

Our Place: *Off Road To Everywhere* as poetry with children

from a talk given at the IBBY conference 2011, Roehampton University

‘What is poetry?’ There it is, a casual little question, sitting in amongst the day’s agenda with a knowing wry smile on its face. Now, if it had been ‘What is a poem?’ we could be straight into the ins and outs, the nuts and bolts, the whys and wherefores of making these curious small worlds of language, these spooky automata, these marionettes that point towards their own strings, grin and snip them, walking off without us...

And so here we are, up to our necks in metaphor. Ask ‘What is poetry?’ and we’ll get deeper. The answer is bound to come as an abstraction or a metaphor — not that these are worlds apart; theory too is a species of myth. You can tell from what I’ve said so far which is my instinctive medium.

Living metaphors are found, not made. (A *made* one is a symbol or an allegory or a trick.) I must be honest, close my eyes and notice that I see ‘poetry’ less as a *thing* than as a *place*. Stand in a strange place with your eyes shut; you feel the particular space around you, with certain movements in the air, certain resonances, other presences maybe in it. (They say that ninjas train in total darkness, bringing this space-instinct to precision.) With that attitude to poetry, you can open your eyes, anywhere, and look...

I looked round the room. It was empty.
Nothing... Nobody at home -
 like a wet afternoon
 or a song with no tune,
 like a shrivelled balloon
 or a week on the moon.
And yet... no, I wasn’t alone.

It may be the way things were standing,
how the floor creaked its one wonky board,
 or the curious feeling
 that up on the ceiling
 I heard a small voice
 from the paint that was peeling
say *Nothing likes being ignored.*¹

This is the start of a poem that launches a writing game, one that seems to work for people of all ages, in which the simple instruction comes in the form of a (down-to-earth) myth. This room, you say, contains a thousand tiny details, ones that *nobody has ever seen before*. Or seen, but not noticed. One of those, just one, is calling out to you. Walk round, cast your eyes about, not searching, but waiting till it finds you. Then give it a voice, in the form of a short free poem.

But me?
I lie here in the light
and in the dark.

On off. Off on.
Barely visible in the dark.
A shadow in the light.
No one knew my life.
It was invisible.
Just a little...

noisy. ⁱⁱ

So speaks the dead wasp in the lampshade, speaking through one participant on a UKLA seminar at Insole Court, Cardiff, November 2011. The most engaging way to share these pieces is as a twenty-questions riddle: *warmer-cooler-warmer-yes!*

The great thing about the poetry-space is that it is paradoxical. The creative writing principles of observation/objectivity, and introspection/self-expression, do and don't conflict. In the state of poetry opposites apply, not in contradiction of each other (as logic and theory tend to suggest) but in the fashion of the *yin / yang* diagram, which to my mind is a wheel that is always turning, the engine of change. Metaphor, which knows that it is partial, transient, is at home with difference. You take on the game, and the discipline, of looking outside yourself, to speak for something else... and thanks to the creative paradox what you tend to get back is both a fresh glimpse of the world and, hey presto, an unsuspected angle on yourself.

Dust... fluff... random stuff -
whatever touches me, I cling.
Call me Sticky Nicky, call me Bob the Blob.
Don't blame me: it's just my job.
I'll stick to anything.

Chair... desk... pavement... floor -
when you don't look, I'm here.
Call me Dunc the Gunk or call me Sue the Goo.
Beneath your shoe, I'm there for you.
You name it, I'll adhere.

Despised... displaced... once I had taste.
I'm grey, downtrodden, old.
Call me what you like, my friend.
I'm with you till the sticky End,
as close as your own sole. ⁱⁱⁱ

I can't imagine who that it, but the name of the poem is 'By Gum.'

As for poetry itself, ask any group, of any age, the question 'If poetry was a building, what kind of building would it be?' (Remind them that 'building' can encompass anything from a nuclear air raid shelter to a Gothic cathedral to a rough-sleeper's cardboard box.) The answers can range from the rampantly extravert, the party in the boarded-up squat:

you can prise back a plank

and slip through
into darkness, a shuddering bass
in your bones, a flame-flicker
that ripples your skin,

and dancers, dancing
till they drop...
and all the neighbours coming out
like ghosts
who can't sleep for the din.^{iv}

... to the absolute introversion of the deep cave:

If you can hold your breath
you'll hear, not see, the cave-pool,

icy-night-sky-clear:

each drip after drip running back
beneath the world to meet its echo

back, back, as far as the human ear

or the tingle in your mind
can follow. *Hear*, it whispers.

