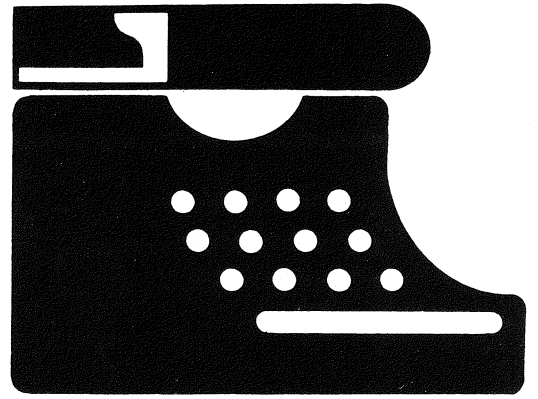


Teachers & Writers



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The Folklore of Naming Using Oral Tradition to Teach Writing

by Elizabeth Radin Simons

“ON THIS EARTH EVERYBODY HAS TO HAVE A name or they are no one,” wrote Veronica, a seventh grade Mexican-American student. A classmate made the same point in different words, “If I wasn’t named, I’d be called ‘no name.’” Not only are we literally no one without our names, our names are powerful: they identify and define us, they contain our personal histories, and when the folklore or traditions that go into our names are studied they provide clues to the values our families and our country hold.

For the last eight years I have been experimenting with modern folklore (contemporary oral tradition) in the classroom. I’ve taught the folklore of names to students in urban and suburban schools, often as part of a larger unit on family folklore. I’ve found that whatever the setting or the grade level, students like to study names, especially their own.

There is a story behind everyone’s name, and each one is important and interesting—although many students do not realize this at first. Consider the story behind the name of Pamela Denise Wells, a high school student.

My mother and father have always told me and my sisters how we got our names. My father named all of us. All of our names start with P, all our middle names with a D and our last names with a W.

There was one mistake with my sister under me. Her name is Thelma. My father said my mother’s mother (my grandmother) beat him to the hospital and named my sister after herself. My father was mad.

When my baby sister was born my father’s mother tried to get to the hospital before my father to name my baby sister after herself. But my father said, “No! What would the name Geraldine sound like for a baby girl these days?”

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In Pam’s class, which was predominantly black in an inner city high school, her story was much appreciated by her classmates. They liked the tradition of having initials in common and talked about why parents would want their children to have the same initials. It makes the family closer, they thought, and Pam agreed. They noticed that Pam’s parents felt the stories about their naming were important, because they had made a point of telling the stories to their daughters over and over again. Pam’s classmates also enjoyed the image of her grandmothers rushing to the hospital after each birth in an attempt to sabotage the parents’ plans and get those babies named after themselves. Since many students in the class were in fact named after their grandmothers, they wondered if Pam’s parents, by creating their own tradition, were violating another tradition, an older black tradition of naming girls after their grandmothers.

Students like the folklore of names, not only because it is about themselves, but also because they appreciate having their lives brought into the classroom and honored as important historical material. The topic is also useful in teaching writing because students have strong feelings about their

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names and nicknames and a lot of first-hand experience with names. Once they have gathered their data—the folklore surrounding their names—students can look for clues to their parents' values. To do this requires some training in analytical thinking, specifically in being able to identify the functions of folklore and oral tradition.

I mentioned that I thought a really important change in this country was that now more women, when they married, were keeping their maiden names, something that was not done when I was married, twenty years ago. There were murmurs around the classroom, girls telling one another, "I'm going to keep mine." Then Alison asked, indignation rising in her tone as she was beginning to realize the significance and power of names, "Why do they [girls] take guys' names instead of the girls' names?" She had asked an important question, one which went directly to the heart of a western European value. Alison eventually answered herself. "It shows," she said, "that men are more important than women." What decisions couples make about their last names at marriage tell a great deal about them and the culture in which they live.

At this point, Sissie announced proudly that her real name was Heleena Dawn Marti Donaire Watson Belcher. Since we all knew her just as Sissie Marti, we were impressed. Sissie explained that she had been named according to a Spanish tradition. In school she used only one last name, her father's, but she had three other last names which came from both maternal and paternal grandparents. Sissie told us that she liked her name because it showed her heritage, which was both French and Cuban.

Finally Eric asked the question which is usually the first in these classes, "Why were you named Elizabeth?"

"I'm Jewish," I explained, "and the Jewish naming tradition is to name after someone who has died." At this point we had a discussion of the reason for such a tradition, focusing on the question, "What does it tell you about the values of Jews?"

Then I told them the rest of the story behind my first name. "I was named for my grandfather who had died seven years before my birth and whose name was Elijah. My parents are first-generation Americans and when they named me they had two concerns; they wanted to carry on Jewish traditions but they didn't want my name to sound too Jewish. So they took my grandfather's name, translated it into Hebrew and back again into English and came up with Elizabeth. They felt then they had preserved our heritage but had not burdened me with a Jewish name."

Whenever I taught the folklore of naming, I told this story. Recently I saw my parents and told them my little speech about how I got my name. They looked at each other and started laughing. When my father got control of himself, he looked me in the eye and said, "Liz, your grandfather's name was Jacob!"

Now I tell both stories to my students because both versions—my parents' and mine—are equally important; both are family folklore.

"Do you have any brothers and sisters?" Danny asked. He wanted to know their names and if they too had been named after people who had died. This, too, was a good question because Danny was branching his inquiry, looking now for family naming patterns.

