



Language and War

A Unit Plan for English Class

by Tim Myers

CAN ADOLESCENTS LEARN ANYTHING profound about the intricate and powerful relationship between language and war? In a century haunted by phrases such as “acceptable losses” and “mutually assured destruction,” can we as teachers help guide our students to some kind of understanding about violent conflict?

Can we help our students make decisions about the Gulf War or the conflict in Bosnia, which many of them have experienced via television? How did they deal with terms like “carpet bombing,” “softening troops,” and “collateral damage,” which were pumped into their homes on a daily basis during the invasion of Iraq? And how can they intelligently enter any future national debate over what “supporting the troops” really means?

The relationship between war and language has become even more crucial than it was in the past. In our century, war can be waged on a massive and thoroughly inhuman scale; we now have weapons of “tele-destruction,” weapons that can maim, kill, or obliterate—and all at a safe distance, where the smell of blood and the sight of corpses can’t penetrate. In addition, advances in media technology, as well as in the psychology of persuasion and information control,

have made the physical reality of war even more distant than our ancestors’ romanticized ballads and idealized woodblock prints did.

And then there’s the age-old tendency simply to turn away from awful truth, or to rationalize it. A recent article in *Civilization* magazine reminds us that 26,134 men died on one day at Antietam in the Civil War—almost half as many Americans as died during the entire Vietnam War. The Confederates and the Union each “lost” roughly the same number of soldiers—but General McClellan of the North, in Michael Kernan’s words, “declared it a glorious victory.”

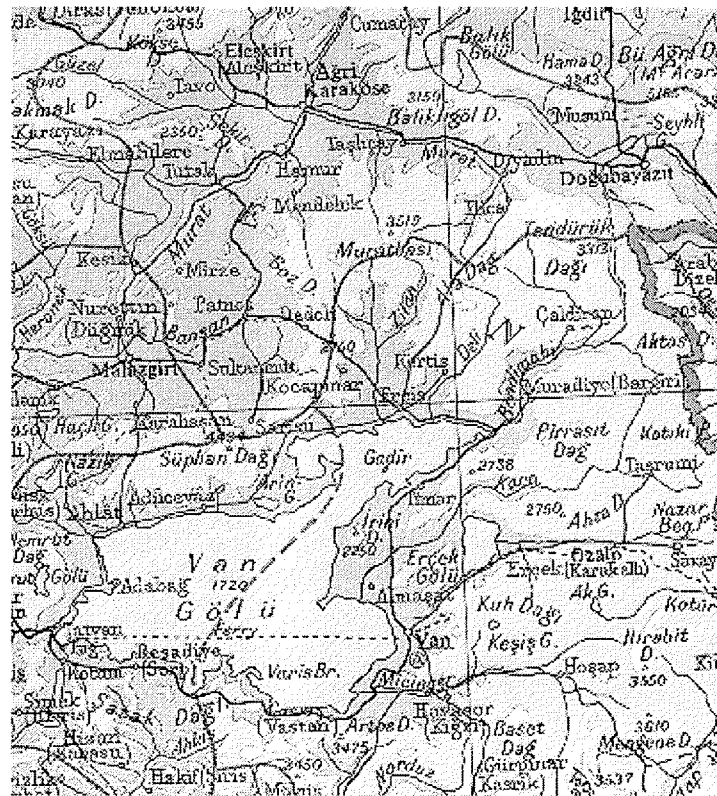
I’ve developed a unit for English class that addresses this crucial topic—a unit in which almost all of my students, from year to year, have worked with dedication and energy. The results regularly included some of the best writing that I ever received, both from high-achieving students and from those with less apparent ability and interest.

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“Was [the war] worth it?” a high-school junior and cheerleader wrote. “Was the cost of the war worth the end result? According to the people...it was not. Many died on all sides and homes were broken up... It...seems sometimes countries start wars just for a powerful feeling anyway. Nobody wants to get hurt and everyone expects to win. Although, we all know the truth....” Another junior—a very poor writer overall—created a scene in which a child watches her older brothers march off to war: “...they were so loving and playful when we were together. It was hard for me to believe that we may never see each other again. Their bodies looked so stiff in their uniforms, and their faces looked so pale and sorrowful....” A third, whose written work was



otherwise unremarkable and whose interest in English was marginal, handed me an envelope stuffed with photos, medals, a locket, and the half-burned diary of her character, a doctor, whose first experience of war brought up deep fears: “This war promises to be...bloody...and worst of all, my brother Michael is in it. I fear for his life and that one day I will see his face on my operating table.” The envelope was in fact the personal effects of the doctor whose family, reading them diary, was just learning of his death.

My “War and Language” unit takes three weeks to finish and consists of two main parts. During the first, students read a variety of written material about war. During the second, each student assumes a character—soldier, doctor, spouse of soldier, etc.—and writes about that character’s experience in a mock war we hold in class. By pretending to be real people experiencing a real war, students can begin to consider how words and attitudes influence each other: how, for example, both our Vietnamese enemies and allies were

called “gooks,” and how friend-or-foe decisions might have been colored by that word; or how, as Russell Baker has said, “megadeath” doesn’t have quite the ring of “a million corpses.”

Before either section can begin, I teach the necessary vocabulary. Even eighth-graders are perfectly capable of grasping terms like “euphemism,” “abstract,” “concrete,” “distancing,” “metaphor,” “jargon,” “technical language,” “dehumanize,” and “doublethink.” Students will master vocabulary if the teacher presents only five to ten items a week, explains them clearly, gives many examples, and has students use the words repeatedly. I also introduce the key idea: Language can distance us from the reality of war, or bring us closer to that reality. For example, the Russians leave “turbulence” behind them as they withdraw from Afghanistan; an article mentions the “effectiveness...of non-nuclear bombing.” The concrete referents of these words—what it feels like to be bombed or machine-gunned, or to step on a land mine, or to be orphaned or widowed by the violence of war—are lost in the vagueness of such language. As a class, we come back to this fact again and again.