Here. And here. And here....^v

These were written alongside children in two different writing classes. In each case we had done a round of sharing images out loud. The guideline, as ever, was that there was no one right answer, and thus no wrong ones. Trust the image that jumps up in your mind and insists; you might not see the sense in it, but it might be just what someone else needs to spark a thought of their own. (I learned to trust this first in Quaker meetings.)

These are mine, the images in these two poems (and several others in the books, and more that have arisen since.) They are not a borrowing of any of the children's, but each was a response to the group I was in, part of our conversation. Neither was one I'd have written alone. It stepped naturally into the space between us, the particular space made by a group together. As I said, poetry: not a thing but a place.

Not is this poetry that bends over backwards to amuse its audience, though it certainly hoped to address them – not an audience of ten-year-olds in the abstract, not an age-band, but the particular children in the small culture we had formed together then and there. Even 'address' sounds too much like a lecture. Revert to the word I used just now: conversation. But permit me a little mild grouchiness. I have a horror of the figure of the full-time Children's Entertainer. (How many clowns are there in horror stories? Say no more...) When my children

were at primary school age, the birthday party business was getting competitive; woe betide the parent who held one and did not get the Entertainer in.

Who didn't love Uncle Grum,
his revolving bow tie
and his daffodil jacket? How he'd loom

into everybody's party, boneless
stubble creasing in a grin:
Hello kiddlywinks. Guess

what I've got up me sleeve
today? (Same tricks
whiffing of armpit). The wheeze

of his laugh. His eyes
when the hostess, plump mother of three,
smiled and he recognised

Miss Birthday Girl
of 1956. How everybody
beat him to his punchlines, barely

looking up from their swag
and their gripes, never spellbound
till the day a gag

lodged in his throat. His teeth
leaped out and landed
grinning at his feet

as if they planned on going solo.^{vi}

This isn't a cruel dig at somebody else, by the way. It's a warning to part of myself.

I am not a child. I won't even use the 'I'm just a big kid at heart' line, except in the sense that we *are* all the ages we have ever been. When I write with children, I am writing my own poems, as person at the age I really am. I think I should give young people that respect: I'm being real with you; you can be real with me. A few things I might sometimes not say, a few places not go, for age-appropriate reasons, but when the starting point is that *alongside* stance it rarely occurs. The poems in *Off Road To Everywhere* are almost entirely written from alongside, to show I was doing what I wanted everybody to do – to write their *own* poems. They are to share, but not share straight away. I want us to be different from each other, not so much (here's another good creative paradox) for the sake of self-expression as for sharing. If you're all identical to start with, why share?

There are voices, laughter. 'Climb aboard!'
they call. There's a party in there.
'We're just about to leave.'

Where for?

'Off-road to everywhere! You'll see...
The last place on earth still unexplored.' vii

So goes the ending of *Camper Van Dreaming*. Where that last place is... Need I say?

We, and people under thirty especially, live in extravert times. Remembering myself and my friends at the age of fourteen, it's a marvel to see the ease with which many kids perform for each other on camera, on YouTube, every time the only-apparently-inarticulate phrase 'So I was, like...' leads into an instantaneous expressive mime. These are skills, and I applaud them. These are *performative* times... with the gains and losses that implies. When performance is a natural way of being, looking to an audience to remember who you are, might some other point of reference be neglected? I have heard more than one experienced writer in schools report that the casual instruction 'Close your eyes - look inside yourself' needs explaining, more and more. When 'introvert' begins to be translated automatically as 'sad' (in the contemporary sense, which is nothing like sympathy) then there's a precious human resource, one that poetry has nurtured in the past, that I'd like to re-assert.

There's a room in my house where nobody goes
except me:
a still room, a light room,
a where-I-go-to-write room,
an any-day, any-time, a middle-of-the-night room,
a feeling-low-and-slow or a high-as-a-kite room.
Feel free!
There's a room in my house where nobody goes.
There are cupboards and corners that nobody knows
inside me.

This is the start of a sort of crescendo of riotous introversion, culminating in:

A music room, a dance room,
a things-found-quite-by-chance room,
a jungle room, a tigers-in-amongst-the-potted-plants room,
a hiding-from-a-hundred-jolly-uncles-and-strange-aunts room,
no family...
An X marks the spot room,
a don't ask why, why-not room,
a sauna-in-the-winter-and-a-freezer-when-it's-hot room,
a sail-to-the-horizon-in-a-little-tin-pot-yacht room
with its own sea.
A cellar room, an attic room,

*a semi-automatic room,
a can't-sit-still-cos-I'm-crackling-with-static room,
a much-too-emphatic sort of amateur-dramatic room -
oh, tragedy!*

There's a room that is private, that no one can own.

