

Writing to Radiohead

Creating Sonic Translations in the Classroom

PETER MARKUS

WHEN I WRITE, I DO MY BEST TO keep poet Ezra Pound's motto in my head: "Make it new." When I teach—I've been a writer-in-the-schools with the InsideOut Literary Arts Project in Detroit for sixteen years—I do my best to "make it new" in the classroom as well.

It's much easier to lean back on the tried and true writing activities that I know will work: writing a list poem about all the things you can and cannot do with your hands, or "I Am/You Are" poems, or self-portrait poems using similes and metaphors, or days when I invite students to look inside their "magic" pencils and write down what they see. Don't get me wrong: great poems, original material, can still be mined from such tried and true invitations and activities, but to keep my own head and heart fresh and wide-eyed to the possibilities of poetry, I try to challenge myself to come up with things I haven't done before—just as I do when I write. And believe me, after sixteen years working in the public schools of Detroit, I've found there's always something new waiting to happen.

As a writer, I also preach to myself and to other writers to *write out of obsession*. If you like fish, write about fish. If

food is your obsession, make poetry from food. If shooting pool is your thing, find the poetry of the pool hall. It's there, no doubt about it, waiting to be fished up, made, or bank-shot into a poem.

As a writer-in-the-schools, I work best when I teach out of obsession. Which is how I ended up in Mrs. Sturgill's fourth-grade classroom at Detroit's Golightly Educational Center, teaching a writing lesson based on the art-rock band Radiohead.

If singer Thom Yorke's lyrics aren't exactly *poems*, then I would argue that the songs themselves—the coupling of words with music—are exactly what I look for when I reach for a poem: a mixture of musicality and mystery and just enough visual anchoring for me to feel my way as a listener/reader through the landscape of image and sound.

Most of my students in Detroit listen to what I'd call TV pop-rap, or what they see either on "American Idol" or on the music video award shows on Nick at Nite and MTV. Once when I brought in some songs to show my students the similarities between blues music (Lightnin' Hopkins, Muddy Waters, BB King) and blues poetry (Langston Hughes), one of them knew that BB King had a guitar named Lucille (her preacher in church, the Sunday before, had worked this bit of info into his sermon). But Radiohead, along with most bands off the radar of popular radio, is a different story and is uncharted territory for these students.

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One of the things that I love about Radiohead is the sound of singer Thom Yorke's voice. It's mumbly, hummy, garbled, gargly, angelic, symphonic, harmonic, wispy, anthemic, and most often it is hard to make out exactly what it is he is saying. Put three Radiohead fans in a room together and ask them to sing along to any of their songs and what you'll get is three different sets of lyrics. Sometimes the lyrics we think we are hearing are better than what is actually being sung, in the same way that a misreading of a text (or even a typo) can oftentimes lead a reader (or writer) into more interesting places within a book.

So, from time to time, to keep things fresh, I will bring songs from a band like Radiohead into the classroom and play them for my fourth-graders. I'll play a song once and turn to my students, telling them, "I don't really know what the singer is saying." Then I'll cue the same song again and ask them to write down what they think the singer is saying. "Write fast," I say. "Do your best to keep up with the song." I also tell them it's okay if what they are hearing, what they are writing down, doesn't make sense.

To lead up to the playing of the songs, I write two words—translate and sonic—on the marker-board and ask the students to tell me what they mean. They'll tell me that to translate means "to take words from one language and to say them in another language," or something like that. The word "sonic" might take some students into thinking about Sonic the Hedgehog from Cartoon Network, but usually one student will eventu-

Photograph of Peter Markus by Elayne Gross.

ally remember the term "sonic boom" which leads us to the basic definition that I'm looking for here: "sonic" meaning "sound."

I then tell the students that we're taking the language of the sound that we hear in Radiohead and translating that sound into the words we think our ears are hearing.

It's that simple. And it really is. I hit *play* on the

classroom CD player and the first song, "No Surprises," begins. And the students begin to write.

