



**Julie Blake** reflects on the experience of Poetry By Heart, and suggests how memorising and reciting poems can transform the way we engage with, feel about and understand poetry.

Imagine this: thousands of young people in the 'exam years' at secondary school freely spending time learning two poems by heart. One poem is published before 1914, one poem after, from a selection of 200 poems spanning 600 years; almost 80% of the poems get picked.

Imagine a Year 10 lad saying of his choices: 'Oh I wish I'd done my Tennyson instead'. Instead? Unable to choose between so many poems he had found to love, he learned six.

Imagine this: teachers in hundreds of secondary schools and colleges organising a contest so that their students can share their poetry learning accomplishments.

Imagine a school in which every form is challenged to give it a go, all 700 pupils getting at least a taste of some differently flavoured words in their mouths, form champions emerging who had no idea they were good at *this*, and a festival of poetry culminating in a whole school contest.

**Sarveen:** 'I think the key is, when you're performing, to really lose yourself, because when you're in the poem then everyone else is and I think that's really important.'

**Faye:** 'I spoke to everyone and they were all like 'we're very nervous', but I think that when it does come up to you going up to your poem, this is your poem, you've learnt it, you've got this special link with the poem. Remember that.'

Imagine this: your school champion is at a county contest in a local library or community arts venue and the MC, a vibrant local poet, announces the winner. Your student – and you – are on your way to the expenses-paid grand finals weekend to compete to become regional and then national champion.

Imagine your student on a national stage, the audience holding its breath, willing him or her to be wonderful, loving the poetry, celebrating these remarkable achievements by young people, and then the rapturous applause. Imagine meeting poets Andrew Motion, Jean Sprackland, Daljit Nagra, Owen Sheers, Jacob Sam-La Rose, Patience Agbabi, and hearing Roger McGough introduce your student recite their poem on BBC Radio 4's *Poetry Please*.

**Poetry By Heart**

This is not fantasy: it's Poetry By Heart, the two-year old national poetry recitation competition for pupils in England aged 14-18. It is an educational initiative of The Poetry Archive, developed in association with The Full English, and supported in different ways by Oxford University Press, BBC Radio 4's *Poetry Please*, the National Association of Writers in Education, Writing West Midlands, The Poetry Society and Homerton College Cambridge.

Just for independent schools? No: 76% of registered schools are state schools, 44% are academies, the 2013 winner was from a Sixth Form College, the 2014 winner was from an LEA maintained comprehensive school.

Just for Year 12/13 pupils? No: 28% of the 2014 national finalists were in Year 10, and two of those were placed 2nd and 3rd nationally.

So far, so good – but if there is one thing we have learned it is this: that many if not most teachers in England have no personal experience of memorising and reciting poems. We suspect it might be different in Scotland with Burns Night recitations and in Wales with its Eistedfodd traditions, and we know it is different in Ireland, but in England it is a performance art we are having to re-learn in order to revive it. The question is, why bother?

**Owning poems in the heart**

The short answer is that The Poetry Archive exists to help people enjoy poetry, and especially through the powerful auditory experience of hearing a poet read their work. The Archive is the premier online collection of recordings of English language poets from all over the world reading their own work – and contemporary poets reading the work of 'classic' poets who lived



before electronic recording technologies existed.

Poets have long known the power of learning poems by heart: Ted Hughes writes about it in his afterword to the hugely popular schools anthology, *The School Bag*, edited with Seamus Heaney. Seamus Heaney argued as recently as March 2013 that memorising poetry was an important way of developing a 'cultural ear' that could not start soon enough. The Poetry Archive developed the Poetry By Heart competition to help young people encounter poems not as objects for metalinguistic dissection and examination performativity but to be owned in the heart and shared in embodied moments of thoughtful speaking and pin-dropped listening.

