

# Poetry on the Glasgow Subway

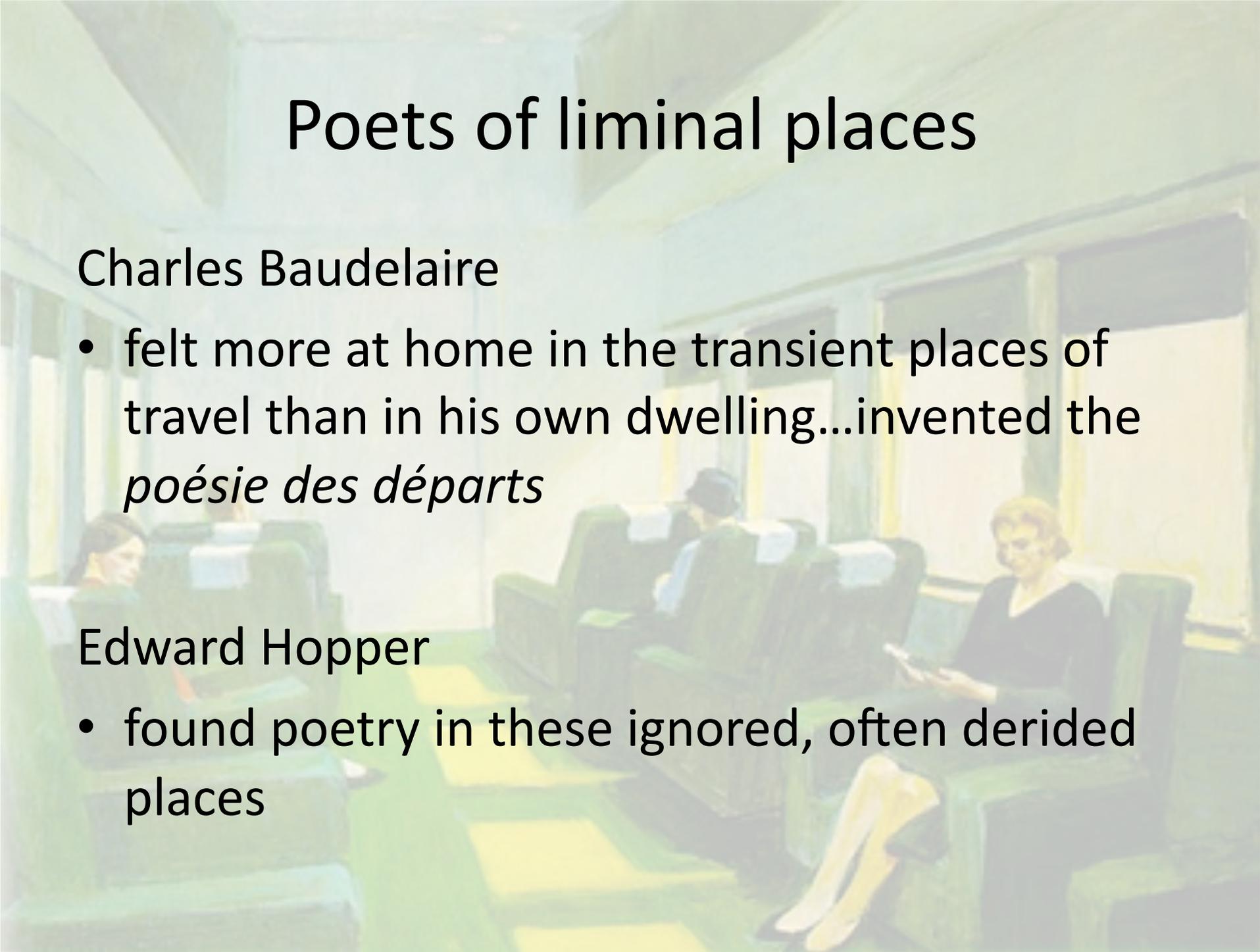
Encouraging Students to Write

Daniel Xerri – University of Malta

# Poetry of liminal places

There was poetry in this forsaken service station... Its appeal made me think of certain other equally and unexpectedly poetic travelling places – airport terminals, harbours, train stations and motels – and the work of a nineteenth-century writer and a twentieth-century painter he had inspired, who had, in different ways, been unusually alive to the power of the liminal travelling place (De Botton, 2002)

