

Sweeping Hearts

Writing Poems Inspired by Native American Music & Poetry

by Elizabeth Raby

HAVING STUDENTS WRITE POEMS WHILE LISTENING to a cassette tape of “Earth Spirit” by R. Carlos Nakai, a Navajo-Ute who plays the Native American flute, has been a remarkably successful exercise with young people from grades two through twelve. Inspired in part by the Native American poets at the 1988 and 1992 Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festivals at Hopewell, N. J., and in part by Margot Fortunato Galt’s article, “The Story in History,” in the September-October 1992 issue of *Teachers & Writers*, I use the tape as a way to bring a Native American presence to the classrooms I visit as a poet-in-the-schools in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

Following Galt’s example, I draw both a pyramid and a circle on the chalkboard. Galt says that the European conception of the universe is structured like a pyramid, by which things are ranked “according to their smartness or complexity or similarity to us.” On this pyramid, humans are outranked only by the angels and then by God. Students have little difficulty assigning things to a place in this hierarchy. I suggest that dirt may rank near the bottom, hence our tendency to feel justified in treating dirt “like dirt.” Students find it easy to think of examples of what we have done to dirt.

We next consider the Native American paradigm of being: a circle that includes, in no hierarchical order, humans and dirt, thunder and bears. I read aloud Joy Harjo’s “Eagle Poem,” a fine example of the circularity and the respect for the things of this world that such a vision engenders:

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon,
To one whole voice that is you.
And know that there is more
That you can’t see, can’t hear,
Can’t know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren’t always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Saturday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky

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In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.

With this poem still echoing in our minds, I tell the class that we will write while listening to a tape of Native American flute music. After making sure that everyone has paper and a sharpened pencil, I explain that while the tape plays I will read three poems aloud, and that afterward there should be no talking for a few minutes. The only sound will be the sound of the flute. I invite the students to go wherever the flute takes them, to hear whatever message it brings them, to follow whatever story it tells—to write down whatever comes to them.

The first poem I read is Li Po’s “Spring Night in Lo-Yang—Hearing a Flute,” which I tell the students was written more than a thousand years ago:

In what house, the jade flute that sends these dark notes
drifting,
scattering on the spring wind that fills Lo-Yang?
Tonight if we should hear the willow-breaking song,
who could help but long for the gardens of home?

—Translated by Burton Watson

Then I read Joy Harjo’s “Song for the Deer and Myself to Return On”:

This morning when I looked out the roof window
before dawn and a few stars were still caught
in the fragile web of ebony night
I was overwhelmed. I sang the song Louis taught me:
a song to call the deer in Creek, when hunting,
and I am certainly hunting something as magic as deer
in this city far from the hammock of my mother’s belly.

It works, of course, and deer came into this room and wondered at finding themselves in a house near downtown Denver. Now the deer and I are trying to figure out a song to get them back, to get us all back, because it's too early to call Louis and nearly too late to go home.

Finally, I read "An Evening at Windy Point for Christopher Jay" by the Hopi poet, Ramson Lomatewama. It begins with the sound of a Japanese bamboo flute (*suizen*):

The sound of *suizen*
lingers over a valley of sand.
Desert shadows grow in silence.
The man, sitting at the edge
brings music to Windy Point.
Below,
juniper and piñon trees listen.
Smooth bamboo songs
touch the face of summer.
There are no monastery walls here,
Only the music,
the man,
the spirit.

The haunting sound of the flute and the softly spoken poems have never failed to achieve a strange combination of attention and peacefulness in the classroom. Very young children may miss an occasional word or reference, they never miss the beauty of the language or the spirit of the poems. Usually there is so much noise in our lives—perhaps without realizing it we all hunger for the calm this music inspires. Students often ask that it be played as the background to other writing exercises. The music establishes a mood they like to extend, which makes it especially good for the first day of a writing workshop.

The music evokes strong emotions in the students, makes them wish for a more perfect world, and gives many of them a chance to express their anguish and anger about the state of the environment. They take bits and pieces from the poems I read aloud and combine them with their own personal histories and the mood the music creates. Here are some examples:

Watching Wondering

I wake and hear the sweet music of the flute
I follow it
 Watching
 Wondering
Beauty fills the air
Each step I take
 Watching
 Wondering
Suddenly the music gets louder
I spot a giant fall of water
 Watching
 Wondering
The lion was next to the lamb
There meadows and lakes are plenty
 Watching

Wondering
I sit under a tree thinking
Has God called me home?
 Watching
 Wondering.
I close my eyes and fall asleep
 Watching and
 Wondering no more.

