Celebrating Our 30th Year

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Where Does It Take You?

Using the Poetry of Paz, Pacheco, Gutiérrez, Blanco, and Deltoro as Models

by Naomi Shihab Nye

IN SAN ANTONIO'S INNER CITY, THE STREETS are shaded by huge aging pecan trees. It's hard to take a walk without nuts crunching underfoot. (*Students, do you notice them? Are you so used to their sounds you don't notice anymore?*)

The giant Judson Candy Factory on South Flores Street has been silent for nineteen years. Too bad. The whole air used to smell like rich chocolate around here. (*Does your grandma or mom remember it? What do you think they were dreaming of when they used to smell that smell?*)

But the Segovia Mexican Candy factory down on Guadalupe Street has been churning out mounds of pralines since 1918 and the salsa has grown tastier in Mexican cafés since more people seem to have developed a taste for the *chipotle* pepper, and the Sanitary Tortilla Factory a few blocks away is bustling. Hot brown paper sacks filled with stacks of freshly pressed corn tortillas replenish the daily cupboard. And the mattress factory south of downtown still claims "Sleep is Life." Passenger and freight trains clang through on the old tracks at two A.M. toward Del Rio, El Paso, Las Cruces—other places with lilting Spanish names. (*Do they wake you up? Are they our local lullaby?*)

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE has been a visiting writer in the schools since 1974. Her anthologies for young readers include *I Feel a Little Jumpy around You* and *This Same Sky*. Her own books of poetry include *Red Suitcase* and *Words under Words: Selected Poems*, and her essays are collected in *Never in a Hurry*.

The warehouses by the river have been turned into the Blue Star Arts Complex—galleries, studios, and loft-style rental units. Rumor is they have a waiting list. Although it's inspiring to see abandoned areas get lifted up like this, the heart of downtown itself shows signs of becoming a place for Temporary Visitors: knick-knack tourist stores, vendors of ugly T-shirts, pre-fab chain hotel/motels, and a Hard Rock Café have mushroomed as dozens of indigenous local businesses quietly disappeared. Where are all those honest, necessary places real residents used to go?

I miss the Post Office Café, the Stetson store, the elegant Frost Brothers department stores, the Kress dry-goods store in the spectacular art-deco building, the Alamo News Stand—I could go on and on and on. In pictures from the 1920s or 1940s of downtown San Antonio, the streets are crowded with honest daily bustle. I want to go inside these pictures and live in that other time. This city is rapidly losing

USING SPANISH, LATIN AMERICAN, & LATINO LITERATURE AS MODELS

what made it interesting to begin with. (*Are you noticing? Are you worried about it? When we talk about using specifics in writing, can we ignore these changes that surround us?*)

I wouldn't mind new things coming in, if it weren't at the expense of the old. If every storefront on Houston Street weren't abandoned now that everybody's at the sleek new downtown mall, I wouldn't mind the mall so much.

So what about it? I tell my writing classes that if we're noticing details, it's our job to document local losses, to examine them closely and to think about the precious, weird little details of our own neighborhoods. "Ah, miss," says Domingo, a student at David Crockett Elementary, "you want us to write about what changed over here, but you know it's much more interesting to write about what didn't change."

"Such as?"

"My mother. She never changes."

But Rico's seen Domingo's mother in a bad and good mood and he swears those moods were *different.* They argue awhile. Pleasantly. In the meantime I'm preparing everyone else for an "observation walk" out by Tarin's Meat Market on Zarzamora Street and the West Side Feed Store where they used to keep an angry monkey in a cage. We're heading out toward the gravel lots and the thirsty yards.

We will take pencils and papers. We'll tune in with our eyes and ears. We will not speak to one another—it's hard to observe closely if you're jabbering. I give them questions to consider in case they go blank. They write them down for reference. "What's right under my feet? What's so small I would have missed it if I weren't looking? What's quiet? What's pink? What's loud? Who's waiting for the bus? What does this smell remind me of?" We will make wild, flamboyant lists of things—the more specific, the better. We can *imagine* as well as record. "If you see a guy you never saw before, you can even make up a name for him. You can make up his story."

