



**World Words**

**Candy Coated Unicorns  
and Converse All Stars**

Inua Ellams

**Teacher's Notes**

## The Poem

Inua Ellam's poem, 'Candy Coated Unicorns and Converse All Stars' is a dark look at the plight of individuals set against violence, both of a domestic and of a general nature. One of the protagonists in the poem has been beaten by her boyfriend. Against this there are images conjured, ranging from environmental degradation through to war. Hope is offered in the form of dreams ('*a candy coated unicorn*') and aspiration ('*we are powerful beyond measure*'). In the end a possible future is imagined where the two strangers meet again when the problems have been resolved. What they share - they are both wearing similar shoes (*Converse All Stars trainers*) - is punned at the end with the maker's name 'Converse' turned into a verb.

## Method

It is important that the students do some creative thinking before they engage with the poem, either by listening or by reading. Use the Pre-listening 1 activity first. As the text will be heard as part of a longer broadcast, prepare students for the interview part as well before they listen to it – Pre-Listening Activity 2.

When they have had the opportunity to explore the theme of the text and have contributed some of their own ideas, then they are ready to listen. There is no 'best' way to do this, but the authors would suggest the following method:

1. Students listen to the whole broadcast, checking their activity 2 charts while doing so. Ask them to recall, orally, any words or phrases from the poem after the listening has finished. Write these on the board.
2. Use the words on the board to orally reconstruct the poem, as a class activity, as far as is possible. The important thing is to recreate the structure and content, not the exact words.
3. Hand out the text and read through. Interrupt with questions if appropriate.
4. Allow the students to listen again, this time with the text in front of them.

Now the students are ready to move onto the final part of the activities. These consist of following through ideas or themes.

## Pre-Listening Activity 1

1. Hand out the pre listening activity sheet 1. Do NOT hand out the poem.
2. Check the lexical explanations:
  - "Traditionally, are unicorns to be feared?' (*No; 'not created out of human fear'; 'good'; 'beautiful'*)
  - Does anyone in the class wear these trainers or know someone who does?
3. Get students to read **The Scene** and **The Players**. Ask:
  - how many people will be featured in the poem? (2)
  - are there other people in the coffee shop (*we don't know; students to decide*)
  - describe one of the characters
4. **Your Task** is a free ranging activity, preferably done in small groups. Prompt the students by asking how the conversation would start (*people are crying*) and ask them to develop the dialogue. They can act this out. Ask them to try to work in unicorn and the poster (Does the unicorn represent strength? Does the poster offer hope?). If they can't, it doesn't matter, but they ought to be able to use at least one of them. Monitor the role playing. Choose two or three to be acted out to the whole class, and invite questions and answers.

## Pre-Listening Activity 2

1. Give students the second pre-listening activity. Ask them to read through the quotations from the radio broadcast and decide who is saying what - writer or student. Then they must choose which category the quotation comes from and to write the appropriate letter in the appropriate square (see answer key below). They then listen to the broadcast to check their answers. The listening activity will have been made easier by this process of identification first.

- a. "I like the last part because *'when backpacks become briefcases and this table stables wars, we will sit and converse like all stars'*, this tells the reader the person plans on doing something about their situation."
- b. "I think it's a common word but unusual in this setting. It holds the idea of a colour and of the sea."
- c. "Lots of 's' and surface sounds .... if you think about the scale of sound, from vowels from *a* down to *o* and *u*, those words dance across the highest spectrum of sound."
- d. "It's tradition that men are the head of the household and you are just property."
- e. "I like *her pupils sparkled bright black* - the idea of black sparkling rather than soaking in colour.... writing it would pose a little twist on the image."
- f. "As long as there is a space given to discuss and debate, then everything can be resolved."
- g. "When rhythm is used - when you think about sonnets - they are very structured rhymes, put in specific places and the way I write is to scatter it loosely so it sounds like musical conversation."
- h. "Her boyfriend is abusing her but at the same time she defends him and loves him."

i. "I guess I was fooling around with the idea of tongues and snakes and a little bit to hint at the idea of a knife."

j. "The poet used words that are incredibly descriptive. We are given a picture of what the setting looks like."

	Oppression	Hope	Imagery	Sound effects
The poet		f	b, e	c,g,i
The students	d, h	a	j	

### During Listening

1. Listen to the broadcast. Students to check their Pre-listening Activity 2 chart while doing so.

2. Ask them to feed back any words or phrases relating to the poem that they remember. It doesn't matter how disjointed they are. As a class activity try to rebuild the poem from collective memory. Some students will remember parts that others didn't. Write these on the board in more or less the order in which they appear in the poem.

3. Divide the class into two. Hand out the following worksheets (appendix) with one half of the class (for example, all those sitting on your left) with worksheet A and hand out worksheet B to those remaining (e.g. on your right). Together, within group A or within group B, they must try to reconstruct as much of the poem as possible. Group A has only verbs, and group B has only nouns. At this stage don't let the two groups communicate. After a suitable period of time (not more than 10 minutes) pair up students, one from group A and one from group B and allow the completion process to continue with the additional information. Allow up to another 10 minutes. Then play the poem again and the students can check their attempts and write in extra information that is missing.