Alison changed the subject a bit and introduced another aspect of naming. "When my grandpa died, my mother

almost had my brother named after him but since our last name was Henry and his name was John, that really couldn't go." The rest of the class didn't understand, and Alison explained who John Henry was. We had a brief discussion about what it would be like to have the name of a famous person. Ralph told us his father's name, Paul Neuman, spelled differently but pronounced the same way as the famous actor's.

"What about your middle name?" someone asked. "Jane" I told them was simply a popular name when I was born, a name fad. Many women my age are named Jane. "What are the faddish names today?" I asked. Tait, who jokingly offered his as a popular name said, "David is the second most popular name, I got that from the *Book of Lists*."

"My last name is from my great-grandfather who was from France," offered Christine Olivette. This led Tapeeka to observe, "Some families have a coat of arms." Christine and Tapeeka had opened up the world of last names, a subject that interested some of the students, especially those who knew the histories of their surnames.

In 20 minutes of class discussion, the students had raised most of the questions I wanted them to pursue when studying their own names. They had asked about nicknames; they had wondered about other names considered by parents; they had talked about changing names and naming decisions at marriage; they had touched on name fads; they had discussed the situation of having the same name as a famous person; they had thought about their last names and how their first names were chosen. In short, we had talked at length about family naming traditions.

To further dramatize the significance of our naming traditions I usually read to my students about other traditions and we talk about how they are similar to or different from our own. For example, chapter 1 of Alex Haley's *Roots* is the story of the naming of the hero, Kunte Kinte. The traditions of the Mandinka tribe speak powerfully of the Mandinka's knowledge of the history of their tribe, of their desire to perpetuate it, and of their beliefs in the great importance of this new child.

Writing about Names

Usually I have the students repeat with some friends in the class the activity which they did first with me. Each writes his or her name on a piece of paper while two or three other students do the interview. Then they do a piece of free first-draft writing about their names. I encourage everyone to write about the history of his or her name, but not all students know its full history. So I offer them several options. They can write about their nicknames, how they got them and who can use them. They can describe how they feel about their names, whether they like them or dislike them, and why. If they ever wanted to change their names, they can write about it and tell the other names they considered. If they choose, they can make up a story of how they got their names.

The students then take their drafts home and read them to their parents. Often the reading provokes a discussion, the parents remembering the thinking that went into the names. In case it doesn't, the students are armed with questions to ask, so they come back to class with more information to use in revising their original pieces. For many parents this is a

lovely moment, a first chance to talk with their child about the choice of name. Conversely it is wise to plan for the students who cannot interview parents. They can do the first draft, but when it comes to interviewing they may want to switch to someone else's name, that of a friend or a teacher in the school.

The study of naming can stop here with the revision of the original piece of writing. If it does, the writing, which is invariably interesting, should be presented either in a class read-around or by printing a booklet of the naming stories on ditto sheets. The folklore of naming, however, can also be just a beginning. Listening to one another read, students can start thinking about or recording the naming traditions in their class and looking at it as history. A sample from the first drafts of a junior English class gives an idea of the richness of this activity, both as a subject for writing and as ideas for follow-up expository writing. In the first excerpt, Ron writes of "the best thing" his father could have given him at birth.

My father chose my name Ronald Lain Nordyke, Jr. because it was his and at the time it was the best thing he could give me.

Also he wanted it to last and go on in the family. . . .

Trish (Patricia) writes of her parents' and grandparents' desire that her name be an expression of her heritage.

My parents and grandparents named me this (Patricia Kathleen Day) because my parents are first generation from Ireland! so they wanted the first born to have a full Irish name! . . .

Writing of her name, Lisa brings up a religious tradition.

Before I was born my parents decided what my name was going to be if I was a girl. Like most Catholic families, they chose my name after a Saint. Saint Isabella and Mother Mary were the saints my parents chose. They changed Isabella to Lisa and Mary to Marie. I now have the name Lisa Marie Richnavsky. I feel happy with my name because it also belonged to two other beautiful women. . . .

When George learned the origin of his name, he changed his opinion of it.

My father named me after my great-grandfather. My great-grandfather died in the Crimean War against the Russians and the Turks. He died in the famous battle of the Charge of the Light Brigade. Before I found that out I didn't like my name. . . . Now I am very proud to have George William Mitchell as my name. . . .

The following Chinese student asked to remain anonymous. Traditions such as his are invaluable when studying names: they make the point that one can learn about the values of a culture through its naming traditions.

In my language _____ is a name of a tree which lives the longest of all among other trees in the forest. Because of its meaning, my uncle got this wild idea about naming his nephew a name which describes the lifespan of his nephew. Of course as you already know, younger people can't disobey whatever their elders tell them to do; so therefore, my dad agreed with his older brother, my uncle, in naming me _____ since it means that I shall live a long life. . . .

In every piece in the class, there were traditions worthy of explanation. Why did Ron consider his father's name "the best thing he could give" him? Did Trish feel connected to Ireland? How had her name affected her? Why should knowing the history of his name change George's attitude? Why is it a Chinese tradition that younger people cannot disobey their elders?

The students also discovered patterns. While sons were often named after fathers, daughters were seldom named after mothers. They speculated on the meaning of this tradition—more evidence that males are more valued? Some stu-

dents were named after movie stars, a common American tradition and evidence that movie stars are heroes and heroines in our culture. It is not chance but an expression of American values that we have a movie star as president.

