

# AS and A Level English Literature



## Poems of the Decade: Teacher Guide

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Commentaries to support the teaching of *Poems of the Decade, An Anthology of the Forward Books of Poetry*

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## Preface

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The poet John Agard recently spoke on Desert Island Discs of the life-changing moment when he first learnt you could mention football in a poem. The poetry he read respectfully at school in the 1960s dealt with the great questions of Love and Art and Life in a language so rich that it might have been dictated from on high by the gods themselves. It was Literature with a capital L.

I think of him whenever opening *Poems of the Decade: An Anthology of the Forward Books of Poetry*. If these are part of the English Literature syllabus, then the game has truly changed. Football? Tame. Try "chlamydia roulette", with the bored suburban kids in Tim Turnbull's dark and funny "Ode on a Grayson Perry Urn".

Certainly, at first glance, the urns and nightingales of tradition have given way to Post-it notes (Leontia Flynn), barbecue fluid (Simon Armitage) and full-fat milk (Patience Agbabi), items more at home in a supermarket shopping list than on a literature syllabus. Even the gods of contemporary poetry seem pulled off the shelf at random: Seamus Heaney and U A Fanthorpe invoke classical myth, Ruth Padel ropes in Shiva and Ian Duhig the Catholic rite of confession, while in Sue Boyle's poem, the temple of worship is a leisure centre. Instead of prayers, the faithful offer "a gentle exfoliant".

It's all very ... eclectic. When any form of language, on any subject, can stamp itself on a plain white page and call itself a poem, how is an innocent reader meant to figure out the difference between the best and the rest?

The question is the reason the Forward Arts Foundation exists. Each year for the past quarter century or so, the judges of the Forward Prizes for Poetry choose the "best" poetry of the year from a wide range of poetry collections submitted by publishers in the UK and Ireland. Their choices, around 70 new shortlisted and highly commended poems, are then published as the annual Forward Book of Poetry.

Over time, winners of the Best Collection prize have included Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Carol Ann Duffy, while best First Collection prizes have gone to Jackie Kay and Daljit Nagra. Each year the five judges are different, but they generally include a number of poets, plus distinguished actors, novelists, musicians, journalists. The Forward Prizes – among the world's most coveted literary awards – were founded to celebrate excellence in poetry and widen its audience, so naturally the judges are asked to look for works that will endure, and equally naturally, they each believe their own judgement to be fair and impartial.

True, when Jeanette Winterson chaired the judges in 2013, she observed ruefully that a large number of poems about cats seemed to have crept onto her personal shortlist, but cats can do that. Another year, it could be bees, or childbirth, or pizza.

Another judge, another year, suggested that first-person poems about dead pets and relatives – freighted with just the right degree of contained emotion – were commonplace. She sought work that pushed at the limits of language: nominating poems where the real action occurred in the gaps between words, the breaks between stanzas, in the unsaid and unwritten. (When these poems happened to be about dead pets and relatives, we watched her closely for signs of mental indigestion brought on by clashing prejudices.) A third judge realised, after reading 100-plus collections, that he'd been guided by sound, testing poems in his mouth and ears. Anyone can make meaning, but only the best can make meaning and music together, he said.

Which of these judges was right? All, because each was surprised into self-awareness by an honest attempt to distinguish between good and less good, important and trivial, fine

and clumsy. We'd invited them to put poems on the scales and weigh them, but, in so doing, they had weighed themselves too.

The joke is that none of the judges, nor the editor of this anthology, nor even the compiler of Pearson Edexcel's specification, can really know which of the poems chosen will stand the test of time, even if each can point to ones which have repaid their own attention, hundred-fold.

The choice now belongs to the readers, including the teachers and students who use this resource. Our job at the Forward Arts Foundation is to enable as many people as possible to enjoy the variety of poetry being written today, and to sharpen critical and creative faculties by encounters with good writing: you can attend the Forward Prizes in the autumn and see the latest generation in the flesh, or you can explore our ever-growing website for new poetry, interviews with poets and further reading: [forwardartsfoundation.org](http://forwardartsfoundation.org). Most appealing of all, you can join in, through your students' participation: each year we run a Forward Young Responses competition, inviting students to write a critical or creative response to one of ten poems shortlisted for the Prizes. The response can itself be a poem, or a film, or a musical or artistic composition, or an essay bristling with insights. The process of choosing the spur to your creativity is as valuable as the final choice. Take time. Enjoy.

