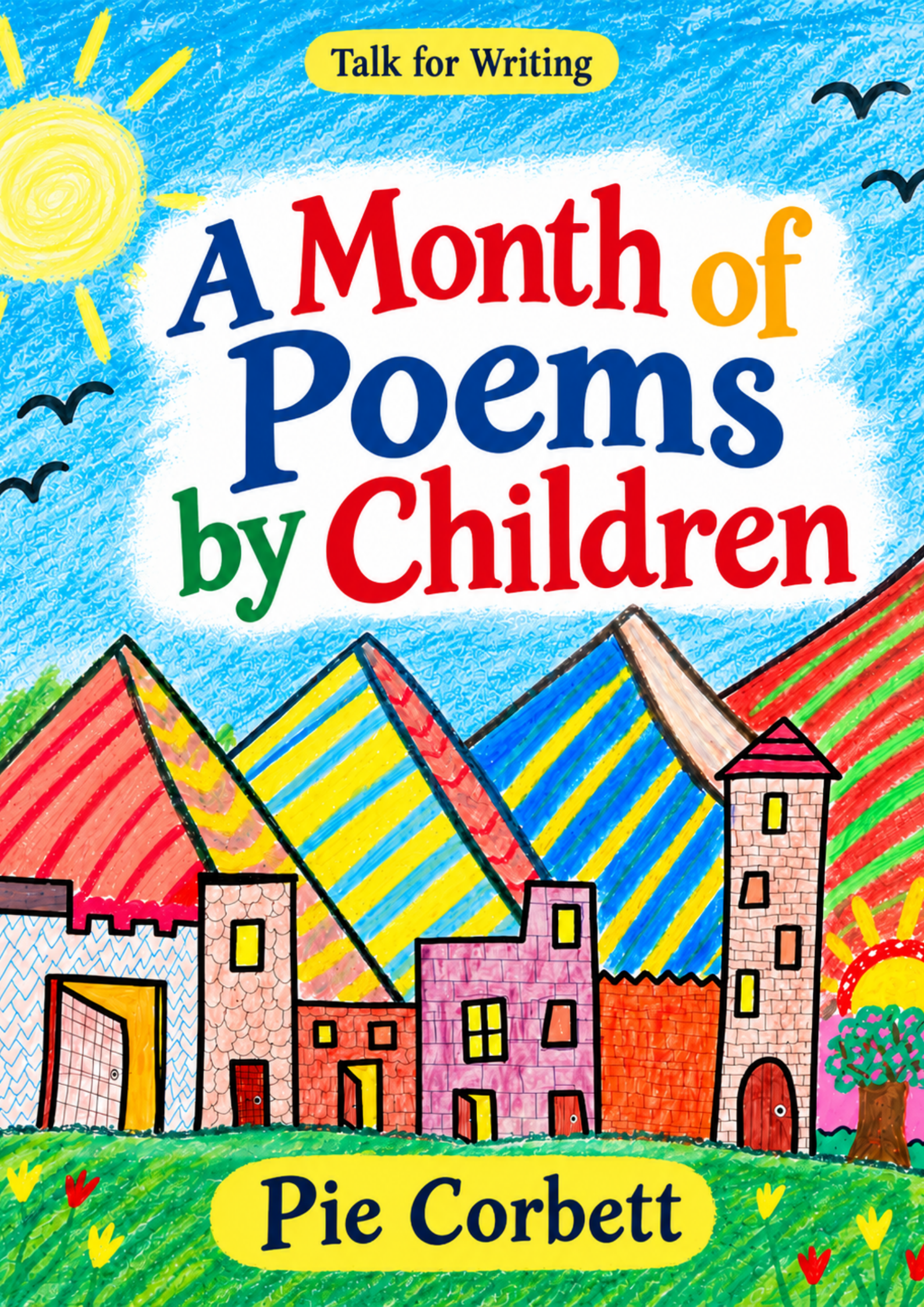
Talk for Writing

A Month of Poems by Children



Pie Corbett

A month of poems by children

Thirty pieces of writing, with reflections on the experiences, books and conversations that helped bring them into being.

DAYS 01–10

01 The Crinkled Face of a Walnut
02 She is
03 The Rooster and the Hen
04 Catseyes
05 Inside
06 Patterns, marbling and words
07 Two poems, two paintings
08 Tombstones
09 This Morning
10 The Wind

DAYS 11–20

11 Finally
12 The lines that lead
13 Be Still
14 Heron
15 I am Different
16 Angel Faces
17 Six ways of looking at a pond
18 The burning bush
19 The Boat made of Stardust
20 Cloudy petals lie

DAYS 21–30

21 My Mythical Memory
22 Three-minute poems
23 The compass
24 The Fox
25 My Secret
26 The Lifeless Clown
27 Silence is
28 Skeleton leaf
29 Painted Petals
30 The Poet's Charm

PIE CORBETT

Introduction

In September 2026, I started posting a child's poem every day for a month. These were read by thousands of people around the world, and the response was so positive that I decided to bring them together in a free downloadable booklet. Perhaps they reminded readers of the indomitable creative spirit that children possess, a spirit that some fear is slipping away in the face of technology. Perhaps the poems were a sign of hope.

The idea came to me after speaking at the Ted Hughes conference in Cambridge about what I learned as a young teacher from Hughes's book 'Poetry in the Making'.

My approach was to begin with a firsthand experience, such as candle flames, a rusted bicycle or a skeleton leaf, or to draw on an experience the children already knew. We would observe closely and explore what we could see, hear and feel. During that observation, we gathered language and ideas together in a class brainstorm.

