

## Creative Juices

*A teaching handout on creative writing for a visit to Skomer Island by a group of Cardiff sixthformers*

It has become a truism that children must write from their personal firsthand experience. While it is easy to accept that personal experience is the basis of all good imaginative writing, it is not easy to resolve the classroom problems which arise from this premiss. Children crave excitement. Their own worlds seem pale and humdrum beside the worlds which they feel capable of inventing. Their instinct is to reject their own world and to 'make up' stories and poems which, unhappily, are so often no more than banal, unconvincing flights of fancy. Paradoxically, the teacher must set boundaries, impose constraints, in order to set free. When we ask children to imagine, we are, above all, asking them to remember with a special intensity. Only then do we establish an authentic starting point for their writing. And so, two clear problems emerge:

1. How do we transform the limited, 'ordinary' experience of the child so that he turns to it as a source of interest and excitement, willing to relive it in a state of total involvement?
2. How, having achieved this involvement, do we help the child towards a position of detachment from which he can apply his craft as conscious artist, subject to the rigour of his discipline?

I have found that these problems can be resolved only through a literature-based curriculum. There must be excitement. When we read, excitement comes through a vital moment of connection with the text. This is a moment when we recognise something we have noticed ourselves but never before truly realised, something which has been brought to our attention by the seeing eye of the writer. At one of these moments of recognition or identification comes a sense of surprised discovery. Suddenly our own experience attains new value. It is exciting, worth taking seriously. There is an episode in Barry Hines' *Kes* which unfailingly provides a class with a literary experience of this kind. The scene is a classroom in a run down urban school. The children are disadvantaged, inarticulate. One boy, Anderson, called upon to address the class, stands miserably silent. He can think of nothing worth talking about. The teacher urges 'just something you've remembered'.

Memory stirs. But Anderson is embarrassed. His own experience is too limited, too trivial to put into words. Shamefaced, he replies:

'There's summat. it's nowt though.'

The teacher's reply is crucial:

'It must be if you remember it.'

And so Anderson is released. No longer inarticulate, he tells his sensuous, exciting story of two small boys filling their wellies with tadpoles. One of those boys, Anderson himself, puts on the tadpole filled wellies. Taddies squash between his toes, spurt up his legs, and, of course, our own children cannot fail to make the connection. Like the class in the novel, they are 'up to the knees in tadpoles'.

Most importantly, through a literary experience, their own ordinary lives have been heightened. For a moment, they turn to the trivia of their own world with a sense of discovery; they make a first, tentative step on the journey to self-acceptance. In the classroom, these fleeting moments cannot be harnessed at will, but we can be sure that our children's writing will testify to their reality. The poems which follow, for example, were written by children whose 'nowt' had suddenly become 'summat'.

Jill Pirrie  
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The following pieces, composed by Welsh landscape poets, highlight the commonplace 'summat' of the extraordinary environment of Skomer, but which so far have not been celebrated with responses to the island as a specific stimulus given to literary creativity that is in each visitor.

Lichen, Cladonia Fimbriata  
Fern at Ynys Llanddwyn  
Field on a Cliff  
Peregrine  
The Seagull  
'There are no trees on Anglesey'  
Part of 'The Sealwife'  
'Burning the Bracken'  
From 'Landscape in Dyfed'  
'The Black Beach'  
'Nettles'  
These Bracken-roots

'Lichen, Cladonia Fimbriata'

*By Ruth Bidgood*

This little scaly thing,  
fibrous lichen, taker of peat-acid  
and the rotten juice of dead trees,  
grows lowly, slowly, on bog-earth  
or the scant soil of crevices,  
and holds up to the air its fruit  
in tiny fantastic goblets.

Might not this pallid creeping thing,  
that needs for food only the sour,  
sparse and corrupt, be late to go? —  
too small and too tenacious  
to be torn off by the dusty wind,  
and offering in final celebration  
its little tainted chalices?

## Was-Beetle

*By Stewart Brown*

'In perfect working order...'  
each limb and wing in place,  
hairs bristled on the underparts,  
this fossil mocks the quick  
fantastic creature it portrays  
by such stony inactivity.

But what's lost? What fuel  
would turn the waiting motors,  
set seized bearings on their course?  
What lack could be discovered  
if this rigoured shell were split?

Was-beetle watches the world emerge,  
seems a sweet-meat, pared chocolate  
I might devour, suck its answers out  
between my teeth, essences  
withering tongue like strychnine,  
like brilliant scuttling poetry...

