



?Teaching? Poems for Children: A Chinese Poem

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Robert Hull explores how to use a Chinese poem.

Poetry anthologies for children too often contain the favourite and the familiar. In this series ?Teaching? Poems for Children, **Robert Hull** selects an individual poem that has not (to best of our knowledge) been published in a selection aimed at young readers and suggests ways it might be used with them. Here he presents a Chinese poem.

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An Old Soldier

Riding on a skinny horse

he

comes dimly from the wood

and out into the mist

and returns dimly into the mist.

Day after day

he is carried unsteadily

he knows not where:

On his sword there is

a little dust

a little rust

a little frost

a little brightness

a little blood shining in the morning sun.

?But is it a poem?? someone asks. One answer is, it doesn?t work if we try reading it as prose. The line-endings insist on being pauses, and being performed. Once read aloud, and read aloud again, it starts to become a poem, a visually sharp sketch of a haunting encounter, a clip that records a poignant, dramatic moment on a journey.

Almost before we see him, the old soldier on a thin horse, he?s gone into the mist. Leaving us not knowing where he came from, where he?s riding to, what his journey is about. We can only guess ? or rather, can?t not guess: ?Is he riding away from a battle?? ?Did he sleep out of doors?? ?What does that blood mean??

The enigma, the being told so little, is the point, perhaps. And the teacher?s opportunity. In this world, sharply outlined but insubstantial, the only materially present things are wood, rider, horse, sword ? and mist. There?s no story to see. The picture?s incompleteness fills us with a need to know, construct, imagine.

Children construct, imagine, invent. They create all manner of 'before's and 'after's for this moment. Their discoveries and intuitions are the substance of their poems, the sketches for them. One 12-year-old watches as *In solitude he slips away / with no-one to guide him / only the moon's glow, / watching him, / far below*. Another has him in up-beat mood: *I strode along in the singing morning? I wondered where my lonely horse / would want to take me to next ? reworking ? he knows not where?*.

The children's imaginations may be engaged, but there are still interventions for the teacher to make, on this journey devising journeys. Crucial is to read more poems, to deepen and fill out the 'journey' narrative. In Arthur Waley's translations, and Pound's, and others', there are moving short lyrics about being on the mountain road, crossing the lake, waiting on the river; poems about departures and absences and returns, loss and age. In reading them we absorb the emotional and at the same time the physical world of the Chinese poem. We don't perhaps even always need to read entire poems, so suggestive can the titles themselves be: *'Saying Farewell to a Friend?', 'Listening to the River?', 'Dreaming of My Dead Wife?', 'Rowing at Night on the West Lake?'*.

Another intervention might suggest itself, an excursion or diversion ? to Chinese painting, and its mountains and lakes and bridges, its fishing boats, its scholars strolling and moon-viewing: its subjects and titles kin to those of the poems.

Children not only draw on these subjects and titles; they not only invent similar subjects and titles for their own poems. Somehow, mysteriously enough, they take up the poems' inner moods and landscapes, and lift them into their own sensibilities, and make poetic use of them. A kind of artistic marinade.

But it is their own stories about departure, separation, and absence that are released in this new context for them. This isn't parody, nor is it 'models' or 'scaffolding?'. It is writing itself, the drawing up of the new from the well of dialogue that goes on in the mind between world as experienced and world as written.

It was a long, slow, liberating journey from 'An Old Soldier' to 'Combing your hair?', the poem of a girl of 12:

*My gaze rests on your stool
where you used to sit,
combing your hair,
and as I look
I see your face,
white as the lily,
for your face was pale,
and your eyes,
green as the ferns by the way side.
I was the envy of the spirits
and they took you for their own.*

The end of one writing journey, the start of another.

'An Old Soldier' ? from Robert Payne, ed. **The White Pony: An Anthology of Chinese Poetry** , a Mentor Book published by The New American Library in 1947, Copyright 1947 by The John Day Company.

Other accessible collections of Chinese poetry:

Chinese poems , trans. Arthur Waley, first pub. Allen and Unwin, 1946

170 Chinese poems , trans. Arthur Waley, Constable, 1992

Plucking the Rushes , ed. David Holbrook, Heinemann Education, 1968 (OP)

Robert Hull , a school teacher for 30 years, is the author of two collections of poems for children, **Stargazer** and **Everest and Chips** (OUP). His **Behind the Poem** is a detailed study of children writing poems.



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