# Poets of liminal places



Charles Baudelaire

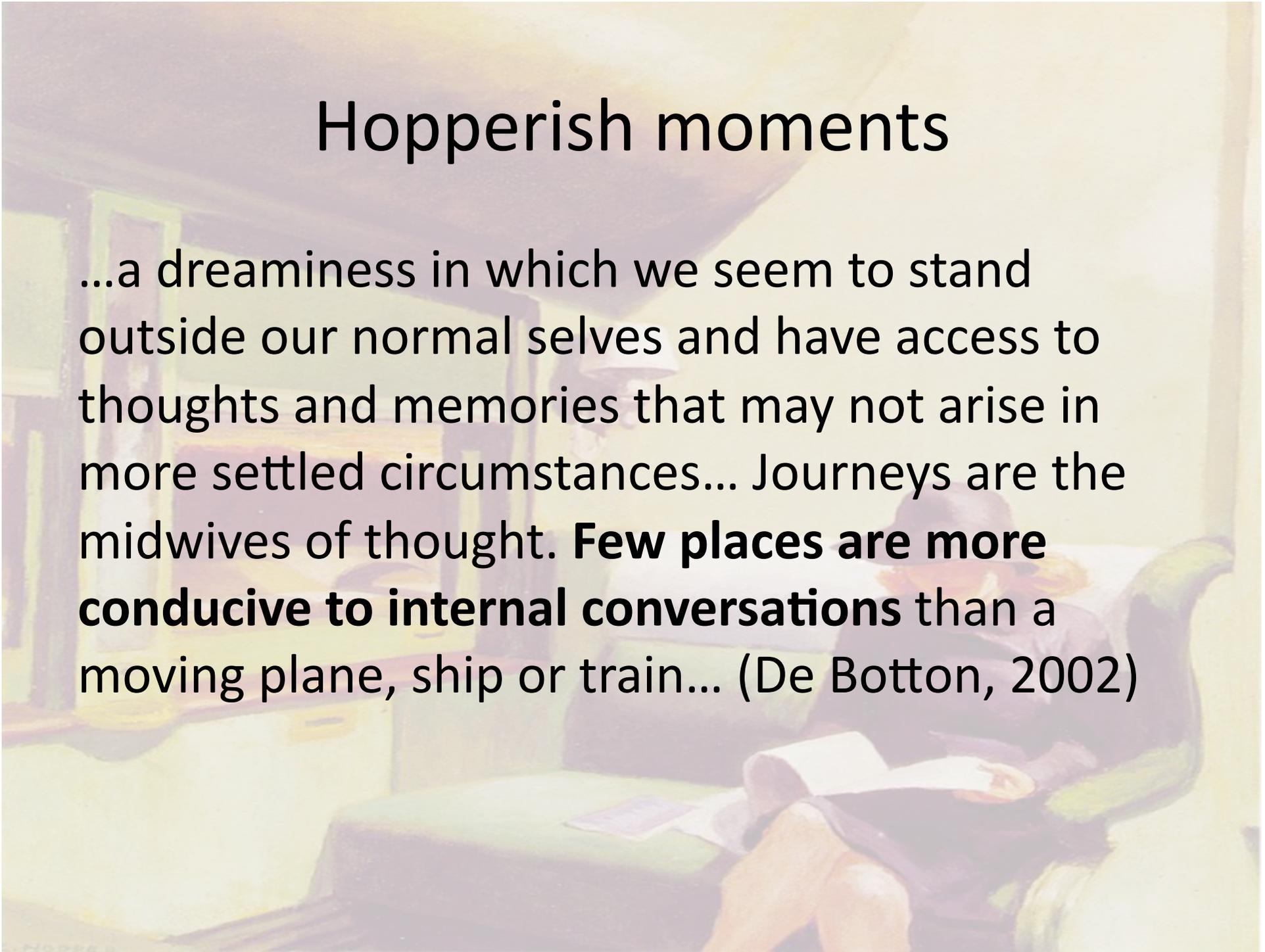
- felt more at home in the transient places of travel than in his own dwelling...invented the *poésie des départs*