Somebody insists, "But ma'am, there's nothing out there! It's dullsville, ma'am!" Everybody laughs. But they like the idea that they're going outdoors to stretch their legs while other classes labor inside.

I read poems to get the class in a receptive mood, and we talk about the poems. "It's good to start scribbling already if a thought comes to you." I tell them they may write in Spanish, in English, or use a mixture of both languages, as many do when they talk. (Writing teachers must always be asking themselves: how can I make this link up to *their lives*, and *feel like home*?) I write some short poems on the board to focus on. (This is crucial. They need to *see poems* to be able to start *thinking poems.*)

Aquí

Mis pasos en esta calle
Resuenan
    en otra calle
donde
  oigo mis pasos
pasar en esta calle
donde
Sólo es real la niebla

—Octavio Paz

Here

My steps along this street
resound
    in another street
in which
    I hear my steps
passing along this street
in which

Only the mist is real

—Translated by Charles Tomlinson

("Ma'am, this guy is dreamy! I like how it's one street mixed up with another street. Do you think it's his memory echoing?")

Amanecer en Buenos Aires

Rompe la luz el azul celeste
Amanece en la Plaza San Martín
En cada flor hay esquirlas de cielo

—José Emilio Pacheco

Dawn in Buenos Aires

Light breaks the celestial blue
It dawns in the Plaza San Martín
In every flower there are splinters of sky

—Translated by Thomas Hoeksema

Students invariably respond most warmly to connections—flower to sky, our town to Buenos Aires, or Guadalajara, or wherever. That's just *one* of the reasons why it's so important to use poems that come from other countries. I also love poems that link the little and the big.

Naranjada

Mañana partida,
los gajos de nubes
dejan caer su semilla.

La naranja de sol,
muda de ropa.

—Luis Medina Gutiérrez

Orangeade

At dawn
the cloud sections
drop their seeds.

The sunny orange
changes clothes.

—Translated by Joan Darby Norris

Canción de enero

La hora es fresca y los niños
  en la escuela con ansiedad aguardan

el perfil del carro de raspados:
botellas de colores que confunden
con su cielo profundo la mirada.
Soles, sueños del dulce principio...
el brillo de los rayos despierta
en la nieve gris de los volcanes.

—Alberto Blanco

January Song

The hour is cool and from the school
children anxiously look for
the profile of the snow cone cart:
bottles of color that blend
long gazes with deep sky.
Suns, dreams of sweet origins...
the shine of the flash is born
on the gray volcano snow.

—Translated by Julio Marzán

Many times I read aloud sections of a poem too long to copy on the board and we talk about phrases and lines. I am careful to avoid the question "What does this mean?" which has been asked far too many times about poetry, as if words and images can't mean themselves, as if they were always tricking us. I prefer, "What does this make you see or wonder? Does this remind you of anything you know? Where does it take you?"

Hopefully it will remind them of what they are going to write.

I like the long poem "La plaza" by Antonio Deltoro of Mexico, a simple but rich listing of details found in a town's heart. The poem bounces comfortably from one line to the next, not making too much of anything, but using each item to create a sense of the whole. Here is the first third of the poem:

En la plaza
el asfalto descansa
toma vacaciones,
se vuelve pista de patinaje,
danzan las bicicletas,
beben los teporochos.

Hijos de papá,
con sus mamás,
salen de misa,

los gorriones, gorrones
disfrutan del festín
de las palomas:
pájaros de postín,
aves de cofia blanca.

El kiosko es un tíovivo
injertado en estatua,
un carrusel anquilosado
al que un día los caballitos
abandonaron.

La fuente en la plaza
es una palmera de agua,
la palmera una fuente;
la fuente y la palmera
son dos primas hermanas.

Las campanas de la iglesia
llaman a misa,
las del carrito de helados
mueven a risa.

