

Slow writing

"I was after something else: the poem not as fancy pastry but as bread; the poem not as masterpiece but as life-work."

Ursula Le Guin

I wrote Ursula Le Guin's words on the dedication page of my first book. I have never changed my mind. Bread as metaphor for what I want in a poem: nourishment, not sugar; satisfaction, not craving.

Leaving the metaphor aside, or perhaps extending it, I have been making bread and writing poetry in equal amounts all my adult life. When bread is made, there are some things we cannot control. Sourdough is what I make most, but most bread contains yeast. In sourdough, yeast is not added, but comes like magic, like alchemy, from the air and combines with flour and water to make dough, which when baked becomes bread. This process cannot be hurried: with a starter (made before-hand, in my case a gift many years ago) mix flour and water. Mix well and wait. Repeat the process the following day and sometimes the day after that. Bake into bread. Before baking, it is necessary to retain a third of the mixture as starter for the next loaf; so, importantly, I am continuing the work undertaken by those micro-organisms we call yeasts. I have been helped in making bread by others, and by my own attention, elbow deep into flour, kneading, pulling, knocking back, very physical, attentive activities. Body, mind, collaboration, intention, time.

Poetry is like that. It's not that we write in total isolation. The unseen work of others, human and non-humans is all around us. We don't make the flour or bring water to our household taps. Nor do we make the paper we write on. In all writing, we write down some words and shape them. When they are right, we bake them into a book, to sustain others, but we keep some words over for the next poem, the next story.

Slow writing is no different, but we are conscious of the process. We are patient. We can knock back words, we can conjure words from the air, like yeast, a process we don't fully understand, but have learned to trust; we can ask the opinions of others on how the writing is looking. Above all, we are aware that it is not the mind alone which produces a poem. It is the sum total of our circumstances, physically come by, whatever our capacities, written from deep experience.

In slow writing we embody our poems, we allow the physical body to help find a solution, the right, exact words; embodiments of true meaning, coming to the poetry as yeast comes from the air to sourdough. The words of others, voiced into air. But we have worked for it. We are not hasty. We can, like the poet Basil Bunting, "Put our poem away till we forget it, then cut out every word we dare. Do it again a week later, and again." In the meantime, we get on with our garden, we walk, we cycle, we knit, we sweep the floor, we get on with the hundred daily things that frame and embody our thought. Our thoughts becoming words. Words becoming poetry. Like kneading dough, it's good to further embody things by writing with a pencil or pen by hand onto paper. The physical act again, often leading to unforeseen results if we cannot sometimes read our own handwriting.

The unknown: will the yeast arrive this time? Will it help make the bread? It comes into play – digest that word! - in the making of a poem: will the words come, and come right? What can I add to help things along? In the case of bread, it's time; time and trusting to experience. It's also true that many things can be added to the mixture: edible seeds of all

kinds, different sorts of flour, some small cut vegetables: all move things along in different directions, according to taste, experiment and intention.

Just so with poetry. Unknown words can set us off on different tracks in different ways, looking for nourishing results. Words which perhaps do not exist in our own mother tongues, but the knowledge of which may effect those alchemical, nutritious changes in our poems.

I'm thinking of, for example, the Gaelic word *glas*. Often Englished as grey, it actually tells of a different experience of colour, one which hovers between light green and blue, one which changes with time of day and season. All these are covered by the word *glas*; it tells us as much about place as about colour, about the perception that colour may be something other than a fixed abstract notion.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, the indigenous US poet and botanist generously offers us another word from her language, Potawatomi: *puhpowee*. She tells us that it is "the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight". She understands the agency of mushrooms, aided by mycelium; holds that they know what to do and when to do it, like words unbidden to a poem, but expected if our minds are open to them, and patient. In that word *puhpowee* is tendrilled generations of close, slow, patient observation and understanding. Of fellowship. Like air-yeast to sourdough, helping the flatness into nourishment.

Other cultures, other words offer us insight into our own ways of seeing things, ways of presenting the world afresh in metaphor, rich and sustaining just as it is. We don't need the actual words of other languages, but the physical realities and perceptions of what they represent. And time. Lashings of slow time, of slowing down to realise that sustenance to be found everywhere and anywhere, in motion, in the air we breathe and share with other tongues and other creatures.

Concepts can be timely and in some we recognise truths long known to slower paced ancestors, but perhaps forgotten in times of emails, telephones, news bulletins, zoom meetings. We may not have exact equivalents for the Japanese *shinrinyoku* (taking in the forest atmosphere during a leisurely walk) or the German *waldeinsamkeit* (forest aloneness), but we understand what they offer in our bodies. We understand on a visceral level. Slowly, we build on our comprehension of word-concepts to make something actual, something flourishing and growing.

In English too, are words which, beside their beauty, offer us insight, from which we can enter different fields of observation: *instar* (the development stage of insects, like caterpillar and butterfly); *inflorescence* (the complete flower head of a plant including stems, stalks, bracts, and flowers); *circumnutation* (the circular movements often exhibited by the tips of growing plant stems).

We have help, if we only take time to find it. It is offered with great generosity everywhere we look deeply and move slowly. Slowly and with intention.