

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: POETRY AND TRANSLATION

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Teacher's notes

David Morley

Taken Away

OVERVIEW

David Morley grew up in Blackpool, the child of half-Romani parents, and his writing often addresses Romani culture and uses Romani language. Frequently he writes poetic narratives which blend traditional story-telling with the hard concrete realities of urban life, writing about difficult situations with the lightness of a magical realist touch. In this activity students will think about tone and language, updating a fairytale to a twenty-first century context, and mixing contemporary diction with archaisms and clichés.

INTRODUCTION

This poem's title 'Taken Away' helps the content of the poem work on many levels. It is about a child who has been taken away from his parents, but the exact details of the story are murky – is this about death (even possibly murder) or the taking away of a child by others who fear the parents can't look after it? Ask the students to work through the poem, making a list of narrative events. What do they think is happening? When is the poem set? The same poem contains 'fairy baby' and 'postman'; the child is 'like a seal' and 'drinking whiskey' – what happens when we mix language, time and situation like this? What's the mood of the poem?

Taken Away

The mother places her baby at the waterfall's brim.
She waits for the moon's climb.

They'd been hard at the hay with a blunt scythe between them
circling and slashing for hours under blanking sunlight
with the cradle nestled and nooked on the one hayless place.
They'd had their breakfast, porridge and milk and tea,
scones, cheese, whatever they had. Their picnic things
were scattered on the green knowe around the cradle
as if plates and pots and pans had been tossed out by the baby.

The wife shadows her husband with a wide wooden rake
weaving and whirling his handwork as he worries the hay loose.
You know how a man makes bouts of hay with a scythe
and round and round the field in close and closing spirals
he rounds on the hayless knowe and that one white cradle
with cups and greaseproof wrappings pallid with butter;
like a maze of mauve leading into a green eye and an unseen
staring gap among the eye's blades. Some small wind shoves
the grass as if a snake were sliding.

The parents are heads down.

Their muscles move with each other as if they were making love.
Round he goes, and round she goes, a buzzard's marriage
on a thermal. Then a cry goes up as if the soil were screaming
or the wind were wounded on nails of brittle straw. A cry
neither parent has heard and cannot stem with any known thing,
not milk or love or kiss or words or food. The young doctor
from across the glen hears the child's call across five miles.
He rides towards it as if the cry were a fire rising in the fields
but all his knowledge's clear water will not quench the child.

And so it goes for the fever of three thickening months
except at the wick of midnight when the baby closes down
as if his switches had been thrown, or some wires scissored

in his throat. Tethered by their child, the parents thaw into sleep
only to freeze awake at dawn as the cry bursts back alight.
Folk keep away. Folk catch that cry in their cattle's eyes; taste
its scum in their milk and mutton.

At summer's flow, the postman
deaf with listening to a lifetime's stories, strode into their cottage,
drowned a dram, and drank the scene into his memory: salt water
damming a child's throat, a cry that would not cease for love.
He stayed with him all day. The parents scrambled for provisions
and the cure of quiet. As the door slammed and their footfalls
slapped into the lane, the postman turned to the baby and the baby
sat up asking if they had gone and, if his parents had gone
would that now mean that he could get up at last – and get up he did
as if he were a young man sternly sick of his own board and bed.
He could stand and speak. The child's voice was dark and thrown
as if four corners of the room were talking with him or through him.
The child clenched the whiskey bottle and downed enough to throw
a horse. He drew a long straw and slit it to the note of a flute.
Then he played the long day through, making the postman drink
deeper and harder than he had the head or the height or the heart for.

A moon widened on the windows; a garden gate squeaked
cringing on its hinges; the parents poured through the door
to find their child crying in his cot like a seal left on some low ledge
of the Atlantic; and the postman pointing at him, adrift or bereft.
'He's not here, your child. He's not anywhere. He's taken away.
He told me everything, how you left him to the cloud and sky,
left him to the harebell and the grasshopper and the cow parsley,
left him in grazed gaps between grass, to skylark and to hoverfly,
while you worked, if that's what you were doing.'

