

poetry

Seeing the world in words

Words by Jenny Rowe

‘[Poetry] can be what it chooses, do what it will - seduce, shock, call out the army, start revolutions - it simply depends on the poem,’ said Laurie Lee, the writer most famous for *Cider with Rosie*. But in saying that poetry is free from definition, he also suggests what unites it: the capacity to move someone; to make someone feel something. Poetry’s emotive power means it isn’t necessarily rational, hence why it’s found a place to thrive on social media, where speed is of the essence and there’s no time (or space) for whys and wherefores. Poet Lucy Beckley, @lucyabeckley, agrees: ‘I love the immediacy of Instagram. I often have ribbons of thought or lines of poems that emerge and I want to share them. I really like the visual challenge that comes with it too. I adore taking photos and they often act as visual prompts for my writing.’ This new cyber world is not so different from poetry’s previous incarnations however.

Where today a poem may exist as a tile on the mosaic of our Instagram feeds, William Blake (1757–1827) created illuminations to accompany his lyrics, essentially illustrations printed next to each poem in the manuscript. This is not to say that we are all literary geniuses like Blake. The point is, we are doing nothing new. This process – of looking out into the world, back into ourselves and reflecting our resulting thoughts onto the page (or screen) via words and images – is well

and truly tried and tested. A human impulse if you like.

Poetry has existed longer than the written word itself and even 10th-century Middle English poems were concerned with the inner life. In one translation of *The Wanderer* the anonymous poet recounts that ‘Woe is renewed/ For him who must send his weary heart/ Way out over the prison of waves.’ From this lonely lament by an Anglo-Saxon warrior to Shakespeare’s love sonnets to Blake’s mythical *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, poetry has been a mirror of the human condition for thousands of years. And as our emotional language has grown, so has poetry’s intensity.

Sometimes it’s all we have and can do. A method of catharsis, purest explanation, a flicker of hope, perhaps within total despair and sadness. Edward Thomas (1878–1917), a 20th-century war poet, wrote all of his poetry between 1914 and 1917, combining sensitive observation of the countryside with introspection and self-consciousness: ‘Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves/ We cannot other than an aspen be/ That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,/ Or so men think who like a different tree.’ (Aspens)

Just a few decades later, Sylvia Plath (1932–1963) laid bare her own emotional landscape in



what would become some of the most famously fervent poetry of the 20th century. Blackberrying is rare in her works as it takes its inspiration from nature: 'I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me.' She seems to have found safety, even camaraderie, in her loneliness here (compared to our poor wanderer, she is not imprisoned by it). Poetry's ability to eloquently cocoon our deepest and most private feelings (sometimes even unknown to ourselves) explains why it is so often read at weddings and funerals, and inscribed onto gravestones, jewellery and cards. It allows us to be open and honest because the language used is often metaphorical or abstract and therefore ambiguous. In Blackberrying, what we might read now as a statement of contentment, might be totally removed from what Plath was actually feeling when she wrote it. It is just as likely she resented the 'big', 'dumb' blackberries for their blind, pitiful love for her. In writing a poem, particularly when motivated by your own feelings, you might feel vulnerable, but you are simultaneously impervious, because though the words emerge from your mind stark naked, read together they become an invisibility cloak, a shield, a veil over your intention.