This first writing activity on the folklore of naming can be the basis of another writing assignment, an expository piece. Using their first writings as their folkloric data, for instance, students could write an essay on what the oral naming traditions in their families can tell an historian or anthropologist about their families. Or after hearing all the stories from the class, students could write about the naming traditions in their class and what they reveal about the values of one American community.

Another expository piece that leads naturally from this activity is on nicknames. Students write about nicknames they get both from family and from friends. "Pretty Panties," who wished to remain anonymous, got this nickname from friends. She explained that she is called "Pretty Panties because all my underwear are like \$5 or \$6 a pair because they are all lace and I like lacy pretty underwear." Steve also wrote of his nicknames, Beake and Beave, and explained their origins. "Beake because I'm skinny and have spiked hair like Beaker on the 'Muppet Show.' I get called Beave because it rhymes with Steve and there's a 'Leave It to Beaver' fad going on." Students can study and write about the origins and functions of nicknames. Nicknames make an interesting comparison to birth names because often they are acquired later in life and, unlike birth names, are descriptive. Like birth names, however, they define and mold us. Children's nicknames especially can affect their lives.

A unit on the folklore of naming has other uses as well. I use it to introduce the study of Family Folklore. When students write autobiographies in English classes they can include something on their names. And in history classes working on oral history, interviewees can be asked for the history of their names.

"On this Earth everybody has to have a name or they are no one." Veronica might have continued, "But once a name is bestowed they become someone." The names we are given define us and stay with us for our lifetimes. At first glance the oral traditions behind the giving of these names seem unimportant, but they are not. A good look at these traditions not only produces interesting writing but also connects the lives of the students to history and can show them the relevance and connectedness of their lives to the larger culture.

Selected References

On nicknames:

Rom Harre, "What's in a Nickname?" *Psychology Today*, January, 1980.

Jane Morgan, Christopher O'Neill and Rom Harre, *Nicknames: Their Origins and Social Consequences* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979).

On names:

The journal *Names* publishes articles on all aspects of naming, including the naming of persons.

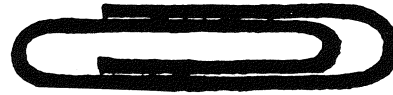
All books in public libraries on first names and surnames are good resources for students studying their own names.

On family folklore in general:

Steven S. Zeitlin, Amy J. Kotkin and Holly Cutting-Baker, *A Celebration of American Family Folklore* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

On American folklore in general:

Jan Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction* (New York: Norton, 1978).



Initials

A Short and Sweet Writing Idea

POET/TEACHER JACK COLLOM USES A WRITING idea suggested by Allison Dale: creating small word-clusters from one's initials. Jack uses this exercise as a starter, usually requiring only half a period for presentation, writing, and reading aloud. It loosens the kids up and sets their minds to bubbling.

The procedure is simple: use all your initials as the first letters of other words. Example: W.C.W. (William Carlos Williams) might become Wee Creative Werewolves (syntactically smooth) or Wow Cucumber Washeteria (unrelated string of words).

JACK COLLOM's "What I See in Children's Writing" appeared in *T&W Magazine* Vol. 14, No. 2, and was followed by a profile and selection of his poetry in Vol. 15, No. 4. He is currently writing a book on how to evaluate children's imaginative writing, to be published by T&W next year.

Here are some examples from Jack's fourth graders last year at P.S. 48 in the Bronx.

Just A Fact (Jackeline Fillion)
Piano Reads Tone (Pablo Torrez)
Finally Pig Lip (Francisco Lopez)
Soul Lemon Watermelon (Shannel Williams)
Silly and Good (Sheila Garcia)
Ride Out God (Rafael G.)
Little Tiny Valentine (Leonora Vasquez)
My Love Spoke
Make Less Sand
Magic Lies, Sir
More Less Some
Motion Lubricant Surface
Mom Lies Still (all Maria Saona)

This kind of wordplay ties in nicely with the work on names described above by Elizabeth Simons.

In Class

by Stephen Vincent

Azonye. He sits in front. He's tall.
He loves to raise his long arms
to speak on literature. Yeats, Achebe,
Wordsworth, Okigbo, Shakespeare.
An ear for two worlds and more. We speak
on how the children
are named. How in his village
six weeks after birth, it is
the grandmother who visits.
If there is a dimple in one place
and not another, the grandmother
says it is this uncle or great uncle
or cousin and not another. He demonstrates.

STEPHEN VINCENT's poem was inspired by an experience in his Introduction to English Literature class at the University of Nigeria some years ago. His article "The First Time I Heard the Word 'Voluptuous'" appeared in *Teachers & Writers* magazine Vol. 15, No. 2.

He points to his neck. He wears
an open-collared shirt.
There is a large birthmark, a deep, almost
black purple from the jugular
down the side
of his throat. The mark is wide,
almost a diamond shape; it cuts
a sharp swathed angle
into his chest. "I am named
after a distant uncle,"
he says. "The man was assassinated
with a machete
in an act of revenge."
The class suddenly rises and ricochets
into laughter. Even Azonye, as if actually cut
by an awkward fate, breaks into
an odd smile. Only gradually
can I turn the class back
to a poem
by Yeats.

A Typical Ninth Grade Class

by Michael Rutherford

AFTER FIVE YEARS BEHIND A DESK AT THE library, I chuck it for Poets in the Schools. I scout up jobs, work two to three weeks at a succession of schools, taking over classes and teaching poetry. If the school likes me, they hire me back the next year. Barnstorming with language.

