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Opening extract from

If You Could See Laughter

Written by

Mandy Coe

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Salt Publishing

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MANDY COE
If You Cold See Laughter

Mandy Coe is an award-winning poet and artist. She has published six books including three collections of poetry for adults and one for children. Her work has been featured on BBC television and radio and she reads at literature events across the UK.

As a freelance writer, Mandy works with community groups and inner-city schools. Her guide to the work of writers in schools *Our thoughts are bees* (co-written with Jean Sprackland) was described by Andrew Motion as 'inspiring, enlightening and far-reaching'.

Mandy Coe's first collection *Pinning the Tail on the Donkey* was shortlisted for the Aldeburgh First Collection Prize. Her poetry for children is anthologised by Macmillan, Oxford University Press and Bloomsbury. Mandy is a Hawthornden Fellow.

Also by Mandy Coe

POETRY FOR ADULTS

Pinning the Tail on the Donkey (Spike 2000)
The Weight of Cows (Shoestring Press 2004)
Clay (Shoestring Press 2009)

NON-FICTION

Our thoughts are bees: Writers Working with Schools (Wordplay Press 2005)

GRAPHIC NOVEL

Red Shoes (Good Stuff Press 1997)

MANDY
COE

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Illustrated by Mandy Coe

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For Frank and Doris Childs
who made our childhood shine …

… and for all the children and teachers
who share their poems with me.

'Day by day I float my paper boats one by one
down the running stream.
In big black letters I write my name on them and the name
of the village where I live.'
—Rabindranath Tagore

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ADVICE FOR . . .

PONIES

let the pictures flow
what do you see?
taste every sound
        neat?
        tidy?
        no
look at apples
without saying apple
be brave
thoughts can interrupt thinking
run fast
learn to stand still

POETS

dream of a land without fences
never show anyone how high you can really jump
accept kindness softly
between the stars and each sweet blade of grass
lie secrets that sound like grasshoppers
let frost make your breath white
know that you are the creator of all rhythms found
        between stillness
and the rare moments you run so fast
you no longer touch the ground

MANDY COE

SEASHELL

Have you seen it? A pink-tinted
coil of air . . . about
so big?

At one end can be heard
the open roar of sea, the other
narrows to silence and infinity.
In between is nothing,

shaped like a ringlet
or honeysuckle twine, and
(before the orange grip
of oyster-catcher's beak)
it was the exact shape of me.

Have you seen that coil of air
where my soft self should be?

FELT FUNNY ALL DAY

There was a man
who left his house in such a rush
he shut the front door on his shadow.

The shadow knocked, the shadow called
though its knuckles made no noise
and its voice stirred no air.

The man walked for a while
but his footsteps sounded loud.
He sat on a bench

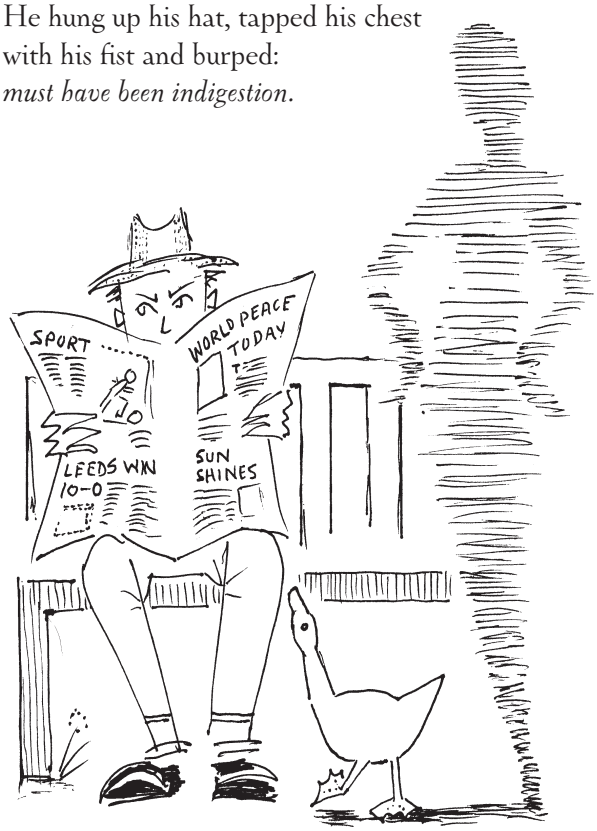
but the bench felt hard.
He read his newspaper,
but the words seemed to dance.

