

**KS3**

# **TOUCHSTONES**

A Teaching  
Anthology of Poetry

**Michael and  
Peter Benton**

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# To the teacher

The *Touchstones* anthologies have undergone several revisions since their beginnings in the late 1960s, not least in keeping up to date with the ever-widening range of poetry published over the past fifty years. But the principles upon which the series is based remain constant and have proved both popular and durable:

- i An anthology of poetry for students should have a generous **inclusiveness** that acknowledges that the poems students may enjoy, feel provoked by, remember and, maybe, find valuable, are as likely to come from a jokey performance script by Michael Rosen as they are from a sonnet by Shakespeare. Students should be offered a wide variety of voices; their poetry experience should neither be restricted by narrowness of vision nor limited to specifically targeted purposes. We abrogate our responsibilities as literature teachers if we allow the boundaries of poetry in school to be set solely by that which is officially examined.
- ii **A mix of old and new poetry** is important. It is as misguided to think that what is 'relevant' to twenty-first-century students can only be poems written in their lifetimes as it is to promote the study of poems from earlier centuries merely on the grounds of their 'heritage' status. Poems by Blake or Jonson can have a good deal more relevance to life today than contemporary poems that foreground the ephemeral preoccupations of the present. Yet, one of the advantages of poetry is its power to interpret the present for us. To set the work of recent writers in the context of that of their predecessors helps to illuminate the complementary qualities of both.
- iii The concept of **a teaching anthology** remains fundamental. The romantic notion that all teachers have to do is to read a lot of poetry to their classes so that its virtues, by some mysterious osmosis, will create a life-long love affair has long been discredited. Conversely, and far more apparent, there is the dislike that is generated in students by teachers who insist on line-by-line analysis, which in most cases leads to the imposition of the teacher's views and the neglect of the students' responses. The approaches to teaching that we advocate are based on the premise that students' activities in reading and responding are the necessary preludes to their critical understanding of poetry.
- iv **'Creative' and 'critical' writing complement each other.** Learning by doing is a natural process with poems. All students have something to say; by channeling their ideas and feelings into making their own poems as well as into commentary upon those of published poets, each informs the other. Students' criticisms gain the confidence of being written by 'practitioners' who have tried writing poems themselves; their imaginative writing gains from their developing knowledge of different forms and techniques.

*Touchstones: A Teaching Anthology of Poetry* has been composed with these principles in mind. It is constructed in the following four parts:

- The focus of **Part A** is upon words, which are the writer's raw material, and upon the balancing act of play and discipline with which poems are made. The first four units explore the main features of how poems work – sounds, rhythm, imagery – culminating in Unit 5 with Ted Hughes' concept of 'the goblin in a word', which draws all these features together.
- **Part B** is the reader's complement to the poet's words. The opening three units seek to tap into the reader's thinking about what a poem says. They encourage reading with the ear as well as with the eye, which with some poems means lifting the words off the page in a semi-dramatised presentation. At the very least, poetry needs to be heard in the head, and it is often at its most engaging when spoken aloud. In different ways, the last two units focus upon the elusive matter of tone, something that young readers especially can find difficult. It may be straightforward to describe the idea or theme of a poem, but tricky to detect the poet's attitude. Or again, the feelings expressed in poetry may come from personal experiences or from invented situations, or some blend of the two, so that capturing the mood of a poem can become an uncertain process, particularly if the writer's feelings towards the subject are seen to change as the poem develops.
- In the title of **Part C**, 'Patterns on the page', the key word is the last one for there is much recent verse that starts life as performance or, if scripted, only really comes alive when, say, John Agard or Benjamin Zephaniah uses their writing as a score for performance. In such instances, a vital layer of meaning is pushed into the words by the performer that is not accessible to the reader of the words on the page. The difference between a poem as text and a poem as script is hinted at in many 'free verse' poems (Unit C14), which record the writer's 'inner voice'. But the traditional forms of pre-twentieth-century poetry continue to thrive alongside the more relaxed styles favoured by many modern writers. In each of the units, recent poems rub shoulders with earlier examples of the same form.
- **Part D** aims to fulfill our fourth principle in two distinct ways, each of which draws upon approaches to teaching poetry from earlier parts of the book. The first three units juxtapose the work of published poets with poems by students. The two final units are concerned with students as writers about poetry, in particular when responding to the demand to write about an unseen poem, and when working out the best way to compare two poems on the same subject. The issues surrounding language, form, imagery and meaning, considered in detail in earlier units, are essential elements in both creative and critical writing.