Then, for a week, I have the students read material on war and fill out “Read and Respond Sheets.” I present a large collection of writings about war; students must choose a certain number of these pieces and fill out one sheet for each. The sheet asks two questions: What was the attitude toward war in this piece of writing? and, What key phrases show this attitude?

The kind of writing about war that I make available to the students is important. For one thing, I include pieces that reflect every possible level of reading ability. And of course, these writings *must* hold the students’ interest. There’s wild variety in my collection—a passage from the *Iliad*, a section from a history book, a G.I. Joe toy soldier pamphlet, a *Mad* magazine satire on weapons sales, *Sgt. Rock* comic books, articles on nuclear war, letters (some from soldiers in Vietnam), encyclopedia articles on weaponry, etc. I can also require each student to read a book on war, anything from *Slaughterhouse Five* to *Dear America* to *The Naked and the Dead* (depending, of course, on readability and the students’ reading levels).

This variety allows me to direct individuals to material that will engage them. I can include “heavier,” more demanding writing for students whose interests and abilities move in that direction. Pieces on the Gulf War or other recent and therefore more familiar conflicts can be incorporated into the lesson—or purposely left out, since heated disagreements could disrupt the learning process.

These readings also provide details about actual war experience, details that inevitably show up again in the students’ own stories.

Again, we focus as a class on the human tendency to talk away from the realities of war. What does it mean to say that the improved U.S. military is “tougher”? What exactly are “atrocities,” in plain English? What underlying attitudes cause an unnamed source to call U.S.-Soviet satellite conflicts “the ultimate video game”? Why did the term “Star Wars” become so popular a misnomer for SDI? Do teenagers

fully analyze the meaning of “Be all that you can be”? Can the word “war” itself, or any other words, really capture in any immediate sense the overwhelming reality of combat?

I also ask students to do an adult interview for one of the required sheets, focusing on “the cost of war.” This means that they apply our two basic questions to a discussion about war that they hold with someone over thirty years old. I ask the students to begin with the question “What, in your experience, is the cost of war?” and then to analyze their notes on the discussion for “attitude toward war” and “key phrases.” Films, photographs, and recordings, if available, can also count as resources revealing attitudes toward war. This almost automatically means that my kids experience actual and fictional war stories—in many cases coming to school amazed at what they’ve heard from their parents, relatives, or neighbors.

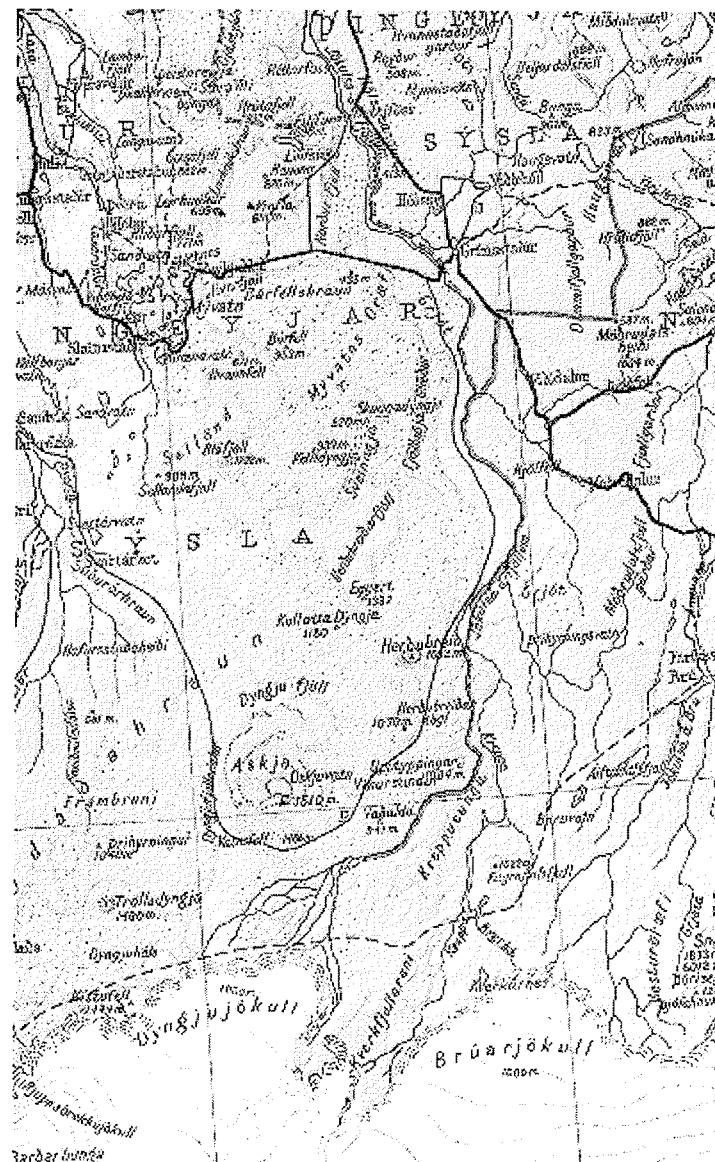
Once I feel my students have some background, I bring out the maps. These maps (not the ones illustrated here, which are of real places) represent three countries in the imaginary world in which our mock war occurs. Using felt-tip markers and colored pencils, I created two maps, each poster-board size, then laminated them. One is an overview of my made-up world and the other an inset that enlarges the area where most of our imaginary fighting takes place. (The map of some real-world theater of war could be substituted here—for example, World War II Europe or contemporary Bosnia—if the teacher feels she can keep the discussion objective enough and wants to include actual historical events in the unit. This could also work well for team-teaching with a history or social studies teacher).