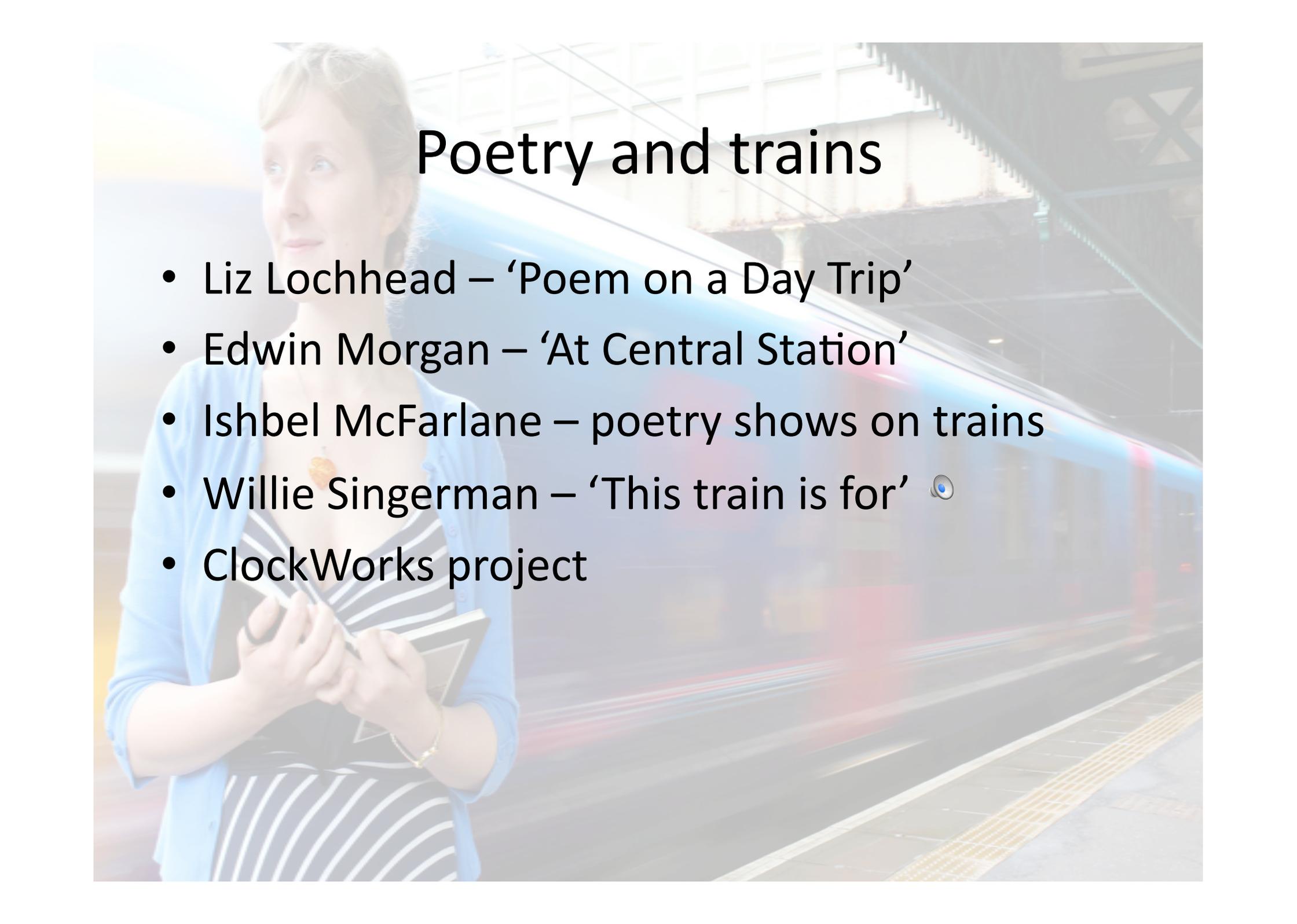
Edward Hopper

- found poetry in these ignored, often derided places

# Hopperish moments

...a dreaminess in which we seem to stand outside our normal selves and have access to thoughts and memories that may not arise in more settled circumstances... Journeys are the midwives of thought. **Few places are more conducive to internal conversations** than a moving plane, ship or train... (De Botton, 2002)