Susannah Herbert



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Forward Prizes for Poetry  
[www.forwardartsfoundation.org](http://www.forwardartsfoundation.org)  
Facebook [www.facebook.com/forwardprizes](https://www.facebook.com/forwardprizes)  
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Susannah Herbert runs the Forward Arts Foundation, a literary charity that encourages excellence in poetry and widens its audience. She is responsible for the annual Forward Prizes for Poetry and coordinates National Poetry Day. A former national newspaper journalist for 20 years, she knows how easily words can be emptied of meaning and sees poetry as an essential defence of language against jargon, clichés and manipulation.



## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Esther Morgan, for researching and writing the poem commentaries within this resource.



Esther Morgan (b. 1970) was born in Kidderminster, Worcestershire. She read English at Newnham College, Cambridge, graduating in 1991. She completed an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia in 1997. Since then she has published three collections of poetry, all with Bloodaxe. Her first, 'Beyond Calling Distance' (2001) won the Aldeburgh Poetry Festival First Collection Prize and was shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize. Her most recent book, 'Grace', was shortlisted for the 2011 T. S. Eliot Prize. She has taught creative writing at UEA where she also edited the contemporary poetry anthology 'Reactions'. She has been a tutor for the Arvon Foundation Writers Centre Norwich and has led many poetry workshops across the country. She was the Historic Recordings Manager for The Poetry Archive and currently works for Norfolk Museums Service. She lives near Norwich with her husband and young daughter and is working on her fourth collection.

## Introduction

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This teacher guide includes commentaries on all of the poems within the *Poems of the Decade* anthology which have been set for study for AS and A level English Literature. The information included here is offered as a starting point, to help you with your own understanding of each poem which will, in turn, support your students as they begin their AS or A level studies.

Each commentary includes some background biographical information about the poet. This is for your information, and to support you in any further reading of the poets' other works. There is no expectation that students will refer to any context, whether biographical or otherwise, in their response to contemporary poetry.

At AS level, students will be asked to compare a named poem from this collection with a second poem of their own choosing. This choice of second poem will, of course, depend upon the requirements of the question, but each poem is offered with a number of suggestions as to other poems which might provide an interesting complement. You may choose to teach the poems in clusters, to encourage the drawing of links and connections between the different poems. Lesson materials on teaching the poems in such a fashion are available on the Edexcel website.

At A level, students will be asked to compare one of two named poems from this collection to an unseen contemporary poem. You may therefore like to set aside some of these poems to approach via unseen analysis. In the A level paper, both the unseen poem and the two choices of comparative poems from the anthology will be printed in the question paper.

For details of the question papers and mark schemes at both AS and A level, please see the sample assessment materials.

The 2015 GCE subject criteria, with the requirement to study one post-2000 literary text, give us a great opportunity to introduce students to literary work which has been written within their own lifetimes. This is particularly important of poetry, which, perhaps more so than prose and drama, can be seen by some students as relegated to the concerns and issues of the distant past. Not so! I hope that not only will your students be inspired by the choice of relevant contemporary voices which they will hear through their study of the *Poems of the Decade*, but that you too might be equally inspired and that this resource will become an invaluable asset to support you in that endeavour.



Katy Lewis

Pearson

## Poem Commentaries

### 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 groundbreaking debut collection of poetry, was published in 1995. Other notable collections include her contemporary re-workings of Chaucer, *Telling Tales* (Canongate Books, 2014) and *Tranformatrix* (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.

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

#### 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.

#### Teaching activities/discussion points

Discuss how the poem uses two voices – the narrator's and the man's – to chart the shifting dynamics of the relationship between them.

How is the woman's body described and how does the description of the woman's body change through the course of the poem? How does this relate to the shift in power within the poem?

Following on from this, students might consider whether the poem is solely concerned with gender relationships or if there are other possible themes.

Look at the form of the poem, in particular the patterns of sound. What effect do these have? How do they relate to the subject matter?

**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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

Split the class into two groups, one looking at imagery connected with the chainsaw, the other with the pampas grass. How does the poet personify these two inanimate entities? What does this tell us about the poet's concerns in the poem? Whose 'side' are the students on by the end of the poem?

