



# Teaching James Baldwin

by Phillip Lopate

WHENEVER I HAVE USED PERSONAL ESSAYS to motivate students to write their own, I have relied on James Baldwin's work, because I know that he will get high school and college kids engaged and excited. The resistances they show to Lamb, Hazlitt, Montaigne, and all those other "old-timey writers" seem to melt away under Jimmy's fiery gaze. It is Baldwin to the rescue, in part because his honesty and passion are very attractive to young people; but also because Baldwin dramatized adolescence again and again as his own particular crucible of selfhood—boy preacher, loss of faith, yearnings to write, father's death, foregoing college, struggles over racial anger and sexual preference—and sympathized so warmly with the efforts of all youth to forge an identity.

In an essay entitled "They Can't Turn Back," on the desegregation of the schools in the South, he writes, parenthetically and characteristically, about the "really agonizing privacy of the very young. They are only beginning to realize that the world is difficult and dangerous, that they are, themselves, tormentingly complex and that the years that stretch before them promise to be more dangerous than the years that are behind. And they always seem to be wrestling, in a private chamber to which no grownup has access, with monumental decisions. Everyone laughs at himself once he has come through this storm, but it is borne in on me,

---

PHILLIP LOPATE's many books include *Being with Children*, *Bachelorhood*, and *Portrait of My Body*. He is also the editor of *The Art of the Personal Essay* and the new series, *Anchor Annual Essays*. Lopate teaches at Hofstra University.

---

suddenly, that it *is* a storm, a storm, moreover, that not everyone survives and through which no one comes unscathed. Decisions made at this time always seem—and, in fact, nearly always turn out to be—decisions that determine the course and quality of a life. I wonder for the first time what it can be like to be making, in the adolescent dark, such decisions as this generation of students has made."

This is catnip to the young.

I am being a bit ironic because, while I love Baldwin's writing, I sometimes feel that I have to exert counter-pressure to pry students from its appeal and exercise a little

## SPECIAL ISSUE: USING AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

- 1** Teaching James Baldwin  
by Phillip Lopate
- 4** Knoxville, Tennessee: Using Nikki Giovanni's Poem  
by Renée-Noelle Felice
- 7** Misery Is Fun: Using Langston Hughes's *Black Misery*  
by Ilise Benun
- 10** Hidden Beauty: Using a Poem by Jayne Cortez  
by Mark Statman
- 13** Square Toes and Icy Arms: Personification and Zora Neale Hurston  
by Catherine Barnett

critical intelligence. Once they fall under the spell of his voice, they tend to buy into his whole analysis of race, politics, America—the bombastically prophetic, wrongheaded parts as well as the sensible. What they really buy into is his presentation of self as a wounded being: there can be no doubt that, in a talk-show culture that enshrines victimhood, Baldwin plays exceedingly well.

When I teach Baldwin I focus on his essays, because I think he is a great essayist—indeed, the most important American one since the end of World War II—and only a so-so fiction writer. His long novels, *Another Country* and *Just above My Head*, now seem windy and unfocused; *Giovanni's Room*, precious. When there is enough time, I have occasionally assigned *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which many consider his best, just to show how the same material (a Harlem adolescence) may be treated via both fiction and non-fiction. To my mind, this first novel of Baldwin's, atmospheric but clotted, cannot hold a candle to his infinitely more expressive personal essay, "Notes of a Native Son."

A twenty-page miracle, a masterpiece of compression, "Notes of a Native Son" seems to pour out in a white-heat of emotional prose, though it is everywhere artfully shaped. The portrait of his father, David Baldwin (whom he later learned was actually his stepfather), is a model of unsentimental ambivalence. Many students, encountering it for the first time, are shocked to see that one can actually tell such tales out of school. Baldwin's ferocious and fastidious candor liberates them to begin writing about the meanings of their parents' lives.

I generally focus on the following amazing paragraph:

He was, I think, very handsome. I gather this from photographs and from my own memories of him, dressed in his Sunday best and on his way to preach a sermon somewhere, when I was little. Handsome, proud, and ingrown, "like a toenail," somebody said. But he looked to me, as I grew older, like pictures I had seen of African tribal chieftains: he really should have been naked, with warpaint on and barbaric mementos, standing among spears. He could be chilling in the pulpit and indescribably cruel in his personal life and he was certainly the most bitter man I have ever met; yet it must be said that there was something else in him, buried in him, which lent him his tremendous power and, even, a rather crushing charm. It had something to do with his blackness, I think—he was very black—with his blackness and his beauty, and with the fact that he knew that he was black but did not know that he was beautiful. He claimed to be proud of his blackness but it had also been the cause of much humiliation and it had fixed bleak boundaries to his life. He was not a young man when we were growing up and he had already suffered many kinds of ruin; in his outrageously demanding and protective way he loved his children, who were black and menaced, like him; and all these things sometimes showed in his face when he tried, never to my knowledge with any success, to establish contact with any of us. When he took one of his children on his knee to play, the child always became fretful and began to cry; when he tried to help one of us with our

homework the absolutely unabating tension which emanated from him caused our minds and our tongues to become paralyzed, so that he, scarcely knowing why, flew into a rage and the child, not knowing why, was punished. If it ever entered his head to bring a surprise home for his children, it was, almost unfailingly, the wrong surprise and even the big watermelons he often brought home on his back in the summertime led to the most appalling scenes. I do not remember, in all those years, that one of his children was ever glad to see him come home. From what I was able to gather of his early life, it seemed that this inability to establish contact with other people had always marked him and had been one of the things which had driven him out of New Orleans. There was something in him, therefore, groping and tentative, which was never expressed and which was buried with him. One saw it most clearly when he was facing new people and hoping to impress them. But he never did, not for long. We went from church to smaller and more improbable church, he found himself in less and less demand as a minister, and by the time he died none of his friends had come to see him in a long time. He had lived and died in an intolerable bitterness of spirit and it frightened me, as we drove him to the graveyard through these unquiet, ruined streets, to see how powerful and overflowing this bitterness could be and to realize this bitterness now was mine.

It's all there, in this paragraph, but it requires some unpacking: Baldwin's sheer love of language; his intoxication with adjectives and adverbs, at a time when others avoided them; his Biblical rhythms, oral-sermon repetitions and series syntax ("and . . . and"); his oxymorons ("crushing charm"); his witheringly undercutting use of subordinate clauses ("never to my knowledge with any success"); his anglicisms ("rather" or the impersonal pronoun "one"); his verbal arrows and pointers ("yet it must be said that," "therefore"); his ability to sustain an extremely long sentence without wearying or confusing the reader; his willingness to pull back from a specific detail and make a broader generalization; his balance between rejection and tenderness, between rage and forgiveness; his ennoblings and deflations, often in the same sentence; his detachment and grim humor; and finally, his generous move to identify with, show complicity with, the sin ("this bitterness") he had seemed to be indicting.

