



20/20 Teacher Notes

Introduction

These notes are intended to help guide teachers into finding innovative ways to use elements of this poetry collection in the classroom. Though not selected with the classroom in mind, the poems in the *20/20 Collection*, released to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Phantom Billstickers National Poetry Day, provide an interesting opportunity to add to a teacher's repertoire and invite reflection on how poetry is used in the secondary classroom. These poems are considered broadly in terms of how the ideas and aspects of crafting might be used as well as how they might serve to engage students in their own writing.

When thinking about how you might use these particular poems it would be worth taking a moment to reflect on how poetry is currently used in your classroom and in your school. Traditionally poetry appeared almost exclusively in English classrooms as objects for analysis – specifically as training for some kind of final examination. Not only does this use severely limit the range of work that might be suitable, it also severely limits a student's understanding of the many purposes poetry might have. More recently there have been more cases of poetry, or a poet, serving to provide a 'studied text' – again, largely for the purposes of an examination. Though it is encouraging to see students lingering with a poem this still provides strong limitations on the types of poems they might be introduced to.

I believe the poems in this collection can offer an opportunity to think beyond the limits of using poetry as an aid to 'doing assessment'. These notes hopefully demonstrate what that might look like in your classroom.

Using ideas from the poems

Best practice English teaching utilises a thematic approach to help students gain sound understandings of sophisticated and complex ideas. In developing work around an idea it is ideal to have a range of texts which offer different, or interesting, viewpoints. This is where poetry can find an important place in class. Thematic teaching gives the opportunity to include a range of texts to prompt student thinking and understanding – they don't need to be exhaustively analysed (or, as Billy Collins put it, beaten with a hose) to offer great material for discussion and comparison. The range of poems here, for example, includes several which in some way deal with growing up and understanding the past. Alison Wong's **There's Always Things to Come Back to the Kitchen For** talks of 'children who sail out on long elliptical orbits' while Lynley Edmeades' **Contained** tells us that 'the years felt so long as a child'. Both link to scientific principles and phenomena to offer ideas on time passing. Specific childhood memories are documented by Paula Green in **Josephine waits in a queue**, Simone Kaho in **Prey**, Leilani Tamu in **Avaiki Rain** and John Dennison in **Sleepers**. This grouping could be used to exemplify another aspect of sound pedagogy: student choice. Offering students a range of poems (with differing levels of accessibility) would allow you to use all these poems in a lesson. Students could choose one and all complete the same task. They could all contribute to a discussion of the ideas based on their own choice.

Other pairings or groupings that could work well on their own or within a larger selection:

Family relationships: **This Paper Boat** (Gregory Kan), **There's Always Things to Come Back to the Kitchen For** (Alison Wong)

Identity: **haka** (Apirana Taylor), **Deuteronomy** (Andrew Johnston)

Understanding culture: **haka** (Apirana Taylor), **Hine Rangi** (Kiri Piahana Wong)

Loss and longing: **Sleepers** (John Dennison), **Miscarriage** (Ish Doney)*, **Avaiki Rain** (Leilani Tamu)

Influence of landscapes: **Flying across Australia** (Kevin Ireland), **At Frankton Supermarket, Queenstown** (Richard Reeve)

Conflict: **I cannot write a poem about Gaza** (Tusiata Avia) is a poem which would work superbly in thematic studies looking at a range of conflicts and alongside many studied texts.

* This is strong and accessible poem but I would use it advisedly – there are a number of situations where it might not be appropriate.

Learning how to craft

Another way these poems might be used is to focus on aspects of crafting. As noted above, this need not involve an exhaustive analysis but more zooming-in on features or characteristics of the poem which are well exemplified in the work. This would not only build students' awareness of, and appreciation of, some of the subtler methods of writers but also give them tools to use in their own writing (some examples of this are given in the next section). When students are required to stocktake and comment on every iamb and past-participle they often do an admirable job of finding 'stuff' but do not necessarily come away with an enhanced understanding of their use. Looking at a poem to focus on a particular technique could form an interesting part of a lesson – again it provides the opportunity to broaden the range of poems a student encounters. Full understanding of the poem is not required to gain insights into crafting from some quality examples.

Here are some ways these poems could help focus on useful crafting tips for students to see and emulate:

Providing specific details: teachers are often repeating the message to students that their writing would benefit from being less vague and more specific. These poems have wonderful examples of closely observed detail and how saying something general (friends) is made more powerful by the specific (naming those friends).

