arnold poem, to a mythical England as symbolised by the white chalk of the Dover cliffs – and an exclamation mark.

The tone and energy of the poem is bound up in its language. Each stanza is packed with a dizzying array of sound effects – rhyme, half-rhyme, alliteration and assonance. Coupled with these is an infectious irreverence towards 'proper' English. Nagra coins new verbs such as 'phlegmed', 'unbladders', 'passport us' and 'Blair'd'. These he mixes with phrases from colloquial English such as 'gobfuls', 'scramming', 'hoick' and 'lingoes' to form a lively hybrid which mirrors the mixing of cultures that immigration entails. The effect is fun and funny – both at the expense of the English but also, to an extent, the narrator whose dreams of a new life are a parody of aspiration. The poem also incorporates language often used by those who see immigration as a threat to national identity – 'invade', 'teemed' and 'swarms' – and subverts it by putting it in the mouth of an immigrant, in this case a Punjabi Indian.

Through this cheerful disregard of 'standard' or 'correct' English and subversion of the tabloid discourse on immigration, Nagra puts the issue of what constitutes national identity at the heart of his poem. The place and its language are, in effect, one and the same – which gives the narrator's remaking of the latter its satirical and political edge.

Links to other poems

The multi-cultural complexities of Nagra's poem are echoed in Ruth Padel's 'You, Shiva, and My Mum'. For another example of how humour can explore serious themes, Ciaran O'Driscoll's 'Please Hold' makes an interesting comparison.

Further resources

This link contains the text of Arnold's 'Dover Beach' and a lucid commentary on it by a practising poet, Carol Rumens: www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/oct/20/dover-beach-matthew-arnold Looking at the Arnold poem in association with Nagra's could prompt some interesting discussion.

Nagra's own website has an extensive selection of reviews and resources: www.daljitnagra.com

Sean O'Brien, 'Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright'

Biography

Sean O'Brien (b. 1952) has been described as the leading poet–editor–critic of his generation. He was born in London but grew up in Hull. The North East – its landscapes, history and culture – have remained a core influence and concern in his poetry. He graduated from Selwyn College, Cambridge, and spent the 1980s teaching in a secondary school in East Sussex. Since then he's made a career as a writer and academic, with fellowships at the universities of Dundee, Leeds, Durham and Newcastle, as well as at universities in Denmark and Japan. From 1998 to 2006, he taught creative writing at Sheffield Hallam University where in 2003 he was made professor of poetry. He is now professor of creative writing at Newcastle University and a vice-president of The Poetry Society.

His many poetry collections include *The Indoor Park* (Bloodaxe, 1983), winner of a Somerset Maugham Award, *The Frighteners* (Bloodaxe, 1987), *HMS Glasshouse* (Oxford University Press, 1991), *Ghost Train* (Oxford University Press, 1995) and *Downriver* (Picador, 2001). With the publication of *The Drowned Book* (Picador, 2007), O'Brien achieved the unique feat of winning the Forward Poetry Prize for Best Collection of the Year for the third time, the only poet to have won this prize more than once. This collection also won the 2007 T.S. Eliot Prize, while his most recent collection, *November* (Picador, 2011) was shortlisted for both the T.S. Eliot Prize and the 2011 Forward Poetry Prize (Best Poetry Collection of the Year).

As a critic he has been very influential, his collection of essays about contemporary poetry, *The Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Bloodaxe, 1998) regarded as a classic. He is also a playwright, journalist and short story writer, and in 2009 published his first novel, *Afterlife*.

His imaginative landscape remains rooted in its own version of the north, from the bombed streets of Hull to the economic deprivations of his adopted city, Newcastle. It's a world of hidden gardens, railway lines, estuaries, industry and decline, a territory he has made his own, exploring it with an increasingly intense, dream-like quality. Combining literariness with colloquial language, O'Brien's work can be angrily satirical but also ruefully humorous in its treatment of his abiding themes of history, politics and class.

Sean O'Brien, "Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright"

There are miners still
In the underground rivers
Of West Moor and Palmersville.

There are guttering cap-lamps bound up in the roots
Where the coal is beginning again.
They are sinking slowly further

In between the shiftless seams,
To black pools in the bed of the world.
In their long home the miners are labouring still -

Gargling dust, going down in good order,
Their black-braided banners aloft,
Into flooding and firedamp, there to inherit

Once more the tiny corridors of the immense estate
They line with prints of Hedley's *Coming Home*.
We hardly hear of them.

There are the faint reports of spent economies,
Explosions in the ocean floor,
The thud of iron doors sealed once for all

On prayers and lamentation,
On pragmatism and the long noyade
Of a class which dreamed itself

Immortalized by want if nothing else.
The singing of the dead inside the earth
Is like the friction of great stones, or like the rush

Of water into newly opened darkness. My brothers,
The living will never persuade them
That matters are otherwise, history done.

Key features/themes

Britain's industrial past, specifically the life and culture of its miners, is hauntingly evoked by O'Brien in this Forward Prize-winning poem. Its title references the great American poet, James Wright, whose work often defended the disenfranchised. O'Brien's poem takes a similar approach to the miners, commemorating their lost way of life.

The poem locates the miners, and the past they represent, underground where they once laboured and where they have now become like ghosts in a very British version of the classical underworld. They are seen as passing into history: 'We hardly hear of them.' In the face of this oblivion, O'Brien's miners are characterised by a gritty stubbornness. They carry on working, refusing to believe that 'history' is 'done'. Their memory has gone underground, where they've become at one with the bedrock they used to dig.

The narrator does not have a rose-tinted attitude towards this past: there is an implied criticism of the miners' determination to go 'down in good order' and their loyalty to a class which clung to its privations as a badge of honour. However, the last two stanzas express a deep respect for the miners and an acknowledgement of kinship with them in the moving use of the word 'brothers'. The language of the poem is solemn with a Biblical resonance to its imagery. The miners are identified throughout with the founding elements of stone and water, an imagery which imparts a sense of grandeur. This is matched by the sound of the poem: while written as free verse, it is nevertheless heavily patterned, giving it a formal quality appropriate to its elegiac tone. Pairs or triplets of alliterating, strongly stressed words generate a powerful rhythm expressive of the heavy work which the miners carried out – the second, third and fourth stanzas in particular use this effect to convey a powerful sense of the miners' physical presence.

While on the one hand the poem seems to accept that the miners are consigned to history, by associating them with the fundamentals of life O'Brien also suggests that their power is not entirely spent: 'singing', 'friction' and 'rush' all speak of a presence which retains a collective energy that may, one day, disturb the future. This seam of the past may not be entirely exhausted.

Poem footnotes:

* "West Moor and Palmersville" – colliery villages near Newcastle-upon-Tyne

* "Hedley's *Coming Home* – Painting of miners by Ralph Hedley (1848-1913) an artist best known for his paintings portraying scenes of everyday life in the North East of England.

* "noyade" – destruction or execution by drowning, especially as practiced at Nantes, France, in 1793–94, during the Reign of Terror after the French Revolution of 1789

Links to other poems

Andrew Motion's poem 'From the Journal of a Disappointed Man' has a very different take on the industrial past, and its deliberately cool tone contrasts with O'Brien's Biblical cadences.

Further resources

This interview has a lot of interesting background information about O'Brien's formative years and his attachment to the North East, which has shaped his politics and poetry:

www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/14/interview-sean-obrien

For some quickfire answers to key questions, this BBC interview from 2007 is good:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7027557.stm>

For a more in-depth recent interview prompted by the publication of his *Collected Poems*, this is worth a read: <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/books/2012/12/sean-o-brien-poetry-is-political-all-writing-is-political/>

Ciaran O'Driscoll, 'Please Hold'

Biography

Ciaran O'Driscoll (b. 1943) is an Irish poet whose work blends dark humour and lyrical craft. He has published eight books of poetry including *Gog and Magog* (Salmon, 1987), *Moving On, Still There: New and Selected Poems* (Dedalus Press, 2001) and more recently *Surreal Man*, a chapbook of 21 poems (Pighog, 2006), and *Vecchie Donne di Magione*, a dual-language edition of poems in an Italian setting (Volumnia Editrice, 2006). In 2001, Liverpool University Press published his childhood memoir, *A Runner Among Falling Leaves*. He has won a number of awards for his work, among them the Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh Fellowship in Poetry. In 2007 he was elected to Aosdána, an institution established by the Irish Arts Council to honour artists and writers who have made an outstanding contribution to art and literature.