Baldwin's prose is a carefully crafted, highly mannered (in the best sense) performance, and some of what I do when I teach him is to draw attention to his techniques. Students tend to inhale powerful prose in an undifferentiated rush, and I want to slow them down. Of course I don't wish to dilute their human feeling for this person who has suffered and witnessed great suffering; but I want them to understand the mastery of language that Baldwin accomplished, because this is part of the positive side of the ledger that helped him survive—and may help them survive.

I ask them to write a portrait of their mother or father, and to reflect on how we take on the traits of our parents, for better or for worse. Or I ask them to write about some incidents in which anger got the better of them, or to consider in an essay the nature of bitterness. Or just write about their growing up. By the time they have finished reading

“Notes of a Native Son,” they have often gotten the point—the challenge to be as honest and personal as possible on the page—and don’t need much specific prodding to be off and running.

I follow it with as many Baldwin essays as I can, because I find that he is one of those writers whom students are willing to be saturated by. The more they read him, the more comfortable they become with his strategic moves and range of interests, and the more he seems a friend. Ideally, I can assign as a text the fat, collected book of Baldwin non-fiction, *The Price of the Ticket*, though one can also get by in a pinch with the earlier, paperback collections such as *Nobody Knows My Name* and *The Fire Next Time*, which are still in print. I ask them to read such gems as “Equal in Paris” (a narrative vignette about his getting arrested), “Stranger in the Village” (a meditation on otherness and the expatriate experience), “The Harlem Ghetto” (just to show how fully formed a stylist he was at twenty), “Alas, Poor Richard” (a searching double portrait of Baldwin and his patriarchal mentor/rival, Richard Wright), “Sweet Lorraine” (about the playwright Lorraine Hansberry), and, of course, “The Fire Next Time.”

This last, full-length essay has portions as great as anything Baldwin ever wrote. You may have to supply a certain amount of historical context for students (the mood of the sixties, the civil rights movement, the Black Muslims, etc.), though I have found, on the whole, that they get it. A bigger problem is the one I alluded to earlier: when this ambitious conglomeration of an essay begins to fall apart, the rhetorical smoothness of Baldwin’s writing may fool students into not even questioning his apocalyptic overkill (such as that if America doesn’t support revolutions abroad and at home, it will be burned to the ground).

The full-length essays that Baldwin continued to write, such as “No Name in the Street” or “The Devil Finds Work,” are fascinating to teach—partly because they have such wonders in them and partly because they don’t really hold together. (It’s salutary, I think, for students to realize that the structural problems of essay writing may be so daunting when the ante is raised that even a master of the form can get bogged down.) In one sense the long, long essay *was* Baldwin’s form: it brought out relaxed, self-surprising passages in him that nothing else did. But in another sense, he never figured out how to pull it off artistically, how to tie up the loose ends or give it an inevitable shape. This may have as much to do with the essay form today as with any inadequacies on Baldwin’s part.

There are lessons anyone attempting to write personal essays can learn from Baldwin. How to dramatize oneself, for instance. Most personal essays misfire because of the blandness of the narrative persona, but this was never a problem for James Baldwin; he could always project himself on paper as in the midst of some burning conflict or dire strait. He was a bit of an actor, which an essayist needs to be—willing and able to take on one mask or another.

Another of his admirable qualities was a self-reflective insight that let us into his thinking process. Six pages into “Alas, Poor Richard,” we encounter this passage:

I was far from imagining, when I agreed to write this memoir, that it should prove to be such a painful and difficult task. What, after all, can I really say about Richard . . . ? Everything founders in the sea of what might have been. We might have been friends, for example, but I cannot honestly say that we were. There might have been some way of avoiding our quarrel, our rupture; I can only say that I failed to find it. The quarrel having occurred, perhaps there might have been a way to have become reconciled. I think, in fact, that I counted on this coming about in some mysterious, irrevocable way, the way a child dreams of winning, by means of some dazzling exploit, the love of his parents.

I began by implying that James Baldwin had in some ways been fixated on his adolescent crisis and had overacted the part of the racial victim. But we see from this passage how incomplete my assessment was; for it demonstrates the worldly, sorrowful realism and willingness to take responsibility for one’s fate that makes Baldwin, at his best, a hero of American maturity. Perhaps what finally makes him so attractive to young people is the way he epitomizes the process of becoming a man, without losing touch with, or falsifying, the part of himself that remains a very vulnerable boy.

### Bibliography

- Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. New York: Dell, 1985.  
———. *Nobody Knows My Name*. New York: Dell, 1978.  
———. *The Price of the Ticket*. New York: St. Martin’s/Marek, 1985.



## PLUG

Phillip Lopate’s essay—as well as all the others in this issue—are from T&W’s new book, *Sing the Sun Up: Creative Writing Ideas from African American Literature*. In this 200-page volume, edited by poet and teacher Lorenzo Thomas, 20 teaching writers present practical ideas and methods for motivating students to write imaginatively, inspired by a wide range of African American poetry, fiction, essays, and drama. Teachers of English, creative writing, and black studies—from elementary through college level—will find this book to be a valuable source of practical writing ideas and lessons, and anyone interested in exploring the richness of African American literature will discover fresh and energetic approaches. *Sing the Sun Up* is now available in a \$14.95 paperback edition. Add \$3.50 shipping and handling. Order by calling toll-free 1-888-BOOKS-TW; by writing to Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, 7th floor, New York, NY 10003-3306; or via our web site: <http://www.twc.org>.

# Knoxville, Tennessee

## Using Nikki Giovanni's Poem

by Renée-Noelle Felice

ONE OF MY FAVORITE "TEACHING POEMS" IS Nikki Giovanni's "Knoxville, Tennessee":

I always like summer  
best  
you can eat fresh corn  
from daddy's garden  
and okra  
and greens  
and cabbage  
and lots of  
barbecue  
and buttermilk  
and homemade ice-cream  
  
at the church picnic  
and listen to  
gospel music  
outside  
at the church  
homecoming  
and go to the mountains with  
your grandmother  
and go barefooted  
and be warm  
all the time  
not only when you go to bed  
and sleep

This is one of those rare poems that works with students of all ages (including adults) and of many different ethnic and social backgrounds. I have used this poem in inner-city schools, in schools with racially mixed populations, and in virtually all-white schools, all to great effect.

Because of its simplicity, "Knoxville, Tennessee" requires no introduction or vocabulary preparation, and can be read aloud by students. I usually begin class by handing out copies of the poem. Sometimes a student will volunteer to read it. If no one does, I'll ask for a volunteer or read it myself. We then talk about what they think of it. Occasionally, African American students ask if the poet is black; when they do, I ask what *they* think. Invariably they think she is; I then ask what images in the poem led them to that conclusion. Their responses usually include the foods, the church, and spending time with your grandmother.

---

RENÉE-NOELLE FELICE has worked as a poet-in-the-schools in all five boroughs of New York City. She has received three grants from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

---

Usually the comments are positive, although one high school student was adamant in her assertion that all of the "ands" in the poem made it "dumb."

