

## Flower, Forest, Shell – Exploring Shelter with Mina Gorji.

*What structures offer shelter? ... to humans? ... to animals, birds and insects? How has nature sheltered you and from what? Can you remember the feeling of shelter? ... the sound? the shape? ... the smell? What kinds of shelter can a poem offer?*

“I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.” — Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

### 1. **shelter**, *n.*

a. A structure affording protection from rain, wind, or sun; in wider sense, anything serving as a screen or a place of refuge from the weather. Now often applied to a small slight building (commonly of wood or iron) erected in a park or other public place to serve as a refuge from the weather.

b. Something which affords a refuge from danger, attack, pursuit, or observation; a place of safety; *Military* a wall or bank behind which persons can obtain safety from gunshot; an enclosed shelter from air-raids, nuclear fall-out, etc., usually underground.

d. Protection from the weather; trees, walls, or the like, which afford such protection.

(*Oxford English Dictionary* definition)

### **Preparation:**

Before the workshop, if you have time, please read as many of the poems/ extracts on the handout as you can and watch the film clip about a hermit crab.

### During the workshop

#### **Introduction:**

Welcome! I will introduce myself say a few things about the workshop and read 2 or 3 short poems about shelter.

## **Exercises:**

1. Look around you. Find a natural object inside your space or that you can see outside your space, through a door or window for example. It could be a plant, a tree, a cloud, a flower, a nut, a leaf, a shell ... Look closely at the object you have chosen. How does it look and feel? Write down how it looks and feels to you. What kind of shelter could it offer a creature? which creature? Imagine you are that creature. *From the creature's perspective*, write down whatever you observe about this sheltering object. A list or a series of short descriptions. Spend 15 minutes with the object and writing.
2. Choose one or two of the poems or extracts or poems about different kinds of shelter that are on the handout. Read them carefully. Make a list of words or phrases from these poems/extracts that stand out to you for whatever reason. Spend 10 minutes reading and writing.
3. Look at both sets of writing, from exercise 1 and 2. Which words stand out to you? What feelings/shapes/forms stand out to you? Can you make a poem about shelter using words/ phrases from both lists? Will it be written *from your perspective* or the *perspective of another creature?* or *both?* Spend 15 minutes writing the poem.

## **EXTRACTS**

### **FLOWER**

1. John Clare, "Clock-a- Clay"

In the cowslips peeps I lie,

Hidden from the buzzing fly,

While green grass beneath me lies,

Pearled wi' dew like fishes' eyes,  
Here I lye, a clock-a-clay,  
Waiting for the time o' day.

While grassy forests quake surprise,  
And the wild wind sobs and sighs,  
My gold home rocks as like to fall,  
On its pillar green and tall;  
When the pattering rain drives by  
Clock-a-clay keeps warm and dry.

Day by day and night by night,  
All the week I hide from sight;  
In the cowslips peeps I lie,  
In rain and dew still warm and dry;  
Day and night, and night and day,  
Red, black-spotted clock-a-clay.

My home it shakes in wind and showers,  
Pale green pillar top't wi' flowers,  
Bending at the wild wind's breath,  
Till I touch the grass beneath;  
Here still I live, lone clock-a-clay,  
Watching for the time of day.

*LISTEN*: Discussion of “Clock a Clay” : <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p04shjdg>

## **TREE**

### 1. Seán Hewitt, “Clock”

A close warm evening opened by rain –  
and me (caught out) leaning on a cedar.

A heron walks its white zed  
along the bank and out into the water,

and just here a small beetle, sheen  
of coal-black, pulls itself into the pink bed

of the rhododendron flower. Then, once  
and once more, a fox barks –

and, though I love you and I know  
there is no such thing as held time,

this tree seems suddenly like a stillness,  
a circle of quiet air, a place to stand

now that I have had to leave  
and cannot think where I might go next.