O'Driscoll's early influences were the classical Modernists of the 20th century including T.S. Eliot and Saint-John Perse. However, over time O'Driscoll found their purity of style and oblique manner increasingly at odds with what he wanted to express, particularly his anger at political folly and social injustice. He turned to satire as an alternative and this enabled him to create the new poetic voice for which he is now best known. He now lives in Limerick, Republic of Ireland.

Ciaran O'Driscoll, "Please Hold"

This is the future, my wife says.
We are already there, and it's the same
as the present. Your future, here, she says.
And I'm talking to a robot on the phone.
The robot is giving me countless options,
none of which answer to my needs.
Wonderful, says the robot
when I give him my telephone number
And Great, says the robot
when I give him my account number.
and a great,
but I can find nothing to meet my needs
on the telephone, and into my account
(which is really the robot's account)
goes money, my money, to pay for nothing.
This call is free of charge, says the robot.
Yes but I'm paying for it, I shout,
out of my wonderful account
into my great telephone bill.
Wonderful, says the robot.
And my wife says, This is the future.
I'm sorry, I don't understand, says the robot.
Please say Yes or No.
Or you can say Repeat of Menu.
You can say Yes, No, Repeat or Menu,
or you can say Agent if you'd like to talk
to someone real, who is just as robotic.
I scream Agent! and am cut off,
and my wife says, This is the future.
We are already there and it's the same
as the present. Your future, here, she says.
And I'm talking to a robot on the phone,
and he is giving me no options
in the guise of countless alternatives.
We appreciate your patience. Please hold.
Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.
Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.
Eine fucking Kleine Nachtmusik.
And the robot transfers me to himself.
Your call is important to us, he says.
And my translator says, This means
your call is not important to them.
And my wife says, This is the future.
And my translator says, Please hold

means that, for all your accomplishments,
the only way you can now meet your needs
is by looting. Wonderful, says the robot.

Please hold. Please grow old. Please grow cold.
Please do what you're told. Grow old. Grow cold.
This is the future. Please hold.

Key features/themes

In his infuriating experience of an automated telephone system, O'Driscoll finds a deeper metaphor for modern life. He is trapped in a world of binary response where any deviation from the set script is met with incomprehension or delay. In his use of repetition, O'Driscoll creates a horrible maze of language full of wrong turns and dead ends. Language is reduced to a banality bordering on the meaningless. It has become purely operational with no room for anomaly or shades of meaning. The irony is that, should the narrator manage to bypass the system and get through to a real person, they will treat him in just as robotic a fashion.

The poem has a kind of desperate comedy about it – funny but with a darker undertone, partly due to the repeated insistence that 'this is the future'. Whether by that is meant the dominance of automation in our daily lives, the failure of language to communicate what we need or the confusions of old age, or all of the above, isn't made explicit. However, it's clear the narrator takes a dim view of the future if this is what it means.

This view is made increasingly clear by the narrator's internal 'translator' who starts to present alternative, sarcastic meanings to the phrases offered by the automated voice. The mention of 'looting' also brings in the outside world briefly, hinting that the narrator's impotence in the face of this system has its parallel in how access to money – and power – is tightly controlled at a societal level.

The deeper implications of the incident are borne out in the final three lines, set apart from the rest of the text. Their progression from 'hold' to 'old' to 'cold' is a powerful warning that a whole life might pass by while you wait for the answer you need.

Links to other poems

Most of the poems in this selection deal with the past, both historical and personal. This poem has one foot in the future as does Robert Minhinnick's 'The Fox in the National Museum of Wales'. Both use humour, but while in Minhinnick's poem language is still vital and creative, O'Driscoll explores what happens when language is emptied of these qualities.

Further resources

O'Driscoll's blog is an engaging, informal window onto his life: <http://blog.ciaranodriscoll.ie/>
This article picks up on some of the underlying currents in O'Driscoll's work, mentioning 'Please Hold' in passing as an example of anger and humour combined:
www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/13165/30/Ciaran-ODriscoll
This site contains 11 O'Driscoll poems: www.molossus.co/poetry/world-poetry-portfolio-20-ciaran-odriscoll/

Ruth Padel, 'You, Shiva and My Mum'

Biography

Ruth Padel (b. 1947) is an award-winning British poet and writer, Poetry Fellow at King's College London, fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, council member for the Zoological Society of London, and the great-great-granddaughter of Charles Darwin.

Born in London, she began her academic and literary career as a classicist, studying for a PhD on Greek tragedy at Oxford University, where she also taught. Later she became a freelance writer, doing features and reviews for many newspapers including *The Independent*, *The Times* and *The New York Times*, and broadcasting for BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4. She invented the popular 'Sunday Poem' discussion column for *The Independent on Sunday*, on which her book, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem* (Chatto & Windus, 2002) is based. This book and its follow up, *The Poem and the Journey* (Chatto & Windus, 2007) did a great deal to de-mystify contemporary poetry and widen its readership.

She has published 10 collections of poetry, a novel on wildlife crime, *Where the Serpent Lives* (Little, Brown, 2010), and eight books of non-fiction including *Tigers in Red Weather* (Little, Brown, 2005) on wild tiger conservation. Ecological issues have always been important to her and her work, and she is ambassador for New Networks for Nature and patron of 21st Century Tiger. She currently also teaches poetry at King's College, London.

Key poetry collections include *Rembrandt Would Have Loved You* (Chatto & Windus, 1998), *Voodoo Shop* (Chatto & Windus, 2002), *The Soho Leopard* (Chatto & Windus, 2004), and *Darwin: A Life in Poems* (Chatto & Windus, 2009). Her work has attracted much acclaim including being shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize four times, as well as the Whitbread Poetry Award and the Costa Book Award.

Her latest collection, *Learning to Make an Oud in Nazareth* (Chatto & Windus, 2014), explores the Middle East, its poems tracing a quest for harmony in the midst of destruction. In its intellectual curiosity and wide-ranging cultural knowledge, this latest collection demonstrates many of her characteristic strengths as a poet. Her work has a bold energy, combining consumerism, popular culture and classical references. Animals are also an abiding source of inspiration and imagery in her richly sensuous poems.

Ruth Padel, "You, Shiva and My Mum"

Shall I tell how she went to India
At the age of eighty
For a week in the monsoon

Because her last unmarried son
Was getting married to a girl
With a mask of yellow turmeric on her face

At the shrine of Maa Markoma
In the forest where Orissa's last
Recorded human sacrifice took place?

How this mother of mine rode a motorbike,
Pillion, up a leopard-and-leeches path
Through jungle at full moon,

Getting off to shove away
The sleeping buffalo,
Puddled shaves of sacred calf?

How she who hates all frills
Watched her feet painted scarlet henna,
Flip-flop pattern between the toes

And backward swastikas at heel, without a murmur?
How she climbed barefoot to Shiva
Up a rock-slide – where God sat

Cross-legged, navy blue,
On a boulder above his cave,
One hand forbidding anyone impure,

Or wearing leather, to come in?
How she forded Cobra River
In a hundred degrees at noon

To reach the God's familiar – his little bull of stone,
A pinky blaze of ribbons, bells, hibiscus –
And, lifelong sceptic that she is,

The eyes of all the valley on her – Tribal, Hindu,
Atheist and Christian – bowed? Shall I tell how you
Laughed and fondly at me for my pride

In her? How I wait on the miracle
Of your breath in my ear? Shall I tell
Them? Yes. Tell that.

