

## AQA Poetry Anthology – Power and Conflict Collection (Part 3)

*Including: Remains, Poppies, War Photographer, Tissue, The Emigree, Checking Out Me History and Kamikaze*

### Remains (Simon Armitage)

#### **Context**

Simon Armitage is a famous modern poet from Yorkshire. His poetry tends to be approachable and colloquial in style. Armitage's poetry often focuses on relationships, or personal feelings.

In 2007 Armitage made a programme for Channel 4 called 'The Not Dead'. He also wrote a collection of poems (including *Remains*) under the same title. In preparation Armitage interviewed a number of soldiers who had fought in wars, including the Gulf War. *Remains* seems to relate to the Gulf War as he mentions 'desert sand'.

#### **Content**

Given Armitage's colloquial style, the poem is fairly easy for us to follow. The speaker is a soldier who, while out on patrol with some other soldiers, came across a looter and shot him. Although the body is quickly taken away, the bloodstains on the ground remain and haunt the soldier as he goes on more patrols in the same area. We then hear how the speaker is affected when he returns home. He can't stop thinking about the man he killed. He is tormented by the event.

#### **Form and Structure**

There are eight stanzas. All but the last of the stanzas are fairly regular unrhymed quatrains (a stanza of four lines). The final stanza is only two lines. This abrupt end stands out to the reader and is done to emphasise how the soldier cannot stop thinking about killing the man. It also links to the 'drink and drugs' in suggesting that the speaker is losing control and is mentally unwell. The poem is split roughly in half – the first four stanzas cover the event, while the last four stanza describe the effects on the speaker.

*Remains* is written as a monologue (a speech by one person speaking alone) and the language used makes it feel like the soldier is speaking directly to the reader, retelling his story. This sense of ordinary speech is enhanced by the lack of any regular rhythm and the use of enjambment (where a sentence or clause continues over a line break).

#### **Language**

The title, 'Remains', has a double meaning for the speaker. It literally refers to the physical remains of the man who has been shot, while also relating to the memory of the shooting that forever remains in the speaker's mind.

Throughout the poem Armitage uses colloquial language to make it seem as though the speaker is directly telling us his story. Phrases like, 'On another occasion', 'legs it up the road' and 'end of story' make it seem like this is spoken English. 'On another occasion' also suggests the speaker has been through many similarly bad experiences. The phrase 'probably armed, possibly not' is repeated to show how this guilt around whether they needed to shoot has haunted him.

It is also interesting that despite the detailed description of the shooting, we do not know the names or any real details about the speaker and his two comrades. The use of: 'somebody else and somebody else' and 'three of a kind' shows us how this could be any soldier. They would all have had very similar, horrifying experiences.

At a few points the language Armitage chooses also alludes to Shakespeare's Macbeth. In this poem the speaker talks of his disturbed sleep, which links to Macbeth's line that 'Macbeth doth murder sleep' after he has murdered the King. Furthermore, the poem finishes with the description of his 'bloody hands', which links the reader to Lady Macbeth's madness following the murder. Lady Macbeth's guilt drives her mad to the extent that she cannot wash the imaginary bloodstains from her hands.

### **Imagery**

The image created of the shooting is violent and graphic. We hear how:

- each bullet 'ripped through his life';
- the body was 'sort of inside out'; and
- the speaker's mate 'tosses his guts back into his body.'

The gory descriptions highlight the trauma of the event and how intensely it has affected the soldier.

Armitage creates a couple of vivid images to highlight the violence and gore of the soldier's experience and the extent to which he is haunted by the memory. The speaker talks of a 'blood-shadow' left on the ground where the dead man fell. At face value this simply describes the bloodstain left on the ground, but think beyond this and the 'shadow' becomes a metaphor for the memory of the looter and the shooting, which the speaker cannot shake off.

Similarly, the military image of the dead man 'dug in behind enemy lines' in the speaker's head emphasises how the horrible experience - and guilt that the speaker feels - has become a constant mental trauma for him.