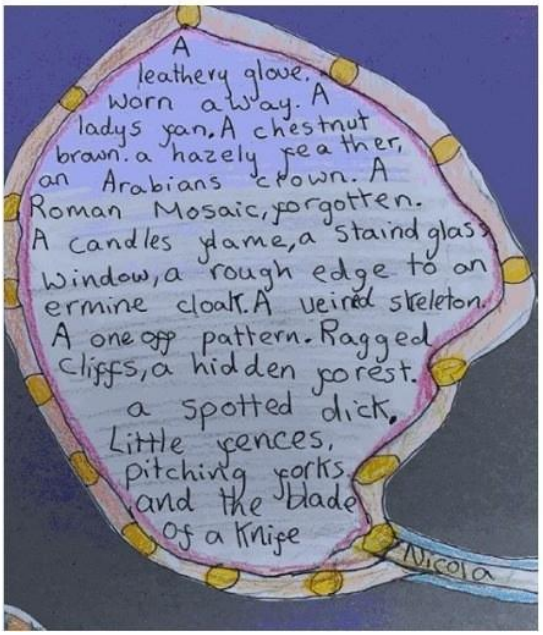
Sometimes we wrote a shared class poem before the children worked independently, although on other occasions the brainstorm was enough. I might give them ten minutes to write, creating a sense of urgency, and ask them to work silently, with the concentration of a hundred-yard dash.

Hughes wrote, 'Writing should capture living experiences rather than serve as a rigid academic exercise.' That idea lies at the heart of an issue I have with writing lessons that are too focused on grammar. In too many classrooms, writing is neither about the writer nor about genuine experience.

What fun it can be in autumn to go outside and collect fallen leaves and leaf skeletons. Children can begin by making careful drawings and prints. Look at a skeleton leaf and ask: What can you see? What does it remind you of? What might it feel like? How would it move in the wind? Make a few notes. Often a small poem has already begun to emerge. The children can order their ideas, giving an image or thought to each line.

The poems in this collection came from classes and workshops that Mel and I taught. Some date back to my first class, more than fifty years ago, yet they still seem as fresh as the day they were made.





A leaf skeleton and a child's drawing show how close observation can generate ideas. Here is another example, 'My Hand', written by Mark, who was eight. The children drew one of their own hands, looked closely, gathered words and images, and then wrote.

MY HAND

My hand curls up.
My knuckles
swell,
like a football being pumped up.
My fist clenches.
Ready to collect my revenge.
My fingers bow to the king.
The smallest of them all.
The king is the thumb.

DAY 01 / 30

The Crinkled Face of a Walnut

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 1 is by Daisy, who was seven years old. Her poem grew out of close observation. I came across it in my garage recently, thirty-eight years after a poetry workshop at my local village school, where children from Years 3 to 6 worked together.

The Crinkled Face of a Walnut...

Veins lead to the mountain point.
Crinkled face shrivelled up.
Stretched sideways.
A pot pourri taste of dried flowers.
High heeled shoes clip
on a wooden floor,
rubbing against rough skin.
A straight track
follows an oval path.
Spindly roads meet together
creating a puzzle.
Fine hairs grow on a high hill.
The builder's hammer hits
against a hard brick.
Spreading into a map of the world.

I brought in a bag of walnuts. We began by looking closely at the outside, noting its texture, the way it felt and sounded when tapped, and the things it reminded us of. I showed the children how to make notes on a flipchart. Then we cracked open the shells. I still remember holding up a walnut when Stuart exclaimed, 'Gor, it's like a shrunken brain!' We smelled the shell and the nut, and gathered more ideas.

After about ten minutes of lively class brainstorming, I modelled how to turn our ideas into poetry, using a fresh phrase on each line and allowing lines of different lengths. The children then wrote independently for around fifteen minutes. A short time limit created a sense of urgency and helped everyone to concentrate. Finally, we shared the poems in pairs and as a class, noticing what worked and where something might be improved.

DAY 02 / 30

She is

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 2 is by Matthew, who was seven years old. It came from a playful, sometimes bittersweet exercise in making metaphors. We tried describing someone through phrases beginning ‘you are’, ‘he is’ or ‘she is’. This is often called the Furniture Game and is associated with the surrealists. I took the idea from Roger McGough’s poem ‘What You Are’, published in the 1967 collection ‘The Liverpool Scene’.

She is

She is like a golden star,
slinking into the night.
She is like a flower of light.
She is like a silent pair of lips
saying something unknown.
She is like a brilliant spurt of love.
She is like an ungrateful silence.

DAY 03 / 30

The Rooster and the Hen

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 3 is by Natalie, who was 11 years old. I gave the children a choice of around forty postcards featuring different paintings. Each child selected a postcard, so everyone had a different image to inspire their writing. What I particularly love about Natalie's poem is the power of her imagery and the adventurous way she uses words.

The Rooster and the Hen.

The tree is a dragon.
Red stems are blazing fire.
The feathers are a wild snake.
Their smooth layers are ridged scales.
The crown of the rooster
rocks unsteadily like the blade of a whisker.

Long strips of grass lie scattered among sharp, uneven daggers.
Clustered leaves shake, crisp veins of the unknown.

Active eyeballs alert,
straining the minute bead.

Shaded berries burst, beneath nimble bones.
The rooster slowly struts nearby.
Deep, pale beds overlap the shelter of the mushroom.



(Rooster and Hen before Hydrangea by Ito Jakuchu 1716-1800)

DAY 04 / 30

Catseyes

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 4 is by Janet, who was in Year 5. She spent an afternoon working on her own in the central area, absorbed in this entirely original poem. It was free writing, undertaken in a concentrated, almost dreamlike state.