Key features/themes

While the main body of this poem affectionately brings to life the character of the narrator's mother, a large part of the poem's power is generated by its use of a question to frame the narrative: 'Shall I tell how ...?' Of course, in the process of asking the question, the story is told, so the question may be said to be rhetorical, with the last stanza acting as a confirmation that the story is worth telling.

But this framing device does raise interesting issues. It suggests firstly that the narrator is unsure as to whether to tell the story or not. Why might this be the case? Is she worried about embarrassing her mother? Or that her mother might be accused of hypocrisy for embracing traditional Indian wedding customs, even though she is a non-believer? Is the narrator concerned the story will reveal too much about her own heritage, or that the 'you' of the title might disapprove? All these possible anxieties are set in train by the questioning structure of the poem and bubble away under its surface.

Some of these anxieties are also expressed in the shifting perspectives of the poem, as introduced by the title. The poem is unsure of where to stand – like the mother it has one foot in contemporary Western culture and one foot in traditional Indian culture. In addition, there's the narrator's relationship with her mother on the one hand and the relationship with the 'you' on the other.

This see-sawing is emphasised by the poet's use of indented stanzas, the poem's actual appearance on the page suggesting the shifting ground of its subject matter. Eight out of the twelve stanzas are also enjambed, the unit of sense breaking across stanzas to disorientating effect, while the irregular, light-touch rhymes and half-rhymes of the poem bind it together, but not too tightly. Connection and disconnection are therefore felt at a structural as well as a thematic level.

What's achieved by the end is a kind of balance. The fond laughter of the 'you' and the final statement at the end are reassuring – it's okay to be in both worlds. The narrator finds inspiration in the physical and mental indomitability of her 80-year-old mother. Her willingness to face physical hardship and to enter into a ritual, despite reservations, for the sake of her son and his new wife is ultimately seen as a good compromise. Tribal, Hindu, Atheist and Christian loyalties are brought into fellowship with each other through the wedding ceremony and her mother's role in it.

Poem footnotes:

*"Orissa" – an Indian state on the subcontinent's eastern part.

* "Shiva" – one of the most important deities in Hinduism

Links to other poems

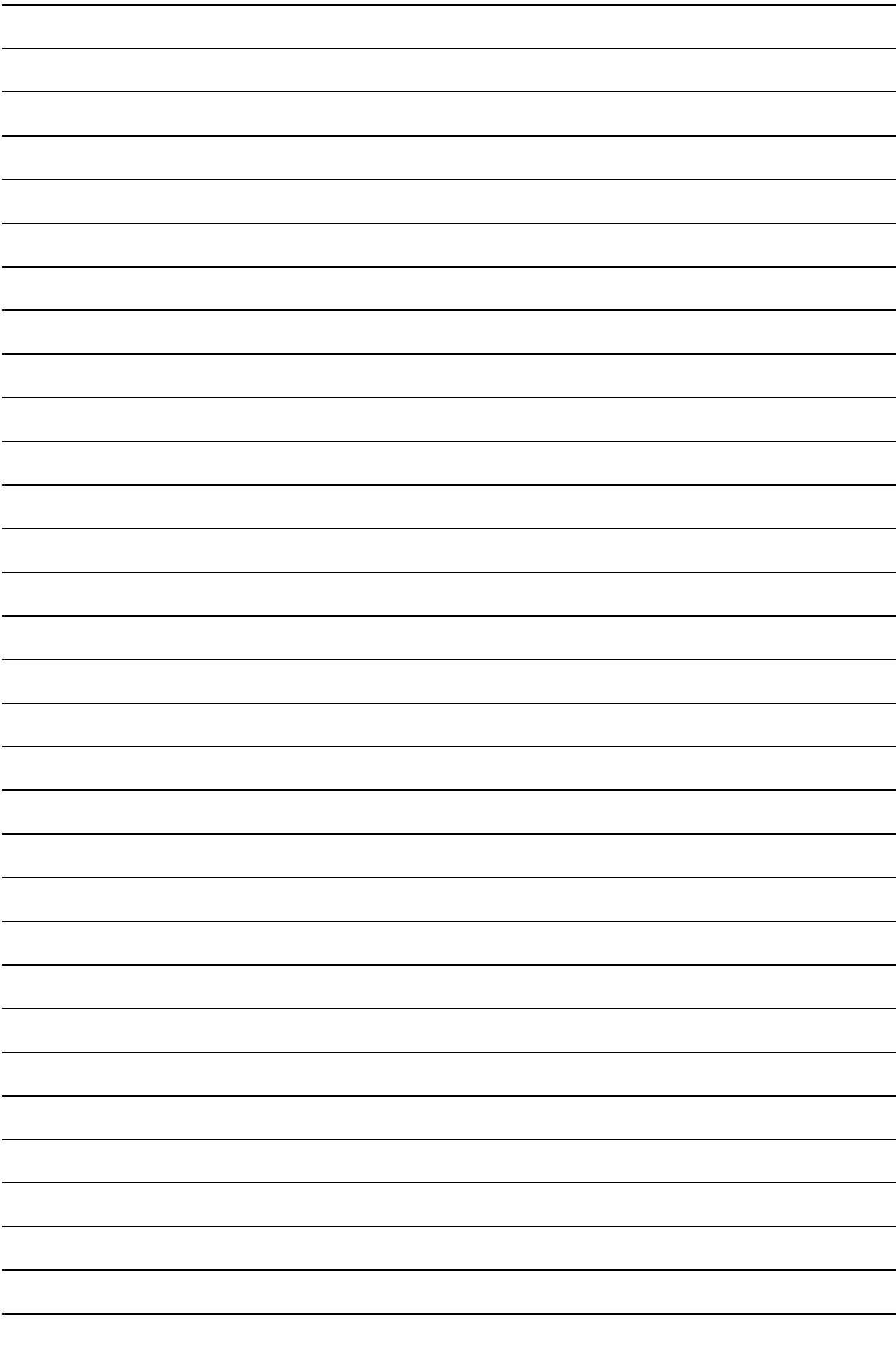
'Look We Have Coming to Dover!' also explores cultural diversity, though in Padel's poem the journey is inverted with a return to, rather than a journey from, a country of origin.

Further resources

Ruth Padel's own website is very comprehensive, with links to reviews and articles, a biography and other content: www.ruthpadel.com

Her entry on the British Council's literature website contains a full critical appraisal: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/ruth-padel>

She has also been a castaway on Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, available to listen to on the programme's archive: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00ghq25



George Szirtes, 'Song'

Biography

George Szirtes (b. 1948) came to England in 1956 as a refugee from Hungary following the Hungarian Uprising. He was educated in England and has always written in English. He was brought up in London, going on to study fine art in London and Leeds. He wrote poetry alongside his art and his first collection, *The Slant Door*, appeared in 1979 and won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. After his second collection was published he was invited to become a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Other acclaimed collections followed, including *Bridge Passages* (Bloodaxe, 1991), which was shortlisted for the Whitbread Poetry Prize, *Reel* (Bloodaxe, 2004), which won the T.S. Eliot Prize, and his *New and Collected Poems*, published by Bloodaxe in 2008. His most recent collection, *Bad Machine* (Bloodaxe, 2013) is a Poetry Book Society Choice and gained him another T.S. Eliot Prize shortlisting. In addition to his own poetry, Szirtes has translated, edited and anthologised numerous collections of Hungarian poetry.

At the heart of his work is the dual perspective of an exile. In his work, English individualism and Eastern European influences meet, creating fascinating tensions. A return trip to his native Budapest in 1984 proved a particularly fruitful trigger for his creativity. This city has always been a haunting presence in his poetry, a result of displacement and the consequent negotiation between a European sensibility and English culture. The past is deeply ambiguous, vulnerable to the reconstructions of memory. Myth and fairy tale rub shoulders with ordinary details from English life, while the malign presence of history and totalitarian politics hovers at the edges.