Finally the landscape is also described to the reader with the use of sibilance (the repetition of soft consonants - in this case an 's'). 'Sun-stunned, sand-smothered land' emphasises the alien environment for the soldier and the distance from which the event still haunts him.

### **Themes**

*Remains* has some important themes running through it:

- **Conflict** – the speaker is a soldier fighting a war in a distant land. He follows orders with his comrades, but the consequences of violence and death are played out in the poem.
- **Guilt** – guilt haunts the soldier. When he returns home he cannot do anything without remembering the killing. The speaker feels particularly guilty because he doesn't know if the looter was armed. He doesn't know if the shooting was necessary.

## Poppies (Jane Weir)

### **Context**

When this poem was written British soldiers were fighting and dying in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the time the Poet Laureate (Carol Ann Duffy) asked a number of writers to write poems to try and reflect the pain caused by deaths in the conflicts. Jane Weir was one of those asked and she put together this poem, which is set in the present, but has a timeless element going all the way back to the end of the First World War in 1918 and the beginning of the poppy tradition of remembrance.

Armistice Sunday began in Britain after the end of the First World War as a way of remembering all those who had died in the war. It has since grown into a national act of remembrance for all those who have fought and died in wars.

### **Content**

The speaker in this poem is a mother who has lost her son in the war in Iraq or Afghanistan. The poem is her expression of the thoughts and feelings of grief that have overtaken her. She simultaneously talks about the present, her son's childhood and hints at his death in a far off conflict.

### **Form and Structure**

At first glance the poem seems to be structured in a regular, but slightly unusual, four stanzas, with short 6 line opening and closing stanzas and longer 11 and 12 line middle stanzas. There are, however, a lot of caesuras (pauses in the middle of lines marked by punctuation) and enjambment (where lines run on) creating an uneven rhythm. It's clear that Weir has done this to reflect the grief of the speaker and the irregular nature of her memories as she tries to remain calm, while dealing with the raw emotion of loss.

The narrative structure (order of how the story is told) is also constantly in flux. The sequencing of the speaker's memories is not in order and changes several times in the poem. We begin with "three days before" then the speaker remembers "before you left" and "when you were little". Finally we hear that "this is where it has led me" – returning us to the present with the speaker. Again this helps to reflect the nature of grief and how the speaker is trying to deal with her emotions.

### Language and Imagery

Weir uses vivid descriptions of the son as a man and as a child to emphasise the mourning of the speaker. 'Smoothed down your upturned collar', 'run my fingers through the gelled blackthorns of your hair' and 'play at being Eskimos like we did when you were little', all provide personal detail to the narrative and show the reader a sense of the speaker's pain.

There are numerous uses of violent, military language and references to injury throughout the poem. 'Blockade', 'reinforcements', and 'bandaged' are examples of how Weir creates military images while referring to everyday things; and makes it clear that the son has been wounded and killed in war.

Enjambment occurs between lines and stanzas to create a sense that the speaker is talking directly to us and to highlight the emotional state she is in, remembering and mourning her son.

Towards the end of the poem Weir introduces images of the songbird and the dove. The speaker 'released a song bird from its cage' as a metaphor for sending her son off to join the army and fight. Later – when the focus has shifted to the mother's visit to the war memorial – 'the dove pulled freely against the sky, an ornamental stitch'. This is open to interpretation and you should have a think about what your take on it is. The dove symbolises peace. Weir may be using the dove as a metaphor for the death of the son and the final peace he has found in death.

### Themes

- **Conflict** – Much of the language used is related to the military and to conflict. It is implied that the son has been badly injured before dying in a distant conflict.
- **Loss (physical and emotional)** - the speaker is in mourning and deeply affected by the loss of her son in war.
- **Remembrance/ grieving process** – poppies symbolise remembrance and the dove symbolises peace. The reader is given a clear sense of the mother's pain and loss.