Strangely, most problems come from the teachers. Many feel I don't teach poetry. Poetry, after all, rhymes, is deep, obscure, and terminally dull. Compounding this, many teachers ask for the program to get out of teaching a class. This is the world I enter. Mr. Milltown is no exception.

"And now class, here's the poet, Mr. Rutherford."

Clutching a pack of cigarettes and a pile of ungraded papers, Mr. Milltown eases toward the door. The ninth graders groan; some slump in their seats; others lean heavy heads on crossed arms. Flies buzz against the windows; rows of slack, video-scarred faces.

"Any questions?" I ask.

"Yeah, Poet, flex your arms," a greaser calls from the back.

I pull up the sleeve of the T-shirt, give them a biceps shot. Whistles, cheers. I silently thank my years of pumping iron.

"Now before we get going, do you think Mr. Milltown should do the work with us?"

Mr. Milltown is slipping out the door as I propose this. Shouts of "Yeah, come on, Mr. Milltown, get in here, do it with us" draw him reluctantly back into the room. He pierces me with a venomous glare as he slides into a seat.

"All right. I'll explain what imagery is for awhile, then give you a specific theme to write a poem on, then we'll read them aloud. Mr. Milltown and I will write too. And I'm sure Mr. Milltown won't mind reading first."

The Inner Space Expedition: Mr. Milltown's Class

The poet appeared each morning, gave survival tips, clicked his heels three times and vanished into a coffee cup.

Lynn found a mirror in each page she wrote, leaned too close, fell in, and drowned.

Amy sucked the hearts out of lilacs and spit back bees.

Chink picked his teeth with a switch blade, pried the top of his head off, and unleashed a meteor shower.

Monica wandered away one night and came back with a husband and three gingerbread children which she shared with the class.

George switched channels until he got static, greased himself with electrons and got a tan.

Vic climbed a female pot plant into the clouds, stole a singing harp, ran back and cut the plant down and smoked his poems.

MICHAEL RUTHERFORD is a writer who has been teaching writing for 11 years in the PITS and the Alternate Literary Programs in the Schools programs, of which he is director. His piece is from an unpublished novel, *Lives in Flight*.

Amos kicked a football until it burst, autographed it on both sides, and diagrammed plays he hoped were poems.

Fred slept.

Elvin went hunting, married his gun, grew a pelt, and worshipped the moon.

Lloyd went hitchhiking, got picked up by Bonnie and Clyde, and punctuated Bonnie's poems with dum-dum bullets.

Julie brought Jesus to the campfire one night. He had fish breath and he left blood on her blouse when he touched her breasts.

Katie drew pictures of horses each day and rode them away whenever she saw smoke.

Nancy wove Navaho poems spun from a drop spindle and nailed them to the wall to exhibit them.

Ron ate the centers out of Oreos and tossed the black cookies as poems.

Kevin painted his face, drank pig blood, chewed betel nuts, and stared through his paper as if it were a window.

Nelson sucked the ink out of dictionaries and sweated poems as he did bench presses.

Gina grew gardens of poems that ate insects and strangled birds.

Chris rode a van of images with illuminated doors, mag wheels, side pipes, a water bed, 8-track stereo, and inflatable dreams.

Tina threw papier-mâché hearts at all of us. We wept and threw them back.

Frank bathed in K-Y jelly and the class woke up.

And we found Mr. Milltown's bones in the forest scored by the teeth of innumerable animals.

All in all, a typical ninth grade class.

At the end of my last day, I walk slowly out into the parking lot, my briefcase stuffed with poems from the kids. Three burlies from Mr. Milltown's class lean on my pickup truck. They cup their hands around furtive cigarettes. When they spot me, they straighten and give me lopsided grins.

"What's up, punks?" I ask.

"Hey, Mr. Ruggabugga," Vic opens, "we decided to, uh, chip in and get you something."

"Yeah," Elvin adds, "for a poet you ain't a bad guy."

"Before you came, I never knew you could be an artist and still beat people up," Chink says.

"Here, Poet, take it." Vic pushes a paper bag into my hand. "Open it up."

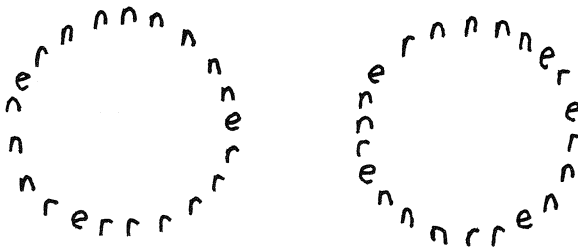
I pull a carton of Lucky Strikes out of the bag. Smiling, I shake everybody's hand.

"Guys, you shouldn't have spent the money."

"We're really sorry, Mr. Rootie," Chink explains, "we know you like cigars, but this was the best we could do. Over at the Grandway, they got all the cigars locked up in a big glass case, not like the cigarettes here, which are sittin' out in the open. Even after Vic knocked over the toilet paper, we still couldn't..."

"Shut up, Chink," says Vic and pounds him in the shoulder.

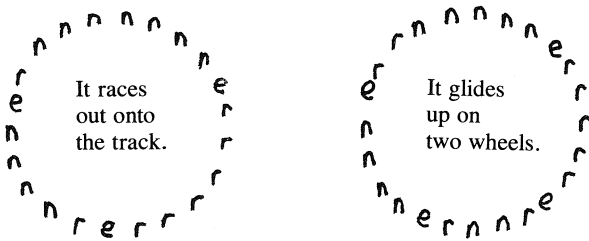
"I don't know how to thank you guys. This is really touching."