- **At Frankton Supermarket, Queenstown** (Richard Reeve)
'snowburnt, sunscreen-sweet, children/ in the back, beer up front, note foxgloves, rabbits, the odd poplars...'
- **I cannot write a poem about Gaza** (Tusiata Avia)
'my friends: Tamar, Shira, Yael, Michal, Noya...'
- **Josephine waits in a queue** (Paula Green)
'Someone stands on a ladder dressed as the statue and doesn't blink'
- **There's Always Things to Come Back to the Kitchen For** (Alison Wong)
'a bowl of plain steamed rice/ a piece of bitter dark chocolate/ a slice of crisp peeled pear'

Using active words and making reading a sensory experience:

- **haka** (Apirana Taylor)
'flashes, rolls, flick, dance, rising, shaking'
'eeeeee aaa ha haaa'

Effectively using the first person:

- **Hine Rangi** (Kiri Piahana Wong)
'My bones are still there, but I am/ gone now'

Fun with sound (assonance/ alliteration/ rhyme):

- **The Whys and Zs** (Bill Nelson)
'who's who in a who-dunnit'
'wrinkle, weather, waterskiing, wallpaper, whist, whispers'

Shifting scale from the domestic to the cosmic:

- **This Paper Boat** (Gregory Kan)
from 'my father and I both/ blow our noses' to 'brown-paper covers of books grow out around your father'
- **There's Always Things to Come Back to the Kitchen For** (Alison Wong)
'rice, chocolate, pear' to 'elliptical orbits, comets, moons'

Use of narrative:

- **Prey** (Simone Kaho)
'The first time I remember being scared was not at home...'

Using punctuation (or minimising punctuation)/ enjambment/ line length to control pace and intensity:

- **Josephine waits in a queue** (Paula Green)
'the classical green folds look like stone and next the bronze figures/ stuck on the pier that might twitch or blink or be there for an eternity/ one knee-deep in water with fingers outstretched missing the rescue/ always...'
- **Flying across Australia** (Kevin Ireland)
'I mean/ all those parched patched bolts of crumpled scenery unrolling/ for what could be ever-and-ever...'
- **Avaiki Rain** (Leilani Tamu)
'...the way/ she used to rock/ me to sleep// cradle me/ in her midnight/ embrace...'

Repetition of structure and phrases:

- **Fear of Flying (in broken Gilbertese)** (Teresia Teaiwa)
Three line stanzas with longer lines bracketed by 'I maaku'
- **I cannot write a poem about Gaza** (Tusiata Avia)
'I cannot write a poem...'

Inspiration for writing

A piece of writing can often be a packet of seeds – in the right conditions more will grow from it. There is great scope to use the poems in this selection to help students learn about, and create, their own writing. In some instances this might generate a whole draft but more often they will be short exercises which develop understanding and, hopefully, encourage young writers to be playful and take risks. It is important that students are not always asked to write 'complete' pieces but get plenty of opportunities to experiment and have fun.

Here are some simple writing exercises that could follow-on from a reading of these poems. As with the crafting aspects, it's not necessary for students to have done a lot of analysis or to even have a good grasp of the original text to use it as their own starting point.

Hine Rangī (Kiri Piahana Wong)

This poem considers an important cultural story but does it as a first-person narrative. Students could choose their own story – from their own culture or another – and explore it in a similar way – a first-person narrative. Students could be anyone from Papatuanuku to Thor.

This Paper Boat (Gregory Kan)

This poem links together mundane domestic observations ('After lunch my mother walks into the dining room') and almost surreal natural images ('I see in their faces strange rivers and waterfalls, tilted over with broom'). A game could be made of this where students collectively write a set of details (basic domestic observations, for instance) and then a set of images based on a common concept (water, nature, music, rugby etc.). They then randomly select a set number of each and have to combine them in the best way they can: 'She fed the cat, I heard electric guitars being shredded'. Activities like this encourage experimenting and having fun with images. In amongst the fun and nonsense there are always some surprising and brilliant images thrown up and a lot of laughter. There is good scope to discuss why some of the images 'work' and others do not.