But still, what does it *do*? That is the question we didn't – still don't – have a formulated answer to. I had an instinctive sense that this would be fun and good for poetry teaching and learning but I had almost no personal experience of it. I enjoyed poetry as a child and had memorised things – Maths formulae, the whole of my O Level French vocabulary book, the lyrics of any number of dreadful 1970s songs – but the only encouragement to learn poetry had been about learning 'quotes' for exams: a word or phrase, a line or two to gain extra marks for pith and polish. These lines and phrases have stayed with me all my life.

**Understanding by experiencing**

Undeterred, and as part of proving the pudding by eating it, I set myself the challenge of learning a poem I had never read before and to perform it as part of a Year 6 pupil workshop. I found my way to an anthology

**"Poetry By Heart was developed to help young people own poems in the heart and share them in moments of pin-dropped listening."**

**Nessa:** 'Remember that your audience is appreciative of poetry, so you're in good hands, and really just to give it your best shot. Don't worry what your interpretation of the poem is like, just say it the way you feel is best.'

**Phoenix:** *'It's so important to remember that it's not necessarily a competition, I mean, it is formally, but just coming up here and doing it, it's more like a show or like a festival of poetry, so you should just enjoy it. Show that process of enjoyment when you read that poem first – you've got to show it on stage, and that's really enjoyable to watch.'*



**“76% of schools registered with Poetry By Heart are state schools and the 2014 winner was from an LEA maintained comprehensive school.”**

called *I Like This Poem* edited by Kaye Webb for Puffin Poetry, subtitled 'A collection of best-loved poems chosen by children for other children'. There I found my poem: 'Lone Dog' by Irene McLeod, sister in law to A.A. Milne, mother-in-law to Christopher Robin.

Rhyming, emphatically rhythmic, hopelessly Romantic, the dog a cuffed and kicked underdog, it had everything my inner child refuses to part with. Topping that was 8-year-old Brian Fulton's introduction in which he explains that he liked it '...because it reminds me of when I was little I was rough and tough. It is also about an animal and I like animals. I like the bit where it says hunting on my own, because I go hunting.' The poem is in copyright so can't easily be reproduced here but it is widely anthologised for children.

That was the first step: choosing a poem I instinctively loved. Robert Pinsky, the former US Poet Laureate, specifies just two criteria for poetry in education: first, make it an embodied learning experience, through listening to it and speaking it; second, let young people have some choices in what they read.

The next step: reading the poem for meaning. My initial reading of this simple little poem focused on the dog: he is a 'lone' and 'lean' underdog in a society of lapdogs and 'fat souls', relishing his rangy freedom and the adventure of life as 'quest'. I noticed the sudden temperature drop in the last line of the second stanza: from breezy swagger to all those 'ands' piling up in a catalogue of harsh experience 'shut door and sharp stone and cuff and kick and hate'.

**Entering the Memory Temple**

Step three was to learn the words. I used the Memory Temple, an ancient technique for memorisation in which you associate the things you want to remember with a sequence of images located in a familiar building, such as your house. To recall the information, you mentally walk through the building, see the images and recall what is associated with them.

The most important finding from my road test is that it is much easier to 'do' the Memory Temple than it is to explain it, but I'll try to 'demonstrate' what I did. Bear with it: using this method, within twenty minutes I had approximately the right words in the right line-sequence, in three stanzas.

In the first line I focused on the word 'lean' and thought of the narrow passageway that goes from the hall in my house, past the stairs and out to the utility room. I imagined standing with the walls so close I could almost feel them pressing inwards, a sensation that seemed to fit with 'lean' and 'keen'. Next I mentally looked down at the stripped pine floor, a rather timeworn floor with some jagged splinters, a perfect memory 'hook' for 'rough' in the second line. When I look back up there is a wallpaper border running along the wall on my right hand side in which grinning cartoon sheep gambol in a cartoon field; I 'pin' this to the next line. There isn't any such thing in my house, but my imagination is getting in the swing of it now! Then I've moved forwards and I'm sitting outside the utility room with the Man In The Moon winking down at me through the window in the back door: this fixes the 'bay the moon' line.