Crawl through the ball
of the eye of a catseye
as it rolls along
the road of people,
tail dragging behind
on the back of the cat,
seated quite neatly
looking like a snake.

Anyone can see the eye
rolling on.

You and I can see that cat
chasing it down the road.

Every cat has two eyes
but this has only one.

Stay still,
you bright green eye,
and go back
to where you belong.

Janet, 10 yrs.

DAY 05 / 30

Inside

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 5 is ‘Inside’ by Ralph, who was ten years old. The poem borrows a pattern from Ted Hughes’s ‘Amulet’. I read Hughes’s poem aloud several times, listened to the children’s first responses and then discussed it with them line by line. Everyone read it together before we tried composing our own version as a class.

Inside the snowflake′s bite of cold
is a whispering wind of wilderness.

Inside the hail, so hard and fast,
is a tiny ball of life.

Inside the serrated edge of an icicle
is a fragment of fire burning its way out.

Inside the splinter of winter
is a cold wind imprisoned in crystals of snow.

Inside the snow so slender
the kingdom of summer destroys the crystals
into splinters of water.

Inside the crushed snow crystals
is a wing of sorrow.

Inside the glittered, scattered snow
is a song of the thaw.

Inside the last leaf of snow life
is a wish of cold winter′s end.

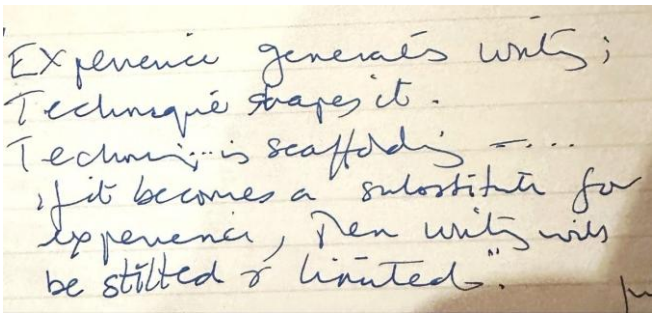
Ralph, aged 10

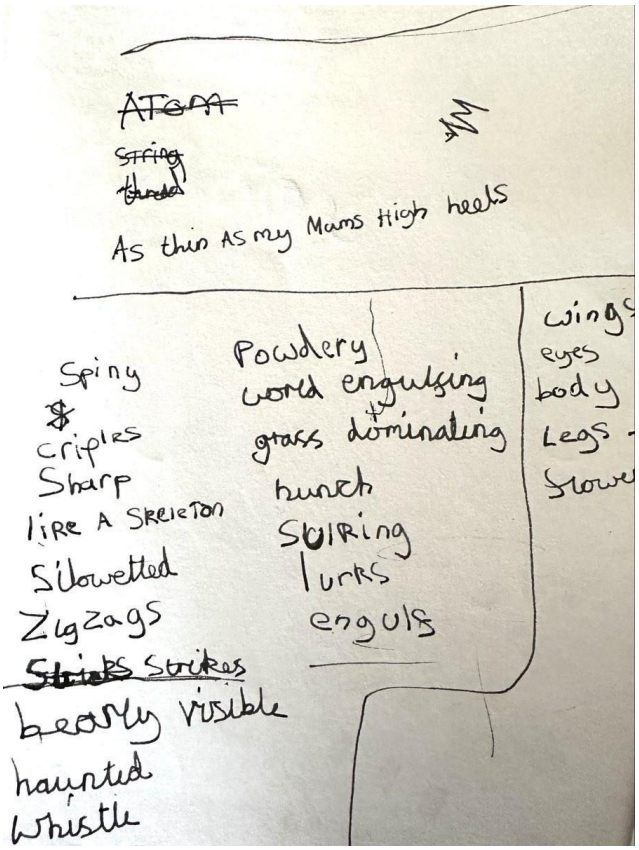
I wrote on the board while we explored how each image could link to the next. Once I was confident the children understood the pattern, they wrote independently. Ralph's image, 'Inside the crushed snow crystals / is a wing of sorrow', catches something of Hughes's power.

In an old notebook, I also found this thought about writing: 'Experience generates writing. Technique shapes it. Teaching is scaffolding … if it becomes a substitute for experience, the writing will be stilted and limited.' I think the words may be Bill Laar's. Another page, from a Year 5 magpie book, contains the image 'as thin as my Mum's high heels'.

At a poetry workshop today, one boy froze, unsure how to begin. He had made a few notes, so I encouraged him to pick out a few words and simply start writing. I told him, 'Be brave. Whatever you write is yours, and I'm going to like it because it came from you.'

And he was.





DAY 06 / 30

Patterns, marbling and words

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 6 brings together writing inspired by marbling. Victoria was seven years old when she wrote ‘Patterns’. Each child floated ink on water and lifted a marbled print from the surface. We looked closely at the swirling patterns and asked what we could see in them.

Matthew also wrote from his marbling. His arrangement of words across the page echoes the movement in the image. He was a Year 3 writer who lacked confidence, and this was an important step forward for him. I typed the poems into a booklet for everyone to read and share. I remember his delight in creating both his marbling and his poem. Judy, also seven, wrote as though the colours were moving and the artwork was coming alive.

Patterns

Swirling freckles
of fire slowly
shatter creased
bubbles.

Frail balloons
linger by a streak
of lightening.

By the
ocean of
brightness a
blossoming tree
curls on the
island of
light.

A sea of
magic quivers.
Beyond a fountain
of luck a
volcano erupts
sweeping tears
across the page.