This symbol is used to indicate specific activities relating to particular poems.



To Take You Further, see page ...

This symbol indicates further activities at the end of each part.

Definitions of technical terms printed in **blue** can be found in the Glossary (pp. 177–178).

## B10 Feelings and moods

All poems express feelings: positive feelings, negative feelings, mixed feelings. This unit looks at poems that explore different feelings, from seemingly uncomplicated happiness (Grace Nichols, p. 82) to deep sadness (Walter de la Mare, p. 83). Most of the poems lie somewhere in between these extremes. They may have been drawn from memories of past times, or prompted by thoughts of contemporary events, or coloured by hopes for the future – or a blend of these things. Usually, we get a sense of the writer’s feeling for the subject and, maybe, why they have written about it.

### Mixed feelings

Feelings change as we learn more about the experiences we have – even ordinary ones like looking at old photographs. In the following poem by Michael Rosen, the ghosts of past emotions are captured in the words – not only those of the writer and his brother but those of his parents too, all layered beneath the poet’s memory of looking at a picture in the family album.

Hear the poem read aloud.

#### Going Through the Old Photos

Me, my dad  
and my brother  
we were looking through the old photos.  
Pictures of my dad with a broken leg  
and my mum with big flappy shorts on  
and me on a tricycle  
when we got to one of my mum  
with a baby on her knee,  
and I go,  
‘Is that me or Brian?’  
And my dad says,  
‘Let’s have a look.  
It isn’t you or Brian,’ he says.  
‘It’s Alan.  
He died.  
He would have been  
two years younger than Brian  
and two years older than you.  
He was a lovely baby.’

'How did he die?'  
'Whooping cough.  
I was away at the time.  
He coughed himself to death in Connie's arms.  
The terrible thing is,  
it wouldn't happen today,  
but it was during the war, you see,  
and they didn't have the medicines.  
That must be the only photo  
of him we've got.'

Me and Brian  
looked at the photo.  
We couldn't say anything.  
It was the first time we had ever heard about Alan.  
For a moment I felt ashamed  
like as if I had done something wrong.  
I looked at the baby trying to work out  
who he looked like.  
I wanted to know what another brother  
would have been like.  
No way of saying.  
And Mum looked so happy.  
Of course she didn't know  
when they took the photo  
that he would die, did she?

Funny thing is,  
Though my father mentioned it every now and then  
over the years.  
Mum — never.  
And he never said anything in front of her  
about it  
and we never let on that we knew.  
What I've never figured out  
was whether  
her silence was because  
she was more upset about it  
than my dad —  
or less.

Michael Rosen





### On your own

Read 'Going Through the Old Photos' to yourself. Make some notes that trace the changing feelings the poem records as the story of Alan's brief life is told. Ask yourself:

- What do you think the two boys are feeling at the end of section 1 (ending 'He was a lovely baby')?
- What are the boys' thoughts and feelings in section 3 (ending '...that he would die, did she?')?
- What do you think the father's feelings might be in section 2 (ending '...the only photo / of him we've got')?
- In section 4, how do different members of the family react to the baby's death, and why?

### As a class

Using your notes, talk about your ideas with the rest of the class.



### On your own

Read through the poems in this unit. Choose one that appeals to you and make notes to say why.

### In groups

Discuss your choices.

Many of the poems in this unit stay 'close to home', dealing with family relationships in a variety of moods and attitudes. They express distance (as in Roger McGough's poem on p. 85) and rejection (as in Jackie Kay's poem on p. 86), as well as closeness (for example, Owen Sheers' poem on p. 83) and affection (for example, Grace Nichols' poem for her daughter below).

#### Hey There Now!

*(For Lesley)*

Hey there now  
my brownwater flower  
    my sunchild branching  
from my mountain river  
    hey there now!  
my young stream  
    headlong  
        rushing  
I love to watch you  
    when you're  
        sleeping  
            blushing.

Grace Nichols



To Take You Further, see page 48.

## Not Yet My Mother

Yesterday I found a photo  
of you at seventeen,  
holding a horse and smiling,  
not yet my mother.

The tight riding hat hid your hair,  
and your legs were still the long shins of a boy's.  
You held the horse by the halter,  
your hand a fist under its huge jaw.

