

Hughes refers to). Similarly in poetry, to approach the big themes head on is usually a recipe for getting nowhere, or creating clunky, inauthentic results. Much better to allow those themes to trip us up when we least expect it, which is partly why I don't carry a notebook around with me – it sets up too great a context of *looking for something that might become a poem*.

There's one further push I want to make, which is to look more closely at Frost's claim that no surprise for the writer means none for the reader. In her poem *Wildly Constant* Anne Carson quotes directly from a letter Proust wrote in 1913:

We think we no longer love our dead

*but that is because we do not remember them:
suddenly*

we catch sight of an old glove

and burst into tears.

Nothing exceptional here: items of clothing, so closely associated with the bodies who wear them, are potent objects for "re-mem-bering". We might think how the gloves need to be described – their colour, their smell, the choice of material – in order to invoke the absent person successfully (I follow the point Don Paterson makes in his 2004 T S Eliot lecture: "Prose evokes; the well-chosen word describes the thing. But poetry invokes; the memorable word conjures its subject from the air"). However, what's important to realise is that just about any object could achieve an invocatory affect.

In her study of trauma theory *Creating Sanctuary*, the American psychiatrist Sandra Bloom gives the example of Paul, who suffers a near-fatal heart attack while dining out with his wife. A man who

prizes self-control, Paul directs his energies into 'forgetting' the episode and regaining his health, but increasingly finds himself experiencing anxiety, for what appears to be no particular reason:

In fact the anxiety occurs when he sits across a table from his wife, when he goes to a restaurant, whenever an emergency vehicle drives by or he hears sirens, whenever he sees someone with the vivid blue eyes of the EMT who gave him a CPR, whenever he smells the aroma of fried onions which permeated the restaurant.

What happens during trauma is that the mind-body whole of the individual, and all its sensing, perceiving and processing functions, is suddenly overwhelmed with stimulus. It's not so much that possible death makes our life flash before the eyes; rather, in that moment we become totally aware of our environment and our place within it. We are given an almost unbearable dose of reality where *everything* is connected, which means that despite the mind's best defences the trauma is constantly reactivated; the individual is continually guided back towards the traumatic event.

Extreme interconnectedness is, of course, also part of the poet's stock-in-trade, the willingness to put any two things together in the belief that something new and enlivening might be sparked through the process of connecting them. To explore this, I tried to conjure up two words that were at least superficially unconnected, which of course is like trying to look relaxed when you're waiting for someone to turn up for a first date. I came up with "marmalade passion", and was just starting to think about the context I'd need to create in a poem for the metaphor to work when I noticed that I was already feverishly drawing links – marmalade is

made of *fruit*, and there are *passion fruits*, passion is often said to be *devouring*, and one might devour toast that's *smothered* in marmalade, then it's but a skip from *smother* to *mother*, and a whole host of further associations. Of course, this word pairing in itself can't be guaranteed to lead to, or even be part of, a good poem. But what I can see already is that there is *something* in there that can trigger the brain into a rapid and slightly obsessive exploration of connections and connotations.

Trauma is something that exists on a spectrum; anything that suddenly threatens our perceived sense of self-in-the-world can lead to an overwhelming flood of perception and stimulus. Not everyone will have been in a train crash or fought in a war, but most people will have an experience of, say, being small and momentarily losing sight of one's parents in a crowd – which for a child is as much a 'whole-world', life-threatening experience as Paul's heart attack. This means that it's possible to talk about trauma and traumatic process on a very small scale, and my argument is that somewhere within every successful poem there's at least one moment that mildly traumatises us, that triggers our deepest knowing of how the world may be unmade in an instant. Even if it appears to be re-made in the following moment, we can't claim that nothing has changed; the poem, which draws us in with the illusion of being a fixed event, has given us a glimpse of how the world is both utterly interconnected, and constantly in flux.

This is also why I don't carry a notebook. Phrases or images often come to me at inconvenient times,

such as when I'm hurrying for an appointment I'm already late for. This is no surprise: being in a hurry is one of those states where the grip of conscious control is temporarily slackened. However, it's usually a mistake to commit the words to paper before seeing whether they have that mildly traumatic quality that ensures they will survive *without* the page; that quality that means they are still agitating in my mind after the meeting has finished, or on the following day. Sandra Bloom talks about traumatised people becoming "possessed, haunted by the theatres in their own minds. They cannot control the intrusive images, feelings, sensations that come into consciousness unbidden, terrifyingly vivid ..."

The poet, on a smaller scale, is attempting to trigger that same experience in the reader, to leave them somehow *possessed*. In doing this, they achieve their primary aim: having read the poem once, and put it down, the reader is compelled to pick it up again, to re-enter the familiar yet curiously troubling room. The poem does not simply invite re-reading; it *demand*s it.



Alan Buckley's pamphlet Shiver (tall-lighthouse) was the PBS pamphlet choice for summer 2009. He recently received an Arts Council writer's grant and is working towards a first collection.