These ambiguities and complexities are held in place by a rigorous and ambitious use of form. Terza rime and the sonnet are favourites, and Szirtes has commented on the importance to him of rhyme, describing it as an 'unexpected salvation, the paper nurse that somehow, against all the odds, helps us stick the world together while all the time drawing attention to its own fabricated nature.'

George Szirtes, "Song"

*Nothing happens until something does.
Everything remains just as it was
And all you hear is the distant buzz
Of nothing happening till something does.*

*A lot of small hands in a monstrous hall
can make the air vibrate
and even shake at the wall;
a voice can break a plate
or glass, and one pale feather tip
the balance on a sinking ship.*

It's the very same tune that has been sung
time and again by those
whose heavy fate has hung
on the weight that they oppose,
the weight by which are crushed
the broken voices of the hushed.

But give certain people a place to stand
a lever, a fulcrum, a weight,
however small the hand,
the object however great,
it is possible to prove
that even Earth may be made to move.

*Nothing happens until something does,
and hands, however small,
fill the air so the buzz
of the broken fills the hall
as levers and fulcrums shift
and the heart like a weight begins to lift.*

*Nothing happens until something does.
Everything remains just as it was
And all you hear is the distant buzz
Of nothing happening. Then something does.*

Key features/themes

This poem celebrates small actions which, cumulatively, can make a difference. It is dedicated to the South African white liberal activist Helen Suzman, who campaigned all her adult life against the apartheid system. This is the context for a poem which honours the collective power of protest.

As the title suggests, patterns of sound, particularly rhyme and repetition, are central to the poem's effect. The poem is split into three sections which mirror the basic chorus/verse/chorus structure of a song. The central two stanzas develop and comment on what's presented in the first and third sections.

The poem insists that a single voice or hand, when joined with others, can begin to effect change. The idea is explored through opposing images of heaviness and lightness – the feather that can 'tip/the balance' of a sinking ship followed by the repetition of the word 'weight' four times. This sense of shift is also present in the short, largely enjambed lines, which provide a momentary hiatus as the eye and the mind hang briefly in the air before landing on the solid ground of the next word. The weaving of repeated and near-repeated words through the poem suggests a gathering momentum.

The most important tipping point in the poem is the one between 'nothing' and 'something'. This comes to fruition in the final stanza when the crucial change takes place from 'till' to 'then'. The process of transformation has begun with the alteration of a single word which changes the meaning of the line completely. In doing so, Szirtes brilliantly demonstrates in words exactly the kind of small act his poem champions: form and meaning become indivisible.

Links to other poems

The very different uses and effects of rhyme can be teased out by comparing Szirtes' controlled, elegant poem with the edgy humour of Leontia Flynn's 'The Furthest Distances I've Travelled' or the grief and regret of Alan Jenkins' 'Effect'.

Further resources

George Szirtes' is a prolific blogger with wide-ranging interests:

<http://georgeszirtes.blogspot.co.uk/>

This article is an interesting intervention in a debate prompted by Jeremy Paxman's criticism of contemporary poetry's 'obscurity': www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/02/jeremy-paxman-poetry-newsnight

There's a lovely personal statement by Szirtes as to what poetry means to him on the British Council's literature website: <http://literature.britishcouncil.org/george-szirtes>

Adam Thorpe, 'On Her Blindness'

Biography

Adam Thorpe (b. 1956) is a poet, novelist and playwright. He was born in Paris in 1956 and grew up in India, Cameroon and England. This cosmopolitan experience has given him an outsider's view of England combined with a strong sense of 'Englishness', a theme which he's explored in various genres.

After graduating from Magdalen College, Oxford in 1979, he started a theatre company and toured villages and schools before moving to London where he taught drama and English literature. His first collection of poetry, *Mornings in the Baltic* (Secker & Warburg, 1988), was shortlisted for the 1988 Whitbread Poetry Award. Further books of poetry are *Meeting Montaigne* (Secker & Warburg, 1990), *From the Neanderthal* (Jonathan Cape, 1999), *Nine Lessons From the Dark* (Jonathan Cape, 2003) and *Birds with a Broken Wing* (Jonathan Cape, 2007). His most recent collection is *Voluntary* (Jonathan Cape, 2012).

Thorpe's first novel, *Ulverton* (Secker & Warburg, 1992), a panoramic portrait of English rural history, was published to great critical acclaim. The book consists of 12 loosely connected narrative episodes tracing 350 years in the history of a rural village and its inhabitants. The book won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize in 1992. Later novels have continued to experiment with narrative form and different historical settings, from West Africa and England on the eve of the Second World War (*Pieces of Light*, Jonathan Cape, 1998) to the turmoil of France leading up to the 1968 Paris riots (*No Telling*, Vintage, 2003), to Germany at the end of the Second World War (*The Rules of Perspective*, Jonathan Cape, 2005).

As a poet, Thorpe is consistently sympathetic in his observation of human lives – particularly of his own family's history – as well as the rhythms of social change and the natural world. He lives in France with his wife and three children.

Adam Thorpe, "On Her Blindness"

My mother could not bear being blind,
to be honest. One shouldn't say it.

One should hide the fact that catastrophic
handicaps are hell; one tends to hear,

publicly from those who bear it
like a Roman, or somehow find joy

in the fight. She turned to me, once,
in a Paris restaurant, still not finding

the food on the plate with her fork,
or not so that it stayed on(try it

in a pitch-black room) and whispered,
"It's living hell, to be honest Adam.

If I gave up hope of a cure, I'd bump
myself off." I don't recall what I replied,

but it must have been the usual sop,
inadequate: the locked-in son.

She kept her dignity, though, even when
bumping into walls like a dodgem; her sense

of direction did not improve, when cast
inward. "No built-in compass," as my father

joked. Instead, she pretended to ignore
the void, or laughed it off.

Or saw things she couldn't see
and smiled, as when the kids would offer

the latest drawing, or show her their new toy –
so we'd forget, at times, that the long,

slow slide had finished in a vision

as black as stone. For instance, she'd continued

to drive the old Lanchester
long after it was safe

down the Berkshire lanes. She'd visit exhibitions,
admire films, sink into television

while looking the wrong way.
Her last week alive (a fortnight back)

was golden weather, of course,
the autumn trees around the hospital

ablaze with colour, the ground royal
with leaf-fall. I told her this, forgetting,

as she sat too weak to move, staring
at nothing. "Oh yes, I know," she said,

"it's lovely out there." Dying has made her
no more sightless, but now she can't

pretend. Her eyelids were closed
in the coffin; it was up to us to believe

she was watching, somewhere, in the end.

Key features/themes

The sense of sight is often dominant in poetry, so here the poet's exploration of his mother's loss of sight takes the reader into unusual territory. Thorpe conveys the impact on his mother through detail which convinces us as coming from direct experience: his mother's difficulty with eating, her dodgem-like awkwardness, and the long list of things she did while pretending she could still see. All these give us a moving insight into the 'living hell' she is trying to cope with. They also remind us that she has become the observed instead of the observing, a shift which has the potential for humiliation, though the narrator stresses she 'kept her dignity'.

The language of the poem is largely plain, conversational, with comparatively little figurative language. One simile – 'as blank as stone' – feels applicable to the poem's spare style. The only splash of colour comes at the end in the description of autumn leaf-fall: 'golden', 'ablaze', 'royal' are all reminders of the riches the mother has lost.

The mother's predicament is also conveyed through Thorpe's repeated use of enjambment, not just across lines but across stanzas. This breaking of units of sense across the white space between stanzas has a disorientating effect, making it harder for the reader to negotiate the poem's meaning.

As in U.A. Fanthorpe's 'A Minor Role', dialogue plays a significant part. The second line contains the statement 'One shouldn't say it', and this division between what can and can't be said runs through the whole poem. The one time the mother is honest about her situation, the narrator is unable to respond with similar candour. Most of the time she pretends she can see, that she's doing okay. Even when close to death she maintains the fiction: 'it's lovely out there.' The last line suggests that, even after death, she is still subject to the comforting fiction which likes to imagine the dead watching over us. Part of the poem's power lies in both the narrator's acknowledgement of the lies we tell ourselves in the face of frailty and ageing, and his regret at 'looking the wrong way'.

