Freeing the Imagination

Using a Surrealist Game as a Springboard to Metaphor and Persona

JOANNA FUHRMAN

My favorite places to teach are outside of school. I like to teach in libraries, in fields, on busy street corners, or in my living room. I once taught a poetry class in the upstairs seating area of a Korean deli, and I frequently teach classes in the back rooms of libraries to tweens who stuff their mouths with cookies and juice while they write their crazy poems and often make themselves fall off their seats laughing—literally. As a teaching artist, I am often trying to recreate this sort of "out of school" feeling *inside* school. Too often in a classroom setting, teachers and students worry about getting the right answer. I sometimes find that when I walk into a high school classroom, there's a contagious feeling of fear and exhaustion. It doesn't feel like a welcoming place for imagination, let alone for poetry.

A portrait of the Surrealist *Littérature* group, courtesy of Jon Rendell www.exquisitecorpse.com

I find myself scheming to create an atmosphere that will mark our time writing poetry as distinct from the rest of the school day, to create a place where play is not only allowed but encouraged. One way I have tried to do this is by using a writing exercise based on what are called "exquisite-corpse" drawings. Before we start the exercise, I explain that exquisite corpses are writing or drawing games that were popular with Surrealist artists in the 1920s and 30s. Like their precursors the Dadaists, the Surrealists wanted to free art from logic and reason, which they saw as part of the bankrupt culture that led Europe into World War I. As Franklin Rosemont writes, Surrealism "aims to free the imagination from the mechanisms of psychic and social repression, so that inspiration and exaltation heretofore regarded as the exclusive domain of poets and artists will be acknowledged as the common property of all." (from *What is Surrealism*?, Pathfinder 1978). Surrealists viewed collaboration and chance as ways to free art from rationality and to democratize the creation of art and literature.

An exquisite-corpse drawing is a collaborative work in which each participant contributes a part of the picture without seeing what his or her collaborators have drawn. This process allows one to create an artwork freed from will or intention. It allows for surprise. Before we can play the drawing game in class, the tables and chairs need to be rearranged so that everyone is sitting in one big circle or divided into a number of smaller circles.

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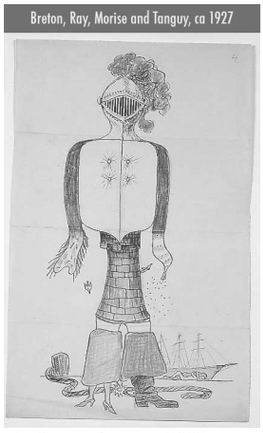
To play the game, each student takes out a piece of paper and quickly draws the head and neck of a person or creature. The student then folds the paper over so that all that can be seen are the ends of the lines marking the very bottom of the neck. The student passes the paper to his or her neighbor who, without seeing the head, draws the torso, starting from the lines indicating the bottom of the neck. The second student folds the paper over so that only the very bottom of the torso is visible and passes it to the last student, who draws the legs and feet without seeing the rest of the drawing. (One could break the body into more sections, but I usually try to keep it simple.) As the students are drawing, I remind them to work quickly and not to think too much. The drawings should feel spontaneous. After the drawings are finished, I ask the students to share them with each other, and we all laugh.

Before explaining the writing exercise that comes next, I hand my students two poems—one by the witty, aphoristic New York poet Elaine Equi, and one by the San Francisco Beat Surrealist Bob Kaufman. The Kaufman poem contains some imagery that would



Exquisite Corpse Drawing (1927), courtesy of John Rendell, www.exquisitecorpse.com

be considered "adult," so if I am working in someone else's classroom I will, of course, clear it with the teacher beforehand.

Before we start, I tell the students we are going to read two self-portrait poems—that is, poems in which the author paints a sort of picture of himself or herself. I wait to discuss the poems until we have read them both.

Autobiographical Poem

ELAINE EQUI

The story of my skin
is long and involved.

While the story of my hair
is quite short.

In the story of my mouth
kisses linger over poppyseeds

and crumbs of lemon-scented cake.
There is a character who always builds

in the story of my bones
and a woman who refuses to leave

her gondola in the story of my blood.
But it is the heart's story

I most want to share
with you who also knows this pleasure

of being shut inside
a vast dark place, alone—

as if at a small table
scribbling lies.