# Poetry and trains

- Liz Lochhead – ‘Poem on a Day Trip’
- Edwin Morgan – ‘At Central Station’
- Ishbel McFarlane – poetry shows on trains
- Willie Singerman – ‘This train is for’ 🗣️
- ClockWorks project

# Edwin Morgan

- In the early 1980s the Scottish Arts Council commissioned Liz Lochhead, Tom Leonard, Alex Scott and Morgan to write poster poems for the refurbished subway
- 4 of Morgan's poems were deemed unsuitable by Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive
- SPTEx: "we must take this opportunity to assure our passengers that as far as we know there are no piranha fish in the Underground"

THE SUBWAY PIRANHAS by Edwin Morgan

Did anyone tell you  
that in each subway train  
there is one special seat  
with a small hole in it  
and underneath the seat  
is a tank of piranha-fish  
which have not been fed  
for quite some time.  
The fish become agitated  
by the shoogling of the train  
and jump up through the seat.  
The resulting skeletons  
of unlucky passengers  
turn an honest penny  
for the transport executive,  
hanging far and wide  
in medical schools.

# Edwin Morgan

- Morgan: “The poems were all fantasies which the PTE took in a literal way.... My poems were more about the old Subway while the PTE want to promote the image of their fresh, new system”
- Published as *Glasgow Poster Poems* in 1983
- Posters of ‘Strawberries’ embellished the subway in 2009

# Graham Fulton

## *Inner Circle* (2008)

- A journey on Clockwork Orange with a poem for every station, beginning and ending at St Enoch, and focusing on anonymous fellow travellers whom one will never see again

# The Pink at Partick – Graham Fulton

on at Partick a pink fairy shocking girl with pink  
Vivienne-Westwood-Derek-Jarman-Jubilee  
pink hair extremely pink with mad pink shoes  
and decadent shiny satiny tights a coat close  
to pink a bag  
with Cupcake on it a bit  
of a pretty pink rebel rebel with black black lashes  
Angel's Delight slightly dangerous pink punk fairy  
making our lives a little pinker at long  
pink last pink fairy girl good for you ignore  
the black pink dirty looks off at Govan



The background of the slide is a photograph of the interior of a subway train. The walls are a bright yellow color, and the seats are a red and orange patterned fabric. The train is moving, as indicated by the motion blur in the background. The text is overlaid on this image.

# John Rice

- 2008-2010: Scottish Art Council's Subway Poet-in-Residence
- Poem postcards were handed out with ticket sales and many of his poems were reproduced as large scale illustrated poetry posters
- Visits to over 100 schools, libraries, museums and other venues
- Started the Glasgow schools poetry competition 'Bang on Bard!'

# The Subway Witches

The witches fly  
on broomsticks high  
through the tunnels so bold.

They choose warm places,  
such as subway spaces,  
as they cannot stand the cold.

The witches are told  
that their luck won't hold  
in the chill of a Glasgow dew.

So it's in under ground air  
that they screech and scare...  
...and so never catch the 'flu!

John Rice  
Subway Poet in Residence

# Shooglin' Aboot Unner the Grun

## The Glesga' Subway

by John Rice, SPT Poet-in-Residence

A ride oan the subway whither early or late,  
is somethin' yer mammy wull tell ye is great.  
It's cool an' it's classy, it's fab an' it's fun,  
when ye're shooglin' aboot unner the grun.

Fae Partick tae Ibrox an' stoapin' at Govan,  
think o' the fun ye'll aw be huvin'!  
Then oan past St. Enoch tae reach the Cowcaddens  
tae visit yer auntie (wan o' the McFaddens).

Ye go doon the sters – there's a whoom an' a whoosh  
as the wind fae the subway spurts oot like skoosh.  
Noo watch ye don't trip, take yer hauns oot yer poockets,  
an' mind yir eyes doan't pop oot their soackets!