Victoria, aged 7



Wind

vibrating

at

a

tower

and

the

wind banging on the

window

Lightning

glowing in the distance

looks like

veins slithering

across a page

whirlpool whizz round and round

looking like the world turning

fire

licking pain burning veins

and

rivers make

its

way

through the

flame



Colours

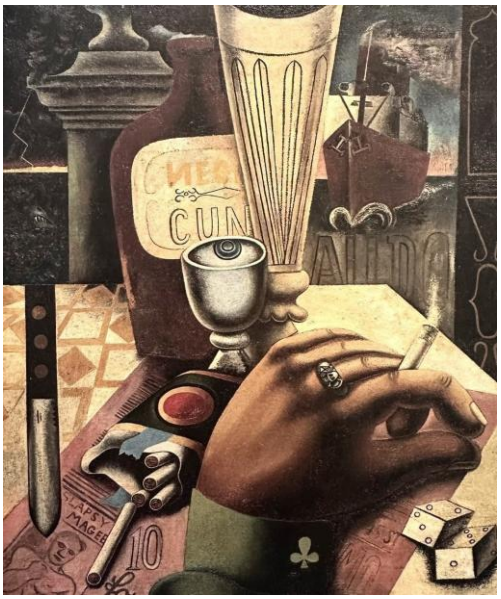
Flowing colours swim across the page,
Spitting red, blue, orange, different colours;
Wiggle lines across the paper.
Like fireworks exploding.
Into the black sky colours fly,
Everything is swirling, twirling into space.
Now in the sky I can see
Goats' eyes, birds' faces;
They swirl and curl, whirl around and around
Like clouds floating.
A snake's tail slithers across the page,
A jellyfish is there now
With the swirling colour everywhere
With spots of blood in the blue sky.
The whirlpool swirls red, orange, blue,
All the colours whizz and flicker,
The roots and veins twist and turn.
A crocodile swims in and out of the dancing colours;
I stretch the colours everywhere
So its head is long and its four feet are stretching.
The hair in the wind blows freely;
The colours drift your dreams away.
Fish of all colours swim away and glide away,
A few spots of everything
And the red burns the paper.

DAY 07 / 30

Two poems, two paintings

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 7 is a double act. Elliot and Clare each chose an image from a set of postcards showing paintings, then went in completely different directions with their writing. Elliot chose a painting by Salvador Dalí, while Clare chose an image by Edward Burra.

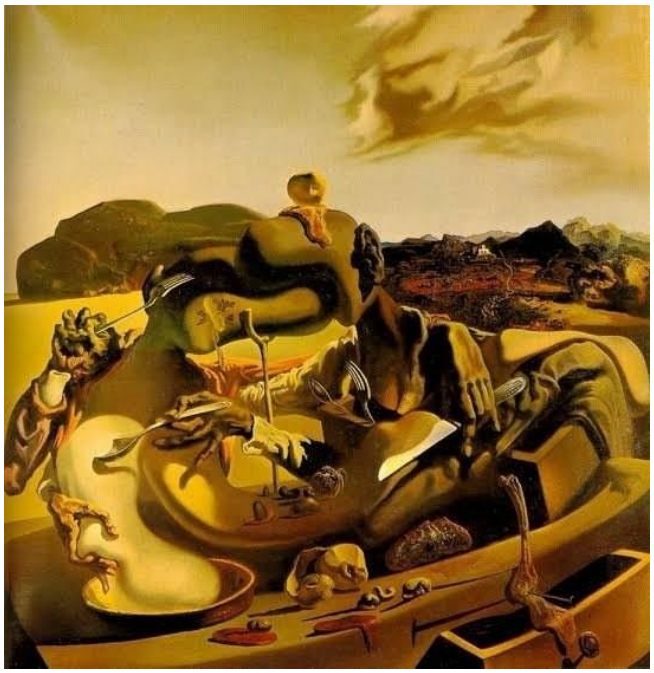


The Poker Room

The knife lies motionless in the murky room,
The hand quivers, a sudden crash,
A streak of lightning stuns the silent sky.
A breeze blown, the cigarette smoke streaks
In a misty haze out through the door.
The table moves as the stranger reaches
For the dusty gin bottle.
The carved, silent ring shows an evil omen.
A crumpled, week old newspaper
Floats to the ground.
The blurred dots of the dice rolls to show a six.
The stranger cackles,
Startling.

Still life

Bleached flesh
Lies on snooker table,
No balls to be potted.
A sly head grasps out
At an unused spoon,
Dipping it in frozen sugar.
A rocky dog drowses
In the background,
Never to wake up to life.
A phantom glides
Through murky skies,
Scanning
The rough landscape,
For something to terrorise.
Bleak porridge
Smoothly slides
Down an opaque stream,
Running into a brass bowl.
A velvet drawer
Hangs open,
An unrevealed
Secret lies inside,
Never to be seen.



DAY 08 / 30

Tombstones

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 8 is by Ralph, who was eight years old. We were working in the village church, making brass rubbings and close observational drawings, and looking for clues about its history and the village around it. Ralph wrote his poem there, drawing directly on what he had seen.

Tombstones

Tombstones lean to a side.
I was sitting by Louise Curry and Harry Walters' grave.
There I sit.
Weathered graves crumble.
A mottled blotch of granite.
Lies in hard soil.
As flowers blow,
the two bodies lie in peace
In the earth's dead prison.
Lichens peel off the grave
A pitted, etched wooden grave
Stands sorrowfully,
Cracked beside the new splendoured grave.
The wind blows.
In silence
A jagged tree waves in the wind.
The scabs on the tombstone look ugly.

