



5 POEMS

BY

JIM MURDOCH

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes...*

For me, Jim Murdoch has the hallowed, venerated, august gift of both instructing and delighting. In 'Poetsplaining' we move from this amusing pejorative title to airs of light-handed pedantry, shifting to bursts of arresting humour and closing with self-effacing genius. At the risk of spoiling your own experience, I won't recite a word. Sloping into 'The Death of the Poet,' inspired by a tribute to Roland Barthes' essay--esteeming the reader's interpretation over an author's intention--is beautifully inlayed and outlined: "There's nothing of me in this poem. / All I did was leave the cage door open." 'Inside Voice' has just the right mix of sentiment and nonsense. 'Wish You Were Here' returns to his theme of meta-verse, poking fun at the poets' process and such platitudes less Horatian. And finally, in 'Poetic Reality' we revert back to

Murdoch's unreality "a dog-shaped poem / sprawled across a page." I just love it when the loftiest of ideas require the least heavy lifting

Five Stars.

Poetsplaining

The purpose of poetry—
at least the purpose of my poetry—
is to hold the reader's attention and, if possible
(if such a thing were possible),
explain a little something about life
or at least allow us to suppose it otherwise.

Poems are shiny things, people are magpies.
Shiny things are rarely nutritious or useful but they are enticing.
The problem is what to do with them
which is where we're at right now.
This poem caught your eye—
it was the title, wasn't it? —
and you feel you ought to be doing more with it than mere reading
(absorbing maybe)
or that it should be doing more for you
(perhaps inspiring).
Line by line it's starting to lose its lustre.

Poems can and do have their odds and ends
and who's to say what's worthwhile or sound?
These mullings may well find their way into a book
that'll wind up under a table leg thereby leaving this world,
if not exactly a better place,
at least a slightly steadier one to be miserable in.

You can only imagine how that might make me feel.

The Death of the Poet

(after Barthes)

I am nobody.
I am a scriptor.
I have no body,
merely a voice.
I have this voice.
It is not my voice.
The voice is yours.
You decide the pitch,
the pace and the power.
You choose the meaning.
I did not invent these words.
Even my name was given me.
There's nothing of me in this poem.
All I did was leave the cage door open.

Inside Voice

My father often talks to me in his head—
I'm not his daughter *per se* nor is she my sister
but he had a part to play in both our origins—

and, sometimes, my voice gets mixed up
with the one that dictates his poems;
hard truths prefer gentler tones, I guess.

He likes it, I think, when I'm a poem.
Poetry makes sense to him.
Daughters not so much.

That said, poems take a lot out of him.
Daughters too, most times.
More than he's equipped to give.

I'm surprised he's never imagined me as a cat.
Maybe now I've mentioned it he might.
I'd make a good cat.

Wish You Were Here

Ask Joe Public what poetry is to him and
he'll likely recite his favourite poem
or misquote a few lines therefrom.

A poet will blether on about his process,
an experience as opposed to a thing—
“You wouldn't understand”—

and co-opt some clapped-out cliché
like poetry being all about the journey
as opposed to the destination

which, one supposes, make poems
the passive-aggressive postcards
we mail back to our friends

and they don't always get.

Poetic Reality

A dog is dozing in the garden
like a poem I think,
a dog-shaped poem
sprawled across a page.

So not a sonnet then
and nothing epic.

Something Larkinesque I'd say
and not just because he has his jowls;
he has his eyes too and as lugubrious a bark
as a bark can hope to get.

The dog was a lie.
A cat is in the garden.
But "dog" works better.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I grew up in the heart of Burns Country in Scotland. In fact, my first poem was in butchered Scots. Poetry, for me, was about irrelevance—daffodils, vagabonds and babbling brooks—until one day in secondary school the teacher handed out roneoed copies of Larkin's 'Mr Bleaney' and I felt as if the proverbial scales had fallen from my eyes. How could something so... so unpoetic as far as I could tell (I mean, the rhymes were in all the wrong places and everything) be poetry? I aimed to find out.*

Poetry used to be easy to define; it adhered to rules. Sonnets were poems, limericks were poems, odes were poems. But then all that changed and people started to realise that these were forms of poetry and that poetry-with-a-capital-p must be something bigger. Which is why a large chunk of my writing over the years has been devoted to ars poetica. I wanted to understand what made poems tick and why when you stripped away all the techniques that people normally associate with poetry—rhymes, similes, metaphors, onomatopoeia—you could still have a poem.

AUTHOR BIO: Jim Murdoch has been writing poetry for fifty years and has graced the pages of many now-defunct magazines and a few, like Ink, Sweat and Tears and Poetry Scotland, that are still hanging on in there. For ten years he ran the literary blog The Truth About Lies but now lives quietly in Scotland with his wife and (increasingly) next door's cat. He has published two books of poetry, a short story collection and four novels.