

Hey, look at this!

Neil Richardson writes 12 articles about his own poetic work and what people, ideas and influences led him to write some of his poems. The series will last for the twelve months of 2010.

Small Change

Imagine, for a moment,
the intimacy of your bedroom.
It's a special place,
a place of privacy and privilege.
Here be lotions, pills and powders,
scissors, tissues, dirty clothes,
unfinished drinks and dog-eared books.
Here is a place to fall apart, and then
a place to put yourself together, once again.
Your bedroom is a world, to share
with those you love, for whom you care.

And now imagine your bedroom
squashed in a dirty doorway,
laid out on a draughty pavement,
your intimacy open to the sky
and the contempt of all and any who pass by.

Embarrassed by the private lives
thrown up before my very eyes,
I cannot contemplate the homeless very long.
Their presence interferes with me.
The growled requests for change
challenge the generosity of my response.
I am demeaned by a handful of coins,
and so, of course, are you.
So, touching my pocket, I walk on,
feeling threatened and impinged upon.

As I walk on, your voice bids me enjoy
my theatre date. Yes, that hurt.
I feel a loss of all enthusiasm,
such is the power of bitter sarcasm.

Your presence mocks our ordered lives.
We have rules, boundaries, niceties
to observe. Why don't you conform?
The social order must be changed, of course,
to bring you in, but how, I do not know.
I hate the fact that you are sleeping rough,
and though my feet are warm, I feel as
powerless as you to change the status quo.
I hate to be a messenger of gloom,
but I just can't see you sat in my front room.
I don't know how to share my life with you.
So, here at least, at last, is my small change,
a token of my sympathy,
a symbol of my apathy.

1993



The origin of this poem was in an incident which took place early one evening in 1993 as Marion and I walked along Southampton Row in London from our car parked in Lincoln's Inn Field, and headed towards the bright lights of Theatreland and The Royal Opera House in particular. Someone was sitting in a doorway begging from the people busily passing by. I half put my hand in my back pocket to find some coins and then noticed that the beggar had a dog with him. I paused, then changed my mind. I thought, "If he can afford to feed a dog, why is he begging for money to feed himself? And why has he got a dog? If he can't manage to look after himself properly, how can he possibly manage to look after a dog?"

I felt myself walking on, quickly putting the beggar out of my sight, turning my back on him, and I experienced a profound sense of guilt, as I really would like to have made a difference that evening, done something positive which would help him get off the street and back into a happy family life.

As I walk on, your voice bids me enjoy
my theatre date. Yes, that hurt.

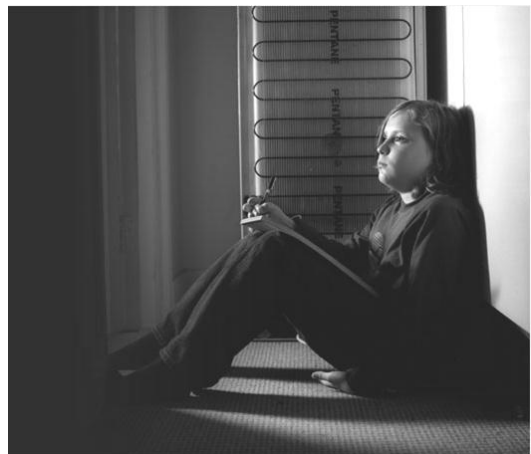
"Enjoy your theatre date" was a very unpleasant comment, like acid thrown in my face, a comment designed to be remembered as the orchestra tuned up, and then again during the interval as we sipped our cold sparkling water or was it white wine, and then again on the way home, and then for a long time afterwards. The comment was intended to make me feel that I was to blame for his predicament.

Obviously, the plan worked. At one level it worked.

It managed to impinge on me, but not with the result of sympathy, rather the result of feeling, "Well if you are so sharp, why don't you do something about yourself? Why expect others to do it for you?" So why not?

St. Mungo's, a homelessness charity has provided evidence about those who live or sleep rough. In 2007 they found that

- 77% of clients were male
- 23% of clients were female
- 49% of clients were from BME communities
- 80% of clients had issues with substance use
- 43% of clients were diagnosed with depression
- 35% of clients were ex-offenders



Rough sleeping is therefore not a life-style choice for most of the people found on our streets. It is a symptom of the deeper ills of our society and so can't be solved by people offering a few coins to rough sleepers. Homelessness charities like **St. Mungo's** and **Shelter** have all made huge efforts to help those on the streets but the solutions are much deeper. We need a strengthening of our sense of belonging, and having a place and a say in our society. The solutions are to be found in strong families, deeper education and a change of emphasis from headline-grabbing examination results to sturdy preparation for life. It is to be found in learning about relationships, understanding the causes of poverty and improving employment opportunities.

I have sometimes been emotionally drawn to give beggars money, despite fearing that it would be used for abusive purposes, but it always feels wrong, feels as though I am superior, feels as though I am only a part-time sympathiser, and it always feels lacking in human integrity.

I don't know how to share my life with you.
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a symbol of my apathy.