Mary Jean Chan won second prize in the 2017 National Poetry Competition with her poem ‘The Window’, which went on to be shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem. Here, Mary Jean looks back on two of her favourite past prize-winners in the National Poetry Competition, discussing what makes these poems work so well for her, and offers up some writing prompts you can use to launch into your own National Poetry Competition entry.

The discussion points work equally well for individual contemplation or group discussion. If you are working with these poems in a class or group setting, you may wish to ask students / choose to work with a partner.

Feeling inspired? If you’d like to use these writing prompts to pen your own National Poetry Competition entry, the competition opens for submissions in the summer and closes on 31 October every year. You can find out the most up-to-date information on how to submit to the competition at poetrysociety.org.uk/npc

On ‘The Curfew’ by Stephen Sexton

Overview

There is a surreal quality to Stephen Sexton’s ‘The Curfew’ (see page 4), the winning poem of the 2016 National Poetry Competition. It draws the reader in whilst refusing easy answers as to what it is actually about. 2016 judge Moniza Alvi observes that the poem is “dreamlike in its shifts, wide-ranging and deeply felt. With magic-realist leaps, it moves fluidly between a zoo’s escaping animals and memories of a ‘legendary’ miner grandfather, a very unusual man, to which the poem is, in part, an unusual tribute.” What is most impressive is the poem’s unusual syntax and punctuation, such as the line “I don’t sleep, but oh plateau! these days // of violence have been my happiest”, or the ambiguous final couplets: “… and now / among the animals, I feel under my wings // the words for things I thought I knew / departing, and I understand him.” The internal rhyme between “wings”, “things” and “departing” is sonorous and effective, and the echoes between “wings”, “words” and “knew” (with the repetitive “w” sounds) add to the melodic sense of this wonderfully multi-layered
poem. Notice as well how Sexton brilliantly juxtaposes the profound and the mundane: “… God which, as my grandfather / used to say, is just the name of the plateau // you view the consequences of your living from. / Or something like that. He said a lot of things.”

**Points to discuss**

1. What do you think this poem is about?

2. Does the form of the poem (couplets) work? Why or why not?

3. Choose the two metaphors/similes that you find most gripping (e.g. “He grew wise and weary as an albatross”) and consider how and why they work. Then choose two metaphors/similes that you find less gripping, and do the same.

**Writing prompts**

1. Write an associative poem featuring juxtapositions of unusual elements. Think about dream logic, how disparate things might be strung together in a dream, but somehow effectively convey a deep sense of meaning. Try writing one poem in couplets, then attempt a second as a prose poem.

2. Sexton’s poem begins with an echo of the nursery rhyme ‘The Animals Went in Two by Two’. Choose a nursery rhyme or song that was significant to you as a child, then adapt its most resonant line to use as your starting point. Borrow language from the source text and splice it with a totally different subject to create your poem.

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**On ‘Phrase Book’ by Jo Shapcott**

**Overview**

Jo Shapcott’s socio-political poem, ‘Phrase Book’ (see page 5), was the joint winner of the 1991 National Poetry Competition. It is a poem that definitely benefits from rereading as a result of its multiple layers and meanings. There appears to be a lot of action, with a war happening elsewhere, but perhaps the conflict is also emotionally and psychologically here, where the speaker is. According to Jo Shapcott, “The poem ‘Phrase Book’ was written in early 1991 in response to Operation Desert Storm, part of the First Gulf War. Many of the phrases in the poem are taken directly from an old, 1960s tourist phrase book: e.g. ‘Please write it down. Please speak slowly’ and ‘Let me pass please. I am an Englishwoman.’ Other phrases are taken from the technology of warfare circa 1991”:

- **Human Remains Pouch = Body Bag**
- **BLISS = an acronym taught to pilots to help them remember how to evade enemy radar (the words BLISS stands for are listed in the poem)**
- **SLAR or Side-Looking Airborne Radar = a form of military radar**
- **J-Stars = Joint Surveillance Target Attack Radar System**
- **Kill Box = the target area for weapons fire**
- **Stealthed, Cleansed, Taken Out = euphemisms for killing people**
- **Pinpoint Accuracy = precise aim at a target (the claim that pinpoint accuracy was possible was certainly overestimated in 1991)**
- **Harms = High-speed Anti-Radiation Missiles**

(from https://www.joshapcott.com/info-for-teachers-and-students)
Points to discuss

1. What are the poem’s central themes?

2. How does Shapcott’s use of terms from a literal phrase book and technical terms of warfare shape the poem’s narrative and meaning?