The man scratched his head
wondering what
he had forgotten.

At home the shadow
zigzagged itself on the stairs,
flattened itself against the window.

In the end it hung itself on the hat-stand,
neat as an ironed shirt. *I've felt funny all day*,
said the man as he let himself in.

He hung up his hat, tapped his chest
with his fist and burped:
must have been indigestion.



‘FLOWERS GO TO SCHOOL UNDERGROUND’

Rabindranath Tagore

Flowers beneath snow,
inside the earth,
within the seed.

Flowers in honeycomb,
girls’ names,
the scented foam of soap.

Flowers in the thread,
a swift needle’s tip,
the dancing swirl of skirt.

Flowers in the paint,
the bristles of the brush,
hummingbird dreams.

Flowers in fireworks,
deep in flowerpots, flowers
humming to the bees.

MANDY COE

MOORHEN

She is the clown of all waterfowl,
stubby and black,
plastic yellow feet, bright red nose.
The eggs — her treasures — are carefully
raised from dog-brown water
on a flimsy throne of twigs.

Her partner honks a warning
at reeds, rats, ripples, sky.
Through park railings
a toddler drops a fistful of white bread.

The eggs are alive with tiny vibrations.
Like nightfall, black feathers
settle and still them.

RAW

We always tiptoe up to rhubarb
and braving the prick of leaves,
kneel in muck
bending the angled stem
until the glassy *snap*.

Something draws us to it,
the sly creak of its shine,
the rawness
that strips spit, making our teeth
feel coated and sharp.

We push out tongues
in gargoyle astonishment,
let half-chewed dollops drop
between our feet. How could the sweet
pink of rhubarb and custard come from this?

Behind splintered sheds
where old men tip rumbling wheelbarrows,
we prepare to bite into onion.

MANDY COE

RECIPE FOR GOOD NEWS

I want to make news
the way a baker bakes a cake,
because the news I'd bake
won't make grandma's smile
turn upside-down
while she sighs at the radio:
What's the world coming to?

I want to make news
the way a baker bakes a cake,
because the news I'd bake
won't make mum bang shirts with the iron
while shouting at the telly:
Tell the truth for once why don't you!

I want to make news
the way a baker bakes a cake,
because the news I'd make
will have everyone cheering
for dark red cherries and chocolate icing.

My news will be so good
we'll gather round to share it,
lick the crumbs off our fingers.

IF YOU COULD SEE LAUGHTER

Hey, it is blue! No, surely red
— the colour of each breath
pumped out by the joy of running
or the jumpstart of a joke.

Tickle-breath is long and spiral.
Pink
I think.

If you could see laughter
it would look like balloons,
the sort magicians knot in squeaky twists.
Laugh a giraffe, guffaw a poodle.

A belly-laugh creates balloons that float,
at the pantomime, the air of the theatre
jostles with colour.
See this baby reaching for your smile?
A yellow hiccup of laughter pops out,
bobs above us for days.

We could rise off the ground with laughter,
tie strings on it and sail around the world.

MANDY COE

TOO YOUNG TO KNOW

In town the shutters stay closed.
We sleep with our clothes on.
The hall is full of bags.
Everyone goes quiet
when an aeroplane passes.

Uncle's shop is empty.
No warm smells of seedcake,
no queuing women to ruffle my hair.

