



2007 Bechtel Prize finalist

# Three Writers, Imagination, and Meaning

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*"I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination."*

— John Keats

## Myself

**W**HAT DOES IT MEAN for a piece of writing to “have meaning?” This is one of those questions with an answer that, the more thought I give it, the more it behaves like a very faint star—I can glimpse its outline in my peripheral vision, but if I look straight at it, it vanishes in the haze. All I am certain of is that meaning matters to people—often it is the factor that determines whether or not a person likes a piece of writing, both their own and others. In my adult writing workshops students regularly introduce their work by explaining they have written about something that has deep personal meaning to them, and their peers respond by being more attentive to the writing. Meaning has weight, it commands respect. At the same time, “I don’t understand what this means” is one of the most common criticisms I hear, whether it is about a fellow student’s writing or a sample poem I bring in for the workshop to consider. As adults, meaning matters to my students. I suspect it matters to my elementary students as well, though possibly in different ways. Maybe, in the end, to say something has meaning is nothing more than a way of denoting that it matters.

Five years ago I was sitting across the table from a fellow MFA student, sharing a quiet afternoon at a campus coffee shop. It was a gray, rainy day, the kind for which upstate New York is famous, and we were both trying to get some writing done. Each of us had an open notebook and a steaming cup of tea beside it, though I had gotten sidetracked filling in the remaining blanks on a *New York Times* crossword someone else had left behind. My friend looked up from her notebook and announced, “I have finally come to a place where I accept that my mother is never going to understand the kind of poetry I write.”

I had never given serious thought to anyone in my own family grappling with my work. They rarely asked to read it. And even when I did send a poem or two to my mother, the most she ever said in return was, “Thanks, that was very nice.” Clearly, though, this had been a source of frustration for my classmate.

I was not sure how to respond. I had never given serious thought to anyone in my own family grappling with my work. They rarely asked to read it. And even when I did send a poem or two to my mother, the most she ever said in return was, “Thanks, that was very nice.” Clearly, though, this had been a source of frustration for my classmate. I could tell from her tone she had given the question of her mother understanding her work a lot of

weight and consideration.

“I’m sure she’s very proud of you,” I offered. “I’m sure she thinks your work is interesting.”

My classmate harrumphed. What she wanted was to be understood.

Had poet Roger Fanning not come to read at our university a few weeks later, this is probably all the thought I would have given the issue. As he took to the podium, he shuffled through some loose sheets of writing before leaning into the microphone to preface his work. “It has always been important to me to write the kind of poetry my uncle could read and appreciate,” he said. “I like to imagine him talking over one of my poems with his buddies at the bar.”

My classmate was not alone, it seemed, in wanting family to connect with the underlying meaning of her work. And it seemed “family” did not just refer to the people closest to her or Fanning, but, in fact, a wider, less literary audience.

Five years later (in the present), living in Texas and teaching creative writing to at-risk youth through Houston’s Writers in the Schools (WITS), I attend a workshop led by poet Brenda Hillman. “Some people argue that poetry is best when it can be understood by everyone and discussed by your uncle with his bar buddies,” she began. “But I think not all great ideas can be comprehended by everyone. Sometimes it takes training to understand difficult but worthy concepts. And perhaps not everything is ripe discussion for a bar stool.”

There they are again: the uncle, the bar buddies, the concern with meaning and accessibility. I think of my former classmate, and I think there must be a discussion happening around these terms and concerns to which I am just not privy. And then I think of my WITS students, all aged between nine and eleven years, and I think they too seem to exist outside of this debate. Just that week, my student Felniqua had written a compelling poem about animals she loves, including a six-eyed dog, birds without wings, and a cat as big as a horse. Her poem stood out amongst her classmates’ writing, which had all stuck to more mundane and recognizable animals—turtles, hamsters, goldfish. “I’ve never seen a dog with six eyes, can you tell me more about it?” I ask.

She returns to me a few minutes later with a new sentence: “I like dogs that have six eyes that can see everything.” So the six-eyed dog was a clever image for keen-seeing beings, something not necessarily meant to represent an actual dog as it occurs in nature—but from my student’s annoyance in being asked to elaborate on the image,

I sense she felt explaining this to be a waste of time. She did not really seem all that concerned with whether or not I “got it.” To her, the image spoke for itself, and to me (I must confess) this was poetry as it should be, all uncles and bar buddies aside.

