

PASSWORDS

Teaching Poems by Nye & Paz

When the World Is Too Much with Us

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It's true, what Wordsworth wrote, about the world being too much with us. Too much noise. Too much chaos. Too much sadness. Surviving and thriving in any city means a daily bombardment of the senses. At the end of a day full of "getting and spending, we lay waste our powers" of imagination. Faced with starker realities, we find ourselves distanced from the sublimes of nature and the dazzling interior of our minds. As a teaching artist in several Chicago schools, I often wonder: How do we hold on to the quiet while walking through the chaos? How do we temporarily leave the chaos so that we may return, stronger, to its center? In classrooms all over the city, teachers struggle to balance both instincts—the urge to help students confront the difficult realities of their lives, and the one to nurture an inner refuge from the everyday.

In poetry workshops at Columbus Elementary School, nestled in a Ukrainian neighborhood, and Crown Community Academy, situated in the Southwest Side community of Lawndale, I encourage young writers to prepare for two distinctly different journeys: one that will take them to the outermost reaches of the universe; the other, to the innermost reaches of their minds. For the voyage out, we read Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "The Rider," about a boy who roller-skates away from his loneliness. For the voyage in, we read an excerpt from the Octavio Paz poem "The House of Glances," in which the poet takes a walk inside the body and finds a "circus of the eye."

"We're going to write our way out of here!" I announce to my students when introducing the Nye poem. I immediately get a lot of *oooh's* and *abbb's* because this makes them think of high-stakes operations and surreptitious spy capers. Before we even read "The Rider," I ask them to consider what they might want to escape from. We generate a long list of fears, worries, and burdens on the board, running the gamut, from death, rats, and screaming parents to hunger, injustice, and war.

So, just how are we going to get away from all these things? Naturally, our next order of business is to brainstorm a list of getaway transport, from the fanciful to the mundane. "Let's think of ways out. Give me some ideas." I get the everyday answers—a bus, taxi, or bicycle—but then they take off and add a hot air balloon, a limo, roller-skates, wings, a jet, a sailboat, a canoe, a four-wheeler pick-up truck, and—most popular of all—a motorcycle. (There's something about a motorcycle that incites escape like no other.)

Then we read "The Rider" together. It's a short, succinct poem, full of pensive questions and explicit details about a particular kind of escape:

A boy told me
if he roller-skated fast enough
his loneliness couldn't catch up to him,

the best reason I ever heard
for trying to be a champion.

What I wonder tonight
pedaling hard down King William Street
is if it translates to bicycles.

A victory! To leave your loneliness
panting behind you on some street corner
while you float free into a cloud of sudden azaleas,
pink petals that have never felt loneliness,
no matter how slowly they fell.

"The Rider" inspires my students to play tricks on their loneliness, to chase after that feeling of floating free "in a cloud of sudden azaleas." The personification of loneliness immediately gives them the power to say, "If I just ride fast enough, it can't run after me!"

To further hatch our escape plans, we consider some important questions together: 1) What do I want to get away from more than anything? 2) How am I going to get away? 3) Where will I go? 4) What will happen to the thing/object/person I escape? 5) How, when, and why will I return? With those questions on the board, I tell them they're good to go. "Go on," I exhort, "Scram!" They laugh and start writing. Sometimes it gets so quiet that it actually feels like many of them *have* left the room.

A girl once told me she was mad
So she hopped on her blue motorboat.
She went so fast the madness tried to get her
But the madness couldn't get her.

And I said in my mind,
 Can I get away from my madness
 On my blue motorboat?
 And I did.
 And the madness
 cried and cried and cried
 Like a broken record.
 But I was gone to Atlanta.
 And moved in with my family.
 And my madness stayed until I came back,
 And I never came back.

—*Ketaurab, 4th grade, Crown Academy*

I hear a kid was once in school
 and he got on his black motorcycle
 and he flew out the window on that motorcycle
 BANG into the sky.
 He went all the way to Mississippi
 and the teachers called to him COME BACK TO SCHOOL!
 The boy was already gone.
 Went all the way to the countryside.
 It was silent and he liked that.

—*Cimone, 4th grade, Crown Academy*

I really love the folkloric quality of Cimone's poem. I can imagine kids whispering, "Did you hear about that boy? You know, the one who flew his motorcycle all the way to Mississippi and rode through the countryside?" They'd tell this story and perhaps, for a moment, be suspended there with this imaginary boy, in the quiet and openness of the country, and for just that single moment, be transported away from all that is "too much with us."

Because a voyage out is not always feasible, I like to offer my students an equally liberating, opposite journey. The Paz poem invites young writers to take a walk inside themselves. "The House of Glances," dedicated to the Chilean surrealist painter Roberto Matta (1911–2002), delves deeper into the interior of one's own being than any poem I've read. The poem taps into an internal landscape full of muscle and bone, terror and worry, calm and the majesty of life on earth.