Showing these maps to the class for the first time is a motivational high point in the unit; it’s crucial in getting the students involved in the creative writing that lies ahead of them. Nothing in the unit seems to attract my kids so much as the sight of these maps, the richness of an entire world in which to let their imaginations play.

The maps must be detailed and visually attractive. They include seas and continents, nations, cities, villages, rivers, mountain ranges and other features, all of which are named. This, of course, is a familiar feature in adventure and fantasy books, and has proven over time its attractiveness to adolescents—and to adults.

In this imaginary world, as I explain to the students, two of the nations are fighting over a border province with newly discovered mineral wealth. In this province, the two cultures have intermarried to some degree. Hill tribes live in one of the embattled areas. Both of the large nations have particular claims to the province. As tensions mount, an assassination by young hotheads and a massive reprisal from the other side provide the pretext for war. In effect, I give my students a vast story—a history—from which their own stories can naturally flow.

Once my class has some basic information on the state of things, I pass out character lists and hold a “character auction.” The characters on the list reflect many different perspectives on war: soldiers, generals, prime ministers, parents or relatives of soldiers, tribespeople, journalists, children in the war zone, spouses from mixed marriages,



military press-release writers, community leaders, doctors or nurses, business leaders, religious leaders, ordinary citizens—even an extraterrestrial observing human behavior from the air and a historian writing fifty years later. Students “bid” by announcing which characters they’d like to be; disputes are settled by the “rock, scissors, paper” method, itself an exercise in conflict resolution. I see it as a small but significant learning experience—a tiny glimpse into the actual meaning of the word “diplomacy.”

I ask the students to think hard about their characters before they write, and then to use the kind of language about war that their particular characters would naturally use. How does a soldier’s mother or father react to the abstract word “casualty”? What do “tactics” mean to a military thinker—and to a surgeon in an army hospital? American teenagers probably won’t feel quite the same about Conan the Barbarian after they’ve imagined themselves as tribespeople whose world is being destroyed in a clash between larger powers.

Then the mock war begins. I tape the maps to the chalkboard and use magnetized colored disks to represent battal-

ions (these disks are about an inch or so in diameter and will affix to chalkboards with metal backs). Then I set up simple campaigns on the map, since I control the movement of troops. When armies meet, a “battle” ensues (this happens each day for four or five days). The outcome of the battle depends on the roll of a single die (which we refer to half-jokingly as “Fate” and which the students love to roll themselves, one representative from either side).

The overall assignment is for each student to write about his or her character’s experiences during the first four or five days of the war. I encourage them to write in different forms: diaries, letters, memos, novel excerpts, sermons, requests for supplies, etc. We emphasize the range of language they produce—from the most specific to the most euphemistic or abstract—and how such half-conscious language decisions influence individual attitudes toward the war. But I give them a lot of freedom in their writing. As long as they follow the basic background and troop movements, they can make up anything they want. (I don’t want to inhibit their creativity, for example, by insisting that their stories somehow all fit together.)

During this phase I circulate, reading, coaching, and inspiring if I can. I point out examples of insight or strong writing, ask about grammar or clarity, remind them to fit their language to their characters. I talk about characterization and dialogue. I model the creative process by telling anecdotes, by suggesting conflicts, themes and plots, and by helping students see where the natural drama of their characters’ experience lies. I question wording or events, bolster certain ideas with praise or further suggestions, lay out options for mood, voice, and pace. Even more exciting for me is to see my students spontaneously telling each other their stories. Many of them do this with passion and gusto, developing their stories and making changes appropriately—a perfect pre-writing activity. Students also act spontaneously as each others’ critics; around the room you’ll hear “There’s no way he could do that.” “Cool!” “But how many days would it take to get there?” “Why should the soldier care—he doesn’t even know them!” Immediate responses like these greatly strengthen the eventual form of the stories.

By the end of the five days, each of the students has an excellent rough draft. We then talk about turning rough material into a finished piece, through selection, compression, summary, polishing and the like. Their final drafts are often very good; many of their stories are compelling and richly realized. I use these compositions as the basis for their grade for the unit.

One of my students—a classic underachieving gifted male—developed an elaborate and profound espionage plot in which the reader of his document learns that, while reading, he too has been contaminated with poison soaked into the paper, just one more victim in a chain of murder. Another’s story ended with a mother learning from casual conversation that her son had died in battle—her grief erupting when strangers happen to mention a unique scar on the face of a nameless corpse. The first student was a high school junior, the second an eighth grader.

Four other factors will affect this unit.

A teacher who is well read in war literature, and especially one able to relate anecdotes about war, will engage the students’ attention and motivate them much better than a teacher who can provide no examples of what really happens. Paul Fussell’s book *The Great War and Modern Memory* is a perfect resource, and is a masterpiece of its kind besides. He writes, for example, of Wilfred Owen’s artistic struggle toward concrete language—how Owen writes his mother about the “sufferings” of his men but changes his tone in a letter to Sassoon, another soldier-poet: “The boy by my side, shot through the head, lay on top of me, soaking my shoulder, for half an hour.” George Orwell’s seminal essay “Politics and the English Language” is another valuable resource, and one that discusses the connections between language and behavior in general. Some familiarity with works like these will provide a teacher with well-chosen examples that can have a powerful effect on students.