Here is a sample of what they come up with:

Sonic Translations of "No Surprises" by Radiohead

I can't figure out
the color of the wrong surprises
Angel can you speak
for us the color of the wrong
surprises. Silent silent. This is
the final silence
the color of the rose surprises.
Pretty touches.
Color of the rose surprises
Red.

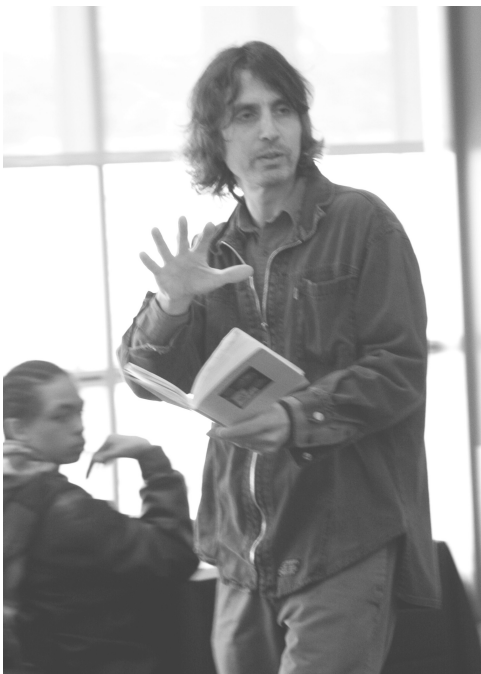
SUDANI (GRADE 4)

I can feel black and white
You look so tired
Angel I'll say quiet
No lies and no surprises
Sorrow
No lies and no surprises
Such a pretty day
No lies and no surprises

I can see black and white
I can feel you here
Angel that I'll speak for
I'll say hugs and no surprises
Sorrow sorrow
Hugs and no surprises please
Such a pretty life
Hugs and no surprises please

JUSTIN (GRADE 4)

Once they've finished writing about this first song, I hit song number two: "Everything in Its Right Place" and tell the students to listen first, then



write, and to trust not only their own ears, but also to trust and to write down what it is that their hands have to say.

Sonic Translations of "Everything in its Right Place" by Radiohead

Livin' large live large
 Everything is in a separate cage
 When yesterday I woke up
 So good up in that room.
 Everything is in a shark cage.
 There are colors in my head.
 Why did she try to say try to save
 Everything everything everything.

KACEY (GRADE 4)

I come out of the darkness
 I come into the light
 I leave my past behind me
 I'm always in God's hands
 You make me insane
 You make the stars not shine

DELAYTHA (GRADE 4)

Run it on
 every scent
 every scene
 every try
 walk up
 everything
 and I try again
 two corners in my head
 what is it you try to sing?
 try try try
 every city
 every second

PATTY (GRADE 4)



Photograph of Peter Markus in the classroom by Amanda le Claire.

Truth be told, I had done a similar exercise some years before where I asked students to do homophonic translations of poems by Federico García Lorca and César Vallejo, but I found that translating songs from ear to page brought out more fruitful results and, in the end, was much more fun.

Even those students who flounder a bit or are more resistant to writing opened up with this activity. The words are already there, in the air, so to speak, or maybe even in the ear of the student listener, and if no one really knows what the singer is singing, well then there's no wrong response to the writing of this poem.

Which is the point: I want to show them that anyone can write, just as anyone can sing. In *The Tropic of Cancer*, Henry Miller says, "To sing you must first open your mouth. You must have a pair of lungs, and a little knowledge of music. It is not necessary to have an accordion, or a guitar. The essential thing is to want to sing. This then is a song. I am singing."

We want to give students an opportunity to sing. You might call this activity karaoke, without the script of words guiding you through the song. I prefer to let the students be guided by sound, by what they make out of what they hear. What they come up with, the words they find on the page, is the song that's been in them waiting for the right time to be let out. To be sung. To be made into song. 🎵