Ralph, aged 8

DAY 09 / 30

This Morning

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 9 is by Tim, who was eight years old. We experimented with writing under constraints. I gave the class a new instruction for each line, then allowed a couple of minutes to respond before moving on to the next challenge.

The children began with the question of how they came to school. As the poem developed, they had to include a book, a number, a colour, an author, an animal, an abstract noun, a reference to time and an ending. The aim was to generate surprising, playful ideas quickly. The approach came from reading Kenneth Koch, who once took part in a spontaneous poetry challenge with Allen Ginsberg at St Mark's Church in New York.

This Morning

This morning I came to school on a bone dry
tongue.
This morning a book cracked open and the
words fell out. This morning number 5 was
seen by a hive.
This morning the colour red was dreaming upside
down in his bed.
This morning C. S. Lewis knocked on my door to
see Aslan.
This morning a baboon popped a balloon.
This morning sorrow giggled.
This morning the past came as a flame and I wrung its neck.
In the evening I called the morning to me and sliced it to shreds.

Timothy, 8

DAY 10 / 30

The Wind

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 10 brings together two responses to the wind. I read Ted Hughes's poem 'Wind' to the class, and we gathered ideas through a shared brainstorm before writing to a time limit. That sense of urgency encouraged concentrated, energetic language.

Most children chose to write about windy or stormy weather, although some wrote about fog or snow. Ramon, who spoke Spanish, invented a striking pattern of alternating two-word and four-word lines. Tim also captured the force of the weather in his writing.

Storm

The thunder
splits silence, shatters calm.
Sky rent,
wrenched into a muscular
explosion. Lightning
spears, veins slender and
slim spitting
acute to the ground.
Forked yellowy
threads spill, zig-zagging
to earth.
Rain rages in fury,
beating, driving
its icy whips to
the window
panes, cascading down
in streams
of punches, ricocheting off
car boots.

Icy Breath

The wind crashes
with a piercing squeal
into the arched reeds
ripping the green
to pieces of thread.
Hair bellows out
as the wind cuts
into your face.
Fiercely,
it bends saplings.
Shredding leaves,
throwing fragments
into the air.

DAY 11 / 30

Finally

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 11 is by Judith, who was seven years old. Much of our poetry grew out of firsthand experience, but this session was different. We began by talking about being alone: where you might be, what you could see and the thoughts that might drift through your mind.

The children then wrote silently, exploring memory, feelings and imagined experience. Judith went deeply into her own memories. Her writing is extraordinary in its fearlessness.

Finally

Late one evening
in a dark gloomy room,
left all alone I felt
my insides had tumbled
down, fear spread over
my body. It was like the
world was gone. I felt I was
in the coldest loneliest place in the
world, I felt I was in heaven being
smothered with angels, the fire seemed
to become real in thought,
the bars of the fire glowed and seemed
to melt and fade deep into my dreams.
The television reflects into the glass
of the window, beyond that
is a new and dark world.
New creatures now
appear upon the
glassy splintery
window.

Late one evening
in a dark gloomy
room, thought and
hope End.

Judith, 7 yrs.

DAY 12 / 30

The lines that lead

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 12 is by Katie, who was ten years old. This time the challenge was less about describing an experience or expressing a feeling and more about playing with language.
I think Katie may now be a teacher in Kent. If I am right, she still remembers the lesson involving a rusty bicycle, close drawing and then writing. My wife Mel, my co-conspirator in all things creative, led that session.

The lines that lead

The wire of weariness,
a winding line.

The escalator of ebullience,
an enthusiastic alleyway.

The route of realities,
an imaginary road.

The sidewalk of secrets,
hidden, secluded.

The passage of perfection,
a positive way.

The tightrope of tears,
a tragic story.

The door of danger,
a daring place.

The feather of feelings,
a fearful bird.

Katie, aged 10

DAY 13 / 30

Be Still

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 13 is ‘Be Still’ by Adrian, who was nine years old. I had read the class ‘In Silence’, written in 1957 by the American Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Adrian read his own poem aloud with great solemnity.

More than forty years later, I can still remember his reading and the silence that followed. It was one of those deafening silences.

Be Still

Be still.
Listen,
Listen for the message;
The message of Life and
Death.

Be still,
Like the wrinkles,
On an old man’s face,
Resting,
Sleeping.

Be still.
The fire inside you has died.
Sleep.
It is no good,
The flowing water is blocked;
Death has fallen,
Gently, silently.

DAY 14 / 30

Heron

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 14 is Heron by Kathryn, who was ten years old. We had read Hyena and Heron by Edwin Morgan. Kathryn was drawn to the short lines and used them to imitate the shape and movement of a heron.

Heron

Cold,
Watchful
Face,
Standing still.
Thin
Spindly leg,
Planted in
The crystal
Shallows,
A humped
Watcher,
Cruel
Eyes peer –
Ing the world.
A sharp
Skinny
Beak,
A ruffled
Bundle
Of grey feathers,
A thin neck
doubled back,
Sticks.
Ready to spear a
Fish.
Splish,
Splash,
Silver dash
Fisher king
Fish snatch
A gleaming morsel,
Hangs
Motionless,
It stalks
To the nest,
A shack of
Sticks.
It zig zags
In to the hazy,
White distance,
A flapping,
Ruffled shape,
Far away
In the sky.

DAY 15 / 30

I am Different

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 15 is 'I am Different' by Peter, who was nine years old. We had been exploring different meanings of the word 'corner', including a boxing corner, being cornered, hiding things and feeling trapped in a corner.