## Ujai

And yet, my student Ujai is sitting by herself today. We are working on “impossible garage sale” poems—pieces where I have asked each student to think about selling something intangible. At the start of the workshop we list some possibilities on the board, including “friendship,” “love,” “math,” “mom,” and “oxygen.” I can see from the lively debate and the hands darting up with more suggestions that my students have really connected with this idea and so I turn their energies to writing. My students cluster together at a bank of desks in the middle of the room and get to work. Almost immediately they are sharing their poems with each other, reading out lines as they write them and offering suggestions on one another’s work. All of them, that is, but Ujai. She is sitting by herself at a bank of desks at the far end of the room.

“So what have you decided to sell at your garage sale?” I ask as I slide into the seat next to her. I can see the sheet of paper on her desk is blank.

“I don’t know. Friendship, I guess.”

I wonder a little if she is not choosing friendship simply because it is the first item on our list. Ujai studies her pencil, thumbing the chipped yellow paint and then examining the lead. She seems to decide it is sharp enough, but still she sits at the desk continuing not to write. All of this is unusual behavior for her. One of my strongest writers, Ujai is often the first to fill a page and ask for a second sheet. And yet here she sits, clearly reluctant to start.

I ask her if she is okay and she shrugs. “Well, then, let’s think about what you are going to write about friendship,” I say. “How much do you think you’ll charge for it?”

Her frustration bubbles over. “But that doesn’t make any sense!” she exclaims. “You can’t pay money for friendship. Why are we writing this?”

Why, indeed. The exercise was inspired by a poem I had recently come across by Malena Mörling in which the ocean is sold at a lemonade stand. Reading it, I had immediately thought of my students, whose writing is often full of buying and selling. A few weeks prior, when I’d asked them to come up with stories about finding a magic box, I had envisioned them describing what the box could do and what they would do with it; as it turns out, what they most wanted was to sell it... and then use the money to buy PSPs, Dwyane Wade shoes, and bags of Cheetos. I hoped the “impossible garage sale” poems would tap into their consumer enthusiasm while inducing them to think

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about buying and selling in different and possibly more creative ways.

“I thought it would be fun,” I say to Ujai.

“What’s fun about something that makes no sense?” she demands and stares up at me grumpily.

That is a fair question.

## Joshua

Joshua is a kid who is easy to love. A year younger than my other students and soft-spoken, he often sits at the periphery of the table where the class meets to discuss the day’s writing task. While his classmates regularly take several minutes to calm down and come to focus—first snatching one another’s pencils, trying to sneak snacks out of their backpacks, calling each other names, and complaining about who they have to sit beside—Joshua waits quietly for the din to subside. He is generally one of the first to light up when we talk about the day’s project, a broad smile breaking over his face as an idea comes to him. Often I will slide him a pencil, and while I continue to brainstorm with his classmates, Joshua will be busy beginning his poems. His writing is graceful and confident and yet his meanings are deeply obscure, almost as though he is penning Buddhist koans.

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I almost gasp when I first read it, the kind of gorgeous writing I would love to do more of myself. “This is beautiful, Joshua,” I tell him, and then briefly hesitate. “Can you... can you tell me what it means?”

In response, Joshua slides me the paper again and points smiling at the sentence. He says nothing else, almost as to imply, “You see it. You see what it means.” It is enough for him to have written it.

“These hands are so hard they can break a school in one touch.”

“Strawberries are a heart with fire on it.”

“Give me a cheetah and I’ll give you a boat.”

The litany of Joshua’s magical lines accumulates class after class, and class after class his only response to requests to explain his work—either from myself or his classmates—is to add more sentences to what he has written. “Why would you give somebody a boat for a cheetah?” my student Kevin wants to know. Joshua looks at him and then licks his lips slowly. He is concentrating. After a few seconds he picks up his pencil and scribbles at the bottom of the page: “I wish I had a raccoon. All I’d give you would be some climbing delights.”

I do not think he is a savant, nor do I think he is putting random words on the page without comprehending them himself. Joshua’s writing clearly has meaning and

significance, even if it is only fully apparent to him. Often I observe Joshua erasing one word to write another, suggesting to me that he is sorting through his language options and making conscious choices about what he is putting on the page.