Would You Wear My Eyes?

BOB KAUFMAN

My body is a torn mattress
Disheveled throbbing place
For the comings and goings
Of loveless transients.
The whole of me
Is an unfurnished room

Filled with dank breath
Escaping in gasps to nowhere.
Before completely objective mirrors
I have shot myself with my eyes,
But death refused my advances.
I have walked on my walls each night
Through strange landscapes in my head.
I have brushed my teeth with orange peel
Iced with cold blood from my dripping faucets.
My face is covered with maps of dead nations;
My hair is littered with drying ragweed.
Bitter raisins drip haphazardly from my nostrils
While schools of glowing minnows swim from my mouth.
The nipples of my breasts are sun-browned cockleburrs;
Long-forgotten Indian tribes fight battles on my chest
Unaware of the sunken ships rotting in my stomach.
My legs are charred remains of burned cypress trees;
My feet are covered with moss from bayous, flowing
across my floor.
I can't go out anymore.
I shall sit on my ceiling.
Would you wear my eyes?

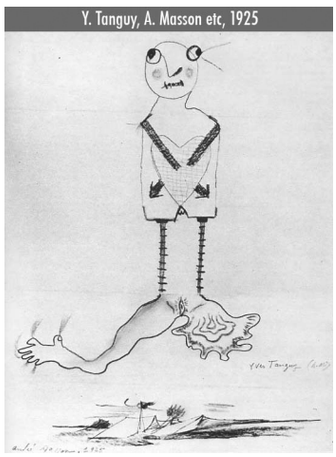
After we read the poems, I ask the students what the two poems have in common. Sometimes students will say both poems give them a "sad feeling." In that case, we may talk about what lines and images evoke sadness. For example, in Kaufman's poem there's the wonderful line, "My legs are the charred remains of burned cypress trees." If one imagines one's legs as trees, they are not instruments of motion, but something immobile, rooted to the earth. In Kaufman's line, the details and specificity help make this idea more visceral. His legs are not just tree trunks, but the *remains* of trunks; not just remains, but *charred* remains. These aren't just any old trees either—they are *cypress* trees. The line feels almost mythic. Other times, our discussions veer toward the idea that in both poems the speakers don't know themselves very well. Even though they are describing themselves, at the core there is mystery. Equi's speaker describes her heart as a "dark place" analogous to a place where one might be "scribbling lies," and Kaufman's describes himself as "an unfinished room." These images suggest the "deepest" self is unknowable and impossible to fully describe.

After discussing the poems, I usually end the conversation by asking the students what techniques or structures both poems use. Usually a student will say, "They both have metaphors," and someone else might say that both poems "use metaphors that describe parts of the person." If no one mentions that both poems create different metaphors for different body parts, I'll say it myself.

I'll then ask the students to look at an exquisite-corpse drawing and imagine that they can speak from the point of view of the figure in the picture. I explain that poets, like fiction writers, often like to create characters when they write; when a poet does this, he or she is said to be adopting a "persona." I like to have students write from another's point of view because it allows students to express themselves without becoming self-conscious about it. One of the difficulties of teaching creative writing is that you want students to be able to explore their emotions, but explicitly asking them to do so can be counterproductive. Students may feel too exposed and will only reveal things about themselves that are obvious and superficial. They won't discover anything about themselves that they didn't already know. A persona allows students to explore themselves without the pressure that comes along with a phrase like "self-expression."

After the students take a minute to look at their drawing, I ask them to write a poem describing different parts of the figure's body and face using metaphors and similes. I find the exquisite-corpse drawings serve as useful springboards to get students to come up with some interesting examples of figurative and image-rich language. Often, if they just describe what they see in the picture, they will come up with a

compelling metaphor. For example, I might show the drawing below and ask the students what they think the eyes look like. If they say "baby birds," I would then ask them for a more detailed and active description. What are the baby birds doing? Where are they? What happened to them? We might start the poem, "My eyes are baby birds/ who lost their mothers decades ago." Or a student might think the legs look like an



Exquisite Corpse Drawing (1925), courtesy of John Rendell, www.exquisitecorpse.com

amoeba, so we might start with a line like, "My left leg is an amoeba, that swims in an ocean of skyscrapers." The main thing I try to stress is that it's more important to create images that are vivid and surprising than to try to create a metaphor that "makes sense" or has an immediately apparent or conventional meaning. It's not the poet's job, I tell them, to worry about "meaning" during the process of creation since, for the reader, some kind of meaning will emerge from the imagery on its own. If you try too hard to make a clear "point," your writing will tend to sound contrived and clichéd.