## War Photographer (Carol Ann Duffy)

### Context

Duffy wrote this poem to reflect on her thoughts and feelings about a friend of hers who was a war photographer. The photographer traveled to some of the worst conflict zones in the world and recorded the horror in photographs, which would appear in newspapers and news bulletins back at home.

### Content

The poem addresses some of the tensions and challenges that Duffy sees her friend having to face. Most of all Duffy shows the struggle for any war photographer of witnessing (and recording) some of the worst aspects of conflict and being unable to do anything directly to try and stop it. She shows how difficult it is for the photographer to switch between the normal world we all know and the horrific conflict he sees while working.

Duffy contrasts the chaos of the war zones with the order the photographer tries to bring into the simple things in his own life, such as lining up his photographs 'in ordered rows'.

### **Form and structure**

The poem is structured in four regular six-line stanzas. This order mirrors the photographer's meticulous approach to developing his pictures and juxtaposes the disorder and chaos of the war zones he has visited.

### **Language and imagery**

Duffy chooses language that vividly creates a number of different settings and images for the reader. In the first stanza words like 'finally alone', 'ordered' and 'softly' create a sense of the calm and order of the photographer's dark room (where he is developing his photographs). This is immediately contrasted with the violence and chaos appearing in the 'spools of suffering' in the photographs. In this first stanza the photographer is also likened to a priest 'preparing to intone a Mass'. This simile emphasises the tranquility of the photographer's dark room. The final line of the first stanza lists three conflict zones where the photographer has been, 'Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh' and then finishes with an interesting metaphor, 'All flesh is grass'. This metaphor dehumanises the violence and suggests that the photographer has been desensitised to the horrible violence he has been documenting.

The second stanza highlights the contrasts between the two worlds the war photographer moves between. This seems to disturb the photographer more than war itself as his hands 'did not tremble then though seems to now'. 'Rural England' with its 'ordinary pain' and 'fields which don't explode beneath the feet of running children' seem unusual to the photographer.

A memory then flicks through the photographer's mind and shows how haunted he is by what he has witnessed. 'A stranger's features faintly start to twist before his eyes, a half-formed ghost'. 'A half-formed ghost' is a metaphor for the memory, but also literally refers to the victim described in a foreign war.

Finally the poem explores the futility of the photographer's efforts to genuinely help in the conflict areas he photographs. From 'a hundred agonies' set out in photos, only 5 or 6 will make it through to publication and make the 'reader's eyeballs prick with tears'. The poet suggests that readers will immediately feel sadness for the people photographed, but will quickly go back to their 'bath and pre-lunch beers'; emphasising the real priorities of people in the developed world, which ensure

nothing will change and conflict will continue. This idea culminates in the final two lines. As the photographer flies off to photograph the next horrific war, 'he stares impassively at where he earns his living and they do not care'. The word 'impassively' emphasises that the photographer has pretty much given up on any real change to resolve the conflicts he sees. The final phrase – 'they do not care' – sums this up.

### Themes

There are two big themes in this poem:

1. the **horrific nature of war**; and
2. **people's indifference to war** and suffering in distant countries.

## Tissue (Imtiaz Dharker)

### Context

Imtiaz Dharker is a modern poet and film/ documentary director. She was born in Pakistan and grew up in Scotland. Her poems usually consider ideas about identity; the role of women in society; and finding meaning in life. She often considers multiculturalism in her work.

### Content

Dharker uses tissue paper as an extended metaphor for life. She examines how paper can be shaped and used to change things. There is also a reference to the thin, light paper used in religious books (particularly the Koran in this poem). Dharker also looks at our different uses for paper in our lives (for receipts, money, maps etc) and how these are closely linked to things we consider important in life.