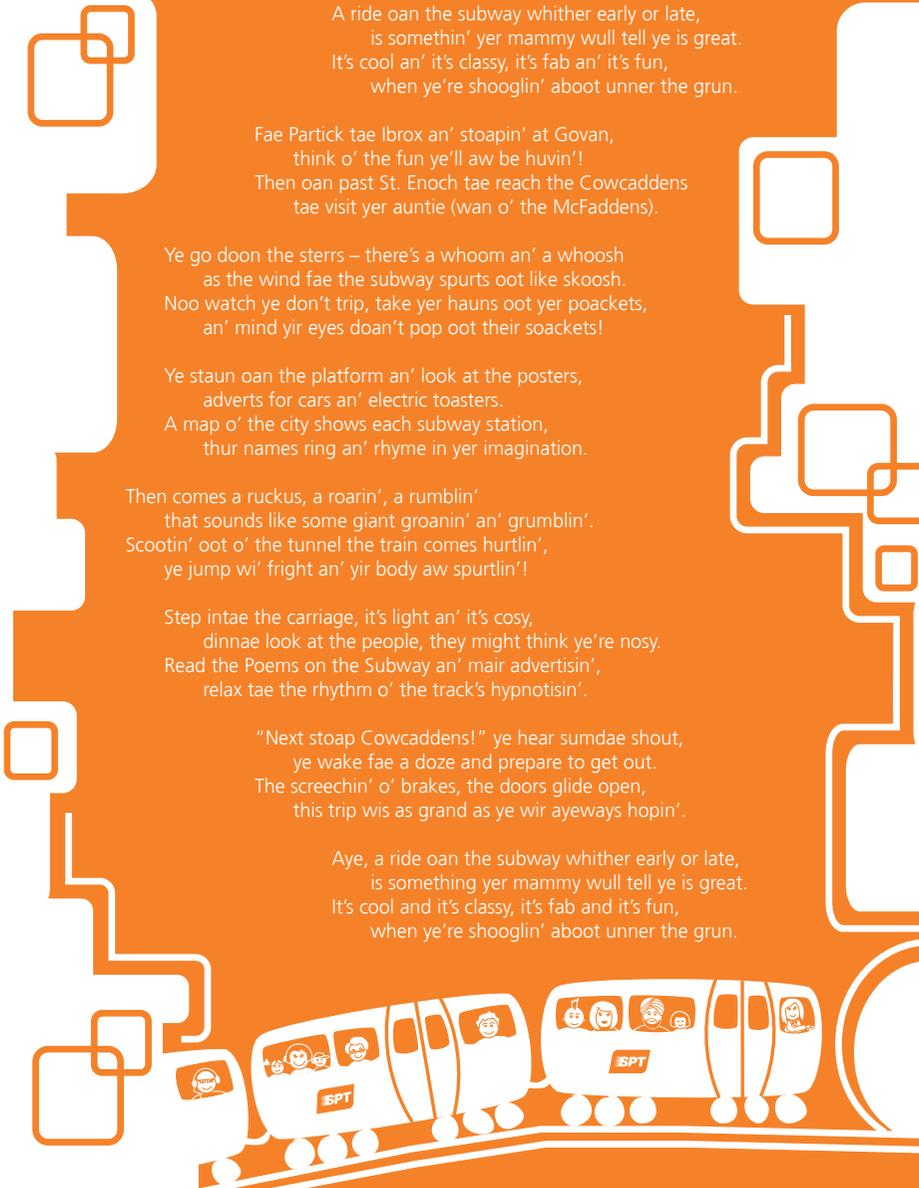
Ye staun oan the platform an' look at the posters,  
adverts for cars an' electric toasters.  
A map o' the city shows each subway station,  
thur names ring an' rhyme in yer imagination.

Then comes a ruckus, a roarin', a rumblin'  
that sounds like some giant groanin' an' grumblin'.  
Scootin' oot o' the tunnel the train comes hurtlin',  
ye jump wi' fright an' yir body aw spurtlin'!

Step intae the carriage, it's light an' it's cosy,  
dinnae look at the people, they might think ye're nosy.  
Read the Poems on the Subway an' mair advertisin',  
relax tae the rhythm o' the track's hypnotisin'.

"Next stoap Cowcaddens!" ye hear sumdae shout,  
ye wake fae a doze and prepare to get out.  
The screechin' o' brakes, the doors glide open,  
this trip wis as grand as ye wir ayeways hopin'.

Aye, a ride oan the subway whither early or late,  
is something yer mammy wull tell ye is great.  
It's cool and it's classy, it's fab and it's fun,  
when ye're shooglin' aboot unner the grun.



# I buy shoes for my son in the **SALE**

(for René)

Even though  
he's 35  
and I do not  
know his size exactly,  
and I've no idea if these  
are his style,  
I buy shoes for my son in the sale.