A teacher must also maintain his or her own political objectivity when presenting a topic like this. Students often hold varied opinions about war; from the beginning of the unit I emphasize that I won’t try to convince anyone that war is wrong or right, but that everyone should have some sense of the reality of war, of what really happens, through direct language. Some students may object that this approach in itself is “liberal” or “anti-war.” My response is that I, as a teacher, can ask certain questions, but that the answers to those questions can only come from individual students. I support this idea by showing respect for all the heartfelt reactions my students present.

I also spend some time talking about the natural human tendency to become desensitized to violence, and I insist my students realize that even the most direct language can’t capture the actual experience of combat.

Finally, to ensure that my students write about the human experience of war—instead of distancing themselves from it by treating it as a game—I let them know from the beginning that we’ll write only about the first days of the war, and that none of us will ever know who “wins” the conflict. Playing a game of Risk is hardly the way to encourage accurate language about war; at this point, too, we discuss exactly what it means to “win.”

I always end the unit by discussing the ways in which language is being used and misused in the greatest human crisis of all time—the nuclear age. When an American president can refer to the Soviets and their political philosophy as “cancer,” “virus,” and “the focus of evil in the modern world,” I expect my students to identify the dehumanization that such language encourages. We talk about phrases like “nuclear deterrence,” examining the huge conceptual gap between the cloudiness of the words and the real possibility of massive human suffering much worse than that at Hiroshima.

My hope is that this unit can help my students, as participants in the ongoing human struggle concerning war, to begin to see the essential role that our awareness of language may play in its resolution.



How to Do a Poetry Night Hike

by Terry Hermsen

SOMEONE HANDED ME A POSTCARD YEARS AGO (see figure). It resurfaces from time to time, reminding me of how, from ancient times, the night has been for stories, myths spun from embers or stars.

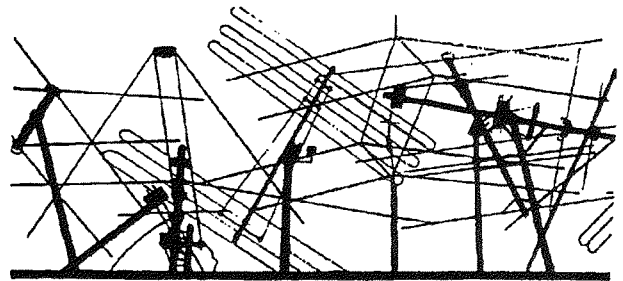
I was doing a poetry residency at Cloverleaf Junior High School, a gray-brown, featureless, moderately new building set in the midst of north central Ohio farmland. One evening after a long day at school, English teacher Jann Gallagher took me for a tour of the school's land lab, a wooded area sloping down to a small creek and its steep embankment, all wonderfully restful after the crowded halls. On the way back, walking through the upper meadow, I let slip the words, "Hey, we could do a poetry night hike here...."

I really didn't know what a night hike was; my wife had conducted several environmental night hikes at outdoor education camps, but I'd never gone on one. I underestimated Jann—an energetic teacher always looking for a way to connect students' use of language with the world. Within three days, she had arranged the hike, talked three teachers and nearly 25 students into participating, and we were set for the following Wednesday. But what exactly were we going to do?

At least I had the weekend to think about it. If writing residencies were really a place for experimentation and if poetry was to meet these kids' lives outside the desk-bound classroom, here was a chance to prove it.

Years, and several such excursions later (in Vermont, California, and Ohio), I've come to think a poetry night hike can be a cross between writing group renga (in which participants build a long poem together over the course of an evening, often outdoors) and a typical American education camp's evening activity in which young people explore the mysteries of the unlit half of the world. Most of all, poetry night hikes are a blend of silence and words. Using that creative opposition, it's up to the planners to structure an event that combines those two elements. On the language side, one might include some writing of poems, individually or as a group, on paper or orally, along with the reciting or reading of poems aloud; these activities can be alternated

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Imagine the world
without electricity

the night would require more effort
the earth would grow large again

darkness would be for stories
the phenomenon of wishes would
reinvent its kingdom

would we
see with fresh eyes, recognize
the shimmer of the commonplace
the light beneath the skin?

Poetry postcard by Barbara Szerlip © 1981

with plenty of receptive time, walks done in silence, owl calls, the gathering of objects, games for awakening our night senses, particularly those of touch and hearing. Of course any "plan" should be adjusted to the group and the local terrain. The progression should be slow, gradually letting the senses open wider, the way the rods in our eyes find their own way of gathering in the light. Each hike is different, even in the same terrain. The feel of the night at hand should also influence the plan. The idea is not to follow a set formula, but to find spaces within earth's "dark skirts," as Mary Oliver puts it, to listen.

On that first hike, Jann and I improvised. At late dusk, all of us gathered in the meadow on the hillside above the school woods. From a song by John Denver with the lines, "Some days are diamonds, some days are stones," I created an exercise in which each participant contributes a line beginning with, "Some nights are....," followed with a metaphor. "Some nights are hollow secrets / Some nights are suspended webs...." Not exactly new lyrics for the radio, but hints of what we might find down there in the woods. Next, forming a group "caterpillar" by placing our hands on the shoulders of the one in front of us, we closed our eyes, all except the leader, who led us down the hill any way but straight. Giggles. Twists. Stumbles. Holding on, tripping into each other's shoes, we came down into the now much darker forest. Then we broke into small groups, and with the aid of two teachers trained in outdoor education techniques, we investigated the small areas around us, "washing our hands in the leaves," matching the shapes of those on the ground with the ones still in the trees. Later, at a small set of benches down by the creek, the students listened while I

recited a few poems about the night: William Stafford's "Traveling through the Dark," Mary Oliver's "Sleeping in the Forest," Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night," and José Luis Hidalgo's "Shore of Night," among others. What is it about night that draws poets to it? Perhaps a heightened sense that, just as in a poem, there are layers to be uncovered, "waves breaking on shores/just over the hill," as Robert Bly says. Night is with us every day of our lives, a polar presence to our claims of mastery and understanding, and yet we are often oblivious to night, as in these stanzas:

All of the night on this earth
is running out between my hands
like water trying to run away
between bulrushes and birds.