The final paper-based metaphor is to link an idea of a building made from paper to human skin. This is a difficult idea to explain fully in an exam and it is open to your interpretation, so have a think about what your own take is on this idea. Dharker might be suggesting that life and the things we think are important are actually very fragile and won't last forever. She could also be suggesting that our actions in life are more important – and outlast – the things we build or record on paper; or that the memories and changes we record on paper are very powerful.

### Structure

This poem is almost entirely made up of irregular quatrains (stanzas with four lines), which only have very limited rhyme. You can think of your own interpretation of this irregular structure, but Dharker may be reflecting the changing nature of life and the fragility of paper. The rhyme and rhythm of the poem are also irregular and very changeable. *Tissue* contains a lot of enjambment (lines running on in and between stanzas) helping to create a sense of the delicacy and flowing movement of tissue paper and the human life it is likened to.

This form holds for nine out of ten stanzas. The final stanza changes quite abruptly though to one line in length. This really emphasises the final line, 'turned into your skin', showing the connection between paper and skin (and therefore life).

### Language and imagery

Throughout the poem the adjectives used work with the structure to emphasise the delicacy of paper - 'fine', 'thin' and 'transparent'. Alongside this, Dharker often refers to light and to its effects on the delicate paper. Repeated ideas like: 'lets the light shine through', 'sun shines through', 'luminous' and 'daylight' show how light illuminates the paper and how our uses for paper are dependent on light.

There are few individual language techniques in this poem (other than a few similes/ metaphors), but there is an extended metaphor linking paper to skin and to life. Dharker consistently refers to the important uses we have for paper, 'the Koran', 'maps' and 'slips from grocery shops' and then introduces the idea of architects building with paper. She ends by suggesting the structures built of paper are actually us – 'thinned to be transparent, turned into our skin'.

### Themes

There are three main themes to *Tissue*:

- **Power** – the power of paper in our lives to record events, ideas and memories. The poem even suggests paper has the power to change the course of our lives.
- **Delicacy/ instability** - the poem suggests that paper can be thinned and damaged by use, that buildings can be damaged by the elements, and that human life is fragile.
- **Humanity** – Dharker compares the delicacy of paper to buildings and structures that can easily be destroyed. The poem ends by drawing human life into this comparison, suggesting that human life is fragile like paper, but that the essence of humanity has the power to outlast structures and ideas.

## The Emigree (Carole Rumens)

### Context

Carole Rumens was born and raised in London. She has written many poems since the 1970s and has translated a number of other poems from Russian. People analysing her work have suggested that she has a 'fascination with elsewhere' – an idea that crops up in much of her writing. This is shown in *The Emigree* because the speaker longs to be 'elsewhere'.

### Content

*The Emigree* is told from the perspective of a displaced person who describes and longs for home. Rumens does not give any names to the speaker of the places

described, suggesting that this poem is about an idea felt/experienced by many rather than about a specific person/ place. It is made clear that the speaker has been forced to flee because their homeland is torn apart by war and a tyrannical dictator. Despite the clear presence of conflict in the speaker's homeland they still remember the perfect place where they grew up.

Through this poem Rumens is showing the reader the power that places can have over people and how we can feel forever associated with a place.

### **Form and Structure**

*The Emigree* takes the form of a first person account, from a general perspective (there are no names given as discussed earlier). The poem is structured in three stanzas. The first two are eight lines in length and the final stanza is nine lines long. Why Rumens has added a line to the final stanza is open to interpretation, but it may be emphasising the lasting impression that this place has had on the speaker's life.

*The Emigree* does not use any rhyme. There is some rhythm to the lines, but this is a little changeable and isn't fully established. This could be mirroring the speaker's mind-set as they have a mix of emotions – positivity for their new home and the freedoms they enjoy, but also a longing to return to their homeland.