Often, after I introduce a model poem to elementary school children, I invite them to write a group poem before they write their own individual poems. I have never felt the need to do that with this particular lesson. One of the beauties of the piece is its power to motivate students to be specific (one of the most difficult tasks facing anyone who tries to help children write poetry).

The first time I tried this assignment, one sixth grade boy turned in the following first draft:

I always like eating those round, small Pizza Hut pies.  
I like the grease;  
the cooking oil at the bottom of the box.

When you open the box,  
the steam comes out at you, pulling you in.

When you sink your teeth in it,  
you feel like you're in heaven.

—Alex Alves

This boy was in a class whose previous poetry lacked specificity and imagination. Unsure as to how to proceed during my first visit, I turned to the Giovanni poem, which I had just discovered, and decided to take a chance with it. To my amazement, most of the students responded in a remarkably specific and enthusiastic way.

I always like to cook rice and beans  
with Corn Pops.

And I like to cook meatballs.  
I like how I season the meat;  
how my hands turn the meat,  
and cut the bread.  
I like how I give the food out.  
It makes me feel good inside.

—Stefanie Montanez

Although food seemed to hold great appeal, physical activities ran a close second:

I always like the way my roller skates rumble on the bumpy sidewalk,  
rolling up and down the big, busy street,  
breeze blowing in my face.  
Little rocks and dust blow  
in my face, making me sightless.

Still, I always like the way  
my roller skates rumble on the bumpy sidewalk.

—*Mecola Hunte*

I always like riding,  
feeling the breeze blowing  
past my skin;  
my legs exercising while  
I relax with nature;  
my hair up in the air,  
blowing behind me;  
going up and down a hill;  
smelling the trees.  
I feel like I am flying,  
wrapped in nothing but silk.

—*Tanicea Marsh*

In the following poem, another student discards the “I always like” beginning, while still maintaining Giovanni’s use of the specific:

When I am in the water  
I feel relaxed and free  
from noise and from people.  
When I dive to get a ball—  
diving and diving—  
I feel like a frog,  
jumping from leaf to leaf.

—*Liz-Ann Cox*

Fourth graders in the same school responded similarly:

I always like chicken fried,  
mashed potatoes made from scratch,  
with melted butter,  
corn,  
and some salad on the side.

—*Jackie Lopez*

Although this is a much “leaner” poem than the ones written by the sixth graders, the specificity indicates that the author really got something from the Giovanni work.

Some time later, during poetry workshops with fifth grade classes at another school, I again turned to the Giovanni poem to help the students with specificity. It definitely seemed to help.

One boy, initially blank, finally wrote:

#### **I Always Like**

the way the basketball feels in my hands,  
dribbling,  
then shooting it into the hoop,  
gliding through the air  
to slam dunk the ball.

—*Ricky DeLeon*

Another student in the class was so inspired he wrote four in this genre:

I always like  
pizza with a lot of provolone,

chopped pieces of sausage,  
some diet cherry soda.

\*

I always like a challenge.  
I like winning a basketball game  
by a three-pointer or a hard move.

\*

I always like to see leaves blowing in the wind.  
The soft whisper of the wind.  
The wind.  
The wind.  
Do you know what the heart of the wind whispers? . . .  
The wind.

\*

Sun bears down on me.  
Eating ice cream,  
pizza,  
drinking cool glasses of lemonade.  
Playing basketball in the heat of night  
by lamplight.

—*Terrance Dickson*

Perhaps the most motivated student in this group used this form to express her feelings about education:

#### **I Always Like . . .**

School.  
When the teacher writes math problems on the board,  
I’m eager to raise my hand.  
The noise in the classroom.  
The children running in the gym.  
My future to think about.  
Teachers who care,  
want me to be somebody when I grow up,  
not a nobody on the corner of the street  
with nothing to do except be alone  
with no education.  
If I want to be somebody,  
go somewhere,  
I have to wake up  
and pay attention.

—*Robin Williamson*

The universal appeal of Giovanni’s poem is manifest in the following examples by tenth graders from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The first one was written by an ESL student still struggling with the language:

I like to wear a pair of old blue sweatpants.  
They have lots of holes.  
But they are very comfortable.  
I feel energetic when I put them on.  
At night, I hang them over a chair,  
as they look tired.  
I only wear them at home  
because they are so exhausted.

—*Edwige Kouassi*

### The Mechanic

I like to work on cars,  
big or small,  
foreign or domestic.  
I love the smell of gasoline,  
mixed with the smell of smoke.  
There is no car I can't fix,  
But I quit at six.

—Louis Buono

### I Like to Be

in a park  
under a shady tree,  
watching ants carry bits of bark,  
listening to leaves swaying back and forth.

—Gordon Forquignon

### Fall

A cold breeze  
ruffling the leaves.  
Enchanted colors.  
Grandma's fresh apple pie.  
The feeling of winter coming up on us,  
when mother bundled you up  
and said goodbye.  
"Off to school," she'd say.  
You looked back and there she was,  
watching.

—Larissa Schiano

I always like summer best.  
You can Sk8 all day  
at the Sk8 parks,  
and Sk8 the street,  
and grease bearings,

and change wheels  
and do tricks  
and no school  
and get kicked out of places  
for hitting hand rails  
and sneak into closed schools  
and win competitions  
and be on the home team.

—Angel Soto

I like to take photographs.  
I like to develop the pictures and  
watch them come clearer in the chemicals.  
I like it when your pictures  
come out exactly as you  
saw them when you took them.

—Christine Furnari

The final poem from this high school was written by a ninth grader who spent most of her time during the residency either talking to friends or reading a book. This was the only assignment to which she responded.

My mama's apple pie  
is so sweet your tongue will say, "Wow!"  
My mama's apple pie's aroma fills the air.  
The apples are soft and juicy.  
And when my mama makes her apple pie, she says,  
"How you want your crust?"  
And I say, "Fried hard, Mama."

—Serena Gerard

### Bibliography

Giovanni, Nikki. *Black Feelings, Black Talk, Black Judgment*. New York: William Morrow, 1970.



## PLUG

*Zoetrope: All Story* magazine plans to publish short stories by high school students in future issues. *Zoetrope* is a new triannual short-story magazine designed to promote short fiction and to give new writers a venue. Writers may submit manuscripts under 7,000 words with a self-addressed, stamped envelope to *Zoetrope: All Story*, 260 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10001. High school students should include a cover letter stating their age, grade, and school.

## T&W CALL FOR ESSAYS

There is still time for you to submit an informal essay for our forthcoming collection of essays, *Classics in the Classroom*. If your students have done interesting imaginative writing inspired by a classic, we'd like to hear about it. The deadline is **April 1, 1998**. Submissions should be 5–25 pages, double-spaced, and sent to Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306, Attn.: Classics book. To receive a copy of our submissions guidelines or to discuss an idea, call T&W toll-free at 1-888-BOOKS-TW and speak with Ron Padgett or Chris Edgar.