—José Luis Hidalgo, from "Shore of Night"

Whatever it was I lost, whatever I wept for
Was a wild, gentle thing, the small dark eyes
Loving me in secret.

—James Wright, from "Milkweed"

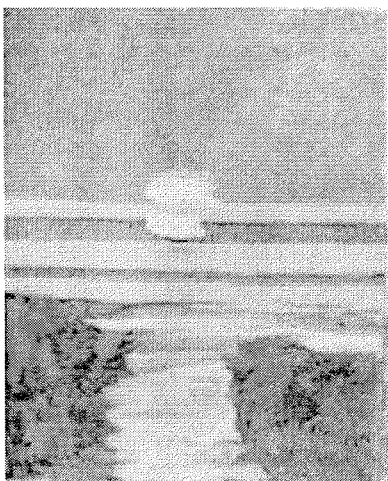
I thought the earth
remembered me, she
took me back so tenderly, arranging
her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds.

—Mary Oliver, from "Sleeping in the Forest"

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.
I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;
around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

—William Stafford, from "Traveling Through the Dark"

Quietly, then, we moved up the trail toward the school. I had asked the group to remain in full silence and explained that we would be doing what is known as a Seton Watch before we left the woods. For this, each would be positioned



ten feet away from anyone else and asked to sit in silence on the trail, simply paying attention to where they were, listening and watching. Because we would be within ready reach of the group, we would be perfectly safe, but because we were far enough away so that we couldn't see anyone else, we would get a chance to feel what it's like to be "alone in the night." Would we be able to shut down the little voices of worries that run through our heads continually? I tried not to sound melodramatic here. It was a simple thing we would be doing: spending ten minutes watching one of the most basic phenomena on earth, the passage from light to dark, as people have done across all cultures for millenia. And yet I knew the experience was odd to us, something we seem to remember only distantly. Back at the room, we got—among others—this poem from Bill Simmerman, a seventh grader:

Trapped

Trapped,
In my brain,

Misty,
I see words floating
Around in my brain,
All school related Words.
All of a sudden
The walls start
To close together.
As if they didn't
Want me.

A door
Flies open,
I jump out.
I keep falling,
Falling
Down,
Stairs all around
Until I almost
Hit bottom.
Then,
A truck roars by,
With its horn blasting,

Waking me out of a trance,
Until I am back
Under the tree
Gazing into the sky.

Clearly this was no run-of-the-mill experience for Bill. (Later he told me that his mind really wanted to close up, wanted him gone.) Notice, however, that it's not only the strange vision that counts in the end, but that the sky has cleared and he's back under the tree, watching. This night hike had accomplished a major goal: to help at least one student see the world more closely.

A few years later, at a two-day encampment with Jann's students at Mohican State Park, it rained steadily. When time came for our scheduled night hike, the ground was soaked, the trees hung heavy, and we wondered if the students would balk at going out again into the dark, soggy night. She had spent six months preparing them for these two days, giving them exercises in description and metaphor, having visitors speak on local history and the interaction between writing and art, as well as writing and study of the natural world. Jann and I laughed at each other's drenched clothes.

"They're having a great time," she said. "Did you see Brenda and Amy climb out on that trunk over the river?"

"Like vultures in the rain," I replied, ever hunting for dark images.

"No, like wide-eyed children again."

The optimist won out. We knew we had to do it.

We gathered the kids, with ponchos and candles, and stood in a circle beside the river. I said, "If every night is something of an oracle, maybe this one has something to teach us as well." The kids' good spirits were encouraging; they weren't half as worried or bothered by the rain as we were. In their regular lives, they would never have ventured outside of their houses in this weather—but here at Mohican it seemed quite natural.

Following much the same procedure as that of our first night hike, we made up a group poem, explored certain trails, listened to poems, did a Seton Watch (this time along the river on the opposite side from our cabins, watching an eerie light form from out of nowhere on the river as the rain fell), and walked back in silence. Back in the warmth of the cabins, we gathered and wrote. Many found the use of a repeated line helpful, based on "Growing Toward the Earth" by Luis Rosales:

When the night comes in and the darkness becomes a staff,
 when the night comes in perhaps the sea will have been
 asleep,
 perhaps all of its strength will not help it to move a single
 pebble,
 or to change the face of a smile,
 and perhaps among the waves a child could be born, when the
 night comes in,
 when the night comes in and truth becomes just another word...

As with other poems at night, it wasn't so much the imagery as the sound of the words that mattered, "sentence sound" (Robert Frost), a ramble in the head that seeks out the possible phrases, sorts the too simple from the overly ornate, the cliché from the strongly felt—and begins. The seventh grade students wrote:

All patterns go slowly
 Hide as trees, as the gods
 In their place stands a
 cloud like light
 Rain talking to water...

