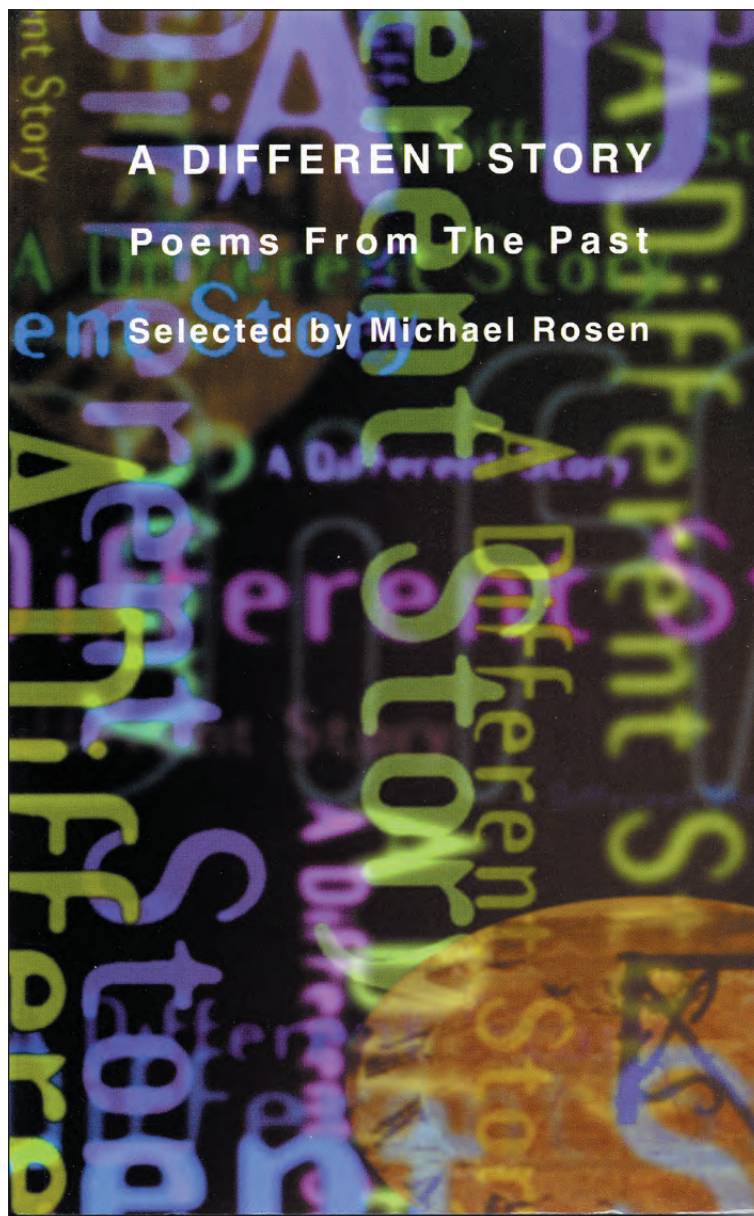


A Different Story



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A Different Story

Acknowledgements

Selection by Michael Rosen with Barbara Bleiman, Sabrina Broadbent and Emma Henderson.

Activities by Barbara Bleiman.

Additional Material by John Stephens and Sabrina Broadbent.

Anthology Edited by Barbara Bleiman.

Design: Fran Stowell.

Front Cover: Dave Bradshaw.

© The English & Media Centre, 18 Compton Terrace N1 2UN

Printed by BPCC Wheatons.

ISBN 0 907016 05 7

Introduction

In schools and colleges, collections of poetry are often put before us to study. When these are collections of several poets, then the book makes a statement like ‘these poems are worth studying’ or ‘this is what poetry is’. So what kind of poetry do we find in such books? Nearly always it has been poems by people who are regarded by teachers in universities as ‘great’. Anyone who has studied English at university can recite their names like a nursery rhyme: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Pope, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Browning, Tennyson, Eliot, Auden, Hughes, Heaney. But if this is the only poetry we read, a lot gets left out. Hidden from view over hundreds of years have been other kinds of poetry. That is the underlying idea of this anthology: to present some poems that have been hidden away. So why have they been hidden? Where? What kinds of people wrote them?