The title of the poem is an adaptation of a famous sonnet by John Milton, 'On His Blindness', written in 1655 after the poet's loss of sight became complete. In it, Milton initially chafes at his condition and how it limits his ability to serve God, but the poem ends with a resolve to bear his loss patiently for, 'They also serve who only stand and wait.' Thorpe's poem is partly a rebuff of Milton's stoicism, of those who 'like a Roman' put up with affliction without complaint.

Links to other poems

In its exploration of the difficulty of talking honestly about physical decline, Thorpe's poem has an obvious parallel with U.A. Fanthorpe's 'A Minor Role', while their contrasting use of the first person perspective results in very different poems.

Further resources

Adam Thorpe's own website has extensive links to reviews of his poetry:

www.adamthorpe.net/poetry.html

Here are two reviews of Thorpe's most recent poetry collection, *Voluntary*, which contain interesting thoughts about his themes and style:

- <http://edmundprestwich.co.uk/?p=1126>
- www.theguardian.com/books/2012/may/11/voluntary-adam-thorpe-review

Tim Turnbull, 'Ode on a Grayson Perry Urn'

Biography

Tim Turnbull (b. 1960) is from North Yorkshire. He worked in the forestry industry for many years and started writing poetry in the early 90s. He studied at Middlesex University and completed an MA in Creative Writing at Sheffield Hallam University in 2002.

Since then he has read and performed his work throughout Britain and abroad. He makes no distinction between writing for stage and page. For example, he won the inaugural Edinburgh Book Festival Slam in 2002 with a poem which had also been published in *The Rialto* magazine. In 2004 he received a Scottish Arts Council bursary and was appointed writer in residence at HMYOI Werrington (a young offenders' prison) and more recently at Saughton prison, Edinburgh.

What Was That? was published by Donut Press in 2004, followed by *Stranded in Sub-Atomica* (Donut Press, 2005), which was shortlisted for the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection in the 2006 Forward Prizes. *Caligula on Ice and Other Poems* was published in 2009, also by Donut Press. Turnbull's poetry is sharply witty and frequently very funny. In his latest collection he presents a satirical survey of the cultural landscape post-Modernism, lampooning human endeavour in some of its many fields and forms.

Tim Turnbull, "Ode on a Grayson Perry Urn"

Hello! What's all this here? A kitschy vase
some Shirley Temple manqué has knocked out
delineating tales of kids in cars
on crap estates, the Burberry clad louts
who flail their motors through the smoky night
from Manchester to Motherwell or Slough,
creating bedlam on the Queen's highway.
Your gaudy evocation can, somehow,
conjure the scene without inducing fright,
as would a *Daily Express* exposé,

can bring to mind the throaty turbo roar
of hatchbacks tuned almost to breaking point,
the joyful throb of UK garage or
of house imported from the continent
and yet educe a sense of peace, of calm -
the screech of tyres and the nervous squeals
of girls, too young to quite appreciate
the peril they are in, are heard, but these wheels
will not lose traction, skid and flip, no harm
befall these children. They will stay out late

forever, pumped on youth and ecstasy,
on alloy, bass and arrogance, and speed
the back lanes, the urban gyratory,
the wide motorways, never having need
to race back home, for work next day, to bed.
Each girl is buff, each geezer toned and strong,
charged with pulsing juice which, even yet,
fills every pair of Calvin's and each thong,
never to be deflated, given head
in crude games of chlamydia roulette.

Now see who comes to line the sparse grass verge,
to toast them in Buckfast and Diamond White:
rat-boys and corn-rowed cheerleaders who urge
them on to pull more burn-outs or to write
their donut Os, as signature, upon
the bleached tarmac of dead suburban streets.

There dogs set up a row and curtains twitch
as pensioners and parents telephone
the cops to plead for quiet, sue for peace -
tranquillity, though, is for the rich.

And so, millennia hence, you garish crock,
when all context is lost, galleries razed
to level dust and we're long in the box,
will future poets look on you amazed,
speculate how children might have lived when
you were fired, lives so free and bountiful
and there, beneath a sun a little colder,
declare *How happy were those creatures then,
who knew the truth was all negotiable
and beauty in the gift of the beholder.*

Key features/themes

This poem takes its inspiration directly from John Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', both in terms of its subject matter and its verse form. This relationship with an earlier model sets up many different resonances. Keats' Ode was inspired by his contemplation of a Greek vase dating from classical times, depicting scenes from ancient life including lovers, gods, musical celebrations and religious rites. The poem grows out of the tension between the vivid sense of life conveyed by these scenes and their stillness, caught forever by the artist in a moment of suspended time.

Turnbull's poem is also about a decorated piece of pottery, in this case by the celebrated contemporary artist, Grayson Perry, who won the Turner Prize in 2003. His ceramics are famous for his combination of classical forms with utterly contemporary decoration which often features scenes from the underbelly of British life, or at least a working class culture frequently derided by the more aspirational media. A clash of cultures is inbuilt in much of his work, therefore. Turnbull's poem shifts this clash into the poetic arena, using the formality and literary heritage of Keats' original as a means of reproducing the tensions of Perry's work. In Keats' poem it's the alienation of time which generates the distance between poet/narrator and the culture he is examining; in Perry's work, and in this poem, it's the distance between classes – between the kids tearing up suburban estates in their hot hatches and the kind of education and sophistication which knows what an Ode is and how to use it.

However, while acknowledging the distance between himself and his subject, Turnbull's poem, as is the case with Keats' original, seeks to empathise with or make a connection to the people depicted on the vase. This can be seen in how the language of the poem develops from stanza to stanza. The first stanza replicates much of the language the tabloid press might use when confronting these young people: 'crap estates', 'louts', 'bedlam'. Turnbull sounds equally dismissive of Perry's art, describing it as a 'kitschy vase', 'knocked out' by a 'Shirley Temple manqué' (Perry is famously a transvestite with a little girl alter ego called 'Claire').

However, towards the end of this stanza there's a shift as the poet recognises that Perry's art is more powerful and subtle than a mere tabloid exposé. As with Keats' Grecian urn, the artist has managed to convey both the frenetic physicality of these young people and 'a sense of peace'. The shift is seen in stanza two when concern for the safety of these kids as they indulge in their high-risk thrills emerges in the tender word 'children'. Yes, their behaviour is anti-social, promiscuous, irresponsible, but they are, after all, only 'children', their bravado hiding vulnerability and a hopelessness about the future which is 'for the rich'. They also seem far more alive than the 'dead suburban streets' and the 'pensioners and parents' they horrify.

Turnbull builds on this idea in the final stanza which imagines a future poet contemplating a Perry urn, as removed from its context as Keats was from the world of ancient Greece. Confronted by Perry's 'garish' celebration of their raw energy, the poem wonders whether this poet will find beauty and inspiration in these young people. The language at this point becomes more formal, more Keatsian in fact: 'razed/to level dust', 'free and bountiful', 'How happy were those creatures then'. There is a poignancy in this: as the rest of the poem makes clear, the young people are far from 'free and bountiful' or 'happy'. However, Turnbull's closing line, which echoes the famous dictum of Keats' poem ('Beauty is truth, truth beauty'), is a reminder to us all to think about how we look at others. Turnbull's (and Perry's) 'gift' is to dignify these 'children', so often dismissed by wider society, so that they become fit subjects for art.

Links to other poems

Like Daljit Nagra's 'Look We Have Coming to Dover!', Turnbull's poem takes inspiration from a classic poem of the past. Both demonstrate how poetry is an ongoing dialogue between poets across time. In its mixture of high culture and working class lives and the tensions arising from these, Turnbull's poem also makes a surprising link to Heaney's 'Out of the Bag'.