They knew
one cure, one pure matter passed from their grandmothers.
When midnight massed itself over breakers and shore,
when the tide of the day had flown, mother, father and friend
headed by torchlight up to the headstream on the high moor.

The mother slides her fairy-baby towards the waterfall's brink,
taut-shawled, his baby arms pinioned like a wrapped cat.
The child's mewling, breathing the breath of the chilled spray
slaping up from the trout-brown pool at the fall's foot.
The father and their friend are behind her, egging her on,
baying that it's for the best, that their child isn't in the child.
The moon bends a bow behind a cloud-castle then shoots
its light-arrow through a slit across the waterfall's rim.

TASK

Bring in a pile of children's books that contain nursery rhymes and fairytales. Also bring in lots of newspapers. Firstly give out the children's books and ask the students to open them randomly and write down ten words or phrases that they think carry the tone of the story or rhyme and make us feel like we are in a magical world. Then give them the newspapers and ask them to choose ten words or phrases that are totally contemporary and put us in the twenty-first century. The students then have to choose one fairytale or nursery rhyme and find a story in the newspapers that somehow relates to it. They should then write a narrative poem, updating the fairytale to the modern day context and make sure it contains at least 5 of their magical words / phrases and at least 5 of their contemporary newspaper words / phrases.

If they want to really push themselves and help their poem gain momentum, they should write the poem in 4 line stanzas, with an alternate line rhyme scheme XAXA XBXB XCXC etc.

However, the poems will also be fine, unrhymed and in a different shape - perhaps try copying David Morley's poem using long lines and irregular stanzas.

Mimi Khalvati

Ghazal: After Hafez

OVERVIEW

In this activity, students will read Mimi Khalvati's *Ghazal: After Hafez* and learn the rules of ghazal writing. They will then, collectively, write their own ghazal, with each member of the group contributing a couplet. This activity is aimed at quite high ability students.

INTRODUCTION

Hafez was a Persian lyrical poet who lived in the fourteenth century, and his ghazals hold a similar place in Iranian culture to that of Shakespeare's sonnets in British culture. They are classic poems, learned by heart by many Iranians, and mostly about love and faith. The fashion of writing ghazals in English is relatively new; the form was introduced to American poetry by Agha Shahid Ali in the 1970s and 80s and Mimi Khalvati is the foremost exponent in British poetry – her past two collections have several ghazals running alongside traditional English forms and free-verse, exemplifying the meeting of East and West that is significant in her work. This poem, 'Ghazal: After Hafez' takes both Eastern images of the marketplace, 'the sun in bazaars', and Western country rivers, 'one glimpse of a chine', and blends them to create an idyllic sense of home.

Ghazal: After Hafez

However large earth's garden, mine's enough.
One rose and the shade of a vine's enough.

I don't want more wealth, I don't need more dross.
The grape has its bloom and it shines enough.

Why ask for the moon? The moon's in your cup,
a beggar, a tramp, for whom wine's enough.

Look at the stream as it winds out of sight.
One glance, one glimpse of a chine's enough.

Like the sun in bazaars, streaming in shafts,
any slant on the grand design's enough.

When you're here, my love, what more could I want?
Just mentioning love in a line's enough.

Heaven can wait. To have found, heaven knows,
a bed and a roof so divine's enough.

I've no grounds for complaint. As Hafez says,
isn't a ghazal that he signs enough?

TASK

Read through the poem aloud with the students. First of all read for meaning. Ask them to work in pairs to write a prose 'translation' of each couplet, e.g.

However large earth's garden, mine's enough.
One rose and the shade of a vine's enough.

could be translated as

The world's massive, but I'm satisfied with my bit of it. Even my little garden, with one rose and the shade of a vine is enough for me.

