PASSWORDS
Teaching Pablo Neruda & Bei Dao

The Lens of Leaving

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Things fall apart, wear out, and die. People leave, change, and break down. Poetry is a junker's dream, where fragments find their way back together again through the needle and thread of words. Poet Mark Strand once wrote, "We all have reasons / for moving. / I move / to keep things whole." Keeping things whole has everything to do with the holiness of wholeness, and with the how and the why of the break. What stories do we read into scars? What poems breathe in that tiny crack in the vase?

As a Hands on Stanzas poet-in-residence with The Poetry Center of Chicago at Columbus Elementary School, I invite young poets to tromp through the landscape of their minds in search of all things broken. To do this, I introduce them to two of my favorite poems: Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's "Ode to Broken Things" and Chinese poet Bei Dao's "Comet."

In his "Ode to Broken Things," Neruda makes peace with all things broken; he portrays brokenness as a state as natural as wholeness. Things get broken, and it is no one's fault: "[I]t's not my hands / or yours / It wasn't the girls / with their hard fingernails / or the motion of the planet."[1] Before we read this poem as a class, I ask my students to help me make a list of things that break. Young as they are, my fourth graders' list is extensive: friendship, a promise, glass, bones, a toy, a heart, a family, trust, and a memory—a rich combination of animate and inanimate objects and ideas. My sixth graders tend to be more abstract about what has broken (or broken out, or broken down): numbers, time, love, a country, fire, laws, innocence, trees, a vase, a necklace, a back, ribs, buildings, war.

I accompany this exercise with a catalogue of questions: Does everything break? Can everything be fixed? Should everything be salvaged? What was life like before and after the break? Where were you when the break happened?

I next ask them to consider the tools people use to fix things. Making this list encourages them to think of brokenness as existing on a continuum with wholeness. Some things that break get fixed, others are replaced, and still others are abandoned. We end up making a full and interesting inventory: wire, glue, masking tape, staples, hammer, nail, thread, and string. Some students also suggest love, truth, and time.

Once we are thoroughly steeped in the broken world, we turn to Neruda's poem, paying close attention to all things broken—not just broken objects, but the line breaks themselves. Neruda's poem is written as an ode, a form that allows poets to meditate on a single idea from various viewpoints. One of John Keats's most famous odes, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," revels in the pure, unbreakable beauty of the urn: "When old age shall this generation waste / thou [Grecian urn] shalt remain, in midst of other woe." His ode pays homage to wholeness whereas Pablo Neruda's ode exalts in the aesthetic of brokeness—the "invisible, deliberate smasher." Often my students will search for a reason: "That pot / which overflowed with scarlet / in the middle of October, / it got tired from all the violets." And my sixth graders will go so far as to redeem the breakage: one student suggested that things must break to make room for all things new and whole.

What do we do with all the things that break, including the feelings we've attached to them over the years? I love Neruda's brilliant and reasonable proposal: "Let's put all our treasures together / —the clock, plates, cups cracked by the cold— / into a sack and carry them / to the sea / and let our possessions sink.../...May whatever breaks / be reconstructed by the sea / with the long labor of its tides." I ask my students if they agree with Neruda: Should we pack our bags right now and go to Lake Michigan? They usually laugh and say that's impossible.

When my students begin to write their own poems of brokenness, the only guidelines I give them are to use at least three of the "healing tools" mentioned in Neruda's poem. This means that even if they are writing about a divorced family, they have to use words such as *needle* or *thread*. I also encourage them to experiment with enjambment, and with how a line length can affect feeling.

Alex, a fourth grader, followed Neruda's model closely but came upon her own lost language in her poem, "Ode to Broken Things":

Things get broken
outside and inside
like they were knocked down
It was not me
or you
It is not someone
that broke my heart my soul my pants
like the moon   glows and my homework
broke   six   years   ago
Let me put all my treasures together

I ask my students to think hard about the people and things that have left them.... What would be the terms and conditions of the return?

my heart, soul, pants, homework
till the moon glows at moonlight
shine
Putting my heart together with paste
Putting my pants together with thread
Putting my homework together on paper
Putting my soul back together with a nail

In her poem "Family," Maggie, a sixth grader, used the same exercise to write about feelings surrounding the circumstances of her mother's recent death:

Since my mother passed away I feel lonely.
I feel heartbroken.
I wish I could grab a needle
and sew her heart
back together so it will start beating
again. I wish I could bring that time
back together and grab a rope and tie
her around my family.