Some were hidden because they were women, some because they were poor, some because they weren’t written down in books, some because they were thought to be dangerous. Some of these people, like Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe* are names known all over the world for their writing, even if the poem in this collection is not one often seen. Others are people ‘discovered’ in recent years, their writing having lain about in libraries for years. Aphra Behn, playwright, novelist, poet and spy was missing from English syllabuses for years. There are plenty of examples of ‘anon’ here too, which can mean, ‘nobody knows who sat down and wrote this,’ or ‘it wasn’t written by any *one* person but was changed and shaped by many people as it was passed on’. This means that very unfamous people have been involved in making some of the poems here: peasants, slaves, miners, tombstone makers, say, and a rather strange breed of person, the ballad-seller, someone who made his living travelling about the country with a pack of poems on funny, tragic themes or topical events to sell them to make a living.

So, what we have here is not easily given a label or a pigeon-hole in the way literary books usually are. But one way to look at it is to say that things that are hidden away are often surprising, strange, exciting and different.

Michael Rosen

Contents

	Page	Activity
An Anglo-Saxon Riddle	6	94
Death	7	
A Betrayed Maiden's Lament	8	
On Nought	9	
The Covetous Man	10	97
Wicked Tongues	12	
A Servant Girl's Holiday	14	
The Schoolboy	16	99
The Death of Queen Jane	18	110
Out of Sight, Out of Mind	20	
Brissit Brawniss	21	
The Passionate Shepherd to His Love	22	100
The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd	23	100
The Furies	24	125
The Lowest Trees Have Tops	25	
Of Treason	26	
These Fatlings Feast	26	
This Island's Mine	27	
The Hill to Hell	28	
On My Boy Henry	30	
The Wooing Rogue	31	100
On Tobacco	32	
What Faith?	34	
A House She Hath	35	
A North Midlands 'Miners' Law' Verse	35	
Song: The Willing Mistress	36	
'The Art of Love' - Instructions to a Man	37	
Rich and Poor	38	
Trail All Your Pikes	38	125
A Last Will and Testament	39	
What is an Englishman?	42	
To the Ladies	44	103
Clever Tom Clinch Going To Be Hanged	45	112
The Dream	46	
A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed	47	105
Epigram on the Collar of a Dog	50	
In Memory of Mr. Peter Daniels	50	
Here Lies Fred	51	
A Woman to Her Lover	52	
Midas's Touch	53	
A Glazier's Verse	53	

	Page	Activity
Here Lie I	54	
Guinea Corn	55	
The Fate of Those Who Go for Soldiers	56	125
The Volunteer	58	125
Supper is Na Ready	60	
The Common and the Goose	60	
The Pottery Worker	61	
The Twa Corbies	62	
What is Slavery?	64	
The Factory Girl's Last Day	66	
Epitaph to Castlereagh	68	
Ah Sidney!	68	
The Foddering Boy	69	108
The Engineer's Epitaph	70	109
The Fine, Old English Gentleman	71	
No!	73	
The Recruited Collier	74	125
Monster Science	76	
The Slave Mother	78	
We Raise The Wheat	80	
What I Know Is Me	80	
My Lord Tomnoddy	81	
The Factory Bell	84	
Two Strings to a Bow	86	
Is it Fair?	86	
The Greatest Bore	87	
Some English Prisons	87	
A London Fete	88	112
Cork and Work and Card and Ward	90	
Fight? What For?	91	125
John Bun	91	
The Death of Queen Jane	92	110
Activities Section	93	
Activities on Individual Poems	94	
Work on the Anthology as a Whole	113	
Exploring a Poem	114	
Performing Poems	117	
Re-organising the Anthology into Themes	121	
Making Your Own Selection of Poems	122	
Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells	124	
Poems About War and Soldiering	125	