—Carolyn Bahnck, 5th grade

Mother Earth

As the woman fell to the hot sand,
She started to think about the child she once had,
About the husband one had not so long ago,
And about the tribe she once had that she would roam the
 land, sea, and sky with.
As she sat there too dried out to drop a single tear for her tribe
 and her family,
She looked around at her only friends, the sun, the sky, the
 land, the plants.
And pleaded for forgiveness, and a child to look after.
Then something strange happened,
She felt a sharp pain, then the cry of a newborn baby
And she no more felt lonely but happy.
Then she looked around and silently said
Thank you to her friends,
She noticed that everything started to bloom and come to life,
And then a second baby was born,
But it was not a real person, it was an animal.
Then a bright light came down to her and told her, "You have
 been given the greatest
gift of all time, the gift to create life for all
kinds of living creatures."
Then she closed her eyes and started to think
of all her friends, opened her eyes and saw her
friends and family looking at her,
And from that day on she knew the earth
would have life on the land that she, once, roamed by herself.

—Melissa Janis, 5th grade

Before, Before

I am the blue-green grass,
I bend into the water,
the quickly moving water is
angry,
angry with the vengeance of the
water-god,
He rushes by angrily,
He is mad at the people,
the people in the village,
they are hurting him with their
chemicals,
I have seen better days,
when the water-god was happy
gurgling and laughing,
before the people,
when animals came to drink,
before the hunters,
 Before, Before.

—Tania Philkill, 6th grade

The flute calls to me.
Its sounds rush through my body
As an eagle's feather
Falls at my feet.

A wolf calls
From the hills
Joining the sweet sound
Of the music.

The fresh, warm air
From the desert
Fills my lungs, as the flute
Seems to cease, but starts again.

This is a song of pureness and love.

The flute calls to me
Its sounds rush through my body
As I awake
From this dream of time.
—Elisa Keller, 7th grade

The flute sounds like a boy lying on his bed.
Looking at stars through his window.
Trying to express his feelings by playing.
He is sad, very hurt.
He is thinking, wondering where everyone is.
He is lonely, just him and his soul.
He is calling for help, trying to see,
He is thinking, wondering if anyone's out there.
Feeling the way he feels.
—Danielle Scheel, 7th grade

Gone, but Still Alive

The medicine man comes through
the opening in my teepee,
I lie under furs of animals
I trapped last winter.
I lie now shivering from the disease.
It is now part of me.
It grows with me, is me,
and I am it.
We are one.
The medicine man is becoming unclear,
as he kneels beside the fire
to make my healing potion.
The medicine man starts dancing.
I can feel his presence beside me.
By my head, my side, my feet,
yet I cannot see him.
He is becoming more and more unclear.
My shivering ceases.
All is black.
The medicine man is on earth,
but I am now in the sky.
My soul is alive,
soaring above the medicine man.
I am well, I am free!
—Katie Cleary, 8th grade

The
soft wind
wakes up the
sleeping trees.
The cool green forest
is awakening to the radiant
dawn. The sun's golden rays
shine through the well-nourished
trees. The healthy animals scatter around
the forest bottom. The huge mountains stand
high above the never-ending sapphire sky. The forest
creatures scatter back to their homes. The sun goes down
like a ball of fire. The darkness of the sky blankets the
sleeping forest.

—Brooke Holland, 8th grade

As the culminating activity for a unit on history, social studies, or environmental science, writing poems while listening to “Earth Spirit” can help students organize new facts, reflect on their meaning, and make them their own. I have often asked students to think of *one* single thing, a fact or an idea that they remember from a recently completed unit and to write a poem about what that fact or ideas means to them. In this case, a judicious selection of poems read aloud at the beginning of the session, combined with the music, is all that is needed to get the poems started.

Sources

Joy Harjo's “Eagle Poem” and “Song for the Deer and Myself to Return On” © 1990 are from *In Mad Love and War* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1990).

Li Po's “Spring Night in Lo-Yang—Hearing a Flute” © 1971 is from *Chinese Lyricism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1971), translated by Burton Watson. Also available in *Talking to the Sun*, edited by Kenneth Koch and Kate Farrell (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Henry Holt and Co., 1985).

R. Carlos Nakai's “Earth Spirit” flute music is available from Canyon Records Productions, 4143 N. 16th St., Phoenix, AZ 85016.

Ramson Lomatewama's “An Evening at Windy Point for Christopher Jay” © 1987 is from *Ascending the Reed* (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Badger Claw Press, 1987).



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