You can build one yourself out of breath, flesh and bone.

There's a padlock that opens to nobody's key.

Just knock,

and wait,

and knock,

and wait,

and when a voice says 'Who's there?'

say, 'Just me.' ^{viii}

I have already said a little about 'me' In most circumstances the 'me' of self-expression is not the ultimate goal (for me) in writing. Of course there are ages and stages in a developing young writer's life, and in a developing life full stop, when finding a voice for yourself and daring to use it is essential. You have to know you can do this before moving on to the wider world of not-just-me, or discovering how many shades and facets of 'me' we can be.

In the poem I've topped-and-tailed above, the 'me' is that of many different speakers, with a different life in almost every line. A video made for National Poetry Day 2010^{ix} did just this, with a different speaker for every line, each of them shown in a backdrop of their own room, full of clues to the vast and mysterious hinterland of every speaker's life. Isn't that just the perfect expression of what we'd like our poetry to do?

Arguably, the modern phase of children's poetry began when poetry came down from its high horse of wanting to educate them, morally or factually, and got down with them, hoping to be one of them, to entertain. You can tell from what I've said that I want it to be — no, I think it always *is* — more complex than that. Not either/or.

Let's not apologise for 'education.' Going back to the roots of the word, who wouldn't want to lead-on-out? I would call the adventure. What sort of poet does not want to lay the world, or even the universe, at children's feet? Or better, at their finger-tips. For starters, here's how to build a small infinity:

blank page
dull day
blunt school
scissors snip
a long thin strip

just think
what if
end to end
a single twist
and stick

*this side that and thick side thin
welcome to the world turned outside in^x*

It's a Mobius strip, and Master Mobius Presents goes on to follow it round its paradoxes, to the other side and back and everywhere.

Educate, entertain... And let's not leave out a third 'e' of Enchantment, either – not a one-sided spell-casting but being part of a shared enchantment by the sensual force of language. Each of the three Es is a principle that has been leant-to in one phase of children's poetry. Better, maybe, to see them as the three dimensions, forming a 3-D grid in space (add historical time as a fourth) in which all the poems we write for and with and round young people live and have their being. Each of us has a priority of our own (like the collaborative classes I mentioned, the world of poetry needs us to be not the same.) Mine, I think, is to lay out the richest and best materials available, just as an art or craft class with children should be well resourced, not give the message that scrap paper and blunt felt pens will do. Given good materials, granted that respect, children tend to respect their materials in return. Why would we do any less, with language?

The boat made of poems

sings and hums and talks and whispers to itself.
It never sleeps.
It groans, it shudders to the rhythm of the waves.
Its timbers creak
in the language of every port it has put into –
the backchat, the patois,
the babble, the Babel, the smuggled rich lingo
of each dockside bar.
But hush: don't tell the captain or the bosun
or the loosely rhyming crew:
there's really nothing to it, poetry,
just air, hot air and paper, oh, and skill
and love and hope, between them
and the deep dark silent sea.^{xi}

ⁱ Philip Gross, *The Living Room*, in *Off Road To Everywhere* (London: Salt Publishing, 2010) 49

ⁱⁱ Laura Trefor, lines from *Significance* (unpublished) by permission of the writer

ⁱⁱⁱ Philip Gross, *By Gum*, in *Off Road To Everywhere* 55

^{iv} Philip Gross, *My Place 1*, in *Off Road To Everywhere* 77

^v Philip Gross, *My Place 4*, in *Off Road To Everywhere* 80-81

^{vi} Philip Gross, *A Funny Turn*, in *Scratch City* (London: Faber, 1994) 20

^{vii} Philip Gross, *Camper Van Dreaming*, in *Off Road To Everywhere* 1-2

^{viii} Philip Gross, *Room Inside*, in *Off Road To Everywhere* 83-85

^{ix} *Room Inside* - video for National Poetry Day 2010 <http://www.nationalpoetryday.co.uk/>

^x Philip Gross, *Master Mobius Presents*, in *Off Road To Everywhere* 33-35

^{xi} Philip Gross, from *Dreams of an Inland Lighthouse Keeper*, in *Off Road To Everywhere* 11

Most of the poems here are extracts. Read the full text, and more, in Off Road To Everywhere (London: Salt Publishing, 2010)