

The Orange

At lunchtime I bought a huge orange—
The size of it made us all laugh.
I peeled it and shared it with Robert and Dave—
They got quarters and I had a half.

And that orange, it made me so happy,
As ordinary things often do
Just lately. The shopping. A walk in the park.
This is peace and contentment. It's new.

The rest of the day was quite easy.
I did all the jobs on my list
And enjoyed them and had some time over.
I love you. I'm glad I exist.

— Wendy Cope

The Orange was written by British poet Wendy Cope around 1989. Although it is addressed towards a man whom Cope was in a new relationship with at the time, I saw the poem as more of a self reflection and observation of Cope's own feelings of contentment with the common, everyday aspects of her life. It lightly describes an ordinary day punctuated by small joys. Cope purchases an orange that is larger than usual at lunchtime and meets her friends, Robert and Dave. All three of them find enjoyment in the comical size of the orange and the poet goes on to share it with Robert and Dave before she goes about the rest of her day, completing all of the jobs on her list. She recognises that she feels peace and contentment, and there is some emotional weight to the fact that this is a new state of mind for her. It is a simple and humble poem - twelve lines encapsulating a grateful homage to the small things in this life.

I first came across *The Orange* when I was about fifteen. I think it resonated because, similar to Cope's appreciation for the orange, for as long as I can remember I have been aware of my attachment to the small things. I could always understand the importance of the orange as a catalyst for Cope's contentment. I had, and still have, similar small moments that spark comfort and contentment, as well as small moments that spark a sort of quiet devastation - I think at some capacity everybody must have these. The experience of a brief pause in time while we wait by the counter in the kitchen for the kettle to boil,

seeing the glow of one side of a building as the sun hits it in the evening, standing in the supermarket contemplating buying cheese because it costs the bones of 4 euro now but it's ok because a great song from 2004 is playing in the background, buying ice creams in petrol stations to break up long drives, fingerprints on windows, bad jokes, chipped mugs - these significant insignificants form in the corners of our lives without us having to try to conjure them.

On a *'deeper'* note, the poem makes me think about the fact that in a world where there is a constant flow of serious political, economic, social and cultural matters, we continue to find a significant place for objects, thoughts and actions that are by comparison, insignificant. They are present in literature, art and ideals throughout the ages, from historical to contemporary. The very existence of, and subsequent love for *The Orange* is proof of this. Nietzsche attempted to define them, Morandi painted them, even the first testament quotes, *'He that despiseth little things shall perish little by little'* - pitiless, yet poetic, keeping on brand with the rest of the Catholic Bible I suppose. Countless literature has been written, art has been created, films produced, philosophies theorised, poems written, all inspired by this idea of the small. How crazy is it that amidst eruptions we can still attach ourselves to these small moments, that chunks of time can be spent feeling them, reaching out, touching them - that in a solemn world of seriousness Wendy Cope could take the time to write a poem about an orange and we can continue to afford to take the time to think about it thirty-five years later. What a privilege is this long term affiliation with the smallest of the small, despite the biggest of the big.

All this, and the fact that *The Orange* loosely formed a section of my thesis, prompted me to contact Wendy Cope a few months ago. In response to my question, 'Why do you choose to write about ordinary things like the orange?', Cope replied,

'I would say that the poem is about a big thing - being in love - and how that makes everyday life happier and easier. Having a love affair go wrong, obviously, has the opposite effect...A poem such as *The Orange*, which seems to be about little things, really isn't.'

The final line, *'I love you. I'm glad I exist'* now has more importance than what I had originally given it, especially since it is commonly known that Cope only had a short relationship with the man the line refers to. Cope had this beautiful, simple day and subsequently wrote this poem of the same description as a result of being in love. Up until now I thought that the ability to note the small things, and appreciate them, was a kind of secret for achieving happiness. I hadn't given much thought to the idea that

happiness, or love, is the secret to making note of, and appreciating the small things. Earlier in this piece of writing I commented that the orange was a kind of catalyst for appreciation of all the other bigger things in Cope's life. However, with Cope's shared response in mind, it is important to make a switch - love is the catalyst for our appreciation of the small things, not the other way around. Cope also commented in her response that 'the big things are love and death. It has been said that they are the only subjects for poetry'. It is disappointing that the poem I credited as a champion of the small things in their own right, is consequently about the big things - but at the same time it is hardly surprising that love, and subsequently death, are more important. The big things and the small things do not exist separately, the poem illustrates that the big things inspire, and are in a way, the makers of small things.

To be honest, at first this seemed like a personal loss. As I said, *The Orange*, the poem that I had once championed, was now about love rather than small things. I don't mean to disregard poems that are about love, but there are just so many already, and it seems unfair to assume that those who are not in love, and I mean in the many senses of the word, not just romantic, these people exist, don't have the capacity to see small things. On top of that I still believe that the small things should be seen as special in their own right. An orange should be enough of an absolute wonder in itself as an object, that there should be no need to connect it with a 'bigger' event or idea. Is there not meaning enough in the simple fact that it is an orange, it exists and we can love it or loathe it for the object that it is? How selfish is it that we need an emotion as big as love or death to draw our attention to small things? However, I have not missed the point that maybe I should take this discovery as a sign of my luck. It may be the fact that I myself have known love and loss in my life has resulted in my ability to relate to this poem so deeply. If this is the case, what a lovely realisation. Loss is awful but I am not the first to make the connection that truly losing something or someone is a result of the pleasure of having loved them. So, if it is these phenomena that make the sunlight seem brighter, dated songs in the supermarket sound better, moments feel softer, time pass gentler, stupid jokes seem funnier or fruit shared with friends taste sweeter - then so be it. I can only hope that everyone at some stage gets the opportunity to truly experience love, loss and oranges.