From my bed I hear my family talking,
but when I dare to ask, when I dare
to touch my mother's hand and ask,
she says I am too young to understand.

Even the dog senses something,
creeping under the table, tail held low.
I hug his neck and whisper into his soft ear,
What is to happen? He licks my cheek.

ONE PAIR A YEAR

And as they wear out
you tie string around the toes
as if to silence a flapping mouth.
Line them with paper: headlines, local news.

You try to walk even, walk light.
Hammering nails into heels
you click and clack.
Every day you slip them off to save them,
side by side on the porch step,
in the shadow of a chair.
All dancing is done with bare feet.

Stones bruise, jute cuts,
it hurts you — or wears out the shoes.
Your decision, each journey,
each time you rise from chair or bed.
You walk to work, shoes bumping your chest,
the laces biting the back of your neck.

MANDY COE

THANK YOU

Danke, merci, gracias
for the heat of the sun,
the kindness of teaching,
the smell of fresh bread.

Diolch, nkosi, shur-nur-ah-gah-lem
for the sound of sand,
children singing,
the book and the pen.

Dhannyabad, blagodaria, hvala
for the blue of small flowers,
the bobbing seal's head,
the taste of clean water.

Shukran gazillan, yakoke, nandi
for the stripe of the zebra,
the song of the chaffinch,
the gentleness of snails.

Mh goi, abarka, mille grazie
for the length of time,
the loveliness of eyelashes,
the arc of the ball.

Dziekuje, bhala hove, shakkran
for the excitement of falling,
the stillness of night,
my heart beating, thank you.



MANDY COE

FROG

The frog has neatly folded legs.
Jaw of bulldog,
pond-skinned, up-eyed. This frog
has a double chin that throbs:
frog, he sings, *frog*.

Now he fans his toes and leaps
into a ring of ripples.
He grew himself, this frog,
from a black dot
in a see-through blob.

He measures time
in tongue-lengths and hops,
this damsel fly: gone!
Only a blink-of-an-eye gulp revealing
what occurs between verses of his song.

ROW FLOW BLOW

For Matt Simpson

an old man in a boat asked me
asked me how to go
I know, I said, I know
row, you've got to row
row, flow, blow
row, flow, blow

the tides of the sea they asked me
asked me how to go
I know, I said, I know
flow, you've got to flow
row, flow, blow
row, flow, blow

The wind behind the sails asked me
asked me how to go
I know, I said, I know
blow, you've got to blow
row, flow, blow
row, flow, blow

MANDY COE

SENSING MOTHER

Dad keeps Mum's favourite dress
deep in the bottom of the ottoman.
Sometimes, when he is at work
I stand listening to the tick of the clock
then go upstairs.

And propping up the squeaky wooden lid,
I dig through layers
of rough, winter blankets
feeling for that touch of silk.
The blue whisper of it, cool
against my cheek.

Other times, the school-test times,
and dad-gets-home-too-late
to-say-goodnight times —
I wrap the arms of the dress around me,
breathing in a smell, faint as dried flowers.

I remember how she twirled around
— like a swirl of sky.

When I am old enough I will wear it.
Pulling up the white zip,
I'll laugh and spin,
calling out to *my* daughter:
How do I look?

MANDY COE

SUN LOVES MOON

Monday, small ads:
Hey Moonie-La, meet me at dawn S x

Tuesday, text:
c u l8r **:-) ?**

Wednesday, diary extract:
I will never EVER call her again.

Thursday, voicemail:
Hi M, it's me. Did you get the flowers?
Sorry about the chocolates,
I put them in my pocket and they got . . . runny.
Listen — is there any chance of us meeting?
Please, *please* call me.

Friday, graffiti:
Sun ♥ Moon

Saturday, singing telegram:

Greetings Miss, I love your face.
Please stop this eternal chase.
Will you be mine and let me shine?
My palest, roundest, Valentine.

Sunday, invitation:

Engagement party! Bring a friend. RSVP