How does Armitage convey the sense of a voice telling a story? Points to consider might be sentence structure and the different kinds of language employed in the poem, for instance everyday phrases and more lyrical language. Is there a shift in the register of

the poem?

Assign individual stanzas to pairs of students and ask them to look more closely at Armitage's use of sound. They could mark up copies of the poem with instances of alliteration, assonance, repetition and rhyme to demonstrate the intricacies of the poem's construction. Ask them to talk about what effect these devices have.

### 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 Lamma Hireling', which is clearly spoken by a fictional narrator.

### Further resources

[www.simonarmitage.com](http://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](http://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.

### 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 – abcbdefe – 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

What does the hanky symbolise in the poem? What resonance do you find in the title of the poem?

Work out the rhyme scheme. How are the formal structure and subject matter related?

Discuss the poem's attitude towards motherhood.

**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>

## 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.

### 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'.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

What words would you use to describe the mood of the poem? How does the poet give the impression of someone thinking aloud? Think about the kind of language used and the poem's structure.

Discuss what kinds of things can be inherited, eg physical attributes, talents, personality, objects, land, houses, religion, superstition, knowledge and skills etc. Note the different kinds of inheritance examined in the poem. Most of the poem is about the

things the narrator hasn't inherited from her female ancestors. What do you think she *has* inherited?

The poem focuses exclusively on inheritance from female ancestors. Do you think this is significant? Why?

For discussion, students could think about what they've inherited and what they would like to pass or not pass on to their children, considering personal, cultural and generational characteristics and knowledge.

### 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](http://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](http://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'.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

Start by thinking about the word 'temple' – what does that word bring to mind? How does it connect to the description of the girl? Why is it a Temple of Learning – who is learning what?

Look at all the similes used to describe the girl. What do they tell us about the narrator's attitude towards the girl?

How do the last three lines differ from the rest of the poem and why?

Look at an extract from the 'Song of Songs' and discuss the similarities with the poem.

### 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](http://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.

### 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.

**Teaching activities/discussion points**

This is a poem called 'History' which begins with the word 'today'. Look carefully at the first 22 lines, up to 'tideworn stone'. How does Burnside convey a sense of the present moment in the poem? Think about the sentence structure, the imagery and the way the words appear on the page.

The present and the past are important themes in the poem. Can you identify other pairs of opposites in the poem? What do these suggest about the poem's concerns?

Note down words and images connected with human activity. Are they predominantly negative or positive, or a mixture of both? What does this imply about the poem's attitude towards humanity?

As a group, vote on whether you found the poem hopeful or pessimistic, and argue as to why.

Do you think this is a spiritual poem? If so, can you find any words/images to support this view?

**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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

Why do you think Carson has chosen to write about two historic battles, set 60 years apart?

Do these poems have anything to say about contemporary conflicts?

#### Gallipoli

Poems often appeal strongly to our sense of sight. What other senses are at work in this poem? Split into three groups and each highlight examples of a different sense – smell, taste or sound. These could then be mapped onto one copy of the poem to illustrate its densely woven texture.

What kind of a place do these sensory impressions evoke?

What other techniques does the poet use to create this atmosphere?

What kinds of human activity does the poem include and what do you think they might imply about the nature of war?

#### Balaklava

How does Carson use colour to link different elements in the poem? What does this suggest about the narrator's attitude towards war?

Discuss the significance of uniforms in the poem.

### 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](http://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](http://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 lecturer for the Royal Literary Fund and in 2008 was made an honorary fellow at the University of Exeter.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

Discuss the deeper significance of the word 'halfway' in the first line to the concerns and structure of the poem as a whole.

Look closely at the description of the two girls. What does the poet emphasise? How

would you describe them? How does this differ from the other women in the poem – there are three in total.

Why do you think the poet chose to write this poem in the present tense?

Perhaps the most arresting word in the poems is 'armaments'. Why does the poet use this metaphor in relation to the girls?

### 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's 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](http://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](http://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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

Start by looking at the title and discussing the different possible meanings of the word 'Deliverer'. How do these relate to the poem's narrative?

Look at the verbs which relate directly to the girl babies and their mothers. What do you notice about them? What effect do they have?