'Fern at Ynys Llanddwyn'

*By Tony Conran*

She crouches on an all-but island,  
Rockface bedded in sheets of marram.

Grass stings like a hair shirt  
Between muscles of the sand  
And the wrenched steel of the wind.

She hides, sniffing the sea-spray.  
It is a fern frontier, this coast  
Where the grey schist erupts.

She watches the sky, a green girl  
Pregnant with epiphytes  
From the equatorial trees.

No, that's a daydream. She sniffs salt,  
Keeps watch on the Wall.  
She is fern on the frontiers of fern.

Though she tries bitterly to  
Remember her exile from the jungle,  
She could not live there.  
Mothering sap swells into sandy groins.  
She is native here. She answers  
To the breathing of the tide.

'Field on a Cliff'

*By Nigel Jenkins*

Devonian red, slabbed sheer  
from the sea, tipping to light  
this patch of ruled hay.

Swathes down, hair parted; swathes  
over, the flash-grey of severed nerves  
rippling all  
through the heat.

Was this morning cut  
and, given the sun, will be carried  
by nightfall tomorrow.

And here in winter, on this top  
which lay once deep beneath waves,  
returning waves,  
will cattle, of the field's return, be fed.

They'll spread for the herd  
the warmth of old hay that lies now  
liquid in the late June air,  
each bale as it breaks  
exhaling dust  
through the breath of fat steers.

'Peregrine'

*By Kate Johnson*

She perches on the rim of the world,  
her nest a spattered rag-bag  
elder sticks are white longbones.

She has unpicked this rock dove,  
the wind worries at grey feathers  
pigeons racket in a cave.

She has crucified a speckled gull,  
its scared eye stares skywards  
its breast a clean bone keel.

In the teeth of a gale, spiralling  
gulls scold. Her eye is yellow fury,  
her belly is pale blown foam.

Her land is a wild quarter of  
red bracken and gorse, the peregrine  
sits hunched in a castle of rocks.  
The sea sucks at the foot of the cliff.  
Far out the peregrine flies fast  
winnowing sun and cloud.

'The Seagull'  
(after Dafydd ap Gwilym)

*By Glyn Jones*

Gracing the tide-warmth, this seagull,  
The snow-semblanced, moon-matcher,  
The sun-shard and sea-gauntlet  
Floating, the immaculate loveliness.  
The feathered one, fishfed, the swift-proud,  
Is buoyant, breasting the combers.  
Sea-lily, fly to this anchor to me,  
Perch your webs on my hand.  
You nun among ripples, habited  
Brilliant as paper-work, come.  
Girl-glorified you shall be, pandered to,  
Gaining that castle mass, her fortalice.  
Scout them out, seagull, those glowing battlements,  
Reconnoitre her, the Eigr-complexioned.  
Repeat my pleas, my citations, go  
Girlward, gull, where I ache to be chosen.  
She solus, pluck up courage, accost her,  
Stress your finesse to the fastidious one;  
Use honeyed diplomacy, hinting  
I cannot remain extant without her.  
I worship her, every particle worships!  
Look, friends, not old Merddin, hot-hearted,  
Not Taliesin the bright-browed, beheld  
The superior of this one in loveliness.  
Cypress-shapely, but derisive beneath  
Her tangled crop of copper, gull,  
O, when you eye all Christendom's  
Loveliest cheek — this girl will bring  
Annihilation upon me, should your answer  
Sound, gull, no relenting note.

'There are no trees on Anglesey'  
(old saying)

*By Sally Roberts Jones*

It is not true, of course.  
Slender, delicate saplings moss the Straits,  
Greyhounds on leash outside their masters' chateaux;  
By Penmon's well the lush growth  
Droops over cress and nettle  
The too-thin limbs of adolescence.  
Inland the thorn-trees bend  
Low on the skyline, shaped by the wind:  
Not beautiful these.  
Wind-carved, they lean on the earth,  
Grow, stubborn, from rock-banks,  
Bind down the hard-purchased soil  
In the stony fields.  
The invisible god they house  
Can't be reached by the axe.  
Where Paulinus's legions  
Faced druids, cat-calling hags,  
The whole gamut of hell-fire,  
Quiet groves flourish:

Part of 'The Sealwife'

*By Hilary Llewellyn-Williams*

One day I shall find my skin again:  
my own salt skin, folded dark, its fishweed stink  
and tang, its thick warm fat, great thrusting tail

all mine: and I'll take it and shake it out  
to the wind, draw it over me cool and snug,  
laugh softly, and slip back to my element.