Go around the class, asking the pairs to read translations of each couplet in turn. Compare the translations, make sure everyone's understood, and ask them if they like the poem for its meaning. Point out that this isn't a 'linear' poem – a narrative in which one event follows another. Instead it's lots of thoughts about the same subject, that could almost be in any order, held together by a shared rhyme and refrain. Would the translations still make sense if you swapped some of the couplets around? Try it and see. Apart from the first and last couplet, which have special features (see below), it's often possible to move couplets around and keep the meaning.

Then talk about the other important element of the poem: its form. There are a few significant ingredients necessary to create a ghazal:

1. The refrain. This appears as the last word or phrase of each couplet. However, in the first couplet it appears in both lines – to get the reader's ear in, so they know what to expect. Traditionally when a ghazal was performed, it was sung, and the audience would join in with the refrain. Can the students spot the refrain here?

2. The rhyme. Unlike in English poetry, the tradition is not to rhyme the last word of the line, but to rhyme the word before the refrain. The rhyme signals to you that the refrain is coming. [*mine's enough / vine's enough*]. It should always be a full rhyme, chiming with the other rhyme words.

3. The signature couplet. It's traditional for the poet to sign off their ghazal by including their own name in the final couplet. Here are some examples from Mimi's other ghazals:

(Ghazal: To Hold Me)

I want Rodolfo to sing, flooding the gods,
Ah, *Mimi!* As if I were her and he, here,
to hold me.

(Ghazal: The Candles Of The Chestnut Trees)

I've searched for sameness all my life
but Mimi, nothing's the same despite
the candles of the chestnut trees.

(Ghazal: It's Heartache)

Let *khalvati*, 'a quiet retreat',
close my ghazal and heal as it may its heartache.

It's absolutely fine to play with the signature couplet and be as creative as you like, as long as there's reference to a name in there. It doesn't even have to be your own name; in our poem, Mimi doesn't sign off her final couplet with a reference to herself, but to Hafez, the name of the poet who inspired her to write ghazals:

(Ghazal: After Hafez)

I've no grounds for complaint. As Hafez says,
isn't a ghazal that he signs enough.

4. The Metre. The metrical structure of older ghazals, whether in Farsi, Arabic, Urdu or even Hebrew, was always quantitative (measuring lengths of short and long syllables) and quite complicated. Many contemporary poets don't bother with a metre when writing ghazals and have decided that having the rhyme and refrain is enough. Others ignore the rhyme too and believe that all a modern ghazal needs is to be in couplets and have a refrain. However, Mimi Khalvati retains all the original features of the ghazal, although she adapts them so that they don't sound too archaic. She even retains the idea that a ghazal should have a regular metrical structure. Ask the students to count the number of syllables in every line of her 'Ghazal: After Hafez'. They will find that every line has the same number of syllables.

1. Now they understand the elements of the Ghazal, it's the students turn to write one. First of all choose a refrain. It could have between one and five words, but I would suggest that, as it's a first attempt, you keep it simple and stick to a one word refrain. You could even borrow Mimi Khalvati's refrain 'enough'.
2. Next, rhyme. Ask one student to suggest a word and then everyone else to give a rhyme. Write them up on the whiteboard so that the students can all see the options. You want a rhyme which has lots and lots of possibility, so don't go for anything polysyllabic or limiting.
3. Agree a number of syllables for each line – more is easier than less, so select a number between 10-15.

4. Then choose subject matter. Come up with a loose theme, rather than anything specific (eg. love, home, school, my country etc.)
5. Go around the room and each pair has to pick one rhyme off the board, so that everyone has a different word. Then each pair should write a couplet which ends with the rhyme and refrain, is about the agreed subject, and has 2 lines, both of a set number of syllables. Give them 5-10 minutes to do so.
6. Come back together as a large group and ask each pair in turn to read out their couplet. As a group, order the couplets so they have the best flow and make most sense. Then collectively, write a first couplet with both lines containing a rhyme and refrain, and a last couplet signing off with your group 'signature'.

If you want to follow-on with an extension activity or homework, students can write their own personal ghazal, with fresh rhymes and a new refrain.