“So, if at first, a wolf ‘comes running’ across the field, what would a sportscar do?”

- “It’d race.”
- “Good. Race where?”
- “Race on the track.”
- “Then what would it do?”
- “Glide up on two wheels.”
- “Good. Now we’re ready to write out stanzas. But where shall we put the writing? Remember, we can put the writing anywhere on the page.”
- “Let’s put it on the top.”
- “No, on the bottom.”
- “No, inside.”
- “Inside the wheels?”
- “Yeah.”
- “Yeah.”

Soon, our poem looked like this:

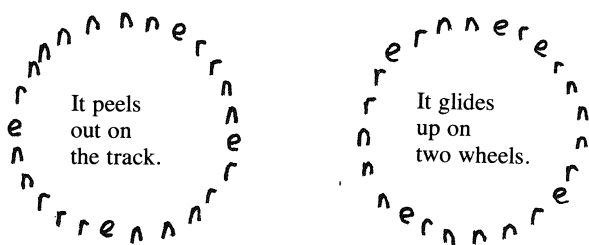


“Now, let’s look at the poem and see if we’re happy with everything about it. How about this word ‘race’? It’s a good verb. But when you think about it, don’t most sports-cars ‘race’? Could we pick another verb that would make the action a little more specific? So that we could see what is really happening to the car?”

- “Zoom.”
- “Yes, that’s good.”
- “Tromp.”
- “Good.”
- “Peel.”
- “Yes. Which of those words do you like the best?”
- “Peel.”
- “Yeah, peel.”

After our revision, we agreed on a final form for our poem:

Poem about a Sportscar

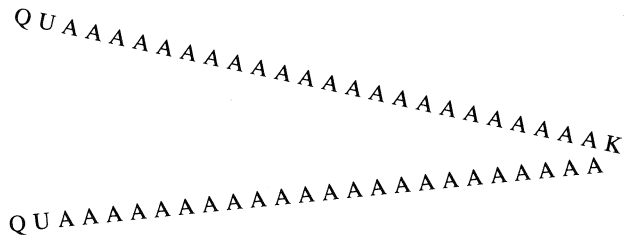


Next, I asked the students to try their own poems—a poem about something that moves and makes a noise. And, in the end, a poem that gives us some sort of emotion or

feeling—but doesn’t name that feeling in the poem itself. The students went quickly to work, some writing two or three poems before the period was over. Here are some examples of their work:

Fall Poem

They fly through the air effortlessly
going South



They fly through the air gracefully
going South for the winter

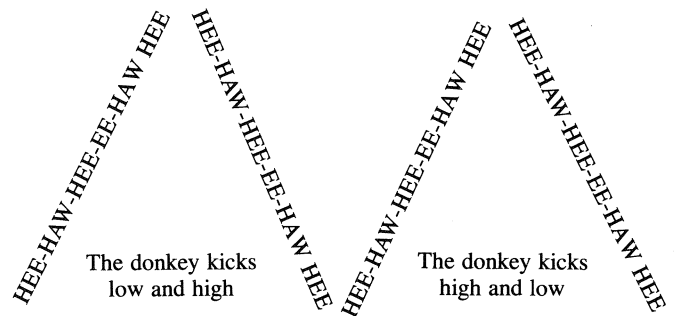
—P.G. and B.K.

A Cymbal

tist tist tist tist
tist tist tist tist tist
tist
tist A drummer hitting tist
his cymbal and grabbing tist
it to make an interesting tist
beat
tist tist tist tist tist

—B.E.

Donkey Kicks



—Sandy Cody and Tammy Schurson

The next day I went to the Clinton Public High School where there was plenty of noise in the halls, but little in the classroom. I was teaching poetry to an Advanced Composition class of seniors and it was the time of year when the senior class pictures were passed around—those hair-sprayed, necktied images forcing their smiles against pale blue backgrounds. During my class the previous week, the photos had been shuffled, dealt, traded, and passed up and down the aisles and the students had been reluctant to break their poker-faced trance to verbalize their ideas about poetry. So, this time I brought in some photos of my own, slides I'd taken of Clinton landmarks and characters: Ed's Fruit Stand, Smitty's General Store, Carl Bengston, the blind welder, St. Boniface Church, Harry Carpenter's Bait Shop:

"Hey, I know that place. It's Harry's—up in Lyons."

"Isn't that where they sell all those Christmas trees in the winter?"

"And watermelons in the summer."

"And bait. I heard old Harry cuts his worms in two, so he'll have more."

"But what does he do with all those tires? Does he ever sell any? They just pile up higher and higher."

"You know what he says, 'Never know when a guy might come along and want to buy a tire.'"

"He does fix radiators, though. And sells gas. Cheapest prices around."

"Yeah, if you can find the pumps."

The students seemed to know Harry's in detail. The photo called up visual, tactile, olfactory, and auditory images, and since we'd been working with these kinds of images in haiku in previous sessions, I hoped the students could play with their knowledge of Harry's in a short imagistic poem. The week before, I'd ended the class by passing out a haiku by Gary Snyder:

A great freight truck
lit like a town
through the dark stony desert

I asked the students to look at the poem again. First, we focused on the main image, how the use of the simile allowed the poem its swift leap—the freight truck suddenly became the town, glowing in the dark. We discussed the way in which the image of the town—surrounded by nothingness, or the desert—showed the singleness of the truck, pointing toward the isolation of the man driving. Then we talked about the sounds of the poem and their reinforcement of the main image. The repetition of the long *a* sound with the "r" consonant in "great freight truck" let the reader imagine the roaring of the semi's engine, while the repetition of the consonant "t" in the final position of several words slowed the poem down to the point where the roar became more like a wail.