There's Always Things to Come Back to the Kitchen For (Alison Wong)

This poem would make a great writing frame for an exercise to encourage students to link together the everyday and the cosmic – to learn how to extrapolate from fine detail to big ideas. In this case a domestic poem which touches on parent/ child relationships.

a _____ of _____

a _____ of _____

a _____ of _____

a mother or father who understands

_____ is the centre of the universe

children who _____

sometimes like _____, sometimes like _____.

Josephine waits in a queue (Paula Green)

Writing about memories is a common ask of students. The take in this poem is a child waiting in a queue in the midst of action and vibrancy. Getting students to choose a time when they were waiting – to see a doctor, to have a ride on something, for someone to return, for adults to start or stop doing something, to arrive somewhere – and then doing a creative visualisation exercise to explore the details of what was happening around them could help them towards their own version. Closing their eyes and remembering back – visual details, aural etc. Colours, textures, comments made, other people waiting, other people going by, animals wandering past, details to show passing of time. A list of these details could provide the basis for a great piece of observational writing.

I cannot write a poem about Gaza (Tusiata Avia)

How do we write about issues we feel strongly about but have not experienced? Young people often want to write about world issues but struggle with a lack of direct experience. This poem gives a structure for doing that. By engaging with why they cannot write about the issue (child soldiers for instance) students could explore the issue without having to make claims or document experiences they cannot easily speak for. At the same time they can still take a strong stand and make their viewpoint heard.

haka (Apirana Taylor)

This poem highlights important cultural concepts such as wairua, tipuna and mauri ora. It gives a very sensory account of an intense moment and this is something students could have a go at. If they can think of a moment when they have similar feeling – it might be a haka, the opening chords of a song, walking on-stage, hearing the bagpipes... – then they could explore the different senses they are aware of in that moment. Using the same length as this poem (63 words) or fewer would help encourage editing choices and prevent it from running away and losing its intensity.

(In which the author interviews light) Chris Tse

This poem would generally be regarded as too obscure to do much with in the classroom but the concept in the title is an intriguing one and provides a challenge some students may be eager to take up – to interview light or some other intangible or abstract concept. In which the author interviews rain? In which the author interviews frustration? In which the author interviews a specific chord?

Flying across Australia (Kevin Ireland)

Students are often asked to write about place and this poem gives a very good example, conveying how overwhelming some experiences of landscapes and places can be. Using the poem as an example, students could be set the task of brainstorming a large number of specific details of a place they know well (say 40-50) and then using that to try and create a density or deluge of detail which creates a similar intensity.

Deuteronomy (Andrew Johnston)

Using the idea of bringing a mythical character into your own world, students could choose a figure from myths, legends, or a saint, or a character from page or screen, and have them encounter something in their own life. Alternatively, they could look at a range of these different personas and choose one that reminds them of someone they know. They could then write combining the stories of both into the one character.

The whys and Zs (Bill Nelson)

There is great fun to be had with the sound here. Students could take some groupings of words from a rhyming dictionary (say 8 -12 words) and then try to use them all in a piece of writing. The reciting of them afterwards could lend itself to a good and very fun competition.

Miscarriage (Ish Doney)

While this poem may not be suitable to use in its entirety, the stanza beginning 'Autumn is the season/ for' could be used on its own as a template for a list poem about any season which focuses on the actions of the season (rather than the colour of the leaves).

At Frankton Supermarket, Queenstown (Richard Reeve)

This poem is critical of developments in the landscape but is a great example of showing and not telling. Students could practice writing about something they do not like with the aim of showing disapproval through their descriptions and never overtly passing judgement.

Prey (Simone Kaho)

This is a very accessible, short narrative poem drawing together related memories. Using ‘the first time you remember being scared’, or ‘the first time you remember not being able to stop laughing’, could be a way into writing some lovely short narrative snapshots.

Final thoughts

Resources like the *20/20 Collection* can be an excellent way for teachers to find new poetry texts to use. It is easy for assessment to lead what happens in the classroom and this can often result in poetry being marginalised or only used in circumstances which are unlikely to endear it to many students. English teachers need to actively resist this. Though finding ways to integrate poetry into a teaching programme can be a challenge when there seems so much to get through and so little time, including a wider range of local poems, like the ones included here, should be seen as a priority. Engaging with these poems can hopefully be highly rewarding for both students and teachers.

The *20/20 Collection*, released to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Phantom Billstickers National Poetry Day, is available for free download here: <http://www.nzbookawards.nz/national-poetry-day/20-20-collection/>. Copyright in the poems remains with the poets and publishers.