—Kristi Dorland

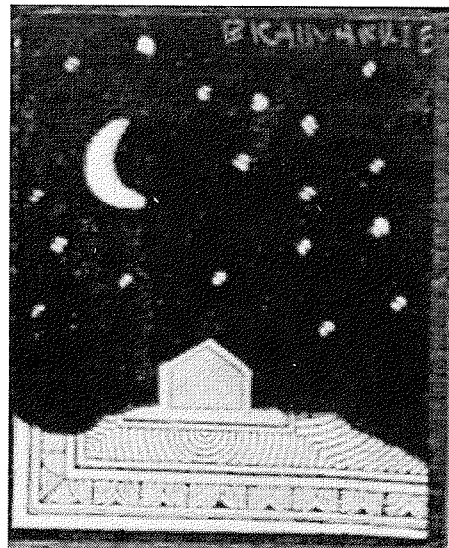
When the night falls the trees stick
 Like arrows in the ground
 When the night falls you're hiding in the darkness
 When the night falls droplets of nothing come from the skies
 When the night falls the images of sorrow pass through the
 trees
 All is quiet but the raindrops on your head & in your heart

—Annette Palmer

When the rain falls down
 all the green seems to turn to blue
 everything turns when the rain falls

—Mike Heider

Are these poems as structurally sophisticated as they might be? Probably not. These students had only minimal training. But something just as fine carried them through: the experience of those two days in the rain. Years later, both



Jann and I have run into students from that group, each one mentioning first and most proudly, "We went to Mohican."

With another class, I used a more complex challenge. When we created the group poem, I asked that each student make up an image for night using an incomplete sentence. As we sat around in a circle, I gave them this definition of imagery as a variation on metaphor: the juxtaposition of unlike things, as in "the asylum of the waters," "the tissues of the grass," suggesting they look for some unfamiliar pairing of words. We composed our lines and phrases in our heads, then combined them into the following spontaneous poem, spoken as we went around the circle:

The hours of pines
 Green moss, waterfalls
 Darkness choking you like a hand
 The rocks are like days
 Naked trees; dead leaves
 Stream rolling through the valley

The logs like bulldozers
A flash of moon
Flight of winds

Trails like branches
The brittleness of leaves

Hidden sunlight weaving
Owls stand like sentries
Run away into the whispering wind
Night comes
Like a tiger on its prey

—7th grade Challenge Class

We lay down in the dry leaves, our heads touching at the center of a circle, and spoke our thoughts as we gazed up through the trees. One student noticed that if you blink your eyes quickly, the effect of the light at night creates a kind of flickering movie. Soon all our eyes were in rapid motion before the black and white “screen” above us.

It’s often helpful to have blindfolds along, particularly for opening activities before full dark arrives. On one hike, done at the school guidance counselor’s ten-acre woods, there stood an acre of 50 or so beech and walnut trees of different heights and intriguing shapes. We blindfolded half the group and had each unsighted member led by a partner through circuitous routes to one of the trees. The blindfolded person was then asked to “memorize” the tree by touch, getting to know it so well that after being led away—again by a deceptive route—he or she would be able to find it once the blindfold was removed. The only problem with this activity was that we had trouble getting them to re-focus for the rest of the hike; they wanted to repeat it over and over.

One poet I know hands out chocolate on her night hikes, claiming she’s helping students expand their senses (she says that chocolate tastes different in the dark).

Christy Dixon, an environmental specialist with whom I planned a night hike for adults at George Rogers Clark State Park, asked us at one point to find an interesting stick in the area around us. She then gathered us in a circle and asked us to get to know the stick, without relying on sight, noting its peculiar feel and ridges. After two minutes she took the sticks away, shuffled them and passed them around the circle at random. We were to carefully touch each one till we knew the familiar feel of *ours*. It was oddly satisfying to come back to the familiar “first stick,” as if we had found home again, or it had found us.

Much as a heightened awareness of our senses helps to guide us back to the night world, our sense of memory can help add meaning to a night hike, particularly for adults. After asking us to look up at the shapes of the trees above us, noting the relationships and spaces *between* the trees as much as the trees themselves, Christy had us think back and see if there was a tree we remembered well. I was surprised at how many of us had particular trees haunting our pasts. I thought of the willow I’d climbed so often as a kid. If you climbed high enough, you were supposed to see all the way to downtown Chicago. Several remembered trees that had

since been cut down. One man said he hadn’t thought of *his* tree in maybe 25 years: a huge beech with knobs on its upper trunk. He used to go out and stand in its presence as a kid, feeling hidden and safe.

Borrowing Christy’s idea, I wanted some storytelling on the night hike I planned for a group of writers at Chapter & Verse, the first national Poetry-in-the-Schools conference held in San Rafael, California, in 1990. My sign taped to the cafeteria door brought fifteen writers together at the base of the mountain behind the Dominican College campus. Much as we were there to talk about teaching in the schools, I thought that this was a time for experiencing the night ourselves, just as we might ask a group of kids to do.

Fortunately, I had help. This night hike in particular felt like a joint adventure. We had writers from all over the country—two poets from Iowa, fiction writers from Minnesota and New York, and several Californians. There was John Oliver Simon, who had led poetry writing tours in the Museum of Natural History in Mexico City. And Ruth Gensler who would, the very next year, go on to edit *Changing Light*, an anthology of poems about night and day. And Daryl Chinn from near Fresno, whose poetry struggles to place his Chinese heritage within an American upbringing. Many were more familiar with the landscape we would be traveling than I was. I had climbed twice to the top, exploring routes and trails, one of which branched off onto a fireroad and led high up to a huge meadow above the Pacific. It would be a perfect place to write at dusk and to watch the night come in over the bay—I thought.

Little did I know how cold it would be. By the time we got up there at dusk, the wind was coming in strong off the ocean. If night were to be a source for poetry, it would have to be tasted in all its ferocity here.