# Misery Is Fun

## Using Langston Hughes's *Black Misery*

by Ilise Benun

PERUSING THE STACKS OF THE LOCAL PUBLIC library one day, I came upon *Black Misery*, the last book Langston Hughes wrote before he died in 1967. In this little gem of a book, Hughes uses perfectly tuned one-liners to shine a spotlight on twenty-seven humiliating moments of childhood. They are universal moments, some racially universal, some humanly universal, many rooted in the 1960s and the civil rights movement.

As writer-in-residence at the Edenwald-Gun Hill Neighborhood Center, a settlement house in the Bronx, I've had the opportunity to use *Black Misery* with almost every age group: elementary school children in the after-school program, adults studying literacy, senior citizens learning computers, and teachers and administrators in a staff development workshop. I've also used the text at other sites, such as with a group of high school kids in a Summer Youth Employment Program in Hoboken, New Jersey.

Despite its official categorization as a children's picture book (with illustrations by the artist Arouni), *Black Misery* is ideal for use with adolescents and adults, who are able to look back and laugh at situations that, at one time, seemed awful.

### Preparation

Though *Black Misery* is a picture book, it is not a straightforward book to teach with. Each page consists of a one-sentence caption and an accompanying black and white illustration that raise complex issues and can inspire engaging discussions. So you need to decide beforehand what to focus on, maybe even choose in advance which captions to read, and anticipate what questions might come up and how you'll respond to them.

I've learned from experience that it doesn't hurt to brush up on African American history. When my first class of fifth graders came upon *Misery is when the teacher asked you who was the Father of our Country and you said, "Booker T. Washington,"* I asked if the students got the reference, and was surprised when most answered, "No." Suddenly it was up to me to explain, and I couldn't. I knew who the Father of our Country was but, like many of the kids, I confused Booker T. with George Washington Carver. Lack of preparation made for a missed teaching opportunity.

---

ILISE BENUN teaches creative writing in the WritersCorp program and at the Edenwald-Gun Hill Neighborhood Center in the Bronx. In 1994 she received a prose fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

---

Be aware that some of the captions need some updating; for example, *Misery is when your pals see Harry Belafonte walking down the street and they holler, "Look there's Sidney Poitier."* Despite the fact that these two actors are alive and well, most children today have never heard of them. I substituted: *Misery is when your pals see Denzel Washington on TV and yell, "Look, there's Martin."* They got that, no problem.

### Classroom Presentation

#### *Reading of Text and Discussion*

My first goal with any class is to get a lively discussion going, which is usually a challenge, but with *Black Misery* it's easy. In fact, using this exercise as an introductory assignment is a good way to get to know a new group of students.

The first question I ask is "Who is Langston Hughes?" Most know his name; some even know him as the Poet Laureate of Black America or the Shakespeare of Harlem, but in my experience, few students—adults and children alike—can say much more. So, to put *Black Misery* in context, some background on Hughes is necessary.

It's not easy to keep this brief because, according to Faith Berry, author of *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem*, he was "one of the most prolific and versatile American writers of his generation, who gained an international reputation and sustained it, at great odds, over four decades." Hughes was a poet, translator, essayist, novelist, dramatist, librettist, folklorist, short story writer, journalist, and world traveler. I list all of these words on the board to show the range of possibilities. Sometimes I read aloud a few of his famous poems and a few not-so-famous ones, as well as a selection from Hughes's series of books centered around his archetypal African American, Jesse B. Simple.

*Black Misery* includes an introduction by Jesse Jackson and an afterword by Professor Robert G. O'Meally, both of which offer concise and interesting biographical material to choose from. O'Meally writes, for example, that "not only did Hughes know the territory of black America, but his work at its best turned on his genius for . . . the perfectly turned line." The lines in *Black Misery* are examples of this genius.

Berry's biography offers much more material, including the story (in Hughes's own words) of how, at the age of fourteen, Hughes was elected Class Poet, despite the fact that he had never written a poem. "Up to that time I had never thought about being a poet and was rather surprised at being elected Class Poet. In fact, I hadn't expected it. But I guess

the youngsters in my class felt I had some rhythm to give a poem. The teacher told us a poem had to have rhythm. And so suddenly a boy called out my name, Langston Hughes, and the whole class said, 'Ay,' unanimously—and that's the way I became a poet."

This inspiring story provides a smooth segue to the first caption: *Misery is when you heard on the radio that the neighborhood you live in is a slum but you always thought it was home.*

Often, there's an immediate groan; someone's eyes light up. I ask: "What is *misery*?" A hand shoots up, a definition is shouted out, and the discussion begins. *Misery is sadness. Misery is madness.* Most know well what misery is, although some don't know it by that name. "What else?" I ask, because I want to show them that it's not just one thing, that it's different for everyone, but also the same for everyone. They call out words, associations, opinions—*pain, suffering, hurt*. On the board, I make a list of all the things that misery is, which will be available for them to use when they begin writing.

At Hoboken High, the discussion went very deep, very fast; from the definitions, we quickly moved into a debate about whether one controls one's own happiness and whether people are miserable on purpose. (Most agreed that it is within our power to be happy!) That evolved into an exploration of prejudice, stereotypes, and the impulse to categorize people. Questions flew around the room: "Does stereotyping make life easier for the stereotyper?" "Yes, but it also limits you because then you don't see people as individuals." "What does it do to the stereotype?" We agreed that everyone can be prejudiced, not only about race, but friends, intelligence, language, hobbies—and we agreed that many traits can be used as an excuse to slap on a label and assume you know a person. It was one of those discussions teachers dream of: everyone is engaged, listening, and responding, and the students speaking with passion about issues that are important to them.

The captions in *Black Misery* work because they're true and they teach emotional truths; there's no faking misery. By noticing which captions elicit the loudest groans, I can show students how to find these truths. We continue reading and talking. "Do you get it?" "I get it!" "What do you get?" The students often relate the Hughes captions to their own experience and sometimes, if I'm lucky, some will spontaneously start making up their own captions. One way to encourage them is for me to start making up my own. Here are two that are inevitably appropriate:

Misery is when the teacher asks you a question and you're thinking about the answer and you're just about to say it when someone else chimes in.

Misery is when you're finally involved in an interesting discussion and the teacher says, "Okay, now it's time to write."

Lots of groans with that one. But we're close now; they're almost ready to write. They understand misery, they're making it personal, some of them are already making up

their own captions. But before I say "Go!" I give them a last little splash of inspiration by reading aloud what some of my other students have written.

### Writing

So as not to create a lot of anxiety, I set some parameters. I give the students a manageable amount of time, usually ten to fifteen minutes, and I ask them to write a minimum of five captions, no maximum. Then I sit down and write along with them. It is extremely important to set the example, to "model the behavior," as the academics say. The students usually go right to work and once they get going, most of them don't want to stop. In fact, one boy in Hoboken kept writing all the way to the end of class.

