

# NEWS FROM THE BEAT

I used to wonder whether “beat poet” was the name of a poet who wrote beat poetry, or simply an instruction to “Beat Poet”. Suppose it depends which poet you’re talking about. I received an email the other day from some people who wanted to do the latter. The subject line read:

“STOLEN FROM THE POOR AND GIVEN TO RICH POETS”

Intrigued, I opened the email.

*“You may know the date of World Poetry Day, but you may not know that this day was established by UNESCO as World POVERTY Day.”*

Gadzooks! Could it be true?

*“Poets will have you believe a UNESCO intern simply forgot “V” out of poverty resulting in the abomination that is world POETRY day. But we know that it was stolen. The V was stolen! We want our V back”*

The email ended with the usual:

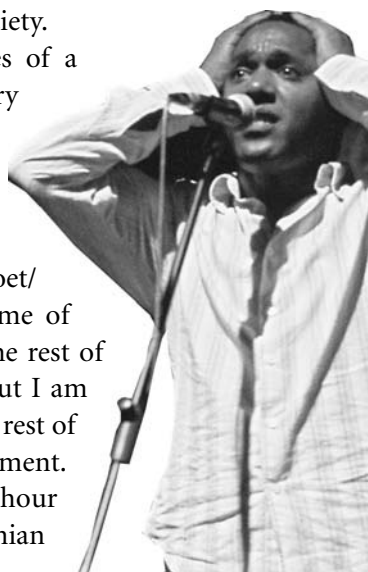
*“sign here and send on to fifteen people or you will get writer’s block”.*

Politics is almost as defensive as a dysfunctional writers’ workshop. Maybe I should forward the mail to Tony Harrison – for it is he what wrote V. Nah. Always one to be drawn in by a good conspiracy theory I pressed delete and solved the problem. Note to self, “delete more often”.

I’ve just returned from celebrating aforementioned World Poetry Day at the only country in the world with the word “love” in its name. Slovenia. On the night of my arrival I was treated to a sumptuous meal in a restaurant situated above the Writers Association of Slovenia. It’s all very Earls Court Poetry Society.

As I parted the flesh from the bones of a perfectly cooked trout an intriguing story unfolded. It was *the* literary story to hit Slovenian News in 2006 – and it’s about Jackie Kay. The melt in the mouth potatoes were to die for, bit like Jackie Kay.

Gregor Podlogar\*, a Slovenian poet/broadcaster, handsome and intense, told me of her visit, “she is fantastic”, he enthused. The rest of the literary table nodded in agreement. “But I am ashamed”, he said, furrowing the brow. The rest of the table shook their heads in solemn agreement. “On her wonderful tour, and only one hour before a prescheduled visit to a Slovenian



Catholic school, the head of the school slammed the door in her face.” Gregor was angry and slammed his fist on the table sending bones of trout flying into the air. Masterfully he caught the trout by head and tail and delicately placed the fish skeleton back onto my plate. He emphasised and growled each grave word, “It. Was. A. Disgrrrrrrace”.

No, the trout was wonderful, really. See, the Catholic school thought Jackie Kay “A Friend of Dorothy”. Jackie Kay had unwittingly touched a nerve, by being born. It became national news and the Slovenian press defended Ms Kay. I am delighted to inform *PR* that Ms Kay’s book sales elegantly rose to the occasion and by that simple and triumphant action the fist of poetic justice punched the teeth out of institutional bigotry. Thwack. Duff! Zap. Now there’s a royalty statement if ever there was one! Biff!

The population of Slovenia is an eighth of that of London and it’s the first of the post-Yugoslavian countries to join the EU. In one day I do three readings, two television interviews and one radio interview – that’s the population covered then.

Back in a more sedate England I’m on another plane to another country, Sweden, and another venue, Gothenburg’s World Museum of Culture. But technology is persistent and, like a flash, BBC Radio Four have booked a studio in Gothenburg for a programme called *Word Of Mouth*. There’s a simile competition back in the UK and I’m a judge. Being a judge of a simile competition is rather like being an accountant in *Alice in Wonderland* – a bit discombobulating.

On the way to the studio, hurrying through snow-lined streets in a taxi, I’m reading *Bravemouth* by Pamela Stevenson. She says of her globetrotting husband Billy Connolly, “he is as close to me as tears”. Now there’s a simile. The taxi driver is built like Hagrid from the Harry Potter novels. He seems to fill the entire front of the Mercedes. He writes himself and I find myself embroiled in a discussion about metaphor and simile. “Metaphor metaphor,” he blurts, “that’s a load of rubbish”. He winks in the mirror.

LEMN SISSAY

\* see also poem by Tomaž Šalamun, pp. 31-2