

The Word's the Thing

The Poems

Episode 3

Background

These poems were written in deliberate attempts to cover a range of lengths and styles. Some are meant to be taken quite lightly; others are meant to be lingered over. The people involved in bringing these poems together have donated them for use in the Year of Reading in Birmingham.

On Work Experience with Death: A Report

I had thought that it might be just photocopying of lists,
or some back-room tidying of scythes,
with maybe some calculations based on the sands of time.
I never imagined it would be quite so – practical.

Standing at the elbow of Death
I watched his unrepresentative sampling
of those with little immediate concept
of what the future no longer held for them.

At the absolutely compelling moment of pressure,
at the razor-sharp edge of survival,
rather than any weighing of moral complexities
lives end with imprints of all-too-human responses.

I would have liked to be able to report
more of a creation of ambience,
The simple touch of a chilling finger
and a voice resonating with its own hollowness.

In reality, though, there was just a muffled apology,
something about not taking it personally,
a not very pleasant severing of souls,
and grumbles about all the paperwork required these days.

Josef Djughashvili was a poet

On his way to carving a revolutionary role
young Josef Djughashvili wrote poems.
Maybe somewhat derivative
but with an inner strength of language
and a theatrical sense of timing
that sustained him as some minor Georgian classic.

Maybe it was the burning eyes, the pockmarked face,
the fatherly beatings and street gangs.
Whatever the root causes
he was widely read,
quietly discussed in public places,
and studied by scholars out of context.

Possibly it sprang ready-armed
from teenage clashes and a study of God.
His poetry was to be meted out
in simplified sentences
ending finally in the listed names
of a poet saved or a poet destroyed.

Does it surprise you that Josef Djughashvili
was widely read and a writer of poems?
Does that jar and jangle
as unholy statements
and unwarranted words
written with rhythm and a strong sense of language?

Functionality

This

Stylish two slot
Vintage look
Solid as they come
Graphite grey
Matt metal ...

This

Family friendly
Kid proof
Quirky design
Feature packed
Last for ever ...

This

Dual control
Simple dial
Memory option
Sleekly curved
Blush Pink trimmed ...

... toaster is all I could ever want.

England: Early Autumn

Steeple beyond hedgerows;
Ancient markers of inward villages
with a gathering of crows
in almost wintering woodlands.

Empty fields and lazy streams;
Squinting into the late lingerings
of pale afternoon sun
to see the last man out.



Abbreviated Instructions for Life

1. Get conceived:
 - Avoid: very young teenagers
alcohol
stressful situations
and people who are too far gone
 - Go for: balanced diets
folic acid
familiar heartbeats
and the checking of calendars
2. Get born:
 - Avoid: backs of taxis
DIY
tangled cords
and “I thought it was just stomach pains”
 - Go for: tubs of water
squatting
painless contractions
and a fully qualified midwife
3. Survive childhood:
 - Avoid: sweet-bearing strangers
fast-flowing rivers
malnutrition
and chasing butterflies into the traffic
 - Go for: immunisations
friendships that matter
fresh fruit and exercise
and paying attention to parents
4. Enjoy rites of passage:
 - Go for: someone who looks a bit like your parents
dressing smartly to suit the occasion
a job that pays well
and an early foot on the property ladder
 - Avoid: gun-toting drug dealers
friends who want you just for the money
people who ask, ‘Do you love me?’
and decisions made just on a whim
5. Start your own family:
 - Go for: condoms, pills and planned conceptions
someone you feel you can share a life with
white wine and music
and tenderesses that show how you care
 - Avoid: very young teenagers
alcohol
stressful situations
and people who are too far gone

Onion Skin Cipher

I write words on your body
in clear onion juice
knowing that I will only be able
to read them again
in the heat
of the moment.



Rewriting history

I am slowly rewriting history
to make my own part in it far more interesting.

In my version, I was there

- (a) ...wishing the arrow into the eye.
Ensuring a Frenchness to language and kitchen.
Court manners and laciness,
a sense of high fashion,
culture and couture
garlic and onions
and the ability to buy baguettes at lunchtimes.

- (b) ...planning a trip across to the Indies.
Ensuring America would be put on the map.
Potatoes and cocoa,
a sense of the frontier,
cowboys and Vegas,
burgers and cola
and the ability to go linedancing on Fridays.

- (c) ...putting steam engines on the right tracks.
Ensuring young boys would have something to spot.
Tunnels and branchlines,
A sense of adventure,
Young Person's Railcards,
wrong leaves and Railtrack,
and the ability to endlessly change at Crewe.

Corporate Soul

There's an absence to be felt in the corporate soul.
Like startled sheep bereft of wool
rights that suddenly turn to wrongs
leakage of power from words once strong
marriage bonds all set to annul.

Like ash that once was fiery coal,
like bones that once were twisting foal,
like the echoes of a well-struck gong,
there is an absence to be felt in the corporate soul.

Like one stray hair in an empty cowl,
one fleck of spit on a snarly jowl,
one final step on a path so long,
one person left of the departing throng.

Like one last joke from the desperate fool
there is an absence to be felt in the corporate soul.

Poet: Moscow, 1935: nightmare revisited

Sometimes a poem may take a lifetime to complete
However, in this case,
given a prior warning
(and under a deadline to release),
what the poet wanted most
was the secure instinct
of a larger leap of faith.
Failing that, the only viable option
being to print something that was false.
Strained from fears and darkness
Cleaned up and spat out.
Under such pressures
keeping ones head remains important.