At the end of workshop, I stand on the curb with my students waiting for their parents to pick them up. Joshua's father arrives in a weatherworn red pickup truck. "Are you going to be here next week?" Joshua asks quietly as he picks up his backpack.

"Yeah. I think next week we're going to imagine having a secret room in our house and then write about it."

"Good," he says, and smiles as he climbs into the bed of his father's truck. He finds a seat on one of the wheel hubs and waves at me with his whole arm as his father pulls out of the parking lot and into Houston traffic. I wave back. Joshua is as much a mystery to me as his writing; I like them both immensely.

### Meaning "From Me, To You"

It is my favorite writing exercise of the year, saved for the first clear day of spring. The trees edging the school parking lot are flowering pink and white. Walking from the lot to the front office, I pass the fence of a woman who is out refreshing the paint on a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe she has enshrined in her yard. In one hand I have a cluster of yellow, helium-filled balloons. In the other, excerpts from Walt Whitman's poem "To You."

"Today we're going to think about the words that really matter, that human beings really need to hear," I tell my students. "We're going to write those words on cards and tie them to these balloons, and then we're going to let the balloons go. We're going to trust that what we write finds its way to the people who need to read it."

"What if a bird eats it?" one of my students wants to know. Every year one of my students wants to know the answer to this question.

"Well, then, I guess that would be a very hungry bird."

I love this exercise specifically because it cuts to the heart of writing that matters. Even students who do not connect with any other project during the year seem to engage with this one. I think they appreciate the generosity of it. After nearly a year of being drilled with writing exercises designed to help them pass a test, they are asked to think about writing that does something for someone else. And, by its nature, that means writing that can speak to another person. Without much prompting, my students all take to their desks and start writing.

Ujai is with her classmates at the center cluster of desks. When I lean over her shoulder to see what she has written, I can see half a page already filled in. "I'm writing

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it to my mother,” she tells me. “She died last year.”


I had been prepared for the bird question, but not quite this. Though I have done this exercise before with other students, Ujai is the first to write to a deceased relative. Her classmates, overhearing what she has said, look up from their writing. Sean, a small boy sitting to her left, asks me if he can have another piece of paper to start over. He wants to write to his uncle who passed away last year. Several other students ask if they too can do the same; within ten minutes, I have a class where two-thirds of the writers are penning something to a lost family member or friend. Though the tone of the room becomes solemn, my students carefully copying their final drafts onto smaller cards, when it comes time to affix the cards to the balloons everyone seems eager.

The sun is almost blindingly bright as we immerse from the classroom and walk to a grassy courtyard in the middle of the school. One by one my students climb up onto a picnic table. There is a feeling of great earnestness about our task. Some of them read something that they have written on their cards before sending up the balloon. Others just quietly open their hands and let the ribbon go. Felniqua asks me if her balloon ends up in my yard, will I keep it and bring it back to her. I tell her I will.

When it is Ujai’s turn she chooses not to read what she has written but says instead, simply, “This is for my mother, and my sister. And me.” She lets her balloon go. A classmate asks her if she thinks her mother will be able to read the card in heaven, and before Ujai says anything, Josh, whose turn is next, speaks up.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, “Ujai wrote it. Her mother knows what that means.”

There are times my students are so wise there is nothing else to add.

**A**ND yet, it must be said that not all of my students’ writing has the creative pizzazz and intuitive spark of a six-eyed dog or a cheetah worth a boat. Just as often, my students’ confidence in the apparent meaning of their writing leads to creative dead ends. It would be all too easy to glamorize youth as a time free of the self-editing that leads many adult writers away from their most interesting images, towards the more familiar and thus more accessible. Making meaning is clearly a concern for my students. For every quietly confident Josh, I have a Ujai who struggles if she can not see a purpose and concrete connection to reality. Good writing has to be a balance between the personally significant and the broadly significant—but how to teach that? I like to think this is the project in which my students and I are engaged together, each week taking up a different creative writing task as we try to learn what works and what does not. What has meaning, and what has the truth of the imagination. 

*Sarah J. Gardner is the author of How to Study Birds, a chapbook collection of poems. Her work has appeared in many journals, including The Cortland Review, The North American Review, Heliotrope, and Calyx. She has taught creative writing in public school settings through several organizations, most recently Writers in the Schools.*