### The "Read-Aloud" and More Discussion

In this final part of the *Black Misery* exercise, I have the students read their work aloud, and most are eager to do so. I like to hear all of their captions, more than once if time allows. Some don't comment on their own captions; in these cases I ask which are their favorites. Or I'll ask the others which they liked best, and why. Before we move on to the next reader, I make sure to comment on at least one or two of each student's captions, pointing out why one works especially well or how another might be improved.

The first time out, many students often write very general captions, so this assignment provides the perfect opportunity to teach the importance and power of specifics. Usually the caption the class considers the best, the one that everyone groans at, is the one most laden with specifics. In Hoboken, it was by Latasha Davis:

Misery is when you're waiting for the bus and it takes too long so you call a cab and as it drives away you see your bus coming.

Some students, however, don't get it on the first try. One fourth grader's experience beautifully illustrates the process of learning to use more detail. First time around, she wrote this:

Mad is when you are terrified.  
Love is when you feel good with somebody.  
Scared is when you are very afraid.  
Excited is when you are very, very, very happy.

—Latisha Knowles

I pointed out to Latisha that Langston Hughes begins all or most of his captions with the words: *Misery is when . . .* and then he describes a moment in life that we can visualize. I asked her to replace her adjectives with scenes or situations that included as many concrete details as possible. Here is Latisha's revision:

Misery is when people sing at your birthday and you say "Don't sing" and they keep singing.  
Happiness is when you see someone special to you, like your ex-boyfriend, and you still love him.  
Angry is when your mother blames you for nothing.  
Misery is when your mother kisses you in front of your best friends.  
Misery is when your teacher said you're not so tall, you're so small.



Latisha was much more eager to read her revised captions, and she got lots of groans.

### Why *Black Misery* Works

Misery is concise. The shorter the text, the easier it is to engage students quickly. *Black Misery* works because the captions are concise. Everyone appreciates this.

Misery is flexible. No matter what you do with *Black Misery*, it works. It allows plenty of room for improvisation. For example, some students substitute other words for Misery, such as Joy, Happiness, or even Responsibility. Here's what sixth grader Ashante Diggs came up with:

Happiness is when you're having a sleepover and none of your friends fight.

Cool is when you're not too hot or you're not too cold, you're just right.

Being a child is when you have no worries, you can play all day and sleep all night and you don't have to pay bills.

Being a friend is when you care for someone, but not in that way.

Misery is fun. One of the challenges of teaching in an after-school program is getting the students involved. To do that, writing can't feel like work; it has to be fun. Hughes makes it fun. He helps us to laugh at our misery, to put it in context—and in turn, he shows us we're not alone.

Misery is universal. Because the text deals so openly with racism, this assignment provides a much-needed opportunity to talk about what really happens and the troubles people have, to tell the stories that are not always welcome in regular conversation. It offers a safe haven for all of us to discuss our experiences, not only as victims of racial discrimination, but also as perpetrators, blinded by our own prejudices. That's the beauty of this exercise: the racism is right there, out in the open. Hughes's captions show how we use someone's skin color to decide who he or she is, before a word is exchanged. Here are a few of my favorite captions from *Black Misery* that do this:

Misery is when you start to help an old white lady across the street and she thinks you're trying to snatch her purse.

Misery is when you first realize so many things bad have black in them, like black cats, black arts, blackball.

Misery is when you find out Golden Glow Hair Curler won't curl your hair at all.

Misery is when the taxi cab won't stop for your mother and she says a bad word.

Misery is when you can see all the other kids in the dark but they claim they can't see you.

Misery is when you learn that you are not supposed to like watermelon but you do.

Ivan Croft, Program Director at Edenwald, looked at race from the perspective of joy:

Joy is when blacks were portrayed as coons and monkeys for years, and yet the #1 recognizable face in the world is Michael Jordan's.

Joy is finally getting to see *Waiting to Exhale* and finding it as awful as you thought (a man's perspective).

Joy is when people have accused blacks of being inferior and we invented the traffic light, blood plasma, filament in the light bulb, and more.

Joy is when Hank Aaron beat Babe Ruth's record.

Joy is when you appreciate opera, and black and white people look at you oddly.

Despite a lively discussion about prejudice, most of the captions written by my students don't focus on racism. Segregation isn't as overt in the 90s as it was when Hughes's book was published, so racism is now just one of many things that contribute to the misery of my students. Many of their captions have to do with the misery of being poor.

What I love most about the work inspired by *Black Misery* is how much gets revealed in a single sentence.

Here's what is making kids of the 90s miserable:

Misery is when a mouse is on your face, arm, and bed.

Misery is when a boy don't want to talk because his mother died.

Misery is why do little boys and girls have to eat from the garbage.

Misery is when you are in the class and you think of jumping out the window.

Misery is when you try to help someone but they think you want something in return.

Misery is when they change your baby at birth and you find out twenty years later.

Misery is when you meet the man of your dreams, then you meet his nice husband.

And here's what makes adults in the 90s miserable:

Misery is when you see an old friend high on crack.

Misery is watching a child cry for a parent that is not there.

Misery is when you go to the hospital to see your brother who used to call you funny names and now he can't speak to you at all.

Misery is thinking you're educated, but you still can't do the crossword puzzle.

The material is so rich, so simple, and so important that I could do an entire ten-week residency using this book and no one would get bored. There are many other related activities that can evolve from this exercise. One class gave me a great idea when they started making up captions for the students who were absent that day. Another idea is to have the students update the references in the Hughes text. As for art, an obvious idea is to have the students create their own line drawings or illustrations to go along with the captions. In fact, a group can work backwards; in other words, draw illustrations and then write captions for them. From there, it's a very short step toward making their own versions of *Black Misery*.

### Bibliography

Hughes, Langston. *Black Misery*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.



# Hidden Beauty

## Using a Poem by Jayne Cortez

by Mark Statman

JAYNE CORTEZ WROTE A WONDERFUL POEM that is challenging and useful for inspiring student writing:

### Under the Edge of February

Under the edge of February  
in hawk of a throat  
hidden by ravines of sweet oil  
by temples of switch blades  
beautiful in its sound of fertility  
beautiful in its turban of funeral crepe  
beautiful in its camouflage of grief  
in its solitude of bruises  
in its arson of alert  
Who will enter its beautiful calligraphy of blood

Its beautiful mask of fish net  
mask of hubcaps mask of ice picks mask  
of watermelon rinds mask of umbilical cords  
changing into a mask of rubber bands  
Who will enter this beautiful beautiful mask of  
punctured bladders moving with a mask of chapsticks

### Compound of Hearts Compound of Hearts

Where is the lucky number for this shy love  
this top heavy beauty bathed with charcoal water  
self conscious against a mosaic of broken bottles  
broken locks broken pipes broken  
bloods of broken spirits broken through like  
broken promises

Landlords Junkies Thieves  
enthroning themselves in you  
they burn up couches they burn down houses  
and infuse themselves against memory  
every thought  
a pavement of old belts  
every performance  
a ceremonial pick up  
how many more orphans how many neglected shrines  
how many more stolen feet stolen guns  
stolen watch bands of death  
in you how many times

Harlem

---

MARK STATMAN has taught in the T&W writers-in-the-schools program and at Eugene Lang College at the New School for Social Research since 1985. His poems, translations, and essays have appeared in many literary and educational journals.