Further resources

For the text of the original Keats poem and a recording of it visit:

www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173742

For a taste of Grayson Perry's thoughts on class and his approach to it in his work, this article written by him is interesting: www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/10117264/Grayson-Perry-Taste-is-woven-into-our-class-system.html#disqus_thread

The contemporary poetry magazine, *Magma*, featured Turnbull and a selection of his poems in this edition: www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=18643

The poet's own website is here: www.timturnbull.co.uk

SECTION A: Poetry

Answer ONE question and write your answer in the space provided.

- 1 Compare the ways in which poets explore the shift from childhood to adulthood in *An Easy Passage* by Julia Copus (on page 37) and **one** other poem of your choice, from the *Poems of the Decade: An Anthology of the Forward Books of Poetry 2002–2011*.

In your answer you should consider the following:

- the poets' development of themes
- the poets' use of language and imagery
- the use of other poetic techniques.

(Total for Question 1 = 24 marks)

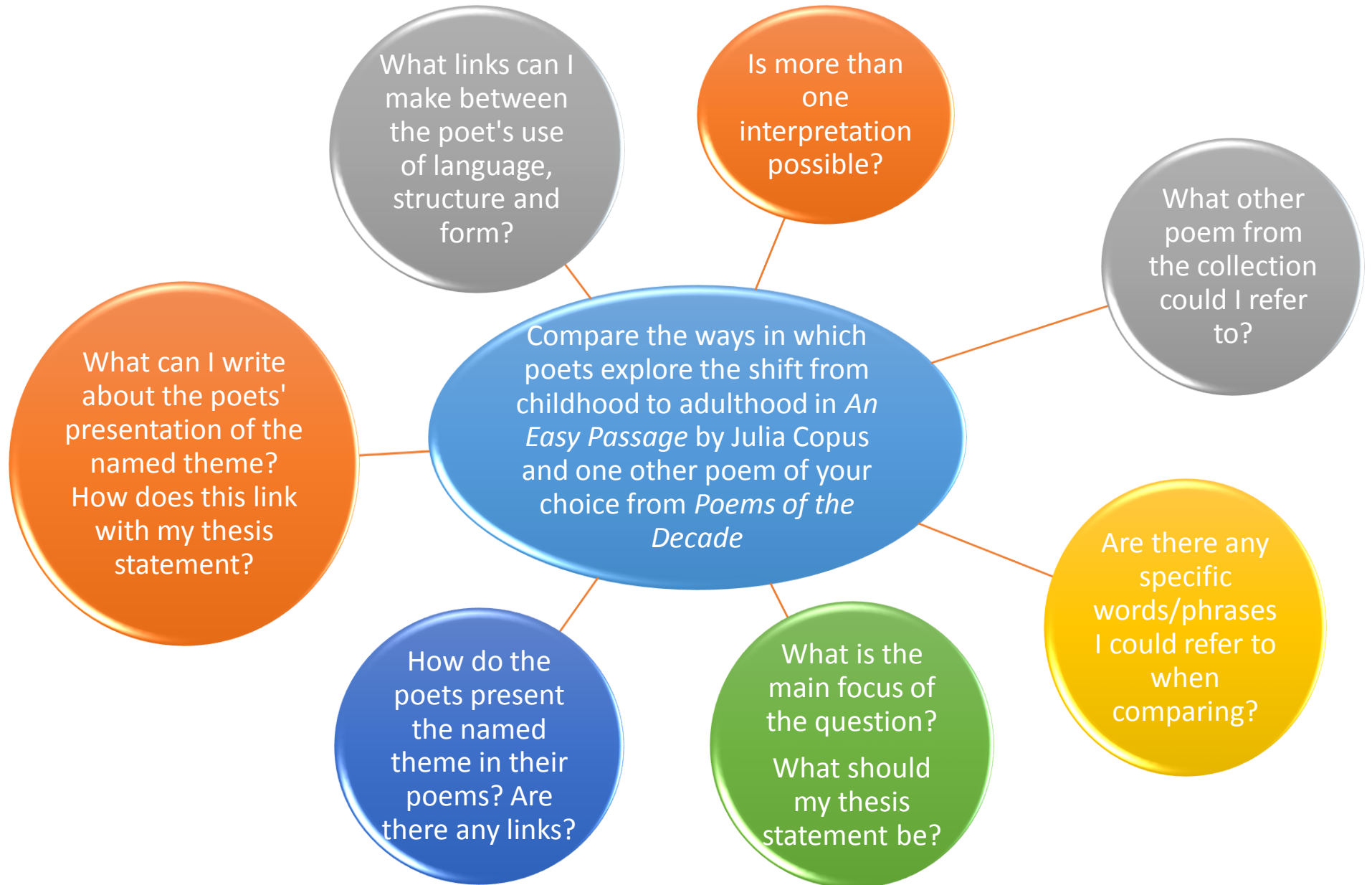
OR

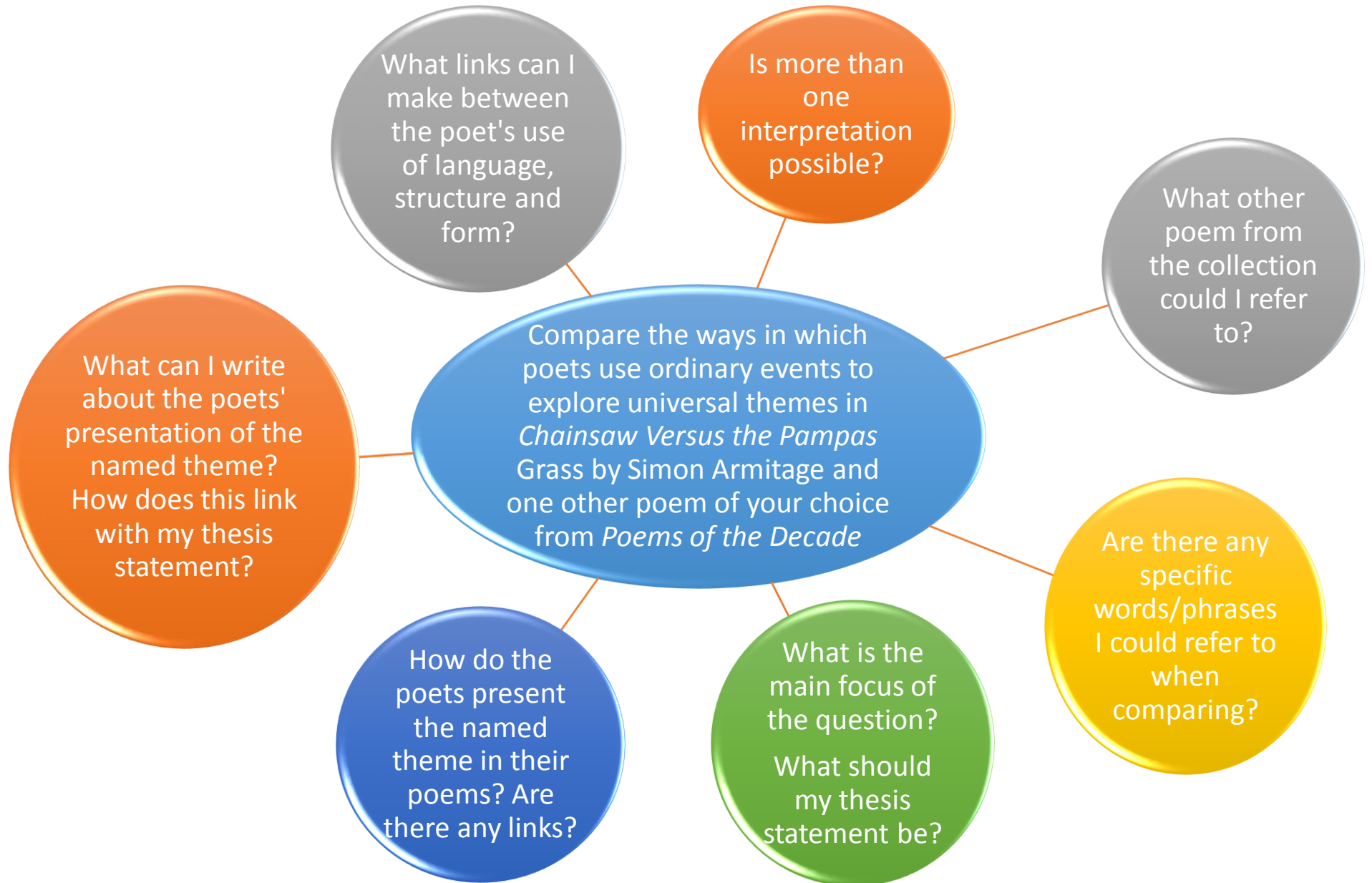
- 2 Compare the ways in which poets use ordinary events to explore universal themes in *Chainsaw Versus the Pampas Grass* by Simon Armitage (on page 6) and **one** other poem of your choice from the *Poems of the Decade: An Anthology of the Forward Books of Poetry 2002–2011*.