I hate to think of him  
on his feet all day at work,  
in last year's shoes with their soles  
thin and blotchy as crumpets.



So I cough up the cash,  
taking a chance. Tending to  
the collar and hem of his life:  
knowing such molly-coddling  
will annoy him.



He'll never understand  
why I buy shoes for my son in the sale;  
until he learns that, as a child in Glasgow,  
his father's father went barefoot.

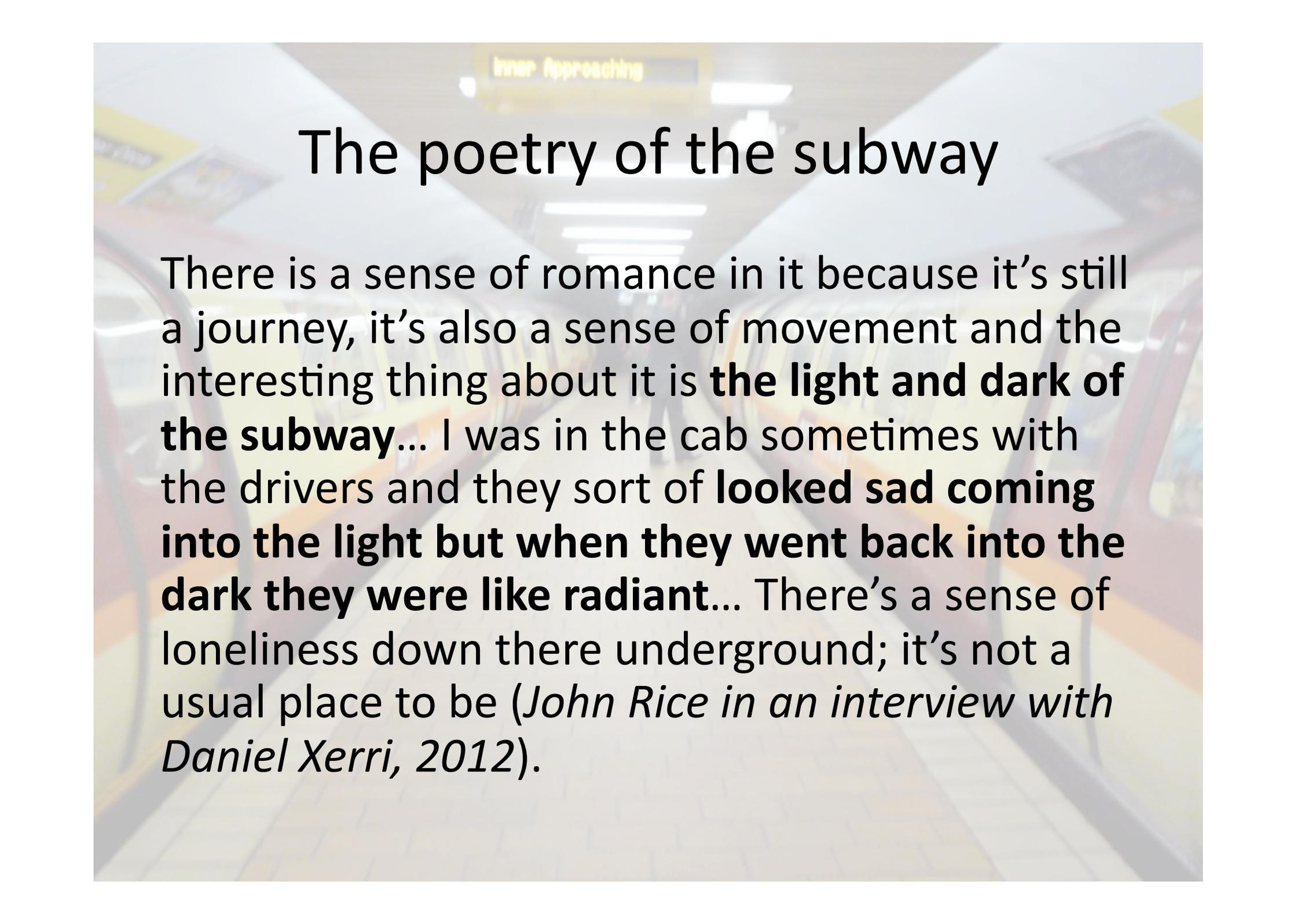


**John Rice**  
Subway Poet in Residence



# Jealously focused attention

A bus, which we might at first have viewed aesthetically or mechanically or as a springboard to thoughts about communities within cities, becomes simply a box to move us as rapidly as possible across an area which might as well not exist, so unconnected is it to our primary goal, outside of which all is darkness, all is invisible (De Botton, 2002)