4. Hand out the text of the poem. Allow a few minutes for the students to check what they have recalled with what is on the page.

5. Read through the poem (this can be done individually). At appropriately timed spaces ask these questions:

- What do the students think 'the dolphins are dying for'?

- What does the poet think he was in a former life? (Investigate: what does the poet mean by *ultramarinean*?)
- Note: B.B. King is a blues singer, known for sorrowful blues songs; his daughters Claudette and Shirley have copied some of their father's songs, less successfully. Is this the reference to re-swim, re-washed, re-sorrowed, renewed?)
- What happened to the stranger within the last hour? (*she was punched by her boyfriend*).
- What is 'this bubble of brown water and baked yeast'? (*the coffee shop*) and what pierces it? (*news of wars*)
- How does the poet reassure the stranger? (*being together afterwards; sharing the same choice of shoes*)
- What is the reference to *not having enough pillows* about? (*not enough of us can dream; the previous stanza implied that dreaming will make us strong*)
- Explain the last stanza (*a reference to a future born of hope - the (soldier's) backpacks have been replaced by a representation of peaceful business and wars replaced by the round table - a symbol of discussion and concord*).

5. Play the recording of the poem again. This time the students have the text in front of them.

### After Listening

A.

Your list	In what way do these lines from the poem offer hope to your list on the left?
<i>crying</i> <i>dolphins dying</i> <i>tears</i> <i>bloodshot</i> <i>legs buckle</i> <i>sobs</i> <i>boxer</i> <i>sighs</i> <i>bitter fables of war</i> <i>distant screams</i> <i>beast</i> <i>blood</i> <i>broken love</i> <i>dying child</i> <i>watery eyes</i> <i>speeding fists</i> <i>atomic voices</i> <i>nuclear slaps</i>	<p>We'll be here when the smoke clears;  two strangers wearing Chuck Taylor trainers swapping tears.</p> <p>.....</p> <p>I will be brave</p> <p>I will dare to dream a candy coated unicorn in this bruised Princess</p> <p>(students own answers here; a time for them to reflection and speculation)</p>

B.

'crying for' implies empathy and thus a more active role in the crying than «'crying about' which is more passive, more of a victim role.

speculation: re-swim, re-washed, re-sorrowed imply that they **need** to be done again perhaps to try again - were they not done correctly before? Discussion point.

## Appendix

### Group A

#### Candy Coated Unicorns And Converse All Stars

\_\_\_ asks \_\_\_ I'm crying \_\_\_;  
\_\_\_ tell \_\_\_ it's \_\_\_ are dying \_\_\_\_,  
\_\_\_ was \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ am \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_ re-swim \_\_\_;

\_\_\_ are re-washed \_\_\_  
\_\_\_, plugged into \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_  
\_\_\_, \_\_\_ are \_\_\_.

\_\_\_ ask \_\_\_ she's crying \_\_\_;  
\_\_\_ slump, \_\_\_ rises. \_\_\_ are \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ sparkle \_\_\_.  
\_\_\_ begin to buckle, \_\_\_ catch \_\_\_ hits  
\_\_\_. \_\_\_ whispers \_\_\_

it's \_\_\_ you're crying \_\_\_,

\_\_\_, \_\_\_ was \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ will testify. \_\_\_ sighs  
\_\_\_ makes \_\_\_ can no longer deny  
\_\_\_ half-carry, half-drag \_\_\_.

\_\_\_ is littered \_\_\_ tell \_\_\_  
\_\_\_. \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ pierce \_\_\_  
\_\_\_.

\_\_\_ tells \_\_\_; \_\_\_ speaks  
\_\_\_ drips \_\_\_\_, slips \_\_\_.  
\_\_\_ I can stop \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_ takes \_\_\_:

it's \_\_\_ going \_\_\_ should not  
\_\_\_ I'm hoping \_\_\_ runs \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ be

\_\_\_ holds \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_  
- \_\_\_ holding \_\_\_\_,  
\_\_\_ won't let her see it's \_\_\_.

\_\_\_ squeeze \_\_\_\_, hold \_\_\_\_, say it's \_\_\_\_,  
let \_\_\_\_. We'll \_\_\_;  
\_\_\_ wearing \_\_\_ swapping \_\_\_.

\_\_\_ reads *Our deepest fear  
is not that we are inadequate,  
but that we are powerful beyond measure;*

\_\_\_ can reason \_\_\_\_,  
can whisper \_\_\_  
can dream \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ could stand  
is not having \_\_\_.

\_\_\_ we are \_\_\_.

\_\_\_  
I will be \_\_\_.

I will dare to dream \_\_\_  
\_\_\_, mistake \_\_\_\_,  
crunch \_\_\_.

