

The Word's the Thing

The Poems

Episode 2

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.

Evacuee

Dear Mum,

I don't like

The flatlands

The lowlands

The wetlands

The areas too prone to flooding and cows.

I don't like

The field lines

The hedgerows

The pathways

The areas too open to sunshine and flowers.

The arbori-agora-tractoriness of it all.

The herbori-labouri-openairiness of it all.

You see:

I simply don't feel comfortable

In these alien spaces.

I urgently need to escape

and slip from this landscape.

I prefer to walk in the shadows of buildings.

I prefer to skulk in the greyness of towns.

Every night I dream of it all:

The alleys

The ginnels

The small streets of home.

The travelling library of temporary identities

We sensed its presence
rather than saw it arrive.
We would just know
on certain mornings
that the library was here.

We would close our eyes
and slip on new selves
Trying them for size
in the mirror of our mind's eye
checking out new certainties.

Not fully formed
more of a toolkit
A fragmented kaleidoscope
of language and authorities
with which to negotiate ourselves.

On those special mornings
we could string out metaphors
Stretch out meanings
rubbing them up against each other
to see which ones sparked with life.



Why couldn't Dr A just have let me be?

(I started losing my purses; now I'm losing my personality)

Here's me, twin-tracking myself
each part oblivious to the other.
Lives running away with themselves
roughly in parallel,
whilst I'm left as me
tenterhooked to a past I can barely remember.
Me, changing in and out of routines
as easy as winking.

When there's no-one else to bother
I'll argue with myself
just for something to do,
a bit of a fuss.
Me and myself talking
crossly on purpose.

This thing I have
(although I really do think
that it's got me!)
has a personality all of its own
with its manic determination
to change things around,
reconfiguring knowns to unknowns.
Leaving me, with all subtleties erased,
between living and thinking.

When I'm not fully alert
other ideas slip unnoticed
through the holes in my mind,
settling in corners that once
acted as reference points;
creating new niche memories
and making trouble.
Me, bringing things up again – and again.
Jittering and skittering me along
to an ending of words
that can't quite be predicted.

So I'm here, as a life deconstructed
into significant episodes
playing themselves out
as well-directed shots
for all to see.
Me, an archaeology of the soul
in several short chapters.



Burning boats: Burning bridges

What do bureaucrats know of fish?
Quotas weighed away
in the cold frost
of the harbour morning.

So maybe the time is now?
Stay safe at home
draw the dole
and down a pint.

Will old films measure out the hours?
Anchored in by walls
pacing a carpet
unnaturally still underfoot.

But who needs the cutting sleet?
Wet ropes and heavy netting
sodding spray
routines and superstitions.

Who needs the ups and downs?
The early rising at sea
trawling for the catch
that might or might not be there.

I am too much: Egos don't attract attention anymore

With a reputation for asking unusual questions
she sees herself as a target
destined to make a sudden departure
from spotlight and celebrity.

On bad days
she is convinced that her would-be assassin
has his roots in a contemporary novel.
Few will have heard of him
and even fewer know what he looks like.

On bad days
she thinks that he is a character in one of her own films.
It just seems unthinkable
that he will not come
or send an unknown on his behalf.

Relative Positions

Here I am looking down at you
and there you are looking back at me.

Here I am
handing over my well-coined phrases
to help you get a better purchase
on life's finer meanings;
and there you are
taking me at my word
believing all that I tell you
about life's little why's and wherefore's.

So here I am
urging you to grow up too quickly
so we can share our delights
and fight over therefore's;
and there you are
knowing more than me
telling me things I need never know
about hopes and fears for the future.

Here we are then, at the end of the day,
me still looking out at you and you still looking out for me.

The Museum: a definition

A building
an institution
a place to display
a trophy store of loot
a mausoleum of history
a place of preservation and restoration
a refuge for objects of endless interest
and a source of wonder and inspiration for one small boy.

The Other

Were we bound so tightly together
in that childhood tricycling
of cracks in the sunlight,
and later in streetgames
or a slow near-drowning
in friendships and squabbles?

Or were we from birth
already gliding so easily
into our differences –
aspects say, of a computer
or say, of a flower –
still able effortlessly to shapeshift
between them?

Advices taken and advices rebuffed
privileging one self over another
until analytical stretched itself neatly
onto well laid-out situations.
Being becoming doing
in a life of unwritten letters
stacking up to push time along.

There's a half-known other
that wants to be me,
but isn't the question to what extent
I would want to be part of him?

The Power of Language

The widow going through his effects
found a letter he had never meant.
A plotline tugging at old levers
and offering new meanings to earlier rulings.
The power of language exploded;
forever echoing.