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Bei Dao's "Comet" meditates on a particular kind of breakage: namely, leave-taking and loss. Like a coruscating comet flying fleetingly through the night sky, people, too, sometimes leave us fleetingly, beautifully, and without explanation.

How do I converse with fourth graders about loss and leaving? How do I explain the strange threshold between darkness and light? As Dao says: "What is hard to imagine / is not darkness but dawn."[2] From the very first assertion—"Come back or leave forever / don't stand like that at the door / like a statue made of stone"—Dao's poem teaches us to address loss directly.

To begin, my fourth graders help me create a list of things that leave. Their hands fly into the air with suggestions: snow, rain, grandparents, hours, parents, Twin Towers, hair. Like Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," with its long catalogue of losses and leave-takings, their list grows as they begin to narrow in on the world through the lens of leaving. We include ourselves in this list, because we, too, have left others—other cities, other countries, other times and experiences.

"Comet" remains unread until we have made two additional lists: thing that return and things that leave forever. Nestled in this rich tangle of ideas, we read the Dao poem aloud together. We pay particular attention to the reiterated ultimatum: "Come back... / ...or leave forever." I ask my students: Does the narrator really want either of these extremes to occur?

I suggest that we return to the poem's title for clues to the answer. What is the nature of a comet? Many fourth graders have learned about the solar system and are quite adept at making scientific inferences in poetry. We pursue the comet connection for a while, drawing on ideas that offer complexity and contrast. Like a comet, people are unpredictable; they dazzle us as mysteries, and just as quickly burn out past the backdrop of a night sky.

The contrasting images in "Comet" help inform the complexities. We begin to recognize that loss is not black or white, happy or sad, but rather something deeply rooted in the ebb and flow of life. I ask my students to go on a hunt for ideas, senses, and/or images that seem like opposites. Three distinctly contrasting ideas arise. The first is Dao's pairing of departure and return. The other two contrasting ideas are found in the second and third stanzas:

> in fact what is hard to imagine
> is not darkness but dawn
> how long will the lamplight last

For complete poem go to:

http://legiblescrawl.livejournal.com/5206.htm

By making darkness impinge on light and heat juxtapose with the cold, Dao suspends the moment of tension and indecision. At the end of the second stanza, he questions whether the trailing debris of the comet will "burn up and turn to ash." And in the next and final stanza he commands, "leave forever / like a comet / sparkling and cold like frost."

I ask my students to think hard about the people and things that have left them. I encourage them to wonder what life would be like if they returned, and what would have to change if they came back. What would be the terms and conditions of the return? Or, what would life be like if that object (or person) decided to take the word *forever* seriously?

To begin their poems, I invite the fourth graders to borrow Dao's haunting invitation to come back or leave forever. I encourage them to speak directly to what has left or threatens to leave. After so much time spent discussing loss, they are experts at identifying those people or things most important to them, and what it might mean if they left their worlds. Sandi wrote:

Come on heart, or leave me
Forever because you keep
me alive forever until
I die.

And you—spring
you left me forever until
you changed.

You—bad dreams
come back at night or leave forever
with those mean dreams.

Alberto, a student who recently emigrated from Mexico, recalled his native country:

I was born in Mexico. I lived at my Aunt's house.
I was in Mexico forever. We came to the United States.

Come Back Mexico

Because my Aunt wants that I go back to Mexico.

Come Back Mexico

Because I miss my animals and helping my Uncle.

Come Back Dog

Because I love him, he always took care of me
When I am in danger forest.

As poets, this heap of broken images becomes an immense terrain of hope and possibility. As we traverse it, we begin to discern what is worth saving, and what is better left abandoned and recycled by the organics of forgetting. And though Dao writes, "you sing alone," through poetry each of us sings alone together.

1. Pablo Neruda, "Oda a las Cosas Rotas / Ode to Broken Things," in *Five Decades: Poems 1925–1970* (New York: Grove Press, 1974).
2. Bei Dao, "Comet," in *The August Sleepwalker* (New York: New Directions, 1990).