I shall find my stolen skin, hidden by you  
for love (you said) that night the sea-people danced,  
stashed in some cleft in the rocks where I may not go

but used to go, and dance too, stepping free  
in my new peeled body, the stalks of my legs in the moon-  
light strange, my long arms shaping the sky

that have narrowed their circles down  
to the tasks of these forked hands: lifting,  
fetching, stirring, scrubbing, embracing — the small

stiff landlocked movements. In the sea  
I plunged and swam for my own joy, sleek and oiled,  
and I loved at will in rolling-belly tides.

Here love is trapped between the walls of a house  
and in your voice and eyes, our children's cries;  
whose boundaries I've understood, a language

learnt slowly, word by word.

'Burning the Bracken'

*By Leslie Norris*

When summer stopped, and the last  
Lit cloud blazed tawny cumulus  
Above the hills, it was the bracken

Answered; its still crests  
Contained an autumn's burning.  
Then, on an afternoon of promised

Cold, true flames ripped  
The ferns. Hurrying fire, low  
And pale in the sun, ran

Glittering through them. As  
Night fell, the brindle  
Flambeaux, full of chattering

We were too far to hear, leapt  
To the children's singing.  
'Fire on the mountain,' we

Chanted, who went to bed warmed  
By joy. But I would know that fires  
Die, that the cold sky holds

Uneasily the fronds and floating  
Twigs, of broken soot, letting  
Them fall, fall now, soft

As darkness on this white page.

From 'Landscape in Dyfed'  
(For Graham Sutherland)

*By John Ormond*

Walk where you will, below is an estuary.  
In advance to a fleeting brightness you traverse  
So many shoals of the dead who have drowned  
In stone, so many hibernations  
Of souls, you could be in phantom country.

But the tapers of gorse burn slowly, otherwise.  
And here are rock cathedrals which can be  
As small as your span. And, at the water's edge,  
A struck havoc of trees clutches the interim season,  
The given roots bare, seeming to feed on the wind;

And in their limbs what compass of sun  
Is contained, what sealed apparitions of summer,  
What transfixed ambulations. If you could cut  
Right to the heart and uncouple the innermost rings  
Beyond those nerves you would see the structure of air.

'The Black Beach'  
(Skogarstrand, South Iceland)

*By Sheenagh Pugh*

Nobody told us it was going to be black.  
Day at the beach, see the puffins, fine,  
and there it was, black.  
Not streaked with coal,  
nor shaly, nor polluted; just pure ash

as fine as sand, running through our hands  
and leaving no mark where we looked to see  
a sooty smudge; uncanny, like a man  
without footprints. The sea creamed in,

bone-white, startling; edging with lace  
the black velvet. You could have sat down,  
but no one did; no-one picknicked or made  
sand-pies of the stuff. It was beautiful,

really beautiful, that stretch of darkness,  
but people trod on it as if they were walking  
over their graves. A seal's shining head  
surfaced close; seemed to look; then sheered off.

'Nettles'

*By Graham Thomas*

They always grow wherever we are,  
Or where we've been. To follow their progress  
is to read a map to hidden places:  
The gardens under clouds of bracken,  
Run-down allotments, paths that run  
From nowhere into nowhere, yet  
Meant something once. Their roots sink down  
Deep in nitrogen, erect  
Markers for those who want to come  
To strip the middens for their finds,  
Or filter in the sombre fields  
Traces of lost settlements.  
But most ignore them till they grow  
Too near a living house, for notice  
How easily they take to ruins:  
Masking fallen rubble, sealing  
Entry at doors, windows, chimneys even;  
Guarding in their silent way  
better than those who've come and gone  
The tenancies of earth and stone,  
The privacies of all their lives.

'These Bracken-roots'

*By Richard Poole*

inhabit a packed, granular, sleeving sea -  
a soil half sand with drowned knurrs of stone.

Nothing else that lives can live with them:  
other radices cramp in the loam-shallows.

In spring the fern-roots thrust up to the sun,  
each blunt, relentless tip the palest green.

Sap-veins in a planet-skin, the dun roots  
consolidate their network imperceptibly -

till spade and fork contest supremacy  
disbranch and bruise that multiple singleness.

Ripped from their element, stranded above ground  
the roots desiccate. The air dyes them black.