But most of all, I tried to show how every word in the Snyder poem mattered, how every word added one more element to the scene, something that could be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched, how there wasn't much room for fancy adjectives and adverbs, abstraction and general observation. Yet, each well-chosen word worked with the preceding one to create an image that resonated some feeling or meaning. This poem was not just a good exercise in image-making.

With the Snyder poem in mind, I asked the students to write a short poem about Harry's. No, they didn't have to worry about counting syllables and lines, but I did want them to concentrate on word choice. And I encouraged them to try for a simile that surprised yet gave the reader some insight into the human emotion behind the description. (If it didn't work, they could always throw it out. It needn't be forced.) And yes, they could team up with a friend.

Chairs scraped together, pencils ground through the sharpener, and pieces of paper were ripped from spiral notebooks. I flashed the slide on the screen again and the students' heads nodded over their desks. The classroom teacher and I circulated about the room, providing encouragement and suggestions when needed.

A group of three waved me over. They'd begun by jotting down some details:

rusted radiators
blue roof
gray walls
brown windows
window shades
gas pumps

"Now what do we do?" One of the students asked, pushing the piece of paper toward me.

"How about some action?" I said.

"Action? There's nothing happening in the slide."

"But the poem doesn't have to match the slide exactly. The poem can have its own story. You can make it up. Or make up an action for one of the objects. What do the rusted radiators do?"

"They just sit there."

"Sit and wait . . . Oh, yeah, I see."

The student started the poem: "Rusted radiators wait . . ."

"Now what?"

"I'd like to do something with Harry," another student said.

"What's most interesting about him?"

"The way he talks."

"The way he chews tobacco."

"The way he's been in that same shack all these years."

"His face. I think it's his face. He must be ninety. His face is a mass of wrinkles."

"How about using Harry's face, then, as the central image in the poem? Let your other details build up to that image, and let that image convey the emotion of the poem."

"Huh?"

We all laughed, but the students said they had the idea, and went to work again. I directed my attention to another group, then after a while, the first group waved me back, and handed me their poem.

"Great. Now how about a title?"

"Like what?"

"Well, something to indicate where we are, perhaps. Something to locate the poem immediately."

After a couple of minutes, the students had their title and finished poem:

Harry's Palace

Rusted radiators wait
with piles of tires . . .
A black eye in the corner.
Blue roof, gray walls, brown windows

brightened by yellow gas pumps.
Window shades drawn like old Harry's face.

—Pat Ribar, Keili Paaske, and Katie Halbach

The students were pleased with their piece, especially the last line. They'd successfully made the leap from the words to the human detail, from the outside to the inside, from concrete detail to emotional resonance. Other students were equally successful, so we tried a couple of other slides together. Here are some of the results.

A Clinton Porch

On the steps

The fat man stands waiting,
Watching . . .

The sun beats down
And sweat pours from his face.
Slowly, he turns and pulls out his handkerchief.

—Brent Dirks and Charles Davis

Ed's Fruit Stand

For days
His acorn squash, pumpkins, watermelons
And gourds wait.
As the sun sets, he feels like a
Train depot no longer in use.

—Steve Knight, Gary Soderstrom, and Paul Schnack

By the Tracks

His face is twisted into a constant smile
As he sits among the autumn vegetables.
Pumpkins, gourds, acorn squash
Surround him like the ancient train tracks.

—Jim Watson and Brent Woods

General Store

Boxes and baskets, trunks and washtubs
hide the walk in front.
Smitty's looks as though nothing is ever sold.
Inside, stocked shelves sag from the weight
of dog collars and leashes hanging from the ceiling.
Sometime
Someone
will want to buy something.
The rooms wait.

—Mark Leonard and Chuck Harris

Smitty's

My family of junk
In front
Greeting you.

I'm the wicker basket
Alone in the corner,
My top blown away in the wind.

—Brian Schaefer

The Blind Welder

For years
the tools were used.
The fire burned day after day.

But now he sits,
Dark glasses over his eyes.

—Julie Johnston and Debbie Gaulrapp

St. Boniface Church

After confession

Sin lingers on the front steps
of the church,
the blackness of the railings,
of the lamp, the glass on
the door, the boy's shirt.

—Chris Kinkaid

I was excited about the precision, the focus, the emotional impact of these poems, the lack of bald statement usually found at this age level. The students were excited, too. I remember a conversation with one of them following class.

"Hey," she said. "That poetry stuff is kind of fun. I don't usually like it. Always before I'd written all that mushy stuff, you know, 'Love is . . . ' jazz. But this poetry was about things and places I know."

And that's what I'd hoped for. Students writing in their own voices about things from their own environment. I knew all the pieces of writing wouldn't be great poems, and I knew that these students wouldn't necessarily keep writing poems. But I attempted to leave the students with two things: first, I hoped that both of these groups, sixth and twelfth graders, would look at their environment differently, that the sights, sounds, textures, and smells of their everyday lives would open up new possibilities, new perceptions; and second, I hoped that these new perceptions might spill over into their regular classroom writing. A good essay seems to deal with the same things that a good poem does—how to make an idea concrete, and how, in an interesting way, to lead the reader to a new insight.

