



Betjeman Poetry Prize

a competition for young poets aged 10 -13

WRITING A POEM ABOUT A PLACE

Where do you start?

By reading. Poems come from other poems, even the best and most original ones. So read all the poems you can find: in the library, in that pile in the corner of the English classroom, on the web. When you find one you like, use it as a model: borrow its first line, its rhythm, its shape. This isn't stealing, or copying – it's how poets learn.

Try this poem

It was written by a seventeen year old, still at school. She came to England from Bangladesh when she was six. As an immigrant, she often found herself saying 'I don't remember' about her home country and home language – but she does remember, as this poem shows. The poem opens up like a fan: it shows us a picture of Bangladesh, then closes again into the poet's doubts, finishing with 'I think'. The denials make it very powerful: it's not just a picture of a place, but an image of the way the place lives in someone's mind. Try reading it out loud.

My Mother Country, by Rukiya Khatun

*I don't remember her
in the summer,
lagoon water sizzling,
the kingfisher leaping,
or even the sweet honey mangoes
they tell me I used to love.
I don't remember
her comforting garment,
or her saps of date trees,
providing the meagre earnings
for those farmers
out there
in the gulf
under the calidity of the sun,
or the mosquitoes
droning in the monsoon,
or the tipa tapa of the rain,
on the tin roofs,
dripping on the window,
I think.*

Now, write your own

What is your lost country? Shut your eyes and have a think: a place you used to go, when you were little, where you were happy, where you were small.... It doesn't have to be a whole country, or even somewhere you don't go anymore. It could be the den at the end of the garden; Granny's house; the hedge at the back of the school...

Start with a list

Write 'I don't remember' at the top of the page, and make a list:

The smells of that place – damp grass, mud, metal...

The tastes – sweet honey, mangoes, Ribena, blood...

The textures and feelings – cold stone, comforting garment, sharp twigs...

The sounds – lagoon water sizzling, tipa tipa of the rain, the howl of a school bell, a distant radio...

And the sights – try for small, near focus images, not a whole panorama – the kingfisher leaping, the pile of books at the top of the stairs, a frame of twigs to look through...

Now make your poem

It's fine to make a version of Rukiya's poem: she doesn't mind! Sana Begum did just that here, and you can see what a powerful poem she came up with.

Pakistan, by Sara Begum (12)

I don't remember

The way I sat, or

How my hair blew in the hot wind.

I have forgotten

How I paddled my feet

In the halcyon sea,

I have forgotten

The shine on the red and yellow boat

Which brought me there

That place.

My heart is like a singing bird

I have forgotten that, also

How my nose twitched to the smell

Of fresh ripe mangoes

And the way they drip,

Dripped down my top.

I don't remember my mother

Shouting at me

In a language I no longer understand.

My mother tongue.

How shameful, shameful,

Forgotten.

On the other hand, you might want to drop Rukiya's frame and just write about your place. Jasmine Burgess, who is the same age as Sana, started with the same exercise, and ended up, after about 100 drafts, with this poem about her primary school.

Primary, by Jasmine Burgess (12)

*Is there a place for you so close your finger could touch it - but then you pull back,
burnt and walk away, as the world blurs. like my Primary School?*

*Sometimes, instinctively, I try to spot my friends - the ones who left with me - still
pouring from the classrooms, a mass
of messy hair and muddy jeans playing
where I once played, in the field*

*behind the hawthorn hedge. Sometimes
when I look through those jagged bars, that thorny, twig-edged puzzle, I know I laugh
madly, squeal, scream- then I remember*

*I'm uniformed; I'm gone. I'm on the other side of the hedge now. But I can still make
out the dull
metallic monkey bars, stained with layer*

*on layer of finger prints and smudges. I wonder if my childhood name is still scrawled
there, thin and pale against the dark green ragged wall, or whether it's been swept away
with the apple cores and tennis balls,*

*or faded, till it's hardly there at all? I wonder if the ghost of me still laughs among the
rest, or if she walks with me, beside the hedge, or if she's long been dead?*

To choose what sort of poem you want to write, look and listen to your list, and start shaping it into a draft. Here are some questions to help you.

Where do you want to begin and end?

Your first and last lines need to get hold of the reader, make them listen, and then leave them somewhere different. You may have written your last lines in the middle of the draft, and your first ones at the end. Rescue them.

Is repetition a problem?

Repetition can work very well in a poem, creating a rhythm – look at Sana's use of 'I don't remember' and 'shameful, shameful'. Don't lean on it though – repeated lines should mean different things as you go through the poem.

Does it have to rhyme?

No. Jasmine's poem has quite a lot of rhyme, and it works well. Rukiya's poem, though, would sound horrible if it rhymed. But Rukiya's poem is full of sound – listen to the way you can hear the

mosquitoes drone in her poem, or the rainfall. The first time Rukiya saw her poem printed in a large format, for a poster in our school corridor, she said, in surprise, 'look at all the 'o' s' and she's right, the poem says 'o, o, o' – as it should, because it is a lament. She didn't put those 'o's in consciously, but they make the poem. You will have done something like that too. Everyone uses sound when they write. Read your list out loud. Listen. What sounds are you using? Write it out in way that makes the most of them.

Should I use better words?

Not if you mean fancier, more abstract ones. Rukiya's poem uses only very simple words, you will notice, and even some made up ones – tipa tipa. This is not because Rukiya doesn't love words – she is very attached to her thesaurus – but because the poem speaks from a six year old vision. There is just one of Rukiya's thesaurus words here – calidity - a word so strange it is hardly ever used in English. I think it works here because it is so foreign, it makes the lagoon seem strange and foreign too. And it lets you hear the oars splosh. But one is more than enough.

What shape should it be?

The shape of itself. Jasmine's poem is a formal one about hedges and barriers, so it is in squares. Rukiya's poem is about a gulf, and a gulf between experiences, so it is the shape of a gulf. Try thinking about the shapes of lines, how they can be best framed by the white paper, and then let the lines shape the poem.

How long should it be?

Short poems are great. So are long poems. So are strings of long and short poems. So try to make it the right length for itself.

My list is a draft now. Do I have to write out again?

Yes, and probably again and again. Poets do this. A word processor can help.

Is it worth it?

Of course. This is your poem, and your place. Listen. Look.

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