•

In the plaza
the pavement has a rest,
takes a vacation,
becomes a skating rink,
bicycles dance,
the winos drink.

Daddy's children,
with their mamas,
come out of Mass,

the sparrows,
scroungers,
enjoy the pigeons' banquet;
swanky show-offs,
birds with white coifs.

The bandstand is a merry-go-round
grounded as a statue,
a carousel so old-fashioned
that one day the little horses
ran away.

The fountain in the plaza
is a palm tree of water,
the palm tree is a fountain;
the fountain and the palm tree
are two first cousins.

The church bells
call the people to Mass,
the bells on the ice cream cart
make the people laugh.

—Translated by C. M. Mayo

I suggest very basic techniques of listing (*Nouns! Remember nouns, my friends! It's not a "pretty" street or a "dull" street, but a street full of things!*)—detailing particular attributes ("a crooked blue fence" rather than just "a fence") and letting things bounce around inside us, creating responses. ("The trees give us shade and what do we do for them? Nothing!" writes Maria E. Gutiérrez.)

I always feel I am evangelizing for the imagination in general, as all visiting writers must feel—we are meeting that wide-eyed "Aw come on!" with "Yes really! Let yourself go!" Sometimes I think the figurative, imaginative worlds have been so filtered out of young minds by now it's best to say "Yes yes yes" to any descriptive oddity.

So, after talking and reading and discussing and note-taking, all done with supersonic swiftness in approximately fifteen minutes, off we go into the streets for the next thirty.

I urge my students—whether elementary school age or adults—to work for "abundance" as they walk: Look hard, pick up the messages in the cracks you've stepped over every single morning. Later you can choose among your riches for your poem. You can polish later. Tonight you may take

another walk closer to your house. We'll work on the poems during our next session, finding a few images or details we like best to center on. I tell them we're gathering clues—just keep asking, what makes our world out here different from any other world? My biggest "victory" comes when some guy who moaned and groaned about his dull neighborhood as we were starting out says, after weeks of walking and writing, "You know, I really changed my mind about this place! I mean, those old stoves over in Ramiro's uncle's yard are like, they all got *faces,* man! I feel like I could write ten poems about every single yard!"

In a town like San Antonio, the use of Spanish casts an even brighter light into the smiles. Even most English-speakers feel comfortable enough to pitch Spanish into our local talk, but there's an even greater interest triggered in inner-city classrooms when bilingual students feel *both* their languages are being welcomed or confirmed. Even if they decide to write only in English, it changes everything, I think. It says *yes* to all their words.

Here are some student poems:

En la calle de la luna

As I walk I sing of darkness, I sing of clouds,
how they change like people, they meet and they flee.
I sing of people, rainbow's light,
empty roads and wooded nights.
My voice is deep.
It sparkles to your ears
and swirls dust away.
My voice flaps and moves like a river.
It whispers to the world,
sometimes it shouts,
but always has a heart.
My voice can be a swan
and speak with its wings
but behind it is a shadow
that looks like the world.

—Vangie Castillo, eighth grade

Mi calle

bright and shiny straight and cracked
y clean sidewalks y picturas de animales
y people
trees beside the sidewalks
hills y mountains
and the most importante
is myself
great things around mi calle
street that leads to the city
tiendas y buildings
bonito gatitos around
mi calle
y casas y perros y barkingful wonder
buildings
and houses
roosters around mi casa su casa
who
do you think
I
am am am
?

—Jesús Alarcón, Jr., first grade

My chicken lives in a silver ciudad.
Mi perro lives in a dusty doghouse.
Mi gato lives in an empty trashcan
in the alley behind mi casa.
Mi hermano lives in a dream world.

—Ruben Hernandez, sixth grade

En mi ciudad Martians live in mobile homes.
In my city it rains and shines.
En mi ciudad it rains cats and dogs from the ground up.
In my city people go to restaurantes to eat.
People go to eat, and sleep in guitars.
En mi ciudad the teléfono rings y people answer it.
In my city people ring and phones answer us.