The blown trees were still in the background  
and the sky was grained by the old film stock,  
but what caught me was your face,  
which was mine.

And I thought, just for a second, that you were me.  
But then I saw the woman's jacket,  
nipped at the waist, the ballooned jodhpurs,  
and of course the date, scratched in the corner.

All of which told me again,  
that this was you at seventeen, holding a horse  
and smiling, not yet my mother,  
although I was clearly already your child.

Owen Sheers

## Autumn

There is a wind where the rose was;  
Cold rain where sweet grass was;  
    And clouds like sheep  
    Stream o'er the steep  
Grey skies where the lark was.

Nought gold where your hair was;  
Nought warm where your hand was;  
    But phantom, forlorn,  
    Beneath the thorn,  
Your ghost where your face was.

Sad winds where your voice was;  
Tears, tears, where my heart was;  
    And ever with me,  
    Child, ever with me,  
Silence where hope was.

Walter de la Mare

Sometimes our feelings are complicated – we may have ‘mixed feelings’. The writer of the next poem, Daljit Nagra, is from a Sikh background. He was born and grew up in west London then Sheffield. In ‘In a White Town’, he remembers how he felt about his mother when he was a teenager.



It is worth looking online to find a video clip of Nagra introducing and reading this poem.

**Kameez** Loose gown worn by women  
**Gora** White male  
**Saathi** Life-long companion

### In a White Town

She never looked like other boys’ mums.  
No one ever looked without looking again  
at the pink **kameez** and balloon’d bottoms,

mustard oiled trail of hair, brocaded pink  
sandals and the smell of curry. That’s why  
I’d bin the letters about Parents’ Evenings,

why I’d police the noise of her holy songs,  
check the net curtains were hugging the edges,  
lavender spray the hallway when someone knocked,

pluck all the gold top milk from its crate  
in case the mickey-takers would later disclose it,  
never confessing my parents’ weird names

or the code of our address when I was licked  
by Skin-heads (by a toilet seat)  
desperate to flush out the enemy within.

I would have felt more at home had she hidden  
that illiterate body, bumping noisily into women  
at the market, bulging into its drama’d gossip,

for homework – in the public library with my mates,  
she’d call, scratching on the windows. Scratching again  
until later, her red face would be in my red face,

two of us alone, I’d strain on my poor Punjabi,  
she’d laugh and say I was a **gora**, I’d only be freed  
by a bride from India who would double as her **saathi**.

Nowadays, when I visit, when she hovers upward,  
hobbling towards me to kiss my forehead  
as she once used to, I wish I could fall forward.

Daljit Nagra



To Take You Further, see page 88.

Roger McGough's poem *The Railings* is about his experience as a teenager at St Mary's College, a Catholic grammar school in Liverpool.

### The Railings

You came to watch me playing cricket once.  
Quite a few of the fathers did.  
At ease, outside the pavilion  
they would while away a Saturday afternoon.  
Joke with the masters, urge on  
their flannelled offspring. But not you.

Fielding deep near the boundary  
I saw you through the railings.  
You were embarrassed when I waved  
and moved out of sight down the road.  
When it was my turn to bowl though  
I knew you'd still be watching.

Third ball, a wicket, and three more followed.  
When we came in at the end of the innings  
the other dads applauded and joined us for tea.  
Of course, you had gone by then. Later,  
you said you'd found yourself there by accident.  
Just passing. Spotted me through the railings.

\* \* \*

Speech-days. Prize givings. School plays  
The Twentyfirst. The Wedding. The Christening  
You would find yourself there by accident.  
Just passing. Spotted me through the railings.

Roger McGough



To Take You Further, see page 88.

## Divorce

I did not promise  
to stay with you till death do us part, or  
anything like that,  
so part I must, and quickly. There are things  
I cannot suffer  
any longer: Mother, you never, ever said  
a kind word  
or a thank-you for all the tedious chores I have done;  
Father, your breath  
smells like a camel's and gives me the hump;  
all you ever say is:  
'Are you off in the cream puff, Lady Muck?'  
In this day and age?  
I would be better off in an orphanage.

I want a divorce.  
There are parents in the world whose faces turn  
up to the light  
who speak in the soft murmur of rivers  
and never shout.  
There are parents who stroke their children's cheeks  
in the dead of night  
and sing in the colourful voices of rainbows,  
red to blue.  
These parents are not you. I never chose you.  
You are rough and wild,  
I don't want to be your child. All you do is shout  
and that's not right.  
I will file for divorce in the morning at first light.