Nearing the top, with the sound of the wind above us, we all felt more than a physical shiver. Yet John, well versed in this landscape, assured us we’d be okay. “We don’t have storms up here in August,” he said. Half our worries were gone. Up above, the dusk was as magical as I’d hoped.

Every night hike requires that we adapt to where we are. In this case, we needed to spend not too long out in the open, so I suggested that people spread out and find sheltered spots in which to write. It’s often difficult to pinpoint the arrival of the dark (the official time of sunset as listed in most papers doesn’t include when full darkness will arrive), so we were a little early and had plenty of time to settle in. In fact, it was hard pulling people away from their cozy spaces inside bushes, behind rocks, or down the leeward side of a slope.

It was too dark to read what we had just written, so when we gathered under a huge spreading California oak, we talked about the night, and several recited previous poems of their own, and we got to experience how any poem sounds different when said out into the night to faces that could be mistaken for huge pinecones at the edge of the circle. We finished with stories from our memories of other nights.

One told the story of staying in a cabin at Lake Okoboji in northern Iowa, going out for a swim at midnight with her sisters and mother. Another of watching the moon over the



Atlantic with two friends just before graduation from high school. Daryl told simply of feeling the warmth from the stove pour into his unheated bedroom when his grandmother opened the door: no words to say goodnight, just that caring gesture to take away the chill. It was hard not to make the connection to our present situation. We had shivered long enough; we started back down the path.

In the comfort of the lounge, John read to us from his notes scribbled above:

Far below, the flocks of cars
measure the night
along a path of expectation.
May feet know the moves of earth
even in imperfect darkness.
This breath, this other breath
a name for bright red fingers,
manzanita, formed to scratch the dark
and patterned soft for deer
as soft as I
rev up & climb the grade
past the last clouds of evening...

As if to echo him, Michael Carey read from a poem he had titled "Night Falls on Tamalpais":

Your back bends
like the morning eucalyptus
yet you keep your promise
not to break the silence
you step on.
Shrivelled bark flakes
like the skin
you step out of...

Without wings
your body rises,
each step a breath
each breath
a short but willing walk
into the dark mountain.

I thought of Frederick Church, Martin Heade, and Asher Durand in their painting expeditions into the American wildernesses of the 1840s, taking their works to the out-of-doors, testing them against the light of storms and night and sunrises. It felt just a bit like that, as if we strangers might return writing to the world again.

Most of us do not venture out at night beyond the seeming safety of city lights and streets. Unlike the amateur naturalist Chris Ferris who, because of insomnia, found a real love of taking walks at night through the English countryside (her book *The Darkness Is Light Enough* provides a fascinating account of her discoveries), most of us won't go out there alone. But under the umbrella of a "sanctioned" night hike, we can address more directly the other half of the world.

Perhaps night hikes are most important for adolescents, who in our time have become increasingly stuck in homes, malls, and automobiles, from whose isolation the fears of the night world are heightened. In the van on their way to a poetry night hike at Cooper's Woods one spring in Ohio, a group of ninth graders found fear arising behind their laughter. "Night is evil," one said. While some objected, others had to admit they had that feeling. There had been some controversy at school over a group of students who had taken to wearing all black. Was the color black itself evil? The administration had hinted as much. These all-white students from rural Ohio had too little experience to guess what age-old feelings and prejudices were surfacing in them. All they knew was that this field trip was raising feelings they hadn't counted on. By the time they arrived, they had stirred themselves into a mild controversy.

Fortunately, a lot of the tension was broken by humor. Just off the bus, Fred, one of the "nuttier" kids, announced that he wanted us to perform a "poem," and proceeded to show us how to pantomime a little ditty about "Four Charreusse Buzzards" who flew one by one "a-a-away" ("What a-a-a shame") until oh-so-sadly there were none.... We all had to act out the motions, as if we were back in kindergarten. Ice broken, we threaded our way silently down the path toward the night.

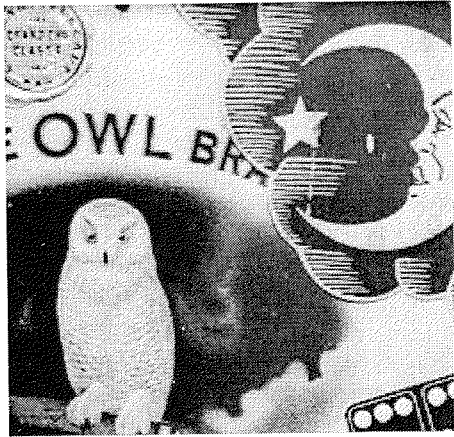
Midway across the meadow surrounded by forest, we stopped to focus for the evening. I talked about night and its history in literature, how the earliest stories began around the fire, and about the need to integrate all areas of learning. I knew that several of the students were more inclined toward science than poetry, so I gave them a section of Kabir's poem "The Clay Jug":

Inside this clay jug there are canyons and pine mountains,
and the maker of canyons and pine mountains!
All seven oceans are inside, and hundreds of millions of stars.
The acid that tests gold is there, and the one who judges
jewels.
And the music from the strings that no hand touches, and the
source of all waters...

—Translated by Robert Bly

This fourteenth-century mystic's thought is similar to that of some twentieth-century physicists who have said that the structure of the universe may be reflected in an atom, each small part, like the clay jug, holding something of the whole. Going out into the night, I suggested, is a way of putting ourselves back into closer touch with *possibility*, with the mysteries of the world that lie so close around us and often go unnoticed in the flatlands of Ohio.

Because we had improvisational musician Bill Walker with us, we next staged a little experiment in choral voices. He assigned students individual lines and phrases from the



poem to play with verbally, singing them, chanting them, adding staccato or slurred lines, increasing and decreasing volume, all under his direction. "Canyons and pine mountains... All seven oceans... Hundreds of millions of stars...."