How does the poet use the short sequence form to explore this subject matter? Think about the role of the narrator and her relationship to the poem's story.

What are the moral implications of the poem? Consider the relative 'goodness' of each character – the nun, the narrator's mother, the foster parents, and the village men and women.

**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](http://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](http://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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

Analyse the first stanza closely as it contains many of the stylistic features which are maintained throughout the poem. Identify these and discuss how they affect the tone and momentum of the poem.

What techniques does the poet use to make the surreal situation convincing?

Look at images and modes of travel in the poem. What do these suggest about the woman’s past and her attitude towards it?

Think about the town which is mapped onto the woman’s body. What kind of a place is it? What words would you use to describe it?

Discuss the concept of layers in the poem.

### 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](http://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](http://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.

### 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.

Horrified, 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' ie 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 'I' 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

### Teaching activities/discussion points

Split the class into four, each group taking one stanza each. Précis what you think is happening in your stanza.

Identify words which you think are old-fashioned/arcane or dialect. What does this tell us about when and where the poem takes place? What kind of world does the poem create?

What is the nature of the narrator's guilt? Do you think there is anything that he is not telling us? If so, how does this affect the poem's atmosphere?

What is the role of magic and superstition in the poem?

At the heart of the poem is a relationship between the 'I' of the narrator and the 'him'.

Can you find other pairings of images and ideas in the poem which mirror this relationship?

Identify moments of transformation in the poem. How do patterns of sound in the poem dramatise the idea of transformation?

### 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?f\[0\]=field\\_poet:192396](http://www.poetryarchive.org/explore/browse-poems?f[0]=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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

Start by looking at the verbs which relate to the girl and those that relate to her adult self. What do they tell us about the differences between the two? What do you think this

suggests about the narrator's attitude towards growing up?

As well as the verbs, look at other physical details in the poem. How does Dunmore use them to re-create a child's world?

How does the poet's use of pronouns enact the relationship between child and adult?

Why do you think the poet chose to set the encounter with her childhood self in summer?

Try writing your own version of a dialogue with your younger self. Or write a poem in reply to Dunmore's, from the nine-year-old to the adult.

### Links to other poems

The poem in the anthology which most obviously connects to Dunmore's in its concerns is Julia Copus's '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](http://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](http://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](http://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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

At the heart of the poem is an exploration of how people react to serious illness. How does the metaphor of the stage relate to this subject matter?

Map all the references to speech and talking in the poem, including those instances of direct speech. What do they imply about the narrator's, and society's, attitude towards illness and death?

In light of the above, discuss the significance of the last line.

Look at the narrator's use of verbs and tenses in the poem. What do these tell the reader about the narrator's attitude towards her predicament?

### 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](http://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](http://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](http://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.

### 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 eg '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'.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

What do you think the narrator means when she says, 'A gun brings a house alive'? What evidence does the poem present to support this idea? Does the poem convince you this is the case?

Look closely at the line breaks in the poem. What do you notice about them? How do

you think they connect to the poem's subject matter?

Divide into four groups and pick one of the longer stanzas to analyse. Look at the predominant sounds in each stanza, including examples of alliteration, assonance and rhyme/half rhyme. Discuss as a class how these contribute to the poem's overall impact.

### 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](http://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](http://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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

The poem contrasts the narrator's past and present life. How has it changed? How does she use the idea of travel to express this?

Look at Flynn's use of rhyme and line length in the poem. How does it relate to the poem's concerns around freedom and travel?

Why are the souvenirs she describes at the end of the poem unusual? What do they suggest about the narrator's current life?

Do you think the narrator knows more or less about 'how to live' by the end of the poem?

**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/>

## 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.

### 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.

**Teaching activities/discussion points**

Discuss the tone of the poem. What kind of language does the poet use to achieve this? Why do you think the poet chose to write the poem in this style?

Discuss the possible symbolic significance of the mermaid.

Identify the one simile in the poem. Do you think it's important? Why?

How many lies does the poem contain? What does this say about the nature of guilt as explored in the poem?

What is the significance of the final word?

**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/](http://www.literaturewales.org/writers-of-wales/i/130216/desc/ford-roderick/)

## 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.'

### 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

### Teaching activities/discussion points

How does the figure of Dr Kerlin contrast with that of Heaney/the narrator? What does this contrast reveal about the sequence's central concerns?