I'm onto the second stanza and my journey through the house continues. I have moved into the utility room and a pair of muddy boots by the back door fixes 'dirty feet'. Next to the muddy boots is a dish of rabbit-flavoured Pedigree Chum with its delicious chunks of meat nestled in amongst glistening brown jelly. This is implausible as I Don't Do Pets, but the preposterousness of the idea fixes the 'cringing for my meat' line. I am half way through!

Now I'm out of the back door and standing on the decking outside. There is a big green kettle barbecue with deliciously un-charred sausages sizzling away on it. I turn away in my mind's eye and I'm virtually growling the 'well-filled plate' line. Then I'm out of the back gate with it shut behind me, I'm looking at the rough stone wall running in front of me and I have the last line in place.

**Mark:** *'Take your time. Because it's your time – make the most of it, don't rush it, enjoy it. If you need to take a pause, take a pause – breathe, don't rush and let your nerves get the better of you.'*

**Tom:** *'It was just quite nerve-wracking getting up there first, but once it was all over I was glad that I had done it, and I really did enjoy it.'*

Then the poem takes over – it's fanciful but I imagine the lone dog taking over too. We're outside, we're free, the Jack Russell on the other side of the sharp stone wall is running along the width of their garden barking and the 'Not for me' repetition means I have the next couplet in a second. Now, suddenly, I AM the lone dog; I've leapt over dozens of garden walls; I'm up on the Downs, high above the Avon gorge; it's night, the sky is studded with stars and I'm sniffing the wind. I have the poem and I am completely surprised and delighted.

**Detailed acts of noticing**

It takes a week to embed the poem: I retrace my steps through the Memory Temple and after a few days I no longer need this support. I keep checking back to the poem and I start thinking about how to perform it. This is where things got really interesting. First, I kept getting the order of the words in a muddle. In this particular poem there are lots of pairs of parallel adjectives, sometimes rhyming, sometimes not: is it 'lean' and 'keen', or 'keen' and 'lean'? Likewise, is it 'rough/tough' or 'tough/rough'; 'bad/mad' or 'mad/bad'; and so on? I develop ways of remembering these: it has to be lean first because it balances in an alliterative way the final word in the line, 'lone'; 'rough' comes before 'tough' because R comes before T in the alphabet; 'bad' comes before 'mad' because 'mad' is of a higher incremental order of badness. These are solutions to a memory problem but they are also detailed acts of noticing, a first step to understanding anything and especially language, structure and form in a poem.

I started thinking about the character of the dog and how he would speak but that got me nowhere. I had a few goes at speaking in a sort of cool doggy growl, but the sing-song rhythm of the poem utterly undermined that and besides, this is a poem written by a poet, not a transcript of a dog talking (or a translation of a dog barking). Remembering the idea that a poet is not so much adopting a persona as speaking from behind a mask, I was quickly freed from the growl and bared incisors. It also opened up a wider space in the poem: the slightly sentimental, washed-out Romanticism became a tauter appeal from an early twentieth-century middle-class woman trapped on the other side of the urge for freedom and adventure. I didn't need a study guide to tell me what the poem 'really meant'; the working out of the poem's voice laid open the possibilities.

**Getting the rhythm**

This gave me some clues about how to think about the rhythm. I'd started off thinking about the poem as a breezy jaunt so my first efforts used the rhythm in that way, intensifying the strong beats, reducing the weak



beats to give the poem a jaunty 'up and down' motion. I noted in a more formal way that the poem at least starts in anapaestic meter (two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one), a meter that can give a poem a rollicking motion that is often associated with comic verse. Not everyone knows that, or perhaps wants to know, but reciting a poem *forces* you to make choices about how to say the lines, and it is impossible to do that without attending to rhythm. Having attempted on countless occasions to teach poetic metre and rhythm without students being able to 'feel' it, I can only feel rather sorry I didn't know this before.