---

hidden by ravines of sweet oil  
by temples of switch blades  
beautiful in your sound of fertility  
beautiful in your turban of funeral crepe  
beautiful in your camouflage of grief  
in your solitude of bruises in  
your arson of alert  
beautiful

Whenever I've taught this poem (usually with ten- to fourteen-year-olds), I've always been surprised by how willing the students are to tackle its complexities: its harsh descriptions of urban life, its anger, and its notion—serious and ironic—of what, in all this chaos, is beautiful. Cortez's ideas about beauty often frame our conversations. Most students are not used to thinking about beauty as something that isn't obvious, something that can be hidden. They're not used to taking images or ideas that are ostensibly "ugly" and thinking of them as beautiful in another context.

To get students thinking in this direction, I ask them to think about what "beauty" means, what they mean when they call something "beautiful." Their initial responses are often conventional: from nature—flowers, a meadow, sun, stars, moon; from the urban—gleaming skyscrapers, glittering night streets, well-dressed people strolling; from people—those nice clothes again, muscular men, slim women, implications of good times.

A natural response to what Cortez describes is to look away. But Cortez demands the opposite: she wants us to look and to look hard. So where in the poem, I'll ask the students, given what they've described as beautiful, is the beauty? The poem is full of sadness and grief ("broken / bloods of broken spirits broken through like / broken promises"), violence ("they burn up couches they burn down houses"), garbage ("mask of hubcaps mask of ice picks mask / of watermelon rinds mask of umbilical cords"). It's a poem of anger. And yet, Cortez insistently speaks about the beauty. How? Why?

As the students think about the poem and my questions, I'll begin to discuss other possible conceptions of beauty, where else we can see it, and of the possibility of beauty growing out of what we might also think of as "ugliness." For example, they've all seen rainbow oil sheen in puddles on the street. Many know about the spectacular effects air pollution has on sunsets. I'll talk about London's mysterious, evocative fog of previous decades and its ordinary origins in coal smoke. I'll mention Monet's paintings of the Seine, where the magnificent colorations he depicts are actually a reflection of the river's pollution, as well as the excitement of the billowing smoke in his railroad station paintings. I'll

talk about spiders spinning their gorgeous webs as a way to trap and kill. I'll even bring up amberggris, which I'll describe as "whale vomit," and how it is used in making fine perfumes. We'll come up with examples of destructive beauty: hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanoes. Great structures like pyramids and sphinxes built by slaves. We'll talk about perspective, how some people find things beautiful and others can't see them, how this happens with art, poetry, clothes, music, weather. Finally we'll return to "Under the Edge of February." "What's beautiful here?" I'll ask again.

At this point, we're able to read new things in the Cortez poem. We can talk about the action in the poem, the characters in it, the setting. I've taught this poem in different places, but when I teach it in New York City schools, the students will always relate it to their own neighborhoods. They think about their streets, the people they know, their own lives. We talk not just about what they see, but what they know about what they see. The students' comments become both intensely observant and personal. They often remark on the fact that where they live is home; whatever the limitations, their neighborhoods are important to them. These are places where my students have friends, where they've played and been happy. They'll talk about the life of where they live: the sounds and smells, people walking on the streets and hanging out in groups talking, the fact of people's homes being here, that there are people eating, sleeping, dreaming.

My students also respond to the "negatives" of Cortez's poem, particularly the problems of outsiders misreading and misunderstanding the world they know. We'll discuss the problems of public perception arising from skewed media depictions: that newspapers, television, and movies show one side of where they live (the crime and the violence, the poverty), and not the other side (schools, stores, churches, homes, the community). In other words, the not-so-obvious, the hidden in Cortez's "beautiful." When we've reached this point in the discussion, we're also at the starting point for their writing. I ask the students to respond to Cortez's poem by writing their own poems to, of, for, and about beauty, and where they find it.

### Poem

Blue is cool  
I found it in the sky  
in the ocean, on pottery

Red is hot  
I found it in the sun  
the rainbow  
on flowers, the outside of a building  
on clothes

White is delicate  
I found it in the clouds  
in the classroom  
in my house  
on flowers  
inside and outside buildings  
on dogs

—Regina Smith, seventh grade

### Dreamer

Once I had a dream  
I could see all the places of the world  
In my mind I could see  
Japan, Russia, Germany  
All the people wanted to sleep  
and sleep on  
Their sleep  
seemed very beautiful to them  
All I could see everywhere  
was people with eyes  
closed

—Tara Thomas, eighth grade

### Night

It was night  
and it was 9:00  
and I'm flying in the sky  
and I can see the North Star  
Some people are watching "The Jeffersons"  
Some people are watching "Jeopardy"  
There are people doing exercise  
There is a person riding a bike in the street  
I went to sit on a tree branch  
It broke  
I fell on a van  
and hurt my back  
and then I flew  
I saw the Statue of Liberty  
It is so beautiful  
I saw the ocean  
The world is so beautiful  
I saw Broadway  
The lights look wonderful  
I can see people  
The people are doing their show

—Charisse Robinson, fifth grade

### Beauty

The feeling of beauty  
It's like  
falling in  
Love  
Diamonds  
Jewelry  
It is such a good feeling  
You feel like getting  
Married  
In a  
White clean  
Crystal  
Dress  
Your hair  
long and  
beautiful  
The water in the Dominican  
Republic  
Crystal clean  
The streets clean

No, no dirt, dust  
mud  
but beauty  
like  
Romeo and Juliet  
Adam and Eve  
Emotions of a  
Dream  
Love  
Fantasy  
It feels so real  
having Beauty  
But dream love fantasy  
is all it is in this  
Dirty World

—Jeanette Cortijo, eighth grade

It is black but the white  
freckles of the stars stand out  
I am blind but I can still  
see the shining light of the  
moon standing out in the  
night  
I am a person but  
to the creatures that lurk  
beyond I am prey  
I look and listen  
but there is nothing  
nothing to see or hear  
the sounds of  
a furious river  
the shadow of  
a soundless bird  
shows in the moonlight  
I think of what humans  
are  
doing to the silent and  
peaceful land  
the animals, not mean but  
nice  
in a strange way  
I was glad that we hadn't  
destroyed it all  
Yet I had to go back  
this was not my home  
my home was in the smog of  
technology

—Jason Ozner, sixth grade

### What Is Beauty

A cold January night  
What happens at night  
All the killing  
All the shots in the wall  
All the drugs in the world  
Is this beauty?  
Beauty.  
I'll tell you  
about Beauty  
What is good

Beauty is real  
That's Beauty  
What about living,  
is that Beauty?  
I know it is for me  
All the beauty in the world  
is what I am living for  
I know that's what I am  
living for

—Shantel Bumpurs, fifth grade

### Happiest

I was walking down  
the street  
I heard a noise and  
I was looking  
for it and I could  
not see it  
and thought it was  
a cat  
but when I saw  
that it was  
not a cat I saw  
something big  
it was bigger  
than a cat and then  
I thought it was a  
dog but it  
was not a dog  
and when I saw it  
was a poor man I  
gave the person \$20  
because I was not  
happy that  
he lived in the  
street so I  
was going to take  
him to a shelter  
and he was hidden  
because he was  
afraid and when  
I saw his face  
he did look like  
good people but  
he looked like  
a child and the  
child was hidden  
the man went to the  
shelter and he  
had a good life  
and house

—José Martinez, fifth grade

### Bibliography

Stetson, Erlene, ed. *Black Sister: Poetry from Black American Women, 1746–1980*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1981.