Peter wrote his poem entirely on his own and handed it in rather shyly. The play on 'stairs' and 'stared' gives the ending extraordinary force. It is a thoughtful and compassionate poem in which a child uses writing to imagine someone else's experience.

I am Different

I am a boy
different from
any other boy.
My legs are curled
and whimpery
like seaweed
when its wet.
Last one down
the stairs.
First one to
be stared at.

DAY 16 / 30

Angel Faces

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 16 is ‘Angel Faces’ by Debbie, who was ten years old. We had been writing outdoors. Some children sketched trees, crows, the playground or passing traffic. Jamie wrote about the school gate, describing its black metal bars as being like a prison. Everyone chose something to observe, made notes and then wrote in silence.

I can hear an echo of the opening of Dylan Thomas’s ‘Under Milk Wood’ in Debbie’s poem. A few weeks earlier, we had listened to Richard Burton reading it. This sort of influence often appeared later in the children’s writing, sometimes long after the original lesson.

Angel Faces

We will wait for years
To crumble into dust.
Children come and go
But we remain.
We stand like spies
Hidden in our cover of grimy moss
As silent as the air.
We are like stars
Staring down at the earth.
We are left to crumble, wither,
Like a plant without water.
We are blind as moles
And deaf as the sky.
We are only stone.

DAY 17 / 30

Six ways of looking at a pond

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 17 is by Kathryn, who was ten years old. We had read Wallace Stevens's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'. The children each chose a subject to explore from several different angles. We wanted each brief observation to contain a little surprise, with fresh and unexpected imagery.

Six ways of looking at a pond

1. A pond's ripple shatters faces into misery and lines.
2. A pond reflects the memories of children playing by its edge.
3. Sheets and sheets of lace gently laid on top of each other, glistening in the sunlight.
4. A pond is a net of faces and fish being dragged behind a trawler.
5. A pond is a glittering pocket of beads trickling into a bag.
6. A pond is a swan's paradise, where she gazes into the darkness.

Kathryn, 10 yrs.

DAY 18 / 30

The burning bush

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 18 is 'The burning bush' by Deborah, who was eight years old. She had been reading Peter Dickinson's 'City of Gold', a collection of stories from the Old Testament. She then wrote freely, finding a voice and tone that feel entirely right for the subject.

It is a remarkable example of how rich reading can echo into a child's own writing without becoming imitation.

The burning bush

The bush blazed, brightly before Moses.
A voice came to him.
Take off your shoes said he.
Who are you? said Moses.
I am the God of this mountain said he.
Take off your shoes for this is Holy ground.
Moses came nearer no more.
He took off his shoes and knelt down before
the bush.
The bush blazed like the white inside of
the sun.
And yet Moses could see that the bush
was unchanged.
Then God spoke one single word.
His name.
And power from God poured into Moses
As wine filling a cup.

Deborah, aged 8

DAY 19 / 30

The Boat made of Stardust

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 19 is ‘The Boat made of Stardust’ by Robert, who was in Year 6. His poem followed work with Philip Gross’s ‘Dreams of an Inland Lighthouse Keeper’, which imagines boats made from surprising materials, including arithmetic. Robert’s poem came from a class taught by Mel at a local school.

The Boat made of Stardust

Sleeping stars glow on the cabin door,
heaving with life.
Sprinkled stardust,
scattered on the floor,
gleams like cosmic particles from heaven.
The starlit night gazes
upon its reflection
in the whirlpool’s green-blue depths.
Crashing comets are the souls
of the atmosphere.
Whispers of the universe crouch
half-concealed on the shadowed mast,
tugging at the still, sea air.
Dipping and rippling on patchy waters,
glistening moon rays ride
with the echoing waves.
Fragile grains whip the sail.

The stars dangling overhead
puncture the gentle night.
A seeping darkness in the hull
smothers all senses
while elementary dust
watches from the wise heaven.
The galaxy blinks,
a living eye,
coaxed from its deep slumber.
Something is plucked from its
depths,
and all hints of life
drain out of the bright
whirls that are stars.
Silence…

Robert, Year 6

DAY 20 / 30

Cloudy petals lie

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 20 is by Reid, who was ten years old. He wrote after looking carefully at a close-up photograph of a bee. Reid struggled with aspects of writing, particularly spelling, and told me that he was no good at it. Yet when we looked beyond the technical difficulties and attended to what he wanted to say, his imagination shone through.

He wrote the poem during a local young writers' day, when children from different schools came together to work with a poet.

Cloudy petals lie

Cloudy petals lie, drowsy, sleeping.

Pollen rests, conscious
of its fragile beauty.

Delicate wings dormant,
frozen in the chilling wind.

Legs weak like the stroke
of a fine, meandering brush.

Glaring eyes powerfully
dart in all directions, staring,
wondering.

The bee
is a master of disguise,

hiding in the autumn brown
of a fragile leaf

camouflaging himself
in the gold of the sleeping pollen

secretly lying in the cover
of blossoming flowers.

Reid, 10 yrs.

DAY 21 / 30

My Mythical Memory

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 21 is 'My Mythical Memory' by Ellen, who was in Year 5. She borrowed and adapted patterns of phrasing from Shakespeare. You can hear the influence of that reading in her heightened language, but the images and ideas are entirely her own.

My Mythical Memory

Look here comes the Cyclops,
With his eyes full of anger.

His invisible book of rage,
The little he can read....

He wears the belt of fear,
O thought of death,
A dying dream.

Look here comes the dragon of gold,
With his wings packed with hate.

His unforgettable book of putrid horror,
The little he can read....

He wears the poppy of death,
O moment of memory,
A nightmare of tar.