In both these types of poems, sixth grade sound and twelfth grade sight exercises, I tried to set up a clear model, then encourage the students to begin writing with the literal facts, the concrete, and allow the more abstract "meaning" to emerge from there. The students, especially the older ones, although hesitant at first, learned to trust their subconscious, to allow the right sides of their brains to go ahead, while the rational left sides were given a rest. The students delighted in the sense of play this allowed and were relieved to be lifted from the pressures of coming up with something "profound"—the kind of profundity that often ends up in "mush"—as they saw an image drawn from common experience come to life on the page.



The Hour with the Face

by Valery Larbaud

To Francis Jourdain

THE FIRST WARM EVENING SET UP CAMP IN THE garden and stationed a sunbeam on guard at each window of the house. Picture the outline of two pink cheeks, a blue glance, a big sister, blonde, leaning against the light. . . . But you mustn't look round towards the window. Don't move. Don't even wriggle your finger. The clock on the mantelpiece says five past five. Monsieur Marcatte is five minutes late—that's a good sign. If only he were going to miss the lesson. . . . Or if he arrived halfway through—then there would only be a half hour of solfège left. Don't move—the slightest motion could tangle up the skein somewhere along the line. Keep on sitting in the armchair facing the fireplace. And stay still. Like the open piano and the closed book where young Mozart, on the cover, is tuning his violin. . . .

5:07. Oh, go faster, Time, go faster! Ten tiny thoughts will harness themselves to the big hand and try to pull it a little faster towards its little sister who is waiting for it down there between V and VI. . . . The head with the blue eyes and the pink and blonde shadows fades from the window, and the stern evening sky scatters in white puddles in the mirrors, windowpanes, and polished furniture. And a little boy, sitting in an armchair, waits for his solfège teacher. (A chair creaks.)

He'll ring the doorbell. That will give you half a minute to get ready to receive him, to take leave of the thoughts, so sweet and warm, that you were entertaining. . . . Quarter after. An obtuse angle has become an acute angle, and now the big hand must be falling more quickly (did they take this into account when they made the clock? Did they add some kind of brake to make sure that the big hand descends as slowly as it climbs the dial on the other side of the VI?) He could arrive at any second—to be a quarter of an hour late is nothing; but twenty minutes is already more substantial—then the chances of having a free empty hour will increase. It's an hour of crossing, like the trip from Pornic to Noirmoutiers. Five o'clock is the coast, which has already disappeared; five thirty will be the open sea, where a white sun dashes against the black glass floor that is heaving and falling while the mind tries to pinpoint the instant when the halfway point is reached. It may be a free hour, but it's also an empty hour, without play. Don't budge—the slightest motion would capsize the canoe where, on the ocean of time, a small boy is paddling with all his might between five and six o'clock.

Luckily, as an antidote to boredom, here is the Face. It's easy to find when you know. But the child is the only one who does. Only he has seen the Face in the veins of the marble mantelpiece: a long Face, serious and young, completely

shaven, with deep eyes and a narrow forehead partly covered by a crown of leaves. Its little black mouth is half open. A little more so than last time, it seems. If only the face could speak! With what an unimaginable tiny voice, a "marble voice," no doubt. No, it keeps its silence. Face, we understand each other without words. I've kept your secret, enchanted prince. I haven't told anyone that there's a face in the veins of the mantelpiece, and I've distracted people from looking in your direction. (Luckily, grown-ups don't know how to see anything, anyway.)

Noble Face, when will your enchantment end? Tomorrow, or maybe next month, or in a year. It will happen at night, of course. Your time will be up, and you'll leave the mantelpiece, and the next day there will be nothing in your place but the deep green of the marble and its golden veins, a handwriting that men have not yet learned to read.

In the meantime, Face, come sit in my little canoe. Someone has rung the doorbell! Now the door will open and Monsieur Marcatte and his solfège will come in with their stink of tobacco and their old hands, and their thick fingernails, bent and stained brown by cigarettes. All the little thoughts hide, and the Face dissolves back into the marble veins. . . . False alarm. It was the back door.

Face, come back. Let's go for a walk together in the woods. (Isn't it funny how you can picture the woods, as if you were really there, while you're really sitting in an armchair. You would like to pay attention to this, follow this train of thought. But the pathways through the forest are more fun to follow. This is how a little idea comes, like a bee, buzzing up to the door of its hive. When it sees that the door is shut, it flies off towards some flowers.) A tiny vessel made out of thoughts sails off to a country called the woods, carrying, in a precious little thought-up coffer, the noble, crowned Face.

We land, we demand entry at the port of leaves, we thrust aside the first branches, we dive into the green darkness. We meet a solitary beam of light. We follow the pathway of a thousand secrets. We cross the road of underbrush where all we can see are leaves and, above the leaves a blue road, like the pink road of the forest, which is a road in the sky. Nothing stirs in the motionless light—except the little aspen tree down there, trembling in broad daylight—or maybe it's trying to signal us? Again we plunge into the shade and under some branches where the dry earth, beneath the hot grass, faithfully saves old wheel ruts, remnants of a time long ago when they used to chop down trees (in those days you could see the shape of a hillside). And suddenly we're beneath the pine trees, the Imperial Guard of the woods, immobile and lofty, with its standards and its pennants of red and gold.