3. Discuss the use of polyphony (i.e. multiple voices) in this poem.

4. Does the fragmentation of the speaker’s experience in the poem ‘work’ for you, as a reader? Discuss why or why not.

Writing prompts

1. Think about something in your life that relies on specific jargon (e.g. a sport, or an activity such as gardening). Using tennis as an example, there are words like “serve”, “passing shot”, “top spin” etc that are commonly used by tennis players. Using the specific terms that you have picked, write a narrative poem which puns on the possible meanings of these words (e.g. “serve” can mean a tennis serve, but also to serve someone a drink).

2. Write a political poem which also functions as a love poem. Revisit the penultimate stanza from Shapcott’s poem for inspiration:

   Bliss the pilots say is for evasion and escape. What’s love in all this debris? Just one person pounding another into dust, into dust.

Enter the National Poetry Competition 2019

Judges: Mona Arshi, Helen Mort & Maurice Riordan

It’s easy to enter online at www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc
Deadline for entries: 31 October 2019

Ten prizes
First Prize: £5000
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Entry fees: £7 for your first poem; £4 for each subsequent poem in the same submission. Free second poem for Poetry Society members. Full details and rules at www.poetrysociety.org.uk/npc
Stephen Sexton

The Curfew

The radicals sprung the locks that night, hurrah! and their lovely collarbones were almost moonly.

Rhinos shrieked and bellowed, elephants tromboned and the animals nosed into town.

Sunrise to sunrise and sunrise we kept indoors. If you can’t count your onions, what can you count

my grandfather used to say. He said a lot of things. Among the other miners he was legendary:

when no more than the thought of the pink crumple of his infant daughter’s body came to mind

a glow would swell in the pit, the men would mayhem bauxite by the light

his tenderness emitted. Some of me lived inside her even then.

The memorial fountain says nothing of the weeks before the rescue failed

but mentions God which, as my grandfather used to say, is just the name of the plateau

you view the consequences of your living from. Or something like that. He said a lot of things.

He grew wise and weary as an albatross and left for that great kingdom of nevertheless.

It would have pleased his handsome shoulders to watch this grizzly scoop for salmon

in the fountain of his friends, or the Bengals, or the shakedown squad of chimpanzees who bang and bang on the grocery window. One by one eleven miners starved to death.

In the streets they collar or tranquillise the ocelots and run a spike of ketamine through the plumbing in the fountain. Dromedaries blue-mood around the pub aloof under their reservoirs of fat.

I don’t sleep, but oh plateau! these days of violence have been my happiest. Even a cabbage is not without desire

my grandfather said one day, and now among the animals, I feel under my wings the words for things I thought I knew departing, and I understand him.
Jo Shapcott
Phrase Book

I'm standing here inside my skin,
which will do for a Human Remains Pouch
for the moment. Look down there (up here).
Quickly. Slowly. This is my front room

where I'm lost in the action, live from a war,
on screen. I am Englishwoman. I don't understand you.
What's the matter? You are right. You are wrong.
Things are going well (badly). Am I disturbing you?

TV is showing bliss as taught to pilots:
Blend, Low silhouette, Irregular shape, Small,
Secluded. (Please write it down. Please speak slowly.)
Bliss is how it was in this very room

when I raised my body to his mouth,
when he even balanced me in the air,
or at least I thought so and yes the pilots say
yes they have caught it through the Side-Looking

Airbone Radar, and through the J-Stars.
I am expecting a gentleman (a young gentleman,
two gentlemen, some gentlemen). Please send him
(them) up at once. This is really beautiful.

Yes they have seen us, the pilots in the Kill Box
on their screens and played the routine for
getting us Stealthed, that is, Cleaned, to you and me,
Taken Out. They know how to move into a single room

like that, to send in with Pinpoint Accuracy, a hundred Harms.
I have two cases and a cardboard box. There is another
bag there. I cannot open my case – look out,
the lock is broken. Have I done enough?

Bliss the pilots say is for evasion
and escape. What's love in all this debris?
Just one person pounding another into dust,
into dust. I do not know the word for it yet.

Where is the British Consulate? Please explain.
What does it mean? What must I do? Where
Can I find? What have I done? I have done
nothing. Let me pass please. I am an Englishwoman.

Jo Shapcott’s poem, ‘Phrase Book’, was the joint winner of the