# The poetry of the subway

There is a sense of romance in it because it's still a journey, it's also a sense of movement and the interesting thing about it is **the light and dark of the subway**... I was in the cab sometimes with the drivers and they sort of **looked sad coming into the light but when they went back into the dark they were like radiant**... There's a sense of loneliness down there underground; it's not a usual place to be (*John Rice in an interview with Daniel Xerri, 2012*).

# Public transport as a vehicle for poetry

I think it does work. It works for people on a very personal level and it's certainly a distraction from the adverts. A lot of people mentioned that to me. It's nice to see something other than adverts (*John Rice in an interview with Daniel Xerri, 2012*).

# Distracting the commuter

I think one of the things I was trying to do was to give them something to read other than the adverts and I was trying to get them to see that if they read poetry it would be much more personal, to give them some sense of enjoyment, some sense of reflection (*John Rice in an interview with Daniel Xerri, 2012*).



# Students writing poetry

- Rice: “My main intention as the poet-in-residence for SPT is to...get the children looking at their surroundings and have them use this experience as the basis for some creative writing”
- Claire (10): “The best part of the trip was riding on the Subway. I’ve been on it lots of times but normally just read a book. This time we looked around and noticed our surroundings. John is very funny and he’s inspired me to write more poetry”

# Rice on his residency

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zj39tdaSQ-4>



# Students writing poetry

When they're writing poetry they're giving a lot of consideration to where words go and what choices of words go on the page. It's a question of...trying to get them to form an insight into the importance of language, the skill of using language (*John Rice in an interview with Daniel Xerri, 2012*).

There she stands all alone,  
waiting for someone to pass by.

She starts with the weather and never seems to  
put an end to her chatter.

Her opinion keeps bursting out like water from a damaged hose-pipe.

You can never miss her long and shabby skirts which  
suit her appearance,

and her voice as loud as thunder,

makes the world stop.

## Missing

Everyday , I creep into the bus

hoping I wouldn't be late for class .

It feels stuffed with all the breaths

of the different faces , unfamiliar traces

of smells which <sup>maybe</sup> belong to some

who I recon from other days .

Today , something was different

where was the wrinkled face

of first seat left ?

The old man and I looked at each other.

His feet in torn sneakers were fragile

and with every step he makes

the smell of a pig's sty choked the air

in the bus.

His mismatched clothes suggest the outmoded fashion

that has lasted a century.

His body though old shows his young strength

which once showed steel muscles.

A few seat-widths along the bus

I watched his lips moving rapidly and continuously

murmuring repetitive words just like a parrot

and a man saying a prayer.