Quiet once more, we turned our backs to the circle we'd formed, and stepped out along invisible spokes, 70 yards or more, to the perimeter of the meadow, where each individual radius met with the edge of the woods. All tied together by our imaginary circle, yet unable to see much beyond our little niches inside the edge of the woods, we wrote poems. Wanting to keep things as simple as possible, I had suggested they write about the feeling of night—without mentioning the word. Or, since they had been studying mythology, I said they might think of the night as an oracle and write a poem expressing what this night had to tell them.

While we wrote, the thickness of the night arrived. We entered a kind of timeless stasis, it seemed, where words and silence, light and dusk, branches and sky merged. Were we floating? At a prepared signal, Bill gave a kind of wavery call out over the darkened meadow and from all their spots around the periphery of darkness, invisible figures emerged. We'd hardly planned it, but watching the students return to us provided a kind of miniature enactment of the "going out into the world and bringing back of discovery" that art and learning most strive for.

We walked on, found stones beside the river, heard poems recited while the students lay on their backs and watched the stars, and finally read their poems back (and sang) around a fire. In the end I don't think any of us wanted to leave. The

students' poems reflected in many cases the emotional and philosophical struggles they originally brought to the woods, but these had been inverted, transformed, seen now in a new light. Let the last words be theirs:

I see a dream fly over
my head hastening to someone's
sleeping form

I see your half-
closed eye
your silver form
taunting me about the
dreams I cannot reach
The silver-maned lions
that cling with dew
They seem to know so much
they seem to be miniature moons

The dance of joining
is not interrupted by my presence
by the light of the moon
so graceful I wish to
join yet I am hindered by
mortality
a dying pine
this dying tree

—Jessica Funk, 9th grade

Dark,
like a blanket with holes it descends upon me
Why
Did it have to happen to me, I've been good
When
Will it end, when will I be able to see light again
How
Will you cure this blindness

*

Alone I was,
When it hit
In my bedroom
Doing, I don't know what
But it just came
Without a sound
As soon as
The sun left

*

The sky is not black at night It happens to be a deep dark blue
Black is not evil I don't know why you would
think such a thing
It just happens that any color is evil—
you just have to look for it

—Steve Carlson, 9th grade

I see softly something that day cannot bring.
 I hear sounds that touch deep inside me.
 The droplets of moonlight caress my face.
 The darkness I feel is that of many years gone by.
 Any sounds I hear are of a world
 I dare not travel.
 For in my world, the night, silence is
 just something to make up for the mistakes of sound.
 And sound just pushes silence
 further into my world.
 For when a bird flies he doesn't
 fly toward sound, he flies toward silence.

—Missy DeLaney, 9th grade

Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night" and "The Secret"
 Louise Bogan's "To Be Sung on the Water"
 Richard Shelton's "Requiem for Sonora"
 Edward Hirsch's "In Spite of Everything, the Stars"
 Margaret Atwood's "The Planters"
 Ted Hughes's "The Thought-Fox"
 Amiri Baraka's "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note"
 James Wright's "Milkweed" and "Lying in a Hammock at
 William Duffy's Pond in Pine Island, Minnesota"
 Robert Bly's "Surprised by Evening," "Snowfall in the After-
 noon," "After Drinking All Night with a Friend, We Go Out
 in a Boat at Dawn to See Who Can Write the Best Poem"
 Gary Snyder's "Paiute Creek" and "Mid-August at Sourdough
 Mountain Lookout"
 Sylvia Plath's "Crossing the Water"
 Theodore Roethke's "Night Journey" and "Night Crow"
 Tomas Tranströmer's "The Name"
 Jean Toomer's "Beehive"
 Tu Fu's "Written on the Wall at Chang's Hermitage"
 Lu Yu's "I Walk Out into the Country at Night"

[Many thanks to the Estate of Joe Brainard for permission to use
 four illustrations by Joe Brainard in this essay.]



Books about Night

Ferris, Chris. *The Darkness Is Light Enough: Field Journal of a Night Naturalist* (Ecco, 1986). Journals of walks at night through the English countryside.

Gensler, Ruth. *Changing Light: The Eternal Cycle of Night & Day* (HarperCollins, 1991). Selections of myths and poems about the different times of day.

Kappel-Smith, Diana. *Night Life: Nature from Dusk to Dawn* (Little Brown, 1990). Explorations of night from a lay-scientist's perspective.

Keene, Donald. *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature from the Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (Henry Holt, 1993). See especially the chapter on the renga tradition, pp. 921–970.

Raymo, Chet. *The Soul of the Night: An Astronomical Pilgrimage* (Prentice Hall, 1985). Scientific speculations about night, in lay terminology.

Van Matre, Steve. *Acclimatizing: A Personal and Reflective Approach to a Natural Relationship* (American Camping Association, 1974). Exercises for exploring the natural world (see especially pp. 17–58).

Night Poems

William Stafford's "Traveling through the Dark"
 Mary Oliver's "Sleeping in the Forest," "Buck Moon—From the Field Guide to Insects," and "Wolf Moon"
 José Luis Hidalgo's "Shore of Night" and Luis Rosales's "Growing toward the Earth," in *Roots & Wings: Poetry from Spain*, edited by Hardie St. Martin
 Georg Trakl's "Summer"
 Randall Jarrell's "A shadow is floating through moonlight" and "A bat is born"
 Osip Mandelstam's "How dark it gets along the Kama"
 Italo Calvino's "Cities & the Sky #3," from *Invisible Cities*
 Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Georgia Dusk," and "Dream Variations"

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