—Roland Morales, fourth grade

After seeing a young child gripping his mother's hand and rollerskating carefully past us, Jamshid Afshar, a fifth grader, wrote this poem:

Rollerskate!

When I rollerskate
I feel life in a way
where time is as fast as I am.
When I rollerskate
I feel power, like being
superior to the world.
When I turn on my rollerskates
it's like my life changing
as I grow older.
When I rollerskate
I feel that loneliness
cannot catch me.

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A Moment of Change

Using a Poem by Juan Ramón Jiménez

by Janine Pommy Vega

IN THE FIRST SEVERAL SESSIONS WITH STUDENTS, I cover some basic ground: metaphor and simile; the use of the five senses in description; and the idea of the persona poem wherein the interior of a character is as important as the world he, she, or it inhabits. This last I usually illustrate by picturing the largeness of the universe around oneself as equal to that of the universe within. The private world inside us contains our feelings, thoughts, secrets, memories, and dreams. I put both these worlds on the board: the five senses connecting us with the outer world, and at least five aspects of the internal world.

By this time the kids have gotten on a roll, in terms of creativity, and have come to trust me. Then I can bring in the following poem.

Mares

Siento que el barco mío
ha tropezado, allá en el fondo,
con algo grande!
Y nada
sucede! Nada... Quietud... Olas...

—Nada sucede; o es que ha sucedido todo,
y estamos ya, tranquilos, en lo nuevo?

—Juan Ramón Jiménez

Oceans

I have a feeling that my boat
has struck, down there in the depths,
against a great thing.
And nothing
happens! Nothing... Silence... Waves...

—Nothing happens? Or has everything happened,
and are we standing now, quietly, in the new life?

—Translated by Robert Bly

In class I change the last word to "way," which is also correct and better suits the lesson.

This poem works well with writers from fourth grade up. In a bilingual class, or a high school Spanish class, I make sure all the examples I bring are in both English and Spanish, and that there are enough photocopies for everyone. I read the poem in Spanish as well as English, so the students can hear its original music.

JANINE POMMY VEGA has taught in bilingual programs in upstate New York schools and the New York City school system since 1976. She has performed her own poetry throughout Colombia and Peru.

After I read the poem aloud, I ask if anybody understands it. I usually get a no. I explain that when something happens to us—something from the outside, or from the inside, like the first time one perceives cruelty in the world, or realizes one's own beauty—there is an absolute change in one's entire being. You may look the same, and act the same, but inside, you are different. You are changed.

If I am your friend, I can perhaps read something in your face, but otherwise unless you choose to tell me about it, the change remains entirely in your own private world. On the outside, apparently nothing has happened. I illustrate this with the example of the first time you realize Santa Claus does not exist, that somebody else leaves the toys.

Then I bring up another amazing fact. The way we human beings are built, we remember best when strong emotions are involved. If you're having a boring day today, in two years you will not remember it. But if your father has chosen today to leave your home and never come back, this day will be a memory that sticks to you; it becomes part of who you are.

I ask them to think back to a moment when something happened outside themselves, or something changed inside. We share the kids' poems I've brought in to illustrate. At this point I usually ask for volunteers to read them in both languages.

The following examples by students were written in English and translated by me into Spanish:

When My Father Left

When my father left, I was four,
and my brother was one.
As he went out, everything
began to get quiet. My
mother said he was only going
back to his country to stay
for a while, but we
couldn't understand her.
After he really went out, and my
mother closed the door, the house
had no sound. It wasn't cheerful
like it was when my father was
in the house. The next day
it was so quiet, it seemed
as if everyone was sleeping.

—Verónica López, fourth grade

Cuando se fue mi padre

Cuando se fue mi padre, yo tenía cuatro años
y mi hermanito tenía un año.

Cuando él salío, todo
comenzó a callarse. Mi madre dijo
que solamente iba a ir a su país
para quedar un rato
pero no pudimos entenderla.
Despues de que salió de veras
y mi madre cerró la puerta, la casa
no tenía sonido. No estaba alegre
como cuando mi padre estaba en casa.
El día siguiente, la casa estaba tan silenciosa,
parecía que todos dormían.