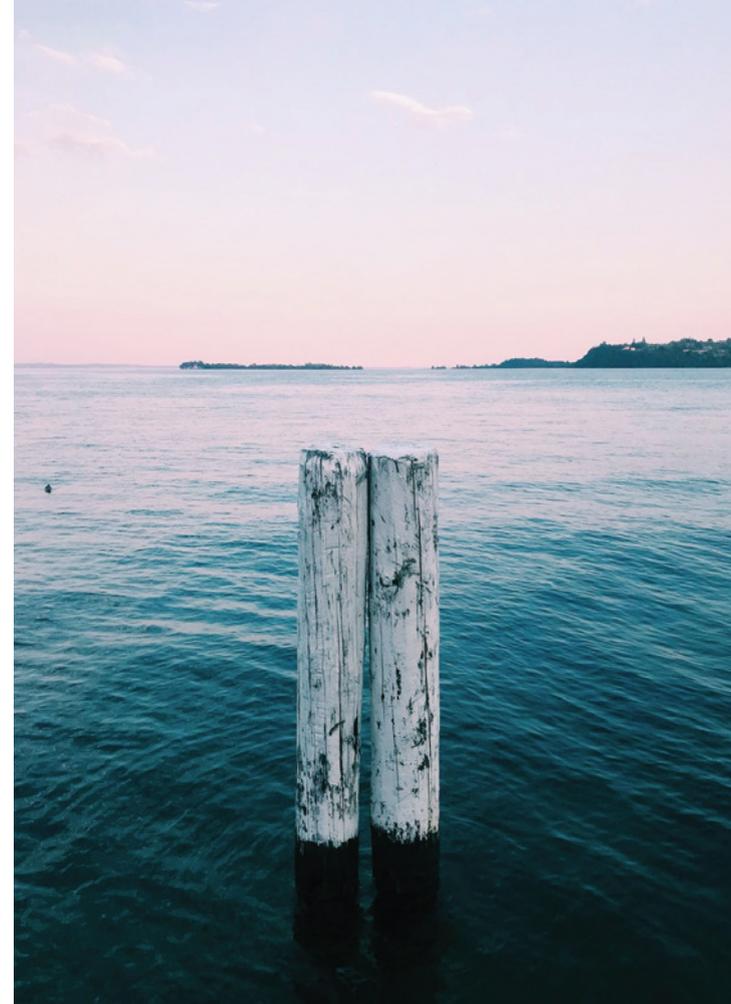
I write poetry as a way to untangle my consciousness a little, particularly when the knots resist rational argument. It has the power to blur the lines between my inner and outer life, which can sometimes be completely at odds with each other, and make them compromise. I'm often inspired by revelatory moments (which we all have everyday, however big or small), when something beautiful or interesting or thought-provoking catches my eye or touches my heart and I am compelled to capture it.

Sensation

*Tangy and sweet
It's a tiny explosion
Topsy-turvy sensation
Then you're back on your feet:
The love of a man
For a hug off his mum;
The love of his mum
For a tarte au citron.*
@mycountryself

Sensation was written when I was on holiday in Provence. My partner and I shared a single, exquisite tarte au citron at a tiny café in Ménerbes. We'd actually been looking for an ice cream, but had failed, and so we made a beeline for the baked goods just as the shop was about to close. The young man (possibly a teenager) who was serving us was obviously covering for his mum and seemed very uncertain about whether or how he should sell us the tart. He ended up calling his mum down from upstairs, who was astonished that he hadn't been able to deal with the situation himself. In my poem I was trying to capture the social awkwardness of growing up, the tenderness and unconditionality of a mother's love, and the inner turmoil swirling behind this mundane moment.

Lucy similarly feels that poetic inspiration can come from anywhere, or even nowhere, but, 'More often than not, it's the everyday, seemingly ordinary that inspires writing. It could be a walk in the rain, the first flutters of a romantic relationship; the sleepless, bleary eyed overwhelm of motherhood or any other emotion or feeling,' she says. Being snap happy (a phone will do) provides me with lots of little portals to emotions in my past. It makes it equally likely that some photographs can bring up less positive feelings - of stagnation, anger or panic, for example.



Poetic love

The earliest poetry was recited or sung as a way to remember history, laws and tales great and small. The rhythm and repetition making it easier to recount, young and old recognising, learning and comforted by its song. Of course, this is something that very much continues to this day all around the world. An important part of the identity and fabric of communities. A sense of self, a provider of love and grounding, a motivator and a peace giver. Poetry can be a powerful and profound reminder of who and where we are, it can be bigger than us.

Swimmer

*They move as one,
An ocean in her palm,
Her frame through the weighty blue,
Forging waves with an arm.*

*Lungs punch her forward,
Compressing like a spring,
She coils in the deep,
Mind unravelling.*

Power engorges her ear, a sound louder than fear, but she is braver - she is a swimmer.
@mycountryself

Though this poem seems to be about feeling empowered, it's also about being small and fallible. I recently started swimming again after I realised I had somehow developed a fear of putting my head beneath the water. Though I love swimming now, and am proud of my perseverance, that terror will never disappear

entirely. I was inspired by the inconceivable size of Lake Garda (which essentially looks like an ocean) and my dally with open water swimming when I was there.

Curating a few of my snaps and scribbles on Instagram is a handy scrapbooking technique that allows me to reflect on how I feel, rather than simply what has happened. When I take a photo, I usually write down a few key words or phrases or images that come to mind in that same moment. Using these words as a starting point, you can capture the essence of what you felt and flesh it out into a poem later, when you have more time. As you write more and the montage grows, you might start to spot patterns or notice your language changing, which is only a good thing. Each poem is a new string to the bow of our emotional and moral identities. As Lucy says, the very process of writing them is 'cathartic and nourishing'. And if we can better understand and love ourselves, we can spend more of our time understanding and loving others.