## The Ride

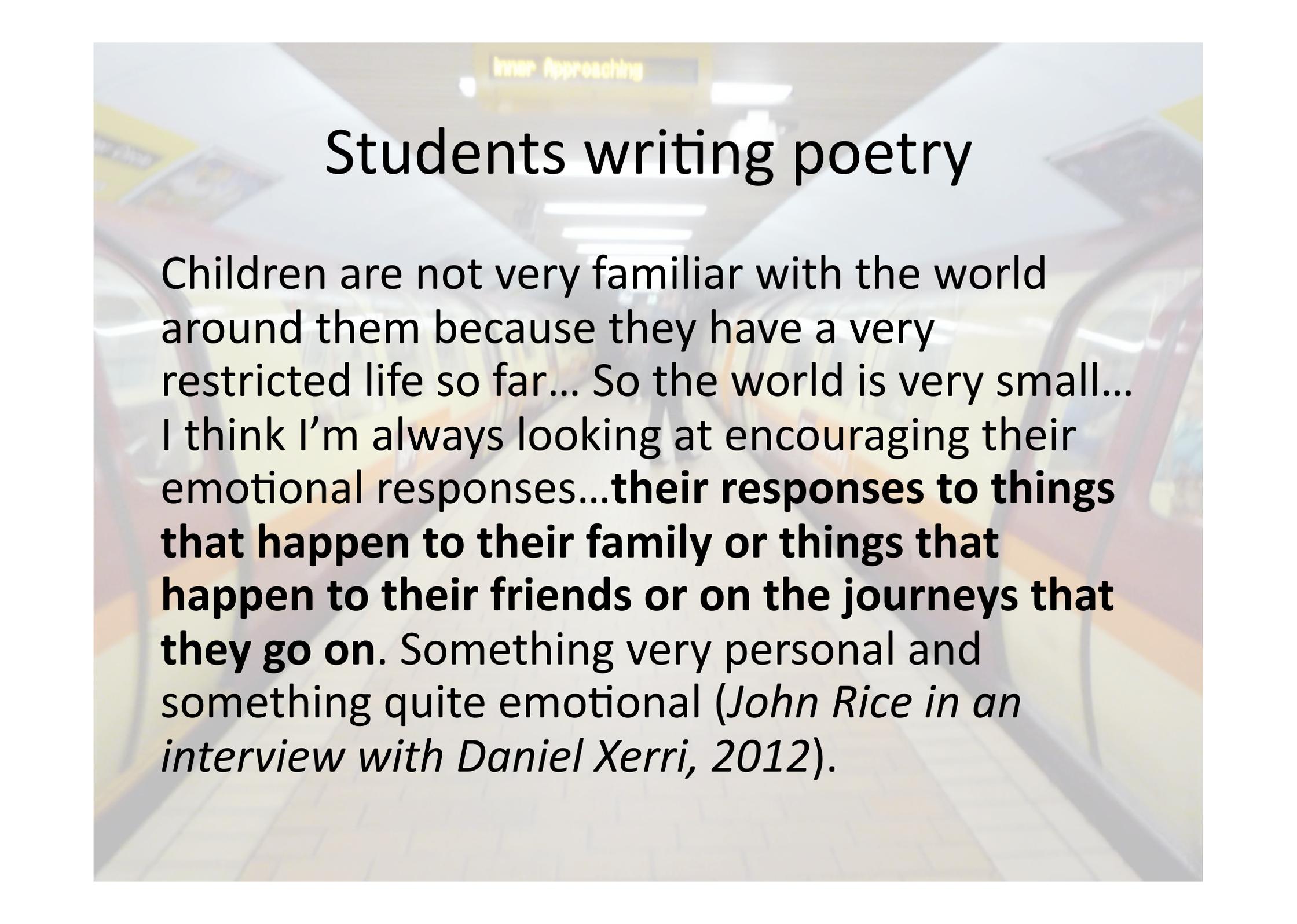
Encapsuled in this travelling machine  
That not only travels through space but also time -  
Time that sweeps away so swiftly and so quietly....  
Every bend brushing away another mile, another year  
And closer we are to our final destination.

Prisoners of man's invention;  
Trapped. Without air.  
Confined to a space shared by so many.  
Prisoners of our own scrap of time  
Impatiently waiting for our final destination.

All we've ever known are the strangers' nudges  
All we've ever heard are the impatient moans  
And all we've ever felt is the lead like lead - the lack of  
oxygen.  
It all becomes bearable at the thought of our final  
destination.

I, for one, am not too eager to get there.  
Instead, I shall pull out pen and paper and I shall write.  
I shall write about the nudges,  
I shall write about the childish moans,  
And I shall write about everyone's thirst for fresh air.

People's way of dealing with their scrap of time.  
And this is a testament of me dealing with mine.

The background of the slide is a photograph of a train platform. A yellow sign at the top center reads "Inner Approaching". The platform has a tiled floor and a metal railing. The image is slightly blurred and has a light overlay.

# Students writing poetry

Children are not very familiar with the world around them because they have a very restricted life so far... So the world is very small... I think I'm always looking at encouraging their emotional responses...**their responses to things that happen to their family or things that happen to their friends or on the journeys that they go on.** Something very personal and something quite emotional (*John Rice in an interview with Daniel Xerri, 2012*).

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5 mins  
with you  
2 mins  
with you  
12:15 PM

Daler Circle

Daler Circle

subway tickets

inform