The Big Oak Tree

One time, in Santo Domingo,
my parents wanted to come
to New York
so that I could learn English.
I didn't want to come.
After dinner, I went
to a big oak tree, and let
the ants crawl over my feet.
They tickled me.
Suddenly, for some unknown
reason,
I wanted to come to New York.
If it would make my parents happy,
it would make me happy.

—Edward Espinal, sixth grade

El roble grande

Una vez, en Santo Domingo,
mis padres querían venir
a Nueva York
para que yo pudiera aprender Inglés.
Yo no quería venir.
Después del almuerzo, me fui
a un roble grande, y dejé
que las hormigas se arrastraran
sobre mis pies.
Me hicieron cosquillas.
De repente, por alguna razón
desconocida,
yo quería venir a Nueva York.
Si les hacía felices a mis padres,
me hacía feliz a mí.

Hard Work in Guyana

My grandfather was chopping down
sugar cane in the field,
his face and his back
were covered with sweat.
He hardly had any clothes on—
only pants, rolled up
like bluejeans.
It was my last day
before leaving my country.
When my grandfather came toward the house,
I ran to kiss him.

—Esther Sukhdeo, eighth grade

Trabajo duro in Guyana

Mi abuelo estaba cortando
caña de azucar en la finca
su rostro y sus espaldas
estaban cubiertos de sudor.
No llevaba mucha ropa—
solamente pantalones arrollados
como blue jeans.
Era mi último día
antes de partir de mi país.
Cuando vino mi abuelo hacia la casa,
yo corrí a besarlo.

(The following translations from Spanish are also by me.)

La música
(poem written for Spanish class)

Sentado en frente de mi piano,
Mis dedos tocan el teclado frío.
La música que hago está muy larga,
alta, rápida y completa.
Oigo el sonido de mis uñas
contra las teclas. Veo la música
volar delante de mis ojos.
Mis manos
se sienten separados de mi cuerpo.

—Jonathon Russo, eleventh grade

The Music

Sitting at my piano,
My fingers touch the cold keyboard.
The music I make is very long,
high, fast and complete.
I hear the sound of my nails
against the keys. I see the music
flying before my eyes.
My hands
feel separate from my body.

Recuerdo de un árbol

Fue una tarde
antes de que yo viniera
para este país,
había una mata de mango
llena de mangos maduros
en la cual yo me subía
y comía mucho. Comía tantos
mangos que no podía comer
otro más.
Y ahora cada vez
que viene la temporada de los mangos
yo me siento triste y solo
sin encontrar nada que hacer.

—Félix de la Cruz, ninth grade

Memory of a Tree

It was one afternoon
before I came to this country,
there was a mango tree

full of ripe mangos
into which I climbed
and ate a lot. I ate so many mangos
I couldn't eat even one more.
And now every time mango season comes
I feel sad and alone
with nothing to do.

I point out that in most cases the poets do not tell us how they feel. They describe the event and let us feel something for ourselves. I ask what senses the poets have used in their poems, to make the outside or inside moment come alive. Then I tell them a story from my own life, where apparently nothing special happened, but where the memory still sticks to me. I try to incorporate at least three senses in the story. Then I ask the kids what the feeling was, and to identify what senses I used.

Now we are ready to write about a memory that has stuck with us, a moment of change that is part of the person we have become. With other assignments, I encourage students to read their own poems aloud to the class; but since this can be a highly personal poem, I suggest that I read them at the end, omitting all names unless the writer indicates otherwise. Occasionally the poems deal with very serious and sensitive issues. If the authors prefer not to have their poems read at all, I ask them to write that at the top of their poems.