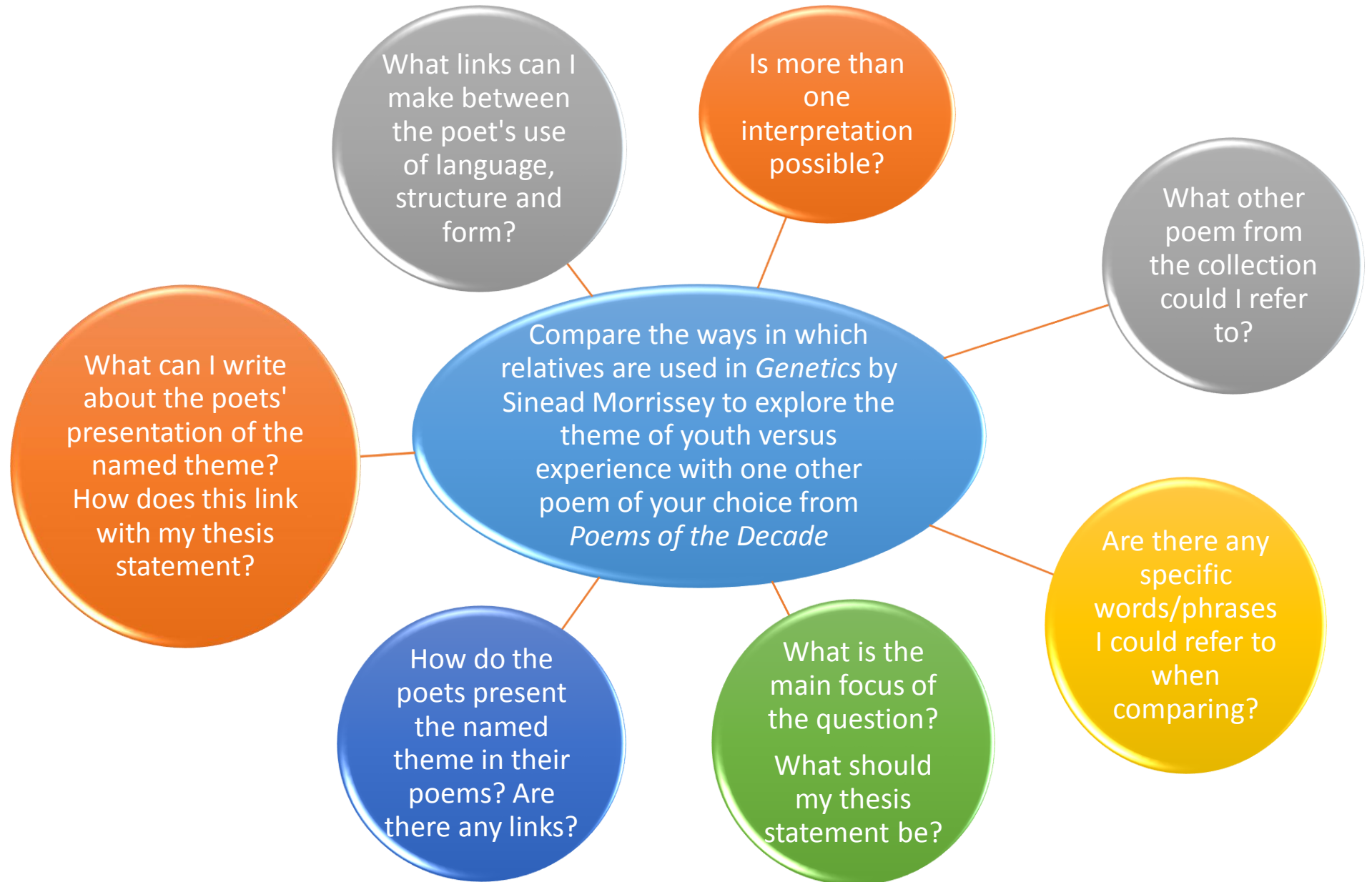
In your answer you should consider the following:

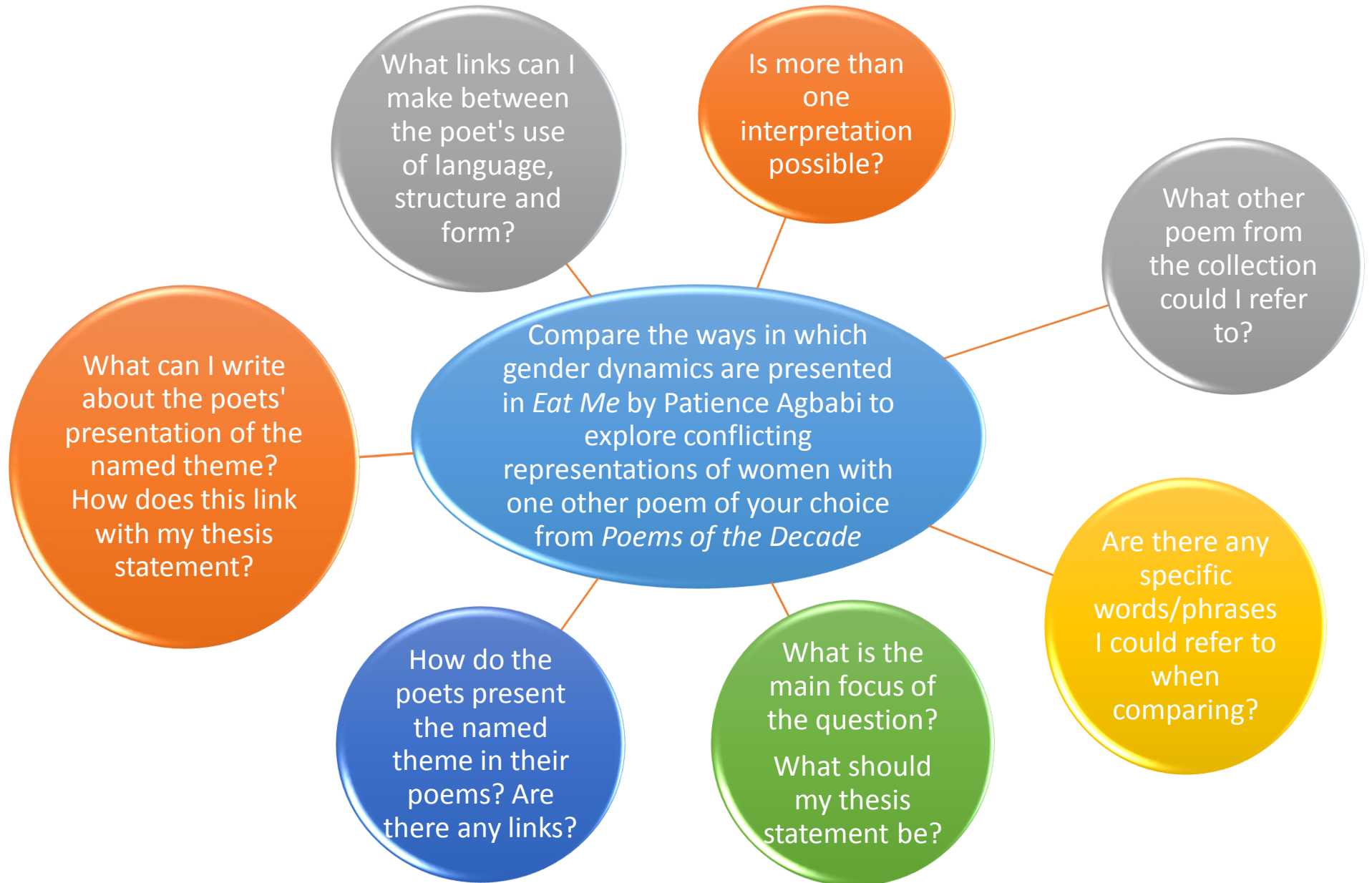
- the poets' development of themes
- the poets' use of language and imagery
- the use of other poetic techniques.

