



MARK STATMAN *The*
Journeywork
of a Poem

En mi corazon vive un caballo
 ese caballo me dice
 Ven conmigo te llevare al campo
 Te montas en mi y veras
 Como nos vamos a divertir
 Galopando, saltando!

In my heart lives a horse
 that horse says to me
 come and I'll take you to the country
 get up on me and you'll see
 how much fun we will have
 galloping and jumping.

—Azahel Estudillo

One day in 1990, Ron Padgett showed me a copy of *Un Techo del Tamano del Mundo/A Roof the Size of the World*, a delightful, bilingual collection of teaching ideas and children's poetry, which he had recently received from its editor John Oliver Simon. Ron knew that I was doing a lot of teaching in bilingual elementary classrooms and he thought there might be something for me in the book, which had emerged out of a collaboration between poets, teachers, and children in Oakland, California, and Mexico City. But, there was a catch—he didn't want to give up the book. Handing me a phone number, he suggested that if I wanted it, I should give John Oliver Simon a call. Which, fortunately, I did.

A week later, *Un Techo* arrived in the mail. Almost immediately, I found poetry ideas that I knew would speak to the interests and needs of my K-1 students. But it was a single six-line poem by a student that was to have a lasting impact on my teaching—Azahel Estudillo's poem about the animal that lived inside him.

My bilingual students, whose families had come primarily from rural regions of Mexico, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic, revealed at once a rather different relationship to nature than I had encountered in students from more traditional urban classrooms. Many of them came from farming communities, and their family members continued to find some sort of agriculture-related work in the United States—landscaping being a popular job choice among their parents. Sometimes, however, students would disappear in the middle of the school year. It was the growing season in their native countries, I soon learned, and their parents often returned to tend to their original land.

So their interest in the poem emerged from a kind of familiarity and non-estrangement with animals and nature. And this is one of the reasons I thought to teach it to them. But my other interest stemmed from a more philosophical notion—how the poem offered a means to think about the physical and emotional connections we can make with the world as a way of understanding it and being a part of it. Gary Snyder has a keen eye for the relationship I’m describing, that of language to the thing-itself:

To see a wren in a bush, call it “wren,” and go on walking is to have (self importantly) seen nothing. To see a bird, stop, watch, feel, forget yourself for a moment, be in the bushy shadows, maybe then feel “wren”—that is to have joined in a larger moment with the world.¹

I have taught this poem for almost fifteen years now. And, when I teach it, I start with the idea that somehow there’s an animal inside me affecting how I am feeling. I say, “Sometimes I wake up in the morning and I’m really happy. What animal could be inside me?” The answers vary: *Un mono* (monkey). *Un sapo* (frog). *Una mariposa* (butterfly).

“Is a butterfly an animal?” I ask.

“No,” my students tell me, “but it’s happy.”

Then I’ll say, “But sometimes I wake up and I’m really sad. What’s inside me then?” Interestingly enough, the same animals will sometimes make the list again. *Un oso* (bear). *Un gato* (cat). *Un sapo* (frog). I’ll do this again for other emotional states. I’m angry. I’m silly. Brave. Scared.

Then I’ll switch it to physical attributes. “I feel like running fast. What’s inside me?” *Un tigre* (tiger). *Un perro* (dog). “I feel like flying.” *Un pajarito* (bird). “*Que tipo?*” I ask. *Una aguila* (eagle). *Un papagayo* (parrot). I continue with swimming, with singing, with dancing, with sleeping. By now we’ve got a lot of ideas and a sense that these animals in my body are taking up A LOT of room.

Now it’s time to introduce Azahel’s poem. From the get-go, they’re all very impressed that it’s written by a fourth grader from Mexico and that he has been published in a book. To know that the poem was created in Spanish and then translated into English and that it exists in both languages (with Spanish coming first!) gives them a sense that someone “important” takes their language seriously.

After reading the poem, I simply ask them what they think. The responses are invariably that they “like the poem,” that it’s interesting “to think of the horse speaking to the girl” and “to imagine their travels.” I tell the students, though, that I’m unhappy with how I’ve read the poem and that I would certainly appreciate their help in doing a better job of it.