\_\_\_ become \_\_\_  
stables \_\_\_\_, we will sit \_\_\_ converse  
\_\_\_.

## Group B

### Candy Coated Unicorns And Converse All Stars

\_\_\_;  
\_\_\_ thing dolphins \_\_\_,  
\_\_\_ life \_\_\_ ultramarinean \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ a land lover \_\_\_ the blue;

These tears \_\_\_ waters \_\_\_ B.B. King's  
daughters, \_\_\_ the ocean's floor, \_\_\_  
\_\_\_, these tears \_\_\_ the blues \_\_\_.

\_\_\_;  
shoulders \_\_\_, head \_\_\_. \_\_\_ the whites  
\_\_\_ her eyes \_\_\_ her pupils \_\_\_.  
Her legs \_\_\_, \_\_\_  
the café floor. \_\_\_ my arms \_\_\_

\_\_\_ thing \_\_\_,

\_\_\_ the last hour, her boyfriend \_\_\_ a boxer  
\_\_\_ her jaw \_\_\_. Her whole body \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ a truth \_\_\_  
\_\_\_, \_\_\_ the round table.

The café \_\_\_ newspapers \_\_\_  
fables \_\_\_ war \_\_\_ the Middle East. \_\_\_ snippets  
\_\_\_ screams \_\_\_ this bubble  
\_\_\_ water \_\_\_ yeast.

\_\_\_ the boyfriend \_\_\_ a beast; \_\_\_  
blood \_\_\_ lips, \_\_\_ her coffee cup.  
\_\_\_, \_\_\_ a sip:

\_\_\_ thing \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ her blood  
\_\_\_ the beast \_\_\_

\_\_\_ love, \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ mother \_\_\_ child,  
\_\_\_ eyes \_\_\_ vain.

\_\_\_ her shoulders, \_\_\_ her hand, \_\_\_,  
\_\_\_ rain. \_\_\_ the smoke \_\_\_;  
two strangers \_\_\_ Chuck Taylor trainers \_\_\_ tears.

A poster \_\_\_ wall reads *Our deepest fear  
is not that we are inadequate,  
but that we are powerful beyond measure;*

\_\_\_ speeding fists,  
\_\_\_ atomic voices  
\_\_\_ nuclear slaps  
\_\_\_ excuse \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ pillows \_\_\_.

\_\_\_.  
\_\_\_ wasteland \_\_\_ coffee cups \_\_\_ couches  
\_\_\_.

\_\_\_ unicorn \_\_\_  
\_\_\_, \_\_\_ chocolate \_\_\_ Kenyan beer,  
\_\_\_ ice cubes \_\_\_ river water.

\_\_\_ backpacks \_\_\_ briefcases \_\_\_ this table  
\_\_\_ wars, \_\_\_  
\_\_\_ stars.

## **Candy Coated Unicorns And Converse All Stars**

She asks what I'm crying for;  
I tell her it's the same thing dolphins are dying for,  
that in my last life I was ultramarinean and though  
I am now a land lover, I often re-swim the blue;

These tears are re-washed waters of B.B. King's  
daughters, plugged into the ocean's floor, re-sorrowed  
and renewed, these tears are the blues in bloom.

I ask her what she's crying for;  
shoulders slump, head rises. Bloodshot are the whites  
of her eyes and her pupils sparkle bright black.  
Her legs begin to buckle, I catch her before she hits  
the café floor. In my arms she whispers between sobs

it's the same thing you're crying for,

how in the last hour, her boyfriend was a boxer  
and her jaw will testify. Her whole body sighs  
as if speaking it makes it a truth she can no longer deny  
and I half-carry, half-drag her to the round table.

The café is littered with newspapers that tell bitter  
fables of war in the Middle East. Snatched snippets  
of its distant screams pierce this bubble  
of brown water and baked yeast.

She tells of the boyfriend of a beast; as she speaks  
blood drips from her broken lips, slips into her coffee cup.  
Before I can stop her, she takes a sip:

it's a thing going where it should not  
and I'm hoping she runs like her blood

and lets the beast be

She holds on to this broken love, like a war  
-torn mother holding to a dying child,  
whose watery eyes won't let her see it's all in vain.

I squeeze her shoulders, hold her hand, say it's okay,  
let it rain. We'll be here when the smoke clears;  
two strangers wearing Chuck Taylor trainers swapping tears.

A poster on wall reads *Our deepest fear*  
*is not that we are inadequate,*  
*but that we are powerful beyond measure;*

we can reason faster than speeding fists,  
can whisper louder than atomic voices  
can dream bigger than nuclear slaps  
and the only excuse that could stand  
is not having enough pillows to go round.

Yet we are fearful.  
But in this new wasteland of coffee cups and couches  
I will be brave.

I will dare to dream a candy coated unicorn in this bruised  
princess, mistake cold hot chocolate for Kenyan beer,  
crunch ice cubes like frozen river water.

And when backpacks become briefcases and this table  
stables wars, we will sit and converse  
like all stars.

*Inua Ellams*