I experimented for a while with the humorous possibilities of the poem: I emphasised the parallel words to make them sound like a child's delighted word-rhyming; I tried drawing out 'bad' and 'mad' to make them sound as if they were in scare quotes; I emphasised the alliteration in the phrase 'silly sheep' to make it sound more absurd. It didn't really work, though, because once you get to the middle of the poem and you've said the word 'hate' aloud, it's hard to read the final stanza without a feeling of quietly mounting desperation. The insistence that the 'lone' and 'hard' trail is 'the best' becomes an act of solitary and rather desperate defiance in the face of an intransigent and rigid world. I didn't need convincing that form and meaning are inextricably linked – my English teacher was a poet – but here was a lesson on a plate if I had needed it.

**Finding the meanings we're ready to make**

I went back to the rhythm and looked at it again. Some lines could be read in quite different ways,

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**Summer:** *'I learned a few poems and performed them all, in front of an audience, and whichever one they thought I communicated my meaning best with, I chose those ones.'*

**Kieran:** *‘When you’re working on the recital of a poem, you’re always in a team of two: there’s you and there’s the poem, and the poem really has to be its own stage directions – everything comes from inside that. You just have to find a way not to get in its way.’*

“I learned that people love hearing a poem recited, and that they listen with a depth I have never encountered elsewhere.”



especially the longer final lines of each stanza: ‘I love to sit and bay the moon and keep fat souls from sleep’. I read it first as an iambic heptameter {-/ -/ -/ -/ -/ -/} creating a slowing effect, the lone dog savouring his easy control. That didn’t feel right so I tried it with four strong beats. When I recited the poem like this, shifting between regular anapaests {/- -} and the potentially more chaotic tumbling of feet with an extra unstressed syllable {/ - -}, I hoped to create a performance that would hold in tension the fragile balance between control and chaos that I wanted to find in the poem. In fact, I’m not nearly a good enough performer to be able to do that convincingly, but a deeper level of understanding came from giving it a go.

In this textured out-loud reading, the poem went from being a cute dog poem to one which enacts the poet’s mask gradually slipping off. It became evidence, proved countless times over in Poetry By Heart, that age-stamping poems is a fool’s errand. Though I’m not advocating giving nine year olds ‘The Wasteland’ just yet, it is in the nature of poetry that it allows us to find the meanings we’re ready to make. Meaning *does* lie within the form of the poem, but it *also* lies outside it. That’s what makes it what Andrew Motion called, in his speech at the first launch of Poetry By Heart, ‘a form of two-way travelling, at once into ourselves and back out again’.

### A risk worth taking

I then performed my poem. Not yet to the Year 6 pupils but to assorted adults I have assailed in the manner of the Ancient Mariner, and to this year’s Poetry By Heart finalists. I learned what a risk you take when you do so: the sweaty hands, the nervous apologies and hesitations, the gut-wrenching fear of failure. But I also learned that people love hearing a poem recited, however haltingly; that they listen with a depth I have never encountered elsewhere; and they waft you along, welcoming, supportive and endlessly forgiving, triumphing with you when you reach the end. It is a risk – but one worth taking.

Poetry By Heart launches again for 2015 at NATE conference in Bristol at the end of June. You can register to take part, receive news updates or regular blogposts about poetry teaching and learning at [www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/](http://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/). In the meantime, we have a summer Facebook challenge for you and your students: check out the advert in this magazine.

*Note: the quotes featured throughout this article are real quotes from interviews with finalists, but the students’ names have been changed.*

**Julie Blake**

is Education Director of The Poetry Archive.

**Anderson:** *‘It was quite difficult at first to be in the mind-set of what the poet had intended to come across, but through learning the poem, which is what this is all about, you do start to – without communicating with the person themselves – deeply understand what it means. I think that’s the powerful thing about poetry and why things like this competition are so important to society, because we have to remember that we are living in a modern world now where there’s technology everywhere but I still think it’s good to have something that’s been going on for hundreds of thousands of years, connecting us physically as well as emotionally.’*

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