Mimi Khalvati

Writing Home

OVERVIEW

In this activity, students will read Mimi Khalvati's *Writing Home* and explore what it means for a child to go to school in a different country and speak a different language from the rest of his/her family. They will then write a poem about what 'home' means to them. This activity is aimed at Key Stage 4, but can easily be differentiated by ability.

INTRODUCTION

When Mimi Khalvati was six, she was sent from Iran to an English boarding school on the Isle of Wight. In interviews she has explained that she 'needed to learn English urgently, if only to know where to go, what to do, and be in the swim of things.' However, she also 'very quickly forgot how to speak Farsi'.

In this poem she looks back at the letters she wrote from school to her mother. She describes the struggle to understand her school environment, her puzzlement at the crab-apple tree: 'apples can't be eaten, crabs can be planted' but also how little connection she feels to home: 'home / had an empty ring'. As an adult, she wonders whether the letters she wrote had any meaning for her mother. Her letters 'mapped my world, tried to fix / meanings to it' but she didn't know if for her mother in Iran, 'my references / to the small world of a girls' school in England / had any meaning.' Ask the students to read the poem, and then think of it from both points of view: Mimi's and her Mother's. What would it be like to be a child of six at a new school in a foreign country? What would it be like to receive letters from your daughter about a world you didn't understand?

Writing Home

As far back as I remember, 'home'
had an empty ring. Not hollow, but visual
like a place ringed on a map, monochrome
in a white disc. Around it were the usual
laurel hedges, the chine, the hockey pitch,
the bridge. On one side, the crab-apple tree
with its round seat, whose name puzzled me, which
wasn't surprising since everyone but me
seemed to understand such things, take for granted
apples can't be eaten, crabs can be planted.

Writing home meant writing in that ring, mostly
to Mummy. Mummy had a white fur coat
and framed in it her face looked tired and ghostly.
I am very well and happy, I wrote,
meaning it. Sensing somewhere in that frame
a face too far away, too lost, to worry.
And why would I? Worry should keep, like shame,
its head down in dreams. Sorry sorry sorry
I can't write anymore goodbye love Mimi
I wrote after only four lines to Mummy.

There's no irony in that. I was six.
Right from the start, home was an empty space
I sent words to. Mapped my world, tried to fix
meanings to it. Not for me, but to trace
highlights someone could follow: Brownies, Thinking
Day, films; a fathers' hockey match, a play
called Fairy Slippers, picnics, fire drills, swimming.
Even the death of a King. When my birthday?
I wrote at the same time, dropping the 'is',
too proud of my new question mark to notice.

My mother kept all my letters for ten years,
then have them back to me. Perhaps they never
touched her, were intended only for my ears
for I never knew her then or asked whether
she made sense of them, if my references
to the small world of a girls' school in England
had any meaning. It was the fifties. Suez,
Mossadegh, white cardies, Clarks sandals. And,
under the crab-apple tree, taking root,
words in a mouth puckered from wild, sour fruit.

TASK

This activity will help students gather material from which they can write a poem about their own home. Make sure every student has a notepad and pen. You will need a bag of random objects (eg. feather, cup, rubber, book, stone etc.).

The following is a guided writing session. You will give the students prompts, and they will free-write notes in response. After each prompt give them 3-5 minutes to write notes. No longer – this should be quick and instinctive. Tell them spelling and grammar don't matter at this stage, just noting down their thoughts as quickly as possible. They will then have a few pages of prose notes from which to make a poem.

1. Ask the students to imagine themselves walking up to the building they think of as home. What does it look like from the outside?
2. Describe their bedroom – what about it do they like, what do they dislike?
3. A Martian is their new pen-pal. They must pick one item in their room and describe it to the Martian, who has never seen it before and has no idea what it is.
4. Who are the people that make home feel like home? Write about them – what they look like, what their voices sound like, what their relationships are with each other.
5. Each student should pick an object from the bag. Write a description of it – what does it feel like to touch, what does it look like, what does it symbolise? Are there any connections between this object and their home? How could they use this object as a metaphor for their home?