Sure. *Por que no?*

I ask them all to stand up. If there’s room, we get away from desks and chairs, usually to a class meeting area, and I encourage them to separate themselves ever-so-slightly from their neighbor. Then it’s time for them to show me their right hands (*mano derecha!*). Like a yoga instructor, I invite them to stretch it out away from their bodies and to the right. Then I ask them to repeat after me and to do as I do:

En mi corazon (I put my hand on my heart)
Vive un caballo (I put my hands to my face to suggest a long horse face)
Ese caballo me dice (I point at myself with my thumb to my chest)
Ven conmigo (I wave “let’s go” with my right hand and hold the pose)
Te llevaré al campo (I fling my hand out, reversing the let’s go gesture)
Te montas en me (I bend over, like a horse waiting to be mounted)
Y veras (I put my right hand to my right eye, index finger extended)
Como nos vamos a divertir (I do the twist, moving once with each syllable)
Gallopando (I mimic the holding of reins, bobbing to suggest a gallop)
Saltando! (I jump as high as I can)

The kids are, needless to say, ecstatic with all this movement and are eager to do it again. Which we do—pointing, bending, twisting, galloping, leaping. Finally, I ask them if they think they can do it along with me, rather than repeating. Yes. Then I ask them to do it without me. They are not only able to do this once, but they’ve been able to enact the poem for well over a year. What contributes to their acute capacity to remember? Partly the brevity of the poem. But also I believe the poem becomes a part of the body as well as a part of the mind. And isn’t that what the poem is about? A creature (a poem even) that takes up residence within us.

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Over time I’ve learned that this poem travels well, not simply geographically but linguistically. For the past few years, the bulk of my work with children has been in a suburban elementary school in North Bellmore on Long Island. This is not only a long-term teaching residency (25-30 days a year), but also one that I’ve had for 18 years. A major goal of mine has been to figure out ways in which I can contribute to sustaining a culture of writing throughout the school.

One strategy I've developed is to conduct a series of short workshops with the kindergartners (and some of their parents) as preparation for more consistent work I'll do with the children in first grade. During these workshops, I regularly introduce them to "En mi corazon..." and the kindergartners never cease to be as thrilled with the poem as their urban counterparts. I teach it in the same way, except that we read it in English. This having been said, I think it's crucial to read the poem in Spanish after they've learned it in English. And I am always intrigued by the strange moment that ensues when the children break out in applause. Why do they applaud? I can only think that hearing the poem in another language feels like a distinct, almost-musical, sensory event.

In both my bilingual and monolingual classrooms, I initiate the writing assignment by asking them to think about their feelings and actions, and to consider (based on their own behavior) what animal(s) might be living inside them. Better yet, I give them the incentive to wonder where the animal might be hanging out. In their heart, legs, toes, or nose? Some of the children wonder: Does it always have to be an animal? Can there be something else inside us? *Por que no!*

Hay una flor
En mi corazon
Es una flor
Anaranjada
Yo me siento bien
Porque
Tengo esta flor

There is a flower
in my heart.
It is an orange flower.
I feel good
because
I have this flower

—*Sergio, kindergarten*

A gorilla is in my stomach.
An iguana is in my hand.
An alligator is in my heart
It feels scratchy in me
When I go to bed

—*David, 1st grade*

En mi corazon
Hay un pescado
Brinca, nada, y quiere comer
Pan con mayonesa

In my heart
there is a fish.
He leaps, swims, and wants to eat
bread with mayonnaise

—*Libertad, 1st grade*

A butterfly
Is in my hand
The butterfly
Shows me the sky
It tells me
There are clouds
And it rains

—*Cathy, kindergarten*

Fifteen years ago, I read a poem that had traveled from a classroom in Mexico via Oakland to New York and then traveled through New York and beyond. When I think of where my students (many of them travelers themselves) have carried this small poem, when I think of where it has carried them, it reaffirms for me one of the things poetry does best. It transports us into unexpected places and with unexpected companions who can show us how much fun, among other things, we can have if we let the poem do its journeywork.

Notes

1. Gary Snyder, "Language Goes Both Ways," in *The Alphabet of the Trees*, Christian McEwen and Mark Statman, eds. (New York: T&W Books, 2000), 4.