

Block 1 What is poetry?

Track 1 The purpose of poetry (6'08'')

Narrator

You will now hear Jackie Kay and W.N. Herbert giving their views on poetry and what it can do.

Jackie Kay

Poetry in my view is little moments of belief in quite intense language. And poetry always loves language, loves the words, is in love with language in some sort of way, and finds a way to get that across, to get the music of language and the love of words across in quite a short and precise way. Poetry loves using images, metaphors, alliteration so there's all sorts of techniques and tricks that people can do: repetitions in poetry that you can't do in prose or if you did do it in prose, it would seem very mannered prose. But poetry, yes, it's almost a moment of belief for me. It's a moment ... When you write a poem, you have to have a certain amount of conviction. You have to believe in that poem and you have to get your reader to believe in it too. You're almost writing the poem and you're saying to the reader or the listener, 'Come into my world and see what I see.'

W.N. Herbert

It's a poem about where we always go on holiday, which my daughter assumes is just going to continue for ever and ever, which is the same little town in Crete and the bay. The poem's actually named after the bay, so it's got a Greek name – 'Ormos Almirou' – and it was about just one moment when we were playing in the sea. And it's that sort of thing which I think poems are very apt for, apt machines for, capturing in the same way as cameras are, you know, just this little moment which seems to have a resonance. And it seems to keep on resonating, so that I was actually sort of just jumping up and down in the waves with her, and I glanced sideways as a particularly big wave came over and she jumped up but she didn't jump up high enough. So there's this kind of moment where she was just sort of stuck in the wave, completely immersed in it. And it sort of affected me in a way that I couldn't say anything about, which is another one of those 'signs'. Contrary to the people who say, 'Oh, you could write a poem about that', it is precisely the moments when you don't know, at all, what you think about something that you could possibly write a poem about.

Ormos Almirou

Bobbing with my daughter in the Cretan waves,
their salt-snort window like slugging jade
that neither opens nor closes on the view beneath:
a desert of wrinkles that the sea composes
then wipes out, to show her sway over days,

I glance sideways as she rises in her ruffled swimsuit,
tries to be a crest that the lip doesn't need,

but it's higher than her hair: she arcs with its roll
and is contained for a moment, like
Longley's otter and the Mayo swell, is borne
facing out through its pain till she breaches in light.

Jackie Kay

Yes, my dad was a lifelong socialist and the last few times I've gone to visit him I've noticed he's been wearing shoes that are not his own shoes, and I've just looked at the shoes and said, 'Who's died now?' And he's told me, and um, you know, all the old socialists. Of course he's getting to that age where all his friends are dying and it made me really think of all the marches these people had marched on and all the things that they've believed in: marches against war, against apartheid.

The shoes of dead comrades

On my father's feet are the shoes of dead comrades.
Gifts from the comrades' sad red widows.
My father would never see good shoes go to waste.
Good brown leather, black leather, leather soles.
Doesn't matter if they're a size too big, small.

On my father's feet are the shoes of dead comrades.
The marches they marched against Polaris. UCS.
Everything they ever believed tied up with laces.
A cobbler has replaced the sole, the heel.
Brand new, my father says, look, feel.

On my father's feet are the shoes of dead comrades.
These are in good nick. These were pricey.
Italian leather. See that. Lovely.
He always was a classy dresser was Arthur.
Ever see Wullie dance? Wullie was a wonderful waltzer.

On my father's feet are the shoes of dead comrades.
It scares me half to death to consider
that one day it won't be Wullie or Jimmy or Arthur,
that one day someone will wear the shoes of my father,
the brown and black leather of all the dead comrades.

I couldn't have written that as a story because it, it had to be something lyrical about the tone of that and it's a kind of, I suppose it's an elegy to my dad and to the past, and to socialism and it's got a certain kind of a voice. If I tried to do that in a story, it would have had to bustle more and be up and about and I'd have had to really create the man and the character and perhaps all the other men who have died in it, and I wouldn't want to do that. So the great thing about poems is that you can say a lot in a very short space of time and you can fill in if you like as many details as you want and leave out a lot. There's an awful lot of space in them, space for the reader or the listener to imagine these people, Wullie or Jimmy or Arthur, but not to have to have their lives and their wives and their houses and their pets and their cars, basically, which you, are the kind of thing that you need in a story.