# Square Toes and Icy Arms

## Personification and Zora Neale Hurston

by Catherine Barnett

“IS ANGER A MAN OR A WOMAN?” I ASKED A student in class last week. The young woman—she is sixteen and has a one-year-old son—thought for a long moment, about to give up. “Tell me what Anger looks like,” I asked, “where he or she lives. Close your eyes and tell me everything you know about this character.” I roamed around the classroom, and when I made it back to her desk, she had written:

Anger’s hands are hammers. His teeth are two-edged swords. His head is made of stone. Anger has no face, just two beady little eyes. His eyebrows always hang low. Anger tastes bitter.

This exchange took place during one of my favorite exercises. The student’s writing owes its energy and power in part to passages from Zora Neale Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, and her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Throughout these works, Hurston personifies both the fictional and real worlds, turning philosophical concepts (like time and fate), life passages (like death), and even the weather into active characters.

In *Their Eyes*, she uses an unusual personification to describe the damage wrought by a flood: “Havoc was there with her mouth wide open.” The overflowing lake itself takes on human characteristics: thunder “woke up old Okechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed. Began to roll and complain like a peevish world on a grumble. . . . The people felt uncomfortable but safe because there were the seawalls to chain the senseless monster in his bed.” Hurston gives the sun a distinct personality throughout the novel. Janie, the main character, goes to bed one night filled with doubt about her new husband, Tea-Cake, who had disappeared with her money. It is the sun who first reassures her:

Janie dozed off to sleep but she woke up in time to see the sun sending up spies ahead of him to mark out the road through the dark. He peeped up over the door sill of the world and made a little foolishness with red. But pretty soon, he laid all that aside and went about his business dressed all in white.

---

CATHERINE BARNETT’s writing has appeared in many national and international publications. She teaches writing for T&W and with the Children’s Museum of Manhattan, where she leads writing workshops for young mothers.

---

Night, too, takes on human characteristics in Hurston’s Florida: “Night was striding across nothingness with the whole round world in his hands.”

In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston writes that “fate was watching us and laughing” and that Hurston herself has “been in Sorrow’s kitchen and licked out all the pots.” In an unpublished chapter, Hurston personifies Time, calling him “hungry” as he “squats” and “waits.” She sees his footprints, and gazes into his reflection:

His frame was made out of emptiness, and his mouth set wide for prey. Mystery is his oldest son, and power is his portion. For it was said on the day of first sayings that Time should speak backward over his shoulder, and none should see his face. . . .

Death makes a dramatic appearance in both Hurston’s novel and in her autobiography. In *Their Eyes*, Janie encounters Death as she watches her husband grow weak:

So Janie began to think of Death. Death, that strange being with the huge square toes who lived way in the West. The great one who lived in a straight house like a platform without sides to it, and without a roof. What need has Death for a cover, and what winds can blow against him? He stands in his high house that overlooks the world. Stands watchful and motionless all day with his sword drawn back, waiting for the messenger to bid him come. Been standing there before there was a where or a when or a then. She was liable to find a feather from his wings lying in her yard any day now. . . .

In a deft 100 words, Hurston manages to give the idea of death a home, gestures, a history, feathers, and flesh.

Those eerie square toes reappear in her autobiography as she describes the day her mother died. Hurston was nine years old and no match against “that two-headed spirit that rules the beginning and end of things called Death.”

The Master-Maker in His making had made Old Death. Made him with big, soft feet and square toes. Made him with a face that reflects the face of all things, but neither changes itself, nor is mirrored anywhere. Made the body of Death out of infinite hunger. Made a weapon for his hand to satisfy his needs. . . . Death had no home and he knew it at once. . . . He was already old when he was made. . . . Death finished his prowling through the house on his padded feet and entered the room. He bowed to Mama. . . .

Try reading either of these passages aloud—several times over—to a class of students and see how the room

grows quiet. I've read Hurston's work to fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, and to a group of teen mothers. Something about those square toes and that feather—you can see it sailing slowly to the inevitable ground—stops chatter and commands attention.

I like to give the students examples of personification from other writers, if time allows. A poem titled "Go Down Death" by James Weldon Johnson (who with his brother composed "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a song once known as the Negro national anthem) complements Hurston's prose. Death appears in the third stanza of Johnson's poem:

And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice  
That broke like a clap of thunder:  
Call Death!—Call Death!  
And the echo sounded down the streets of heaven  
Till it reached away back to that shadowy place,  
Where Death waits with his pale, white horses.

And Death heard the summons,  
And he leaped on his fastest horse,  
Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.  
Up the golden street Death galloped,  
And the hoof of his horse struck fire from the gold,  
But they didn't make no sound. . . .

Later in the poem, Johnson writes that Death "didn't say a word, / But he loosed the reins on his pale, white horse / And he clamped the spurs to his bloodless sides. . . . And the foam from his horse was like a comet in the sky." At the end of this poem, Death cradles a smiling woman in his "icy arms."

The contrasts between Hurston's and Johnson's personifications help students realize that there is no "right" way to treat something that is as universal as death. And the simple fact that both writers end up with such peculiar and striking images—that Death can take such different guises, unique to each writer's vision—leads the class naturally to an all-important discussion of clichés and how to avoid them.

The best way to get around clichés, I tell students (and myself), is to be as specific as possible. Two fifth graders' efforts with this exercise provide good examples of how to dig beneath the surface of clichés. One girl began with a stereotype, defining "courage" rather than personifying it. "Courage," she wrote, "is a brave person who is not afraid of anything." But as she worked she began to discover more about her character:

Courage is a man of human size. He wears a white t-shirt and tight blue jeans and has a beautiful voice. He is nineteen years old. He's 100 times stronger than any man. He can lift up the Empire State Building.

Imagining herself as Courage, another girl worked her way from the general—"I am invisible"—to the very specific:

I can only be seen in the dark. I sneak in people's houses when they are afraid. I calm them down by putting their hands on my heart. . . . I like to drink rain and eat five feet of clouds a day for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I sleep underground where the ants live.