### **Language and Imagery**

At first glance the language used in this poem looks fairly natural. It's the sort of language that might be used in everyday speech, making it seem as though the speaker is talking to us. Alongside this natural language, however, Rumens uses lots of metaphors and similes to emphasise her message. Metaphors like: 'the bright, filled paperweight', 'branded by an impression of sunlight' and 'time rolls its tanks' create contrasting images of the positive memories of the speaker versus the conflict that has now engulfed the homeland. The city itself, which the speaker focuses the poem on, could also be considered an extended metaphor for a lost childhood that everyone can relate to.

Alongside the metaphors, Rumens make use of a number of similes: 'frontiers rise... like waves', 'docile as paper' and 'like a hollow doll'. Finally the city itself is personified as a visitor who comes to the speaker, 'it lies down in front of me... I comb its hair and love its shining eyes.' There may also be a double meaning in the final stanza when the 'city comes to me on its own white plane'. As the city is personified, this refers to an aeroplane flying in to visit the speaker; but beneath that the 'white plane' could also refer to a sheet of paper, suggesting that the city now only exists in the words of the speaker. It could be an imaginary place or just somewhere that the speaker knows they will never see again.

Throughout the poem the overall tone is one of fondness for the lost city, but there is also a recurring threatening tone as we hear about the conflict overtaking the speaker's lost city, 'it may by now be a lie, banned by the state' and 'it may be sick with tyrants'.

## Themes

- **Exile** – the speaker is an exile from their homeland. The lost home could also represent a lost past, or childhood.
- **Conflict** – there is a conflict raging in the speaker’s home city, from which she has fled, and there is a conflict within the speaker between positivity for the freedoms of their new home and a longing for their home.
- **The power of places** – the poem emphasises the power that places can have over us (literally and as a metaphor for something lost).
- **Light vs dark** – there are numerous images of light breaking through darkness. These support the idea of conflict.

## Checking Out Me History (John Agard)

### Context

John Agard was born in the Caribbean in 1949 and moved to the UK in the late 1970s. In his writing Agard uses non-standard phonetic spelling (where a word is written as it sounds) to mirror his Caribbean accent. His writing covers issues around being black and challenging racist attitudes. Agard is particularly interested in highlighting unconscious racist attitudes (that people don’t even realise exist).

### Content

The poem focuses on exploring how history is taught in school and throughout life. Agard shows how a biased teaching of history can impact on how people think about their own identity. In the poem Agard repeatedly stresses how he has been taught a history which is biased towards white people and their achievements. He gives numerous examples of important white people he has been taught about (who he struggles to identify with); and contrasts these with some of the key black figures from history who he is never taught about, but with whom he can identify once he has found out about them for himself. Finding out about these historical figures is helping him to discover his own identity. The poem challenges the reader to think more closely about our heritage and identity.

### Form and Structure

*Checking Out Me History* alternates between two different structures, which are shown by the change in font between normal and italic. The two structures have the following features:

1. Denoted by a normal font, the first structure repeats ‘dem tell me’ and covers the white version of history he has been taught throughout his life. This structure has lots of rhyme – with rhyming couplets, triplets and quatrains throughout. The tone in this structure is angry and rebellious.
2. Denoted by an italic font, the second structure tells the stories of major black historical figures like Toussaint L’Ouverture and Mary Seacole. This structure has very short lines, uses abbreviations and misses out words.

There is some rhyme, but this is very irregular. These features may reflect how these characters have been cut from the history taught to most people. The tone in this structure is celebratory.

### Language and Imagery

The key (and very noticeable) language feature is the non-standard phonetic spelling Agard uses to provide the sound of his Caribbean accent. This language runs throughout the poem and is clear from the first few lines, 'dem tell me dem tell me wha dem want to tell me'. The repetition of 'dem tell me' throughout the poem emphasises how he has been repeatedly told about the history of white people, it contrasts with 'dem never tell me about' followed by the black historical figures he cites.

In telling the reader about the white dominated history he has been taught, Agard includes a number of characters from myths, legends and fairy tales. 'Robin Hood' and 'de cow who jump over de moon' are examples of fictional characters he has been taught about, while real black historical figures have been left out of his history lessons. This highlights the biased/ inaccurate nature of what he has been taught.