Compare the language of the first and last poems with the middle two poems. How does this dramatise some of the concerns identified above?

Why do you think Heaney chose to write a sequence to explore these themes?

Look at the role of ritual and belief in the sequence. Are they forces for good or evil or neither?

Does the sequence imply that poetry can be useful at 'births and deaths'? What do you think?

### 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](http://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](http://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/](http://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1982-seamus-heaney/)

## 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.

### 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.

**Teaching activities/discussion points**

Although hinted at, the revelation of the mother's death is not referenced directly until nine lines from the end. What does this imply about the narrator's emotional state?

How does the poem's syntax and single stanza structure help to convey the narrator's reaction to his mother's death?

Chart the patterns of rhyme in the poem. How do they change during the course of the poem? How might this reflect the central relationship between mother and son?

Discuss the importance of hands as an image in the poem.

What clues does the poem give us as to the narrator's family life and background? What is his attitude towards this past?

**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.

### 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 'oidrum' 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

The poem takes the reader on a tour through a huge museum. What kinds of past does the museum preserve? What do they suggest about human history?

In the light of this, discuss the significance of the poem's title.

'This fox ... is the future.' What kind of future does the poem hint at?

What kind of creature is the fox as described in the poem? Why do you think the poet has chosen a fox as the central figure of the poem?

What are the main sound patterns which Minhinnick deploys? What effect do they have on the pace of the poem and how does this relate to the poem's subject matter?

### 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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

Look at the first two rhyme words. What is the significance of the poet's use of half rhyme in her version of the villanelle?

How does the poet use this form to explore her subject matter?

What tone does the poem have? What kinds of language contribute to this and how does this relate to the subject matter?

Discuss the final stanza and how it is both different from and similar to the rest of the poem.

**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](http://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](http://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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

How does the poet contrast the narrator of the poem with the men he observes? Are there any similarities between the two? How do these both shed light on the central concerns of the poem?

What do you think is the nature of the 'secret problem' which the men are struggling with?

How does the narrator describe the workmen? What does this reveal about his attitude towards them? What do you think might be their attitude towards him?

How does the title relate to the poem and inform our reading of it?

### 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](http://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](http://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](http://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 'Punlish' – 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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

Who is the narrator of the poem? What kind of voice do they have?

Working in pairs, highlight either examples of colloquial English or of non-standard English. Discuss the effect of mixing the two and how it relates to the concept of Englishness as explored in the poem.

Comment on the sound the poem makes and how this affects its tone.

Do you think the poem has any satirical intent? If so, who or what is being satirised?

### 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](http://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](http://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.

### 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

### Teaching activities/discussion points

How does the poet use sound to create a sense of the miners' physical presence?

Look at the imagery which the narrator uses to describe the miners. What do you think this implies about his attitude towards them and their lost way of life?

Does the poem believe that the miners' history is 'done'? What do you think?

### 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](http://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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

Discuss the poet's use of repetition in the poem and what effects this creates.

Why do you think the wife keeps stating 'this is the future'? What are the narrator's concerns about this future?

Why do you think the last three lines are set aside and how do they differ from the rest of the poem?

Explore the poem through a writing exercise looking at examples of marketing materials – leaflets, for instance, or packaging materials. Provide your own 'translation' using O'Driscoll's poem as a model.

**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](http://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/](http://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, combing consumerism, popular culture and classical references. Animals are also an abiding source of inspiration and imagery in her richly sensuous poems.

### 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

### Teaching activities/discussion points

What does the use of questions reveal about the narrator's attitude towards the story she tells?

Think about the character of the mother in the poem. What sort of person is she? Why do you think the narrator is proud of her?

What is the effect of indenting alternate stanzas and also breaking sentences across stanzas? How might this relate to the poem's exploration of different cultures?

Discuss the word 'miracle' in the final stanza. Why might the presence of the 'you' seem miraculous to the narrator? What else in the poem might be described in this way?

### 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](http://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](http://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.'

### 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.

**Teaching activities/discussion points**

Why is the idea of 'Song' relevant to the poem's celebration of collective action?

Discuss how Szirtes uses repetition to mirror the meaning of his poem.

