



# PASSWORDS

# My Scream is Made of Echoes

## Teaching So Chong-Ju and Graciela Reyes

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In a city where so many voices are competing to be heard and where whole communities sometimes go unheard, I like to offer my young Chicago students a range of acoustical choices—to scream, to whisper, to sing, to be silent. After all, poetry is not only the study of words, it is also (like music) the study of volume, of dynamics, of how to be heard. To bring home the idea of vocal texture and weight, I introduce my students to Korean poet So Chong-Ju’s “A Sneeze” and Argentine poet Graciela Reyes’s “El Grito/The Scream.”

“I have a secret,” I tell my third graders at Chicago’s Columbus Elementary School. Once their interest is piqued, I announce that I am going to bestow my secret on the student sitting nearest me. His assignment will be to pass my secret on quietly and precisely to his neighbor. He will only have one chance to pass the secret along, so he must not let a word like “um” interrupt the clarity of his message. “By the way,” I add, “my secret is a poetic one.” Introductions done, I cup my hands around young Eduardo’s ear and whisper, “I am a furious, blue ocean.” Eduardo proceeds to pass the metaphor on to Carlos who passes it in turn to Cielo who passes it to Susana, and so on until it reaches the final student, who stands town-crier-style and proclaims my metamorphosed secret—“I am a furry blue shoe.” Such are the excitements of our whispered transmission.

After a few cycles of whispers, I ask my poets to think of their own secrets and to write them down on a sheet of paper. I coach for playful, audacious metaphor, but I also invite them to write whatever kind of secret they want. Some students scribble that they are really stars in the sky. Others write more poignant confessions, such as “I wish I lived with my dad.” After everyone has a secret safely tucked away, we talk for a while about the subject at hand. What is a secret? Why do we tend to whisper our secrets? Do we whisper things other than secrets?

Once our philosophical interlude has drawn to a close, I introduce them to Chong-Ju’s poem, emphasizing what I like to call a “whisper chant.” When I first read “A Sneeze,” I was taken by the rhythmic repetition of the phrase “somewhere/is someone/saying my words.” I heard it as an incantation in my head. When I decided to teach the poem to my third graders, I knew that they’d get into the quizzical chant and it was also a good way to highlight the rhythm of poetry without relying on rhyme.

### A Sneeze

Somewhere  
is someone  
saying my words?

I stepped out  
into the blue autumn day's  
winds that touched the ricepaper door.  
I sniffed at the weather,  
and sneezed.

Somewhere  
is someone  
saying my words?

Somewhere  
as someone says my words,  
has a flower overheard and passed them along?

The clouds split as I look up—  
a shining brassy spot of sun  
on the mountain's back.

Traces that stir  
the waves of an old love.

Is someone  
somewhere  
saying my words?

As someone says them  
has an ox overheard?  
Does he pass them along?

—*So Chong-Ju* (translated by David R. McCann)

Variations on the question (“is someone/saying my words?”) echo three times throughout the poem, urging readers to wonder whether their own voices, secrets, and ideas are resonating throughout the natural world. Could such a simple utterance as “hello” or “I wish” ripple throughout time, making waves in the lives of others? The puzzling title suggests that something so seemingly mundane as a sneeze can have immense force and impact. Chong-Ju strings together a daisy-chain of objects, animals, and ideas that can listen and receive our words. The poem suggests an infinite interconnectedness composed of whispers alone.

In response to Chong-Ju’s poem, I ask students to return to their secrets and think about an object or animal in the world that they want to confide in. They don’t have to reveal the secret but they have to get close enough to another being to whisper something. From there they must decide how the whisper gets disseminated and think about where it might end up. Brian (a sometimes restless third grader) settles down to see where a shark will lead his words.

I whisper to a shark.  
The shark whispers to her body.  
When it grows up,  
She whispers to the turtle  
Who then whispers  
To his body.  
The turtle went to the sea  
And grew up.  
The turtle whispered  
To the whale, the whale  
Whispered to her body.  
The whale  
Whispered till the end.

Kassandra explores the different distances  
that words can travel.

My words took me to Mexico and  
Mexico brought me back to Chicago.

My words took my pillow to the park  
And brought it back to the floor.

My words took my pencil and was  
dancing with the other pencils.

My words took my dog to the school  
And dropped him on the floor.

My words took me to my father  
and then I went to bed.

My dream took me to the ocean  
where they have lots of fish.

Sometimes, though, a whisper isn't sufficient to the task of communication. Just as we might crank up our stereos in one situation and put on our Walkmans in another, different contexts call for different kinds of listening and diverse manners of speaking. And that's when a poem such as "El Grito/The Scream" comes in handy. It encourages us to consider the scream within—to contemplate its texture, shape, and purpose. I usually introduce this poem to sixth-grade poets whose urge to be heard is paramount. It begins:

Tantos anos con el deseo de dar un grito  
un gran grito hermoso, sin mas significado que ser un gran grito.  
Uno lleva un grito. A veces suena que lo grita,  
y se despierta temblando.