Here are some of the poems written by my students at the Academy of Conservation and Ecology in Canarsie, Brooklyn. I was working with Ms. Thomas' ninth-grade class through a small program called the Comprehensive English Preparation Project. You may notice that the writers switch back and forth between metaphor and simile. Since they are both useful forms of figurative language, I tell the students not to worry about using only one technique or the other. For this exercise, they should use whatever seems right to them in the moment. They can always switch from metaphor to simile (or vice versa in the final draft).

The Story of my Body

IGOR LAUDE

My eyes are two peeled strawberries.
My mouth is a bat
that never does anything, but flies around
hitting himself.
My body is a rotten banana
forgotten in a fruit bowl.
My legs are like a math compass
that nobody wants to put a pencil in.
My feet are like a fish room
that you don't want to be next to.

Self-Portrait on Summer Nights

ERYKAH ROYAL

My head is a stereo filled
with endless music

My shirt is a plastic bag
dancing in the breeze

My legs are the street lights
glowing down the block

My shoes are repeating summer nights filled
with partying and the dreadful feeling of waking up

My heart is pounding with frustration
still not escaping from this barrier

My ears are mice that walk across the cold floor
with whispers from the closet

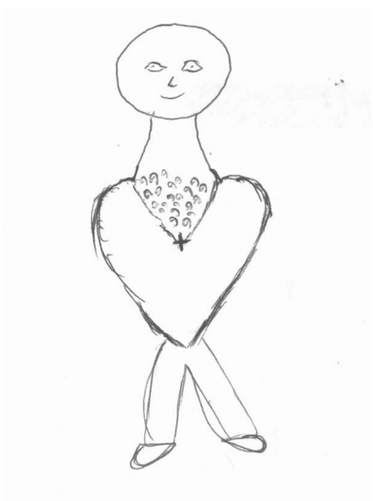
My eyes are infinity pools that are just about
to overflow the world

My hair is a never ending ball of rubber bands
found on the concrete floor

Juwan Da Costa wrote his poem about his classroom's collaborative drawing (pictured below).

Several Wonders of the Universe
JUWAN DA COSTA

My head is a tiny shanty town with no chance of
getting any
occupants.
My chest is a heart-shaped field, growing the
greenest of crops,
in any weather.
My eyes are shapes ready to be used in a math
equation,
or to build a window.
My legs are as short as the eye can see.
My body is a wonder of the world everyone sees,
but nobody can understand.



Exquisite-corpse drawing by Joanna Fuhrman's writing class.

My Body
IMMANI ALEXANDER

My head is a lunchbox stuck in
an attic with dust flying everywhere.

My nose is an umbrella hook being held
by senior citizens on a snowy day.

My arms are an open book filled with pictures
of clowns.

My legs are two beef jerkies being eaten
by elephants.

My shoes are gifts given to a whale.
Would you want to be me?

What I think makes these poems so wonderful is not only their sense of playfulness and surprise, their wit and imagination, but also their intellectual and emotional complexity. I love Erykah's ending image. When I think of a ball made of rubber bands, I think of something bouncy and perhaps even joyful. But what does it mean to be a rubber ball on a concrete floor? It's an image that evokes both joy and pathos. The ball evokes life and lightness, while the floor evokes heaviness and maybe sadness. I love how Immani twists and makes new the cliché of the self as "an open book." I think it's interesting that it's her arms that are "an open book," because it makes me think of the expression "with open arms." Usually one thinks of someone who is compared to "an open book" as being easy to read, serious, and earnest. But if the book is full of images of clowns, the line's connotation changes to one of playfulness and fun. Furthermore, a clown is not only a silly figure, but one who is concealed by makeup and a rubber nose. So in a single beautiful, clear image, the speaker is simultaneously open and closed, serious and silly. Like poetry itself, the line evokes life's boundless contradictions and paradoxes.