How do the line breaks contribute to the poem's overall effect?

In his poem 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', W.H. Auden famously said that 'poetry makes nothing happen.' What 'happens' in this poem?

**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](http://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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

The first stanza contains the phrase 'to be honest'. How does the poet develop ideas of honesty and pretence throughout the poem?

Who is lying or pretending in the poem? How does this relate to the idea of seeing/not seeing?

Discuss the use of colour in the poem.

Eighteen of the twenty-three stanzas are enjambed, breaking across units of sense. How might this dramatise the subject matter?

### 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](http://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](http://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.

### 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.

### Teaching activities/discussion points

The young people described in the poem arouse very different sentiments in different people. Identify all the attitudes towards them in the poem. Can you find examples of specific words/phrases that convey these attitudes?

Look more closely at the narrator's attitude towards the young people he describes. Does it change during the course of the poem?

The poem's subject matter and verse form are based on John Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. What are the effects of using this form to treat this subject matter?

Do you think you need a good knowledge of the Keats poem (and of the work of Grayson Perry) to appreciate Turnbull's poem? If so, do you think this undermines the argument of Turnbull's poem?

What do you understand by the idea that beauty is 'in the gift of the beholder'? Do you think the young people described in the poem are 'beautiful' and why?

### 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](http://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](http://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](http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=18643)

The poet's own website is here: [www.timturnbull.co.uk](http://www.timturnbull.co.uk)

## Further resources

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To save repetition, what follows are some key resources which are relevant to a number of poets whose work is discussed on the previous pages.

1 The Poetry Archive – [www.poetryarchive.org](http://www.poetryarchive.org)

The Poetry Archive is the largest online collection of recordings by poets – contemporary and historic – reading their own work. Its mission is to help make poetry accessible, relevant and enjoyable to a wide audience. Many poets in the archive introduce their poems before reading them, often providing a valuable insight as to their meaning – for the poet – and how they came to be written. It features the following poets from *Poems of the Decade*:

- Patience Agbabi
- Simon Armitage
- John Burnside
- Ciaran Carson
- Julia Copus
- Carol Ann Duffy
- Ian Duhig
- Helen Dunmore
- U.A. Fanthorpe
- Vicki Feaver
- Leontia Flynn
- Seamus Heaney
- Alan Jenkins
- Robert Minhinnick
- Sinéad Morrissey
- Andrew Motion
- Daljit Nagra
- Sean O’Brien
- Ruth Padel
- George Szirtes.

2 Forward Arts Foundation [www.forwardartsfoundation.org](http://www.forwardartsfoundation.org)

The Forward Arts Foundation publishes *Poems of the Decade: An Anthology of the Forward Books of Poetry*. It runs National Poetry Day and awards the prestigious annual Forward Prizes for Poetry: winners over the past quarter century include Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Carol Ann Duffy, Simon Armitage and Jackie Kay. This awards ceremony, at the Royal Festival Hall in London, is a good chance to see the best new poetry live.

The Forward Book of Poetry, published annually, is the judges’ selection of the most exciting poetry published in the year, described by *The Observer* as “a cross section of what is happening in contemporary poetry...always refreshingly open to new work”.

The website contains useful background information on the Forward Prizes and books plus details on entering the Forward Young Responses competition, which invites students to respond to a poem from one of the shortlisted poetry collections. The site also includes resources for use on National Poetry Day.

- 3 *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, editors W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis, Bloodaxe, 2000

This anthology gathers together short-ish (two or three pages, often shorter) statements on poetry, poetics and poetic practice by poets themselves, opening with the early 20th century Modernists and continuing up to the new millennium. It features the following poets from *Poems of the Decade*:

- Seamus Heaney
- U.A. Fanthorpe
- Eavan Boland
- Andrew Motion
- Ciaran Carson
- Sean O'Brien
- Simon Armitage
- John Burnside.

- 4 *In Their Own Words: Contemporary Poets on their Poetry*, editors Helen Ivory and George Szirtes, Salt, 2012

This takes a similar approach to *Strong Words* but brings the idea up to date, taking into account poets emerging in the first decade of the 21st century. It features the following poets from *Poems of the Decade*:

- Vicki Feaver
- Ian Duhig
- Tim Turnbull
- Patience Agbabi.