Here comes the pixie of love,
With her heart full of gold.

Her hopeful book of forgiveness,
The little she can read....

She wears the ring of destiny,
O dream of power,
A replaced wrong.

Ellen, Year 5

DAY 22 / 30

Three-minute poems

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 22 is a small collection of poems by children in Year 5. I gave a title and allowed just three minutes to write. The time limit encouraged concentrated ideas rather than rambling explanations. Steven's poems are particularly vivid examples of this.

The four gecko poems were also written in three minutes, following careful observation of a close-up photograph. The results show how much imaginative writing can happen in a very short time.

3-minute poems

by Steven, 10 years

Bark

Delicate fragments of tree-skin,
minute details seen only when
fascinated by the marvels of it.
Grooved like wrinkled flesh.

Stones

Heated by the sun, cooled by wind,
statues of themselves. Beings that
can't move from the inside.
Observers of time.

The Gecko Poems

3-minute poems by 10 year olds

His hollow eyes unblinking, unthinking capture every moment. The gecko's smirk like a naughty child playing a trick.

His spotted skin like a scarlet robe
glittering with tiny inset gems.
The gecko's eyes bulge like blackberries.
Its banana-shaped fingers stick to the rock.
The skin is smothered in star-shaped freckles.

Flimsy fingers curl over rocks.
Raging red skin like a flame of fire.
Albino spots cover him like chicken pox.
Alien eyes bubble out of an empty hole.
Tongue flicks from a grim mouth.

The eyes stare as if they were black diamonds.
White spots spread the body like a disease.
Feet grab as fingers cling to a rock.

DAY 23 / 30

The compass

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 23 is by Kyron, who was eight years old. I brought in a collection of objects from my curiosity box and asked the children to look closely before writing. Kyron produced a short, tightly focused metaphor.

The compass

The slick silver slit
legs slither apart.

A ballet-dancer
accomplishes the
splits.

The compass.

Kyron, aged 8

DAY 24 / 30

The Fox

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 24 is ‘The Fox’ by Hayley, who was eight years old. I read Ted Hughes’s ‘The Thought Fox’ to the class, and we also had a stuffed fox to examine closely. Hayley’s words move across the page in little steps, almost like paw prints. It is wonderfully crisp writing.

The Fox

The fox
creeps over
the
frost
at night.

His ruby red eyes
shining
in
pitch of darkness.

His white fangs
sticking
out
of his jaws
his russet body
swaying as he walks.

His bushy

tail trailing
on
the white ground
his black nose sniffing
along
the grass
for food.

His
toe-nails
digging, deeply
into the ground.

DAY 25 / 30

My Secret

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 25 is 'My Secret' by Eleanor, who was in Year 5. Working from one of my poems as a model, the children wrote about abstract ideas. They began by imagining what an idea was made of, where it might be found, what it could do and what would happen if it were lost. This poem came from Mel's teaching.

The Secret

My secret is made of –
the steady beat of an Indian's drum,
and a deer's strong horn,
the velvet of a peach's skin,
and a past that has faded,
a panther's teeth like chopping knives,
and the end of a ruined world.

I found my secret –
dancing in the shadows by an abandoned railway,
riding a wild bull across the endless plains,
in a forgotten box in the creaking attic,
waiting to be freed,
within an Impressionist's painting at the London gallery,
and at the tip of the vorpal blade.

This secret can –
break out from Wormwood scrubs,
make a new moon full,
decide the future for the human race,
climb a rainbow,
then with break-neck speed,
roller coast down the opposite side.

You see, if I lost my secret,
even the soldiers in the Second World War would pause….

By Eleanor, Year 5

DAY 26 / 30

The Lifeless Clown

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 26 is ‘The Lifeless Clown’ by Richard, who was nine years old. I love the word choices in this small gem. Richard was severely dyslexic, yet he had a powerful gift for writing. He had joined Mel’s Year 5 class with the label of a ‘remedial’ reader and writer, and nobody had recognised his aptitude.

His poem reminds me how important it is for a teacher to be a sympathetic reader, attending first to the meaning and imagination in a child’s writing.

The Lifeless Clown

My handkerchief is
saturated, With white
cloudy tears.
Life is a hazard.
I have no use for the wretched thing.

Richard, aged 9

DAY 27 / 30

Silence is

PIE ON THE WRITING



Poem number 27 is 'Silence is', which Jonathan Bryan and I wrote together, line by line, over the internet.

Jonathan used eye movements and a spelling board to compose his words. He was eighteen and preparing to go to college to study for a degree in creative writing.

Silence is

- tied to the cannon
as the ship sinks an eagle
in a thermal over moorland;
- swaddled in a strait jacket;
- golden to Icarus;
- hidden behind a wall;
- an open clam in a rockpool;
- cloud-camouflage.

Silence's mum is a
gossip. The typography
of love
Is quieter than a shrew's whisper.
Silence sips its lips;
ties tongues and deafens death.

Silence keeps its coward-
council; weeps bloodied tears
of grief!

Silenced,
the snowdrops clench their teeth.

Silence is waiting.
It's your breaktime you're missing not hers.

Jonathan Bryan and Pie Corbett

DAY 28 / 30

Skeleton leaf

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 28 is ‘Skeleton leaf’ by Sally, who was nine years old. Her careful writing followed close observation, drawing and printing from a leaf skeleton. Sally once described poetry as ‘when you try and say what things are really like’.

I have also included a draft and finished poem by Nicola, who was nine. Both emerged during a single workshop. Her original notes show how the ideas were gathered and shaped before the poem was completed.