So many years with the urge to scream  
a big lovely scream, meaningless except as a big scream.  
One carries a scream. At times one dreams that one screams it,  
and one awakens, trembling.

—*Graciela Reyes (translated by Mary K. Hawley)*

Before passing out the poem, I read those lines and ask, “How many of you have ever screamed before?” Not surprisingly, everyone raises his/her hand. “Why do people scream?” I ask. Olga replies, “We scream because we’re angry.” Ashley interjects, “We scream to get someone away from us.” Alejandro offers something different: “You scream because you get hurt or you need help.” Other reasons surface: Madness. Joy. Victory. Terror. Grief. Cataloguing a list of screams heightens the nuances between them and encourages young poets to differentiate between them based on their trigger or intended impact.

To explore these nuances further, we try to imagine what each of these screams is made of and what shape it might take. For example, if you could touch the scream that comes from fear, what would it feel like in your hands? This question really gets the synaesthetic ball rolling:

**fear:** a scream made out of musty worn-out leather,  
shaped like a crumpled ball, hidden  
**anger:** a scream made out of boiling water,  
shaped like a snake, slithers  
**sadness:** a scream made out of soft yellow silk, ghosts,  
and echoes, shaped like a leaf, falling  
**joy:** a scream made out of fresh snow,  
shaped like a perfect snowball, falling from the sky

After we’ve succeeded in creating this list, after we’ve made our screams and the emotions behind them palpable, I add: “But did the narrator ever scream?” In the silence that tends to follow my question, I read aloud another stanza of Reyes’s poem:

Los novios se besaban en lo oscuro del parque,  
yo no gritaba nunca.  
Las arañas tejían telas entre los libros de la biblioteca,  
yo no gritaba nunca, nunca.

Lovers kissed in the darkness of the park,  
I never screamed.  
Spiders wove webs among the books of the library,  
I never, ever screamed.

An intriguing debate emerges. “How many of you think she let out her scream?” I ask my poetic electorate. Hands shoot up in the air. “And how many of you think that she never ever screamed?” A few more hands are raised. “And how many of you are not really sure?” Even more hands. The “Scream Poem” assignment that emerges is simply to respond to one of the many questions our debate has unleashed.

**The Scream of Many Transformations**

So many years with the urge to scream  
I held it in so long that  
it gave birth to the three kings.  
It felt like silk wrapped around me  
with all its might that when a lion  
roared, an army of men came out.  
I huffed and I puffed that  
when I tried to breathe, the ocean's  
waves grew larger and the  
mountains grew flat as  
the calm sea

—*Lamy, sixth grade*

**Screaming Me**

I need to scream I need to  
let it out it's like red fire I need to  
let it out out in the sun and on sandy  
beaches and maybe just maybe it  
will die down no. I need to scream it out  
I need to let them know I  
need to let them know what's happening  
so when I decide  
to scream if  
I could let  
myself go I would  
scream but that  
just might not  
happen my heart  
won't give in  
to my scream  
it's holding it  
back the scream  
will not scream

—*Alisha, sixth grade*

While the whisper poems meditate on the

connectivity of all living beings and highlight the intimacy achieved in whispering our secrets to the world and in having them received, the scream poems take on a more defiant stance. They emerge from the individual self attempting to communicate deep wells of emotion, and also speak to the frustration that comes with not always being able to scream when one needs or wants.

To use one's voice—softly and specifically or loudly and broadly—or to exercise the right not to use it is a poetical and a political choice. It's one that teachers and poets in the classroom can invite students to contemplate through deep exploration of language and text. There are myriad poems and poetic forms out there that ask young poets to consider the significance of voice—chants, manifestos, call and response, questions-and-answers, diatribes, epistles, lyrics, and other forms that push poets to consider what kind of influence their voices have on others. Mark Statman's work on silence in the poetry classroom, including his use of the wonderful poem called "Hay Silencio En La Lluvia/There is Silence in the Rain" inspired me to teach what might exist inside our silence, and what we learn by listening closely to it.

Inside the whisper—a scream. Inside a scream, perhaps, a whisper.

#### Notes

So Chong-Ju. "A Sneeze," in *The Vintage Book of Contemporary World Poetry*. Ed. J.D. McClatchy. New York: Vintage Books, 1996, 454-455.

Graciela Reyes. "El Grito/The Scream," in *Shards of Light/Astillas de luz*. Ed. Olivia Maciel. Chicago: Tia Chucha Press, 1998, 99.