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PLUGS

NEW T&W BOOK

You don't have to know Spanish to use the new book from Teachers & Writers Collaborative, *Luna, Luna: Creative Writing Ideas from Spanish, Latin American, and Latino Literature* (excerpts appear in this issue). In the book's 21 lively and practical essays, poets, fiction writers, and teachers tell how they have used Spanish, Latin American, and Latino literature to inspire their students to write imaginatively. Their students range from primary to college age, monolingual and bilingual. The literary models come from both Spain and the Americas, placing the modern greats such as Lorca, Neruda, Jiménez, and Gabriela Mistral side by side with younger writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Victor Hernández Cruz, Ana Castillo, Nancy Morejón, and Alberto Blanco. This 248-page paperback ($14.95 + $3.50 shipping and handling) may be ordered from your local bookstore or directly from Teachers & Writers, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306. For more information or to order by VISA or MasterCard, call (212) 691-6590 Monday–Friday, 9–5.

SECOND ANNUAL NATIONAL POETRY MONTH

In April of 1997, teachers, writers, librarians, booksellers, and readers all over the country will celebrate poetry, by teaching it, reading it, writing it, performing it, setting up special displays and posters, and promoting it in schools, communities, and the media. Of course poetry needn't be confined to any single month, but, judging from last year's events, the National Poetry Month idea generated a lot of interest in poetry. For information on poetry activities for your school or community, ask for T&W's free National Poetry Month brochure (address above). Also contact the Academy of American Poets, 584 Broadway, New York, NY 10012. (212) 274-0343.

MURIEL RUKEYSER'S ESSAYS

It was with great pleasure that we recently received a copy of the reprint of Muriel Rukeyser's classic collection of essays, *The Life of Poetry*. This book has remained as fresh, passionate, and deeply moving as it was when it was first published, in 1949. Rukeyser's love of poetry and her political activism combined to form an unshakable belief that poetry could change the world for the better. But Rukeyser had more than powerful convictions; she also possessed a great intelligence that was willing to probe deeply and ask difficult questions. She was that rare thing: the real thing. This handsome reprint (223 pp., $14.95) is available from the publisher, Paris Press, PO Box 487, Ashfield, MA 01330, (413) 628-0051. Or from two distributors, SPD (800) 869-7553 and Consortium (800) 283-3572.

Muriel Rukeyser was one of the founders of Teachers & Writers Collaborative. For a description of her as a teacher (and more), see Christian McEwen's article "Four Women" in *Teachers & Writers* magazine, vol. 24, no. 4, March–April 1993, p. 4.

RIVER OF WORDS PROJECT

Poet Laureate Robert Hass invites all teachers to submit their students' poetry and art for the second annual River of Words national contest on the theme of watersheds. Eight grand prize winners and their parents will be flown to Washington, D.C., to be honored at the Library of Congress. The deadline is February 15. For entry forms and contest guidelines, contact International Rivers Network, River of Words Project, PO Box 4000-J, Berkeley, CA 94704. E-mail: row@irn.org. Website is at http://www.irn.org. (For a 40-pp. teacher's guide, send $5 for postage and handling.)

Other Poetic Models

by Julio Marzán & Ron Padgett

HERE ARE SIX OTHER WRITERS OF SPANISH, LATIN American, or Latino poetry that can be used in the classroom.

Nicanor Parra

Chilean poet Nicanor Parra (b. 1914) uses the roller coaster as a metaphor for his own poetry:

Montaña rusa

Durante medio siglo
La poesía fue
El paraíso del tonto solemne.
Hasta que vine yo
Y me instalé con mi montaña rusa.

Suban, si les parece.
Claro que yo no respondo si bajan
Echando sangre por boca y narices.

—Nicanor Parra

Roller Coaster

For half a century
poetry was
the paradise of the solemn fool.
Until I came along
and moved in with my roller coaster.

Get on, if you want to.
Clearly it's not my fault if you come down
spurting blood from your mouth and nostrils.

—Translated by Ron Padgett

Parra is a master of an ironic and playful naughtiness. The structure of this poem is simple: in the first stanza he brags, and in the second he issues a warning. After translating this poem into English, a small group of bilingual elementary school students came