After the free-writing exercise has finished, ask the students, in class or for homework, to look through their notes and use them to write a 10 line poem entitled 'Writing Home'. The poem can be in free-verse. If they are interested in trying out a rhyme-scheme, show them the rhyme-scheme of each of Mimi's stanza's (see below) and suggest they follow this scheme for their own poem: ABABDCDEE.

They could also try two poems – one rhymed and one un-rhymed. How are they different?

Everyone, when writing their poems, should think carefully about address. Is this a first-person poem, like Mimi's, and about writing a letter home? Or is the poem itself the letter? If so, it could be very interesting to use the second person, and address the letter to 'you'.

Moniza Alvi

Presents From My Aunts In Pakistan

OVERVIEW

Moniza Alvi was born in Pakistan but was brought to England when she was still a baby. Throughout her childhood her Aunts sent her and her mother presents of clothes and jewellery, full of mirror-work and Indian gold and in return requested cardigans from Marks and Spencer. This poem uses clothing as a way to talk about the cultural conflicts of growing up mixed race and between two cultures and in the writing activity below, students will use their own clothes as a metaphor to describe being caught between two worlds. The activity is suitable for KS 3/4.

INTRODUCTION

The vivid colours of the salwar kammeez fabric, bring this poem to life, but contrast strongly with the 'denim and corduroy' Alvi longs for and which fit into her 'sitting room'. She empathizes with the beggars of 'no fixed nationality' as she is caught between her Pakistani heritage and her English surroundings. Read the poem carefully with your students (it's available on the web here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english/poemscult/presentsrev2.shtml>) and ask them to go through it and identify how the girl feels at each moment in the poem. Do her feelings shift? How is this reflected by Alvi's descriptions of clothes?

TASK

Ask the students to think about their own lives. Are they ever 'between two worlds'. Do they have relatives in other cultures, speak more than one language, eat different foods? It might be as simple as showing different selves at school and at home – when they put on their uniform or wear their own clothes.

Ask them to write down descriptions of two outfits: their school-clothes and home-clothes, or British-clothes and 'other'-clothes. If they don't have different clothes (perhaps money is an issue), ask them to do it with 'ideal' outfits – (1), what they really wear, and (2), the clothes they would wear if they could magically be dressed in anything they want. They then have to create a poem about 'Outfit Three' which they are giving as a gift to someone in another country, or even another universe. It should combine elements from their first two outfits, and so reflect various parts of their life and personality. Do the different elements go together? What does each piece of clothing say about person and place? Are different items of clothing suitable for different occasions, for different times or locations? How would the students explain this to someone who knew nothing about their world?

Moniza Alvi

The Veil

OVERVIEW

In this activity, students will read Moniza Alvi's poem 'The Veil' and think about what the veil means in today's society. They will then collect newspaper articles and information from the internet about veils, and use them to write their own, collage, poem, on the same subject. This should help students think about 'The Veil' in a more complex way and also understand the difference between journalism and creative writing.

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is not political rhetoric. A polemical statement about 'The Veil' might be emphatic and heartfelt, but it will also be closed – 'The Veil IS...'; 'The Veil DOES'. Moniza Alvi's poem doesn't present us a reductive statement, instead she gives us lots and lots of images. Ask the students to go through the poem carefully, line by line, word by word: how many different instances of things being veiled can they find in the poem? And in each case ask them to think about whether the veil is protective or concealing. Ultimately, what do they think Moniza Alvi is saying about the Veil and its meaning? And how would they say this differs to a political discussion about the Veil?