2. John Clare, "The Hollow Tree"

How oft a summer shower hath started me  
To seek for shelter in an hollow tree:  
Old huge ash-dotterel wasted to a shell,  
Whose vigorous head still grew and flourished well,  
Where ten might sit upon the battered floor  
And still look round discovering room for more,  
And he who chose a hermit life to share  
Might have a door and make a cabin there –  
They seemed so like a house that our desires  
Would call them so and make our gypsy fires  
And eat field dinners of the juicy peas  
Till we were wet and drabbled to the knees.  
But in our old tree house, rain as it might,  
Not one drop fell although it rained till night.

3. John Clare, "A Sudden Shower"

Black grows the southern sky betokening rain  
And humming hive-bees homeward hurry bye  
They feel the change - so let us shun the grain  
And take the broad road while our feet are dry.  
Ay there some dropples moistened on my face  
And pattered on my hat— 'tis coming nigh -  
Let's look about, and find a sheltering place.  
The little things around, like you and I,  
Are hurrying through the grass to shun the shower.  
Here stoops an ash tree—hark, the wind gets high,  
But never mind, this ivy, for an hour,  
Rain as it may, will keep us dryly here.  
That little wren knows well his sheltering bower  
Nor leaves his dry house though we come so near.

## **SHELL**

1. Extract from “Consider the Hermit Crab” by Katherine Rundell, *LRB*, February, 2020

The majority of hermit crabs are asymmetrical; they have ten legs, but the front left claw is enlarged for defence, and the front right is smaller, for scooping food, about which they aren't fussy: algae, plant life, other dead crabs. They have, too, under their shells, rear ends that twist in on themselves – helter-skelters. And they're off-kilter beautiful: the jewelled anemone crab has shocking emerald eyes, on stalks that are striped like a barber's pole in red and white. They can be sea-grey or royal purple; the giant spotted hermit crab is orange with white dots edged in black; the hairy yellow is striped yellow and cream, with opulent hairs on its legs and eyes on blue stalks. Up close, even the coconut crabs are beautiful: some are aquamarine at the hinges, some rich brown with a burnt-orange back.

Hermit crabs can, if they must, make their home almost anywhere. They have been found in tin cans, in coconut halves. The Pylochelidae family evolved to make their homes not in shells but in sea-sponges, stones, driftwood, pieces of bamboo. More and more, in these darker days, I admire resourcefulness. I love their tenacity: forging lives from the shells of the dead, making homes from the debris that the world, in its chaos, has left out for them

*WATCH:* The Hermit crab: extract from a film by Jean Painlevé

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbsZzotlvww>

## 2. Elizabeth Bishop, "Strayed Crab".

This is not my home. How did I get so far from water? It must  
be over that way somewhere.

I am the color of wine, of *tinta*. The inside of my powerful right claw is saffron-yellow. See, I see it now; I wave it like a flag. I am dapper and elegant; I move with great precision, cleverly managing all my smaller yellow claws. I believe in the oblique, the indirect approach, and I keep my feelings to myself. But on this strange, smooth surface I am making too much noise. I wasn't meant for this. If I maneuver a bit and keep a sharp lookout, I shall find my pool again. Watch out for my right claw, all passersby! This place is too hard. The rain has stopped, and it is damp, but still not wet enough to please me.

My eyes are good, though small; my shell is tough and tight. In my own pool are many small gray fish. I see right through them. Only their large eyes are opaque, and twitch at me. They are hard to catch but I, I catch them quickly in my arms and eat them up.

What is that big soft monster, like a yellow cloud, stifling and warm? What is it doing? It pats my back. Out, claw. There, I have frightened it away. It's sitting down, pretending nothing's happened. I'll skirt it. It's still pretending not to see me. Out of my way, O monster. I own a pool, all the little fish that swim in it, and all the skittering waterbugs that smell like rotten apples.

Cheer up, O grievous snail. I tap your shell, encouragingly, not that you will ever know about it.

And I want nothing to do with you, either, sulking toad.

Imagine, at least four times my size and yet so vulnerable... I

could open your belly with my claw. You glare and bulge, a  
watchdog near my pool; you make a loud and hollow noise. I  
do not care for such stupidity. I admire compression, lightness,  
and agility, all rare in this loose world.

3. It's exhausting to be a guest

In somebody else's house

Forever.

...

Can you find your way home

By smell?

— Bhanu Kapil, *How to Wash a Heart*.