Along with my plea—this prayer! this push!—for specificity and detail comes another, equally essential to this (and every) exercise: *include the five senses*. Johnson's poem illustrates the power of sensory detail: his Death has those "icy arms," his horse is silent as it gallops down the golden street.

By now some students may be getting confused. Two Deaths, five senses, a dozen details—what's going on? If so, a brief discussion of personification is in order. "How and why give human traits to something as seemingly abstract as death?" I ask them. I encourage the students to name some other abstractions they might want to personify.

I often make this same mistake: at the mention of "abstract," faces go blank, so I simply ask the students for words they hear over and over—words they've heard so often they've lost their meaning. Words like death, love, happiness. What others? As a class, we create a list. Even though these words are universal, the lists reflect the make-up and concerns of each class. At a school in uptown Manhattan, for example, fifth graders thought of Trouble, Fear, Racism, Greed, and Courage. A class of teen mothers came up with Depression, Fatigue, and Ambition.

It is often a good idea to start by writing a group description. This loosens everybody up, and creates a mood for writing. The students choose which word they want to transform into a character; a group of teen mothers, for example, chose "Pain." I usually ask a few leading questions, borrowing heavily from Hurston and Johnson and encouraging students to bring the senses into their descriptions. With the teen mothers, responses came fast. "Pain," they said (as I wrote their words on the blackboard),

wears dirty sneakers and a black sweatshirt. He lives on the corner of your block, an unwanted visitor. He has gold teeth, an afro, dirty fingernails. He never uses condoms. His voice is rusty, scratchy, screechy. He says, "I love you, I love you, I love you. Hi Baby. Suffer. You look good." He tastes like lime and hot sweat. His face feels like alligator skin. He has calluses all over his feet. He's afraid of losing honor.

Soon I ask each student to choose his or her own word from the long list of words on the board and to create a living, breathing character out of it.

"You never hear Fatigue," wrote one fifteen-year-old mother who had given birth six weeks earlier. "He is so quiet and smooth. He comes to you like thirst and leaves like wind. He touches the weakest part of your body, which is your eyes. He lives anywhere he wants to live. . . ." Her friend, also the mother of a young boy, discovered a very different Fatigue:

Fatigue drags her feet all day. Her shoes make a scraping sound against the ground and whenever she passes by someone they yawn. She carries a pillow and blanket in a shopping cart, along with a clown. When she pulls the clown's cord it plays "Rock-A-Bye Baby" and that soothes her. . . . Her voice is gentle and she is soft-spoken. Her mellow voice will hypnotize you and make you sleepy. She always says Relax, don't work so hard, there's always tomorrow. . . .

Another young mother wrote a brief sketch of Ambition, a woman who “walks with her head high”:

She wears yellow. When you look at her she slows and dazzles in front of your eyes. Her hair and nails are always neatly done. . . . She carries a crystal rock in her pocket. She always says believe in yourself and you can do anything.

A fourth grader with learning disabilities described Fear as someone who “brings a warrant made out of fire.” Peace, wrote one of his classmates, “is a lady with love written all over her.” Love is always a popular figure in this exercise, and appears in many guises. One defiant fifth grade boy surprised his classmates with his portrait of Love as a man who carries a suitcase. He smells like apples. He wears black pants, a white t-shirt, white shiny shoes. . . . In his suitcase he carries presents for his wife and love poems. He has friends who say, “We care about you.” He gives everyone presents and sometimes says I love you. Every day he goes to church and prays.

Two third grade girls came up with very different pictures of Love. “Love is when the sky turns blue,” wrote one shy girl. “She comes knocking on my door quietly. Then she calls my name five times. And I say, ‘Who is it? Who is it? Who is it?’” Her classmate saw Love as a boy. “When I hug him,” she wrote, “it feels like his eye has heaven in it.” At a neighboring desk, a boy wrote about “Anger, a man with a black robe”:

His eyes are strange. One of them is black and one of them is brown. When he touches the ground it cracks. He goes down into the ground and says, “Come, Michael, Come.” And I follow him to the underground. I see angry faces. I was saying, “It can’t be true. It can’t be true. It can’t be true.” And everything in the underground faded and he said, “Please don’t leave me. Please, Please.”

Happiness, wrote another third grader, “looks like my grandmother. She is wearing black pants and a black shirt. She is carrying presents. She lights candles.”

After reading aloud the Hurston or Johnson excerpt (or both), you might choose a few of the following personification sketches by third, fourth, and fifth grade students to demonstrate how others have transformed words like Wealth, Jealousy, and Sadness into characters of their own.

Wealth is somebody who is dressed in a polka-dot suit. I call him when me and my sister need some cash in our stash. When he comes to give us money he drops a gold coin on the ground. And then he throws a sack of money to each of us. His teeth are yellow and his face is green and his eyes are blue, and his ears are flat but oval shaped. All the time in his pockets he has gold coins. Real gold coins. And he never spends his money. He saves it up all the time.

Jealousy goes around looking at things that other people have that he wants. He is always jealous of the clothes they wear, the things they carry out. He mumbles to himself, “I wish I had that,” with a frown on his face. I

always see him at the bakery buying a muffin. When he sees me he says, “Get out of my way, kid, you bother me!” I don’t know what he has in his suitcase, but people say he carries a dead bird in there. I think he keeps it for good luck.

Sadness has sad, big, blue eyes and skinny lips. He smells like the breeze in the sun. He has a deep low voice. He is never happy and he carries a broken heart in his hand. You can see him in the alleys at night. He is very skinny and has little toes. He wears only a worn-out suit.

Joy looks like an elf. He wears a green overcoat and green tight pants. He carries many, many presents. His voice is very high and screechy. He has white hair and a long beard. You can find him on special occasions.

Sadness just came to my house. All she did was ask for sugar, but she looked so sad her eyes were watery. . . . She told me her daughter just died. She got hit by a car. And she could remember when she held her in her arms when she was born. The old lady has bags on her eyes. She has a cane. She was leaning on me crying.

This exercise acquaints students with Hurston’s work and with the technique of personification, and it can also lead them to their best writing. The pleasure of reading Hurston’s prose aloud is soon matched by listening to the students read their own. Their images are often so strong that their descriptions—like Hurston’s—approach the intensity and lyricism of prose poems.

## Bibliography

(Note: All Hurston quotations are from the two books noted below. The James Weldon Johnson poem “Go Down Death” appears in many anthologies; I found it in *American Negro Poetry*, edited by Arna Bontemps.)

Bontemps, Arna, ed. *American Negro Poetry*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.

———. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.



## REMINDER

The teaching ideas in T&W’s new book, *Sing the Sun Up: Creative Writing Ideas from African American Literature*, would lend themselves perfectly to lessons timed for Black History Month (February) or National Poetry Month (April). For more information on this book, see the plug on p. 3 of this issue.