Agard uses lots of natural language and imagery, particularly when describing the black historical figures he is discovering. 'Thorn', 'stream', 'river', 'mountain' and 'fire' are all used to connect these characters with his natural heritage and identity. This is added to by other images of light, which illuminates his identity: 'beacon', 'fire', 'healing star' and 'yellow sunrise'.

The poem also contains lots of end rhyme (strong rhyme in the last word or syllable of a poem's lines or stanzas) to emphasise his key points and the switch between the two structures.

### Themes

- **Meaning of history** – Agard is challenging us as readers to think about our history and not to necessarily just accept the versions of history we are taught.
- **Power of identity** – the speaker has never been able to identify with the biased version of history he has been taught. Only when he examines the past for himself does he start to understand his own identity. He feels stronger for it.

## Kamikaze (Beatriz Garland)

### Context

Beatrice Garland has not directly experienced any of the things she talks about in this poem, but she has said: "I spend a lot of the day listening to other people's worlds". In *Kamikaze* Garland reflects on one of these worlds. Kamikaze pilots flew suicide missions for the Japanese Empire at the end of the Second World War. Their

missions were to crash into allied ships. There was a strong social pressure on the pilots and their families to carry out these Kamikaze missions. These pressures are explored in the poem. This is also relevant in the modern world as terrorists use suicide missions in modern conflicts.

### **Content**

*Kamikaze* is mainly told from the perspective of the daughter of a kamikaze pilot who turned back from his suicide mission and returned home. This is a narrative poem (telling a story). Garland begins by exploring the moments in which the pilot decides to turn back. She goes on to show the reader the consequences in the rest of his life – his neighbours and family look down on him and shun him. Even his wife and children reject him and refuse to speak to him.

### **Form and Structure**

This is a narrative poem (telling a story). It begins by reporting on events as if someone else had told them. Then, in sections of the poem in italics, Garland switches to a first person narrative (where the speaker tells a story directly for herself). This allows the reader to better understand the thoughts and feelings of the speaker.

*Kamikaze* has a fairly simple structure. There are seven stanzas, each with six lines. There is no rhyme and only a very basic rhythm. This simplicity means the reader focuses on the story itself and the tragedy of the events. The poem is made up of only three sentences to give it the feeling of a story told orally. As we move between the sentences the speaker and time setting change as well. You need to think about what your interpretation is of why Garland has made these changes.

### **Language and Imagery**

As with some of the other poems in this collection, Garland uses relatively natural language that we might use every day. There are still a number of important literary techniques used in the poem to emphasise the key events for the pilot and the thoughts of his daughter.

In the first half of the poem Garland uses impressive metaphors to show us what is influencing the pilot's thoughts. 'A tuna, the dark prince' and 'the loose silver of whitebait', suggest the power and value of the sea and how the life it holds has forced the pilot to think again about completing his mission. Garland also provides the reader with vivid details of the pilot's experience by describing how his senses react to the setting. 'Green-blue translucent sea' and 'dark shoals' show us what he is seeing and the 'salt-sodden' boat involves the senses of touch and taste.

A developed simile, 'arcing in swathes like a huge flag waved first one way then the other... the dark shoals of fishes', is used to compare the ideas created by man to the natural world and what really matters in life. The patriotic (flag waving) Japanese military had persuaded the pilots and their families to believe that kamikaze

missions were honorable, but the fish show the power of nature and that life is more important and has a stronger effect on the pilot.

### Themes

- **Social pressure** – The pilot is first pressured into going on the mission and is then disowned by his family and friends for returning. The social pressure created by propaganda has enabled this.
- **The power of nature (in particular the sea)** – the reader is shown in detail that it was the natural sights the pilot saw as he flew over the sea, which persuaded him to turn back. The natural power of life was more potent than the power of the military and social pressure.