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Poetry is a special way of talking and writing. Poems are often musical, playing with the sounds of language while they tell stories, reveal feelings, make pictures and give us ideas. We all find this pleasurable, but children especially so. I guess that's because for very young children, language often comes at them as something they hear without necessarily understanding it. Then poems come along and hit the same channel, sound, rhythm, rhyme, repetition and all the other tricks in the poet's bag.

Poems can be snapshots: small pictures of a moment, an object, a scene, a feeling. They can be like photos in the family album: a moment frozen which we can look at over and over again and wonder why it matters to us.

Poems are also places where you don't have to say it all, they don't have to tie it up in a neat knot in the way that stories usually do. Poems can end with questions. Poems can end with no answers. Poems can pose problems. And that's fine, because life doesn't usually finish with neat little endings. Life itself is full of questions and problems. Particularly for children.

Poems are great for exploring those fascinating questions once posed by the painter Paul Gauguin: where do we come from? Where are we now? Where are we going? These are questions about what kind of background we have, what kinds of things we believe in and care about, what do we want our lives to look like in the future. Poems often explore these themes. And they do it in personal, direct ways, saying, in a thousand different ways: this is me, this is us, I wonder what kind of person I am, I wonder what's going to happen, and so on. And aren't these questions that children ask over and over again?

Poetry is great for what is almost the opposite of this: pretending we aren't who we say we are. Poets write poems where they pretend to be goddesses, houses, worms, graves, long dead ancestors, aliens. This allows poets to explore feelings they didn't know they had, and in so doing, they invite children to wonder about other lives, other states of existence, other possibilities.

Poetry can be impossible. As we proceed along our logical, sensible lines, relying on gravity to keep our plates on the table, days to follow nights, our blood to flow round our bodies, poems don't have to obey these rules. Whether it's through nonsense (remember the dish who ran away with the spoon?) or through making one thing like another, (perhaps our plates aren't sitting on the table; but rather, the table is tired of carrying the plates) poetry can get us to see the world in strange, new ways and from strange points of view.

Poems are often full of echoes, gathering together hints and memories of other poems, other stories, films, signs, speeches. They gather up and change words. It's as if poems like this point us at the very language we see and hear around us and invite us to stop, think and wonder if the words we are used to are right, honest or worthwhile. For children, this is especially important. If you think for a moment, very nearly all children enter school, using a language that is theirs, only to find that school is full of language that seems to belong to other people. If poetry plays with language and, through its music, invites children to remember and imitate it, this becomes a language that they can possess.