But here is the path that no one has ever dared to follow to its end. It meets, at its darkest curve, a nameless, almost forgotten brook, its brown water trickling slowly beneath a roof of interwoven branches that it sadly reflects. Further on we cross a pathway that might lead to the Road of the Blindworm, but it's choked with trailing creepers covered with red thorns. Further on we find ourselves suspended over a clearing inhabited by a horrible tribe of giant thistles. And then there's a meadow with a lake, its two shores filled with

"The Hour with the Face" is a selection from VALERY LARBAUD's *Childish Things*, translated by Catherine Wald and scheduled for publication in 1985 by SUN Press (347 West 39 St., New York, NY 10018) in paperback (\$8).

washer-women soaking their laundry. And after that comes a towering grove where a big sad bird, who lives there all alone, flies off suddenly with the noise of a closet door opening! And right nearby is the place where, one day, we saw a little iron cage next to a wolf-trap and, peering through the bars, we saw a grey cat with the blue eyes of a child pacing back and forth. And suddenly we are at the edge of the woods, alongside a huge stream, and on the other shore, where the meadow and the sun begin, we recognize the curve of the hillside and, looking up, we see a corner of the housetop. The path descends and widens and descends again, while a last branch tries to hold us back, and, crossing the wooden foot-bridge, we find ourselves out of the Tree Kingdom.

Face, noble Face, while awaiting our time of deliverance, let's take another trip to the continents of the sunset:

the sky above the garden is like the blue and golden map to another world

Ten to six—saved! Monsieur Marcatte won't come. You can move now, step out of the canoe, salute the Face—who remains inside the marble, a little bit sad and hushed, with its half-open mouth—with an imperceptible wink, and silently dock the dream canoe in the port at last attained Now we are out of the shadow and out of danger. A swallow preens its feathers after the storm.

But in the depth of the marble the Face is still waiting for its spell to be broken. It will still be waiting when we reach the age of twenty, and the children who come after us will discover it in turn.

—Translated from the French by Catherine Wald

Collected Early Poems

by Fleming Meeks

I'VE ALWAYS WRITTEN IN SPURTS—TWO, THREE poems at a time, and then nothing. The pattern for these creative bursts was established nearly thirty years ago with my first poems, dictated to and transcribed by my beautiful and attentive aunts Margie and Jean. Because I grew up in Georgia (and at age three had not travelled much beyond South Carolina), the poems reflect the local dialect. Nonetheless, I feel that they transcend the label “regional verse.” The poems are untitled.

Ah eat may hushybah oan thuzdy.
(I eat my Hershey bar on Thursday.)

O what a lovely coathanger.
(Variation: Lovely, lovely coathanger.)

I don't know which of these poems was composed first, but to the best of my recollection they both came to me on a single afternoon. I thank my aunts for not allowing me to forget them.

FLEMING MEEKS is a poet and freelance writer living in New York City. He reviews action/adventure novels for *Publishers Weekly*.

Two Stories

by Lorna Smedman

Collage

I glue a photograph of Kafka and Max Brod to a sheet of paper. They are sitting on a small couch, leaning towards each other, having an animated conversation. Max Brod is holding his infant son on his lap. Kafka is smiling, and almost touches Max's shoulder with a delicate hand. I want to enter their conversation, so I cut apart some words, and scatter the letters above the photo, hoping the men will use them to answer my questions. Focusing my mental concentration in a beam out of my forehead, I push it through the surface of the photo, into Kafka's mind. What are you saying? He doesn't respond. I try several times. The letters don't move. I form the question in the space between them, and increase its volume to scream level, but I can't break into their intimacy. Frustrated and angry, I go through the papers on the table and find a picture of two Mexican bandits, wearing big black hats and holding old-fashioned pistols. I cut them out and glue them down with their guns aimed at Kafka's and Brod's heads. This threat fails to startle them into talking. They don't even notice the bandits, and I don't have the heart to really get tough with them.

Dangers of Reading

I go into a new restaurant. There are five waiters and I am the only customer. The menu is more expensive than I ima-

LORNA SMEDMAN is a poet and editor. Her most recent collection, *The Dangers of Reading*, is not really about the dangers of reading. It is available from Prospect Books, 500 East 11 St., New York, NY 10009 for \$5.

gined so I order soup and a glass of wine, and take out *The Banquet Years*. I am reading about Alfred Jarry. The soup is mediocre. Suddenly I smell smoke, glance up and see flames, my book is on fire. I jump up, whacking the book on

the tablecloth until it's extinguished. Absorbed in my reading, I had been holding the book over a small lit candle. The last pages of the index are badly charred. Throwing some money on the table, I rush out. ●

PLUGS



Focus on Asian Studies is a lovely resource journal for elementary and secondary school teachers. Each issue is organized around a theme, with articles, curriculum ideas, book reviews, lists of available teaching materials, etc. Particularly recommended is the special Asian Literature issue (Vol. 2, No. 2, Winter 1983), still available for \$3 from The Asia Society, 725 Park Ave., New York, NY 10021. Annual subscriptions are \$5 (three issues), with checks payable to The Asia Society, P.O. Box 1308-M, Fort Lee, NJ 07024 (Attn. *Focus*).

Call for Articles

Issues 16/4 and 16/5 of *Teachers & Writers Magazine* will be guest-edited by writer/teachers Wendy Salinger and Meredith Sue Willis, respectively.

Issue 16/4 will focus on the particularity of teaching writing to children—how it differs from teaching writing to adults. Deadline for submissions: November 15, 1984.

The theme of issue 16/5 is "Reading What Students Write: Refining the Ways We Respond to What Our Students Produce." The subject, then, is evaluation (but *not* grading). Deadline for submissions: February 1, 1985.

Send all queries, submissions, and correspondence to the guest-editor c/o Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003. ●

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