To introduce the poem, I tell my students to close their eyes and listen for a sound inside themselves. The room becomes very still. They hear their moms calling to them, their deceased relatives, the wind, the sound of their bones moving, blood traveling through their bodies.

I pepper them with questions: “What’s the weather like inside your body?” A few say that it’s snowing, while others are sure that gigantic rays of sunshine are pouring through them. “What time is it inside your body? Who lives inside you? What kinds of objects do you find?” As soon as I know that they are all tapped into their interiors, we read the following excerpt from Paz:

You walk inside yourself, and the tenuous, meandering reflection that
 guides you
 is not the last glance of your eyes before closing, nor the timid sun
 that beats at your lids:
 it is a secret stream, not of water but of pulse-beats: calls and answers
 and calls,
 a thread of clarities among the tall grasses and the beasts of the mind
 that crouch in the darkness.
 You follow the murmur of your blood through the unknown territory
 your eyes invent,
 and you climb a stairway of glass and water, up to a terrace.
 Made of the same intangible material as echoes and clanging,
 the terrace, suspended in air, is a rectangle of light, a magnetic ring
 that wraps around itself, rises, walks, and plants itself in the circus of
 the eye,
 a lunar geyser, a stalk of steam, a foliage of sparks, a great tree that
 lights up, goes out, lights up:
 you are in the interior of the reflections, you are in the house of glances,
 you have closed your eyes, and you enter and leave from yourself to
 yourself on a bridge of pulse-beats:

THE HEART IS AN EYE.

Due to the complexity of Paz’s language, I sometimes tell them what they can expect to find in the poem—a staircase, grass, a tree, beasts, glass, water—and then challenge them to be on the lookout as we travel through it.

“What is a ‘pulse-beat?’” I ask. Some students will shrug their shoulders, but there’s always at least one that understands that Paz is referring to a beating heart. As a class, we make fists and create a powerful rhythm of pulse-beats on the desks, which brings the poem to life still further. Next, we encounter the staircase, made of glass and water, and also explore the terrace made of echoes and clanging. “Why is there a staircase inside him?” Some students guess that those steps are his backbone. “If you had a staircase inside, what would it be made of?” A girl once answered, “Out of voices.” When we reach the “great tree that lights up, goes out, lights up,” I ask: “What’s the fire all about?” “It means that you’re alive, that you want to jump around!” they answer. One student explained that when there’s fire inside you it means that you can stay warm inside even if it’s cold outside—as perfect a reason as any to nurture the fire within.

“What’s the weather like inside your body? What time is it inside your body?”

Finally, we reach the bridge. Why would a bridge exist inside us? What is the purpose of a bridge made out of our own heartbeats? Perhaps listening to the beating of your own heart leads you to your true self—and often—since the self changes so often in life, your heartbeats become the bridge you cross to travel from one self to the next.

I tell my young writers that now it is their turn to take a walk inside. Use your heart as an eye to see what the other two eyes do not see. The poems that emerge from their inscapes never fail to astound me—the surrealist clarity of detail naturally lends itself to metaphor, without being heavyhanded.

I’m walking inside myself...
I hear the sound of a planet
Wrestling with another
I hear the baby yelling and
Crying. I discover that
It is summer in my brain.
A lion is running
Very, very, very fast. I walk inside
Myself and hear the sound of
Echoes and my mom
Screams, where am
I? But she does
Not know I am walking
Inside me. My mom is
Trying to find me but
I’m flying inside myself.

—Vladimir, 3rd grade, Columbus Elementary

I walk inside myself I open
a flaming door and a golden mansion
appears with blood cells...the
blood cells are red they ride
on my happy lions I walk up the
stairs the guards did not see
me. Then I saw a case made
out of feelings and I opened
it and saw a crystal that
said whatever you want to wish....

—Michael, 3rd grade, Columbus Elementary

Sometimes I will read them other poems that encourage inward journeys. Emily Dickinson's Poem 254, which begins "Hope is the thing with feathers," is all about seeing hope as a small bird that perches inside the soul and sings incessantly no matter how dire the straits. Charles Simic's "Stone" celebrates the magical interior life of objects, leading us to believe that every object in the world possesses a secret inner life. One of my all-time favorites is by Mexican poet Alberto Rios:

The Cities Inside Us (excerpt)

We live in secret cities
And we travel unmapped roads...

...You and I, we are the secret citizens of the city
Inside us, and inside us

There go all the cars we have driven
And seen, there are all the people

We know and have known, there
Are all the places that are

But which used to be as well. This is where
They went. They did not disappear.

By taking both outer and inner journeys, young poets are often able to find that dazzling border between the two—the facility to escape and return and escape again, each time with a fresher understanding of life's complexities.

Sources

Naomi Shihab Nye, "The Rider," from *Fuel* (Rochester, N.Y.: Boa Editions, 1998).

Octavio Paz, "The House of Glances," trans. Eliot Weinberger, from *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz 1957–1987* (New York: New Directions, 1986).

Alberto Rios, "The Cities Inside Us" (1998), cited from www.poets.org.