An Anglo-Saxon Riddle

Moth word ate me that thought

amazing event when I that wonder heard

thief in darkness glorious saying

and that strong foundation steal-guest (i.e. thief) not was

whit the wiser when he those words swallowed

Anon, c. 975

Death

Whenne mine eynen misteth
And mine eren sisseth¹
And my nose coldeth
And my tunge foldeth²
And my rude slaketh³
And mine lippes blaketh⁴
And my mouth grenneth⁵
And my spotel renneth⁶
And myn her riseth⁷
And myn herte griseth⁸
And mine handen bivieth⁹
And mine feet stivieth¹⁰
Al to late, al to late
Whenne the bere¹¹ is at the gate!
Thenne I shal flit
From bedde to flore,
From flore to here,¹²
From here to bere,
From bere to pit,
And the pit fordit,¹³
Thenne lith myn hous uppe¹⁴ myn nese:
Of al this world ne give ich a pese!¹⁵

Anon, c.1275-1300

1. hiss
2. fails, folds up
3. my colour fades
4. grow pale
5. gapes? grins?
6. my spittle runs
7. stands on end
8. quakes

9. shake
10. stiffen
11. bier
12. hair-shroud
13. will shut
14. upon
15. a pea

A Betrayed Maiden's Lament

*I haue for-sworne hit whil I life
to wake the well-ey.¹*

The last tyme I the wel woke²
Ser Iohn caght me with a croke,
he made me to swere be bel & boke³
I shuld not tell [-ey.]

Yet he did me a wel wors turne,
he leyde my hed agayn the burne,⁴
he gafe my mayden-hed a spurne⁵
and rofe my kell [-ey.]⁶

Sir Iohn came to oure hows to play
ffro evensong tyme til light of the day;
we made as mery as flowres in may—
I was begyled-ay.

Sir Iohn he came to our hows,
he made hit wondur copious⁷
he seyde that I was gracious⁸
to beyre a childe-ey.

I go with childe, wel I wot;⁹
I schrew¹⁰ the fadur that hit gate,
with-outen¹¹ he fynde hit mylke and pap
a long while-ey.

Anon, c.1350

1. I have given up doing it
when I spend the night, for as
long as I live.

2. spent the night

3. by the bell and the book (the
Bible)

4. well

5. a stroke

6. took my virginity

7. brought lots of presents

8. lucky

9. I know full well

10. curse

11. unless

On Nought

He that spendes myche & getes nothing,
And owthe myche & hathe nothing,
And lokes in his porse & fyndes nothing,
he may be sorye and saie nothing.

Quothe K.L.

Anon, c.1350

Re-organising the Anthology into Themes

This anthology has been organised in chronological order. In other words, it starts with the earliest poem, an Anglo-Saxon riddle and ends with a poem written in the early twentieth century.

It could have been organised differently. Many anthologies group poems by theme. If you were going to re-organise the anthology by theme, what theme headings would you choose?

1. Go through the anthology, looking at the poems and decide on what subjects and themes are dealt with in the poems. Discuss alternative headings for the themes. For instance, there might be a heading about Love/Relationships/Sexuality/Male and Female Lives/Marriage. Which of these headings would you choose? Would you want more than one of them?

2. Choose one of your theme headings to explore more fully. List all of the poems that you think should be included under your heading.
Read all of the poems under your heading.
Find two that strike you as similar in some way.
Make a chart headed:

Similarities	Differences

Use it to record what you notice in comparing the two poems.

- 3.** Prepare a reading of the poems and an oral presentation in which you:
- describe the similarities and differences between the two poems;
 - say why you chose the two poems and what you like about them.

Making Your Own Selection of Poems (1)

Dip into the anthology, reading whatever takes your fancy and noting down titles of poems you particularly like.

Pick your three favourite poems. Share them with a partner.

Try doing any of these things with your poems:

- learn one of them off by heart to recite to the class;
- do a drawing/painting that expresses the ideas/the feelings/the images in one of the poems;
- prepare a reading/performance of your collection of six poems, with a brief introduction to the reading and to each of the poems.

Making Your Own Selection of Poems (2)

Working as pairs, choose two poems to be read at each of the following occasions:

- a Valentine's Day party;
- a funeral;
- a poetry reading for parents, organised by the PTA;
- an event to raise money for a war-torn country.

Join up with another pair. Compare your choices and justify them to each other.