Jackie Kay



To Take You Further, see page 87.



## To Take You Further

### 1 Tone of voice

Poems about ideas and feelings (B9 and B10) can be tricky to understand because the tone in which they are expressed often leaves readers feeling that they have to detect what is left unexpressed, to 'read between the lines', and to find out what's behind them. In 'Divorce', it is especially important to ask yourself about the voice, about who is the 'I' of the poem.



#### As a class

- Read Jackie Kay's poem 'Divorce' on page 86. Who is speaking? What is the tone of what she says?
- What picture of the parents does the poem suggest? ('cream puff' in line 12 is rhyming slang for 'huff', and 'Lady Muck' is an ordinary woman who behaves as if she is 'her ladyship'.)
- What does the girl want her parents to be like? Is it realistic?
- Do you think the girl's sufferings merit her emotion?

#### On your own

- What picture of the girl and her relationship with her parents do you have by the end of the poem? Write a paragraph to explain your views and refer to the poem for evidence to support them.
- Jackie Kay was born in Edinburgh in 1961. Her mother was a Scottish nurse, and her father a Nigerian student. Jackie was adopted at birth by Helen and John Kay, a white couple. Whatever the drama of this poem might suggest, she was always close to and loved her adoptive parents. Find out more about Jackie Kay by reading some of her other poems and seeing her reading on the internet. Write a brief account of her life and work and say what you like about her poetry.

## 2 Thinking about parents

Read 'The Railings' by Roger McGough (p. 85) and 'In a White Town' by Daljit Nagra (p. 84). Both poets are thinking about their teenage years. Roger McGough's father was a Liverpool docker. Daljit Nagra was born in England and brought up in London and Sheffield by his Indian parents.



### As a class

- What do you think Roger McGough's father's feelings might have been as he watched his son playing cricket at St Mary's College?
- There were real railings round the cricket ground but not at other events in the McGough's life mentioned in the last four lines. What sort of railings were these?
- In much of 'In a White Town', Daljit Nagra is looking back to his school days. In verses 1–5, what are the feelings he has behind all the actions he takes?
- In verses 6–8, we learn more about Nagra's mum. How do you imagine her? What does she think of her son?
- In verse 9, what are their feelings towards each other nowadays?

## 3 Thinking about ideas

Read 'The Tyger' by William Blake (p. 68) and 'A Century Later' by Imtiaz Dharker (p. 74). In both poem, we have to catch the attitude and mood of the writer through the selection of details, the choice of words and the rhythm of the lines.



### On your own

- In 'The Tyger', there are lots of questions. Can you roll them up into *one* question?
- In 'A Century Later', pick out which line or phrase you think expresses the key idea – there are several contenders. Quote the words and say why you have chosen them.



## 4 Serious humour

Look again at Benjamin Zephaniah's 'Talking Turkeys' (p. 58) and hear it read aloud.



### As a class

- How do the language, the rhythm and the images in 'Talking Turkeys' suggest playfulness and fun?
- What is the serious message disguised by the humour?
- The expression 'to talk turkey' or 'talking turkey' means 'to talk about something very seriously'. What does it suggest the writer feels about his message?

### On your own



Benjamin Zephaniah performs his poems and you will find several examples online of him doing so. Research some of these and find out about his life. Then write a short piece about what you like about his work.

## 5 Climate crisis and polluting the planet

Read 'Ark' (p. 76) and 'Song of the Satellite' (p. 78).

- Climate change: 'Global heating', 'Climate crisis', 'School strikes'. These and other headlines signal vastly complex challenges for the whole planet.
- Pollution: 'Poisoning air and sea', 'Loss of biodiversity', 'Extinction Rebellion'. These and similar headlines flag up other areas where people are increasingly aware of threats to the planet.



### On your own

Focus on *one* example of challenges to the planet that is, to you, especially significant (melting glaciers in Greenland; bushfires in Australia; torrential rain and flooding; plastic waste in the oceans, etc.). Read up about it online. Make notes of what you find. Use these to write a short poem that captures your thoughts and feelings about your chosen example.

### As a class

Organise your poems according to their subject matter and present them as either a 'Climate change' or a 'Pollution' project for display and/or a live performance to other classes.



**KS3**

# TOUCHSTONES

.....

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