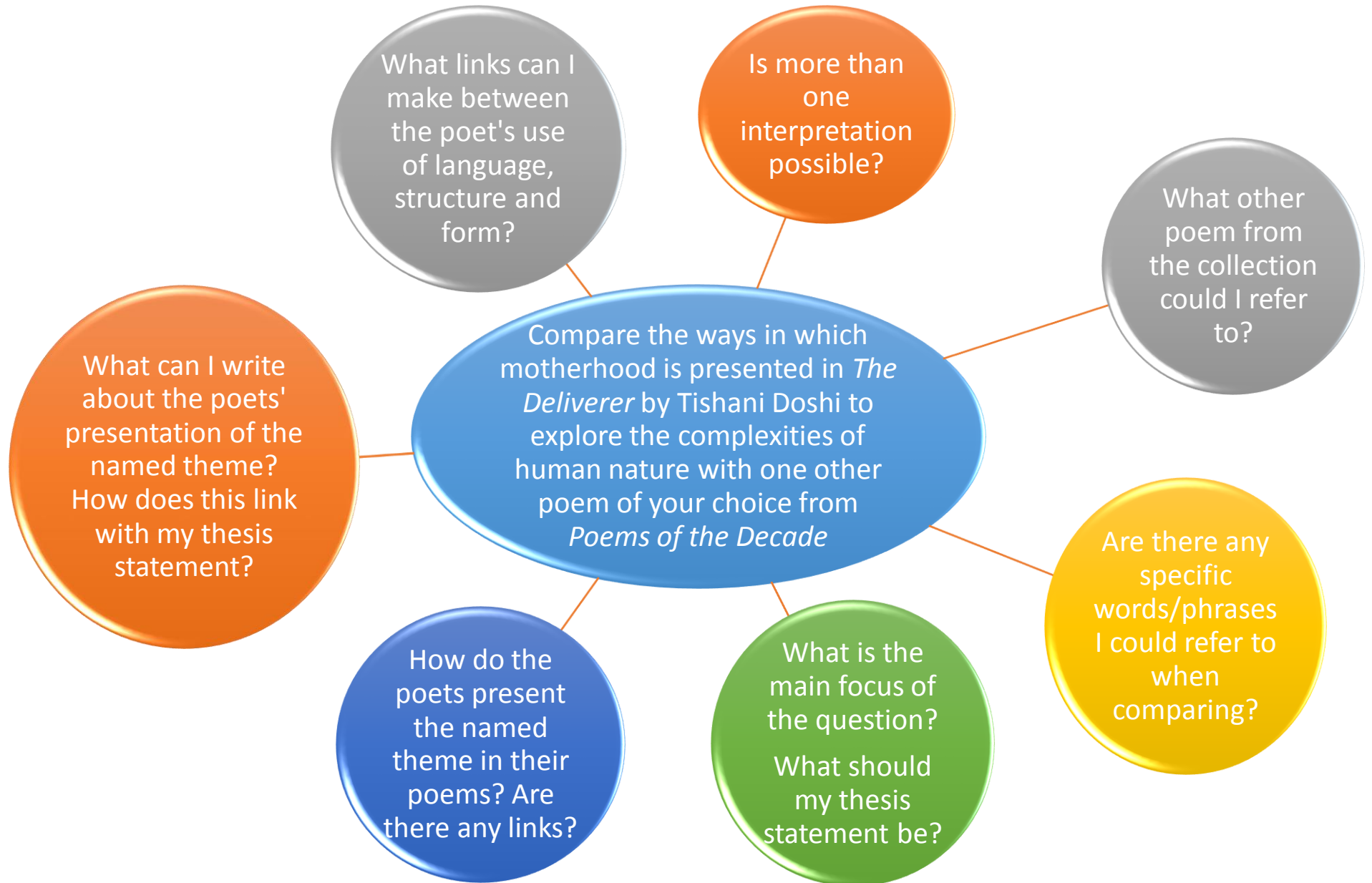
(Total for Question 2 = 24 marks)











Level	Mark	Descriptor (AO1, AO2, AO4)
	0	No rewardable material
1	1-4	<p>Recalls information/descriptive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AO1 – Recalls basic points with few accurate references to texts. Recalls limited concepts and terms. Ideas are unstructured with frequent errors and technical lapses. • AO2 – Uses a highly narrative or descriptive approach. Shows overall lack of understanding of how meanings are shaped in texts and the writer’s craft. • AO4 – Has limited awareness of connections between texts. Describes the texts separately.
2	5-9	<p>General understanding/approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AO1 – Makes general points and references texts, though not always securely. Gives general explanation of concepts and terminology. Ideas are organised but writing has errors and technical lapses. • AO2 – Gives surface readings of texts by commenting on straightforward elements. Shows general understanding of how meanings are shaped in texts and the writer’s craft. • AO4 – Gives general connections between texts. Provides straightforward examples.
3	10-14	<p>Clear understanding/exploration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AO1 – Offers a clear response, providing examples. Accurate use of concepts and terminology. Ideas are expressed with few errors and lapses in expression. • AO2 – Demonstrates clear approach to how meanings are shaped in texts. Has clear knowledge which shows understanding of the writer’s craft. • AO4 – Makes clear connections between texts. Supports with clear examples.
4	15-19	<p>Consistent application/exploration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AO1 – constructs a consistent argument with examples, confident structure and precise transitions. Uses appropriate concepts and terminology. Expression is secure with carefully chosen language. • AO2 – Displays a secure understanding of how meanings are shaped in texts. Provides evidence of effective and consistent understanding of the writer’s craft. • AO4 – Makes connections between texts. Uses consistently appropriate examples.
5	20-24	<p>Discriminating application/exploration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AO1 – Provides a consistently effective argument with textual examples. Applies a discriminating range of concepts and terminology. Secure expression with carefully chosen language and sophisticated transitions. • AO2 – Displays discrimination when evaluating how meanings are shaped in texts. Shows a critical understanding of the writer’s craft. • AO4 – Makes effective connections between texts. Exhibits discriminating use of examples.

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
Eat Me											
Map Woman											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
Chainsaw											
Inheritance											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
Out of the Bag											
Ode on a Grayson Perry Urn											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
You, Shiva and My Mum											
Look We Have Coming to Dover!											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
Please Hold											
A Minor Role											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
On Her Blindness											
The Fox in the National Museum of Wales											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
War Correspondent											
History											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
A Leisure Centre is Also a Temple of Learning											
To My Nine-Year-Old Self											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
An Easy Passage											
The Furthest Distance I've Travelled											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
The Deliverer											
Giuseppe											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
The Lammas Hireling											
Effects											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
Material											
Genetics											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
Song											
The Gun											

Name of Poem	Themes	Structure	Form	Other Techniques	Language	Perspective	Voice	Tone	Imagery	Context	Links to Other Poems
Journal of a Disappointed Man											
Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright											