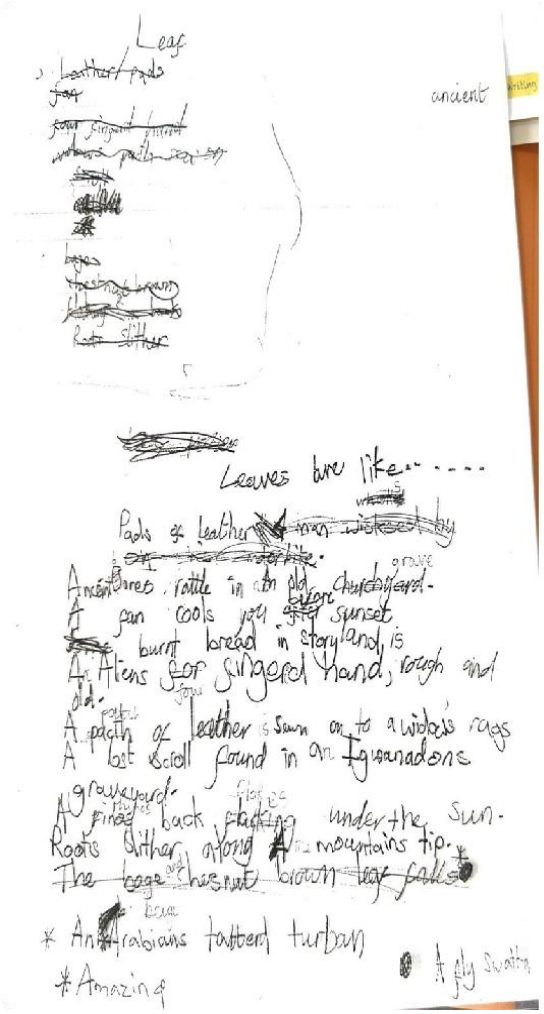
Lifeless like tissue
Laces neatly threaded
Gentle, fragile
The silk delicate embroidery
The veins spreading
Network carefully stitched
Boney like witch’s
Fingers
Backbone gentle and
Tender

Sally, aged 9

ANOTHER LEAF POEM

Nicola’s original draft and finished poem

Nicola was nine when she produced these notes and her poem in a single writing workshop. The original drafting shows her thoughts taking shape as she wrote.



Leaves are like…

Pads of leather.
Ancient bones rattle in an old grave.
A fan cools you before sunset.
Burnt bread in storyland is an alien’s four fingered hand, rough and old.
A patch of leather is sewn on to a widow’s rags.
A lost scroll found in an Iguanadon’s graveyard.
A rhino’s back flakes under the sun.
Roots slither along the mountain’s tip.
A fly swatter.

Nicola 9 yrs

DAY 29 / 30

Painted Petals

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 29 brings us back to Daisy, who appeared at the beginning of the collection. This time she was six years old. She stared at a pot of primulas, completely absorbed, and spoke the poem aloud over about ten minutes. I wrote down exactly what she said, read it back to her and listened as she revised it orally.

It is a wonderful example of the power of sustained attention to something that genuinely captures a child's imagination.

Toblerone-shaped
yellow seeds
curved round a glow worm.

Butterfly wings spread
from pink to red
like watercolours running
into space.

Strawberry and raspberry
stars cling to custard
and peach petals.

Branches lead
from a mustard sun.
Overlapping leaves protect
the forest flowers.

Clear crinkles skin
like seaweed veins
sliding to the centre
of the painted path,
shading the blooms.

Octopus's tentacles
bend upwards.
Hairs like fine dust
flow along the stalk.

Spindly dry roots
push through delicate
winding roads.

Red and gold,
cold Indian pot,
hard against my
warm hands.

The scent reaches up
to Heaven,
reminds me of
Spring.
Primula thinks it's
Queen.

Daisy, aged 6

DAY 30 / 30

The Poet's Charm

PIE ON THE WRITING

Poem number 30, the final poem in the collection, is 'The Poet's Charm' by Katya, who was seven years old. It is an incantation to bring poems to life, and a fitting way to end a month celebrating perception, imagination, creativity and the power of the living word.

By the slim pencil,
By the tender writing,
By the blank page,
Come to life.

By the point of the nib,
By the dark writing,
By the loping rhythm,
Come to life.

Katya, aged 7

A FINAL REFLECTION

Afterthought

In a way, these poems are markers, or footsteps, from a career devoted to creativity. I have always believed that when children and a teacher come together to create something, it is a sacred act. Out of very little, we can make something of lasting beauty.

Looking back, I can see recurring threads: firsthand experiences; playful games that give children creative constraints; the influence of art; and the writing of poets such as Roger McGough, Ted Hughes, Kenneth Koch, Thomas Merton, Edwin Morgan, Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, Peter Dickinson, Philip Gross and Shakespeare.

The classroom should be a place where children encounter the finest art and writing we can find. Such experiences build the child's inner world and language, and open up a sense of what is possible with words. That input deserves to be rich. Meagre writing comes out of meagre input.

The teacher's attention needs to move beyond the mechanics of transcription towards what the child is trying to say. Often, we help children bring into being ideas and feelings they did not know were there. When children know we are interested in their experiences and what they want to express, their confidence grows. When they see themselves valued as writers, they become more willing to work on handwriting, spelling and punctuation.

This matters especially when children's writing is shared through anthologies, scrapbooks, class blogs and other publications. Many of the poems collected here won awards in competitions run by WHSmith, Cadbury's and the Poetry Society.

My final thought is how lucky I was to have been there when these children created such extraordinary poems.

PIE CORBETT