TASK

Give the students a pile of fashion magazines and news articles printed out from the internet about the veil. Ask them to cut out lots and lots of words to create a 'word-choard'

- When gathering a word-choard, think about ensuring you have a variety of vocabulary to allow flexibility.
- You may prefer to use individual words to phrases as phrases limit imagination and restrict the language options. However for weaker students or to speed up the process, you may wish to use phrases.
- Once you have a word-choard gathered it's often useful to sort it into categories e.g. different types of words (linking words separate from main words) or words that rhyme, have certain numbers of syllables.
- Lay out words in phrases and move them about. Be absolutely certain that you want this phrase in this position before you stick it down as it's much harder to make changes than in a regular drafting process.
- Set up the rules beforehand – will you allow students to include some of their own words to make it easier for them? If so, how many? Do they have to cut

their punctuation out of newspapers too or do they have free rein? Are you (the teacher / leader) going to cut out an extra stash of words to be available for those whose word- hoard is lacking or will you be strict about limiting them to their own words?

Like Moniza Alvi's, their poem will also have the title 'The Veil' and their poem has to address this topic, but can only use vocabulary from their word-hoard and should be made by gluing the words onto a blank page of A4.

Afterwards, ask the students to type them up / write them out and to make changes: they can introduce punctuation, extra words, and repeat words or phrases as a refrain. They should be encouraged to introduce lots of repetition and rhythm to give their poems momentum.

The students can then read their poems out loud. Did taking words from fashion magazines or from news articles make a difference to the content or tone of their poem? Did their whole poem say one opinion about the veil or, like Alvi's, was it a reflection on different meanings and possibilities? Was it political, factual or metaphorical? Is there a difference between writing political poetry and political journalism? Why might both be important?

Saradha Soobrayen

Mo Ti Bébé

OVERVIEW

Saradha Soobrayen is an emerging poet, living in London. Her family is Mauritian and Soobrayen describes writing 'Mo Ti Bébé' ('My Little One') as a way to capture the sounds and rhythms of her grandmother's voice. She has written the same poem in both Creole and English, dropping articles and using powerful verbs in the English version, to try and capture the unstructured nature of the Creole language that her grandmother and parents spoke. The narrator is a mother; her poem addressed to 'you', the baby who gives her no rest, until the last stanza when the mother swaddles the child in traditional style, hoping the wind will rock it to sleep. In the following exercise, the students will create a 'doing' poem, exploring how careful use of verbs can change the mood and give the poem a specific momentum.

INTRODUCTION

Ask the students to read the poem and identify the 'you' and the 'me' in the poem. How would they describe the relationship? What is the atmosphere of the poem? How would they describe the emotions of the narrator? How do they think the poet had created these feelings? The poem is built from verbs, driving forward and escalating the tension. The reader, like the narrator, is allowed no break from the child as 'You twist, you turn, you clench /you kick, you push, you pull / you fight your sleep'. Ask the students to go through the poem and count the total number verbs the 'you' performs. How does the tone of 'you smile' in the penultimate stanza of the poem differ from the tone and movement of the rest of the baby's actions up to that point?

TASK

After they have read and responded to 'Mo Ti Bébé', ask the students to get in groups of three or four. Ask them as a group to pick one verb from the poem eg. cry, jump, push and improvise a scenario in which each member of the group performs that same verb in a different way or with a different emotion – eg. jump for joy, jump over a puddle, jump up and down with anger etc. They should then act out their scenario to the rest of the class who try and guess what the action is, and what scenes and emotions are being portrayed. By the end of this, everyone in the group should see how it is possible to use verbs as a way into creating moods.

Now, ask them to work individually and choose one mood or emotion they have seen performed in the class, and write down a list of ten verbs which could evoke this emotion / mood. Then ask them to choose a different mood / emotion and list five verbs which evoke the second choice. Once they have lots of material to work from, ask them to write a narrative poem, using first and second person. They can divide the poem in the same way, and include in the first two thirds of the poem at least six of the verbs which evoke the first mood. Then their poem should change mood and the last third of the poem should contain at least three of the verbs which evoke their second mood. If they prefer, they can alternate between the two moods throughout the poem. Afterwards, if they want to, they could read their poems out to each other, and see if the others recognise the moods they are trying to evoke. If not, they should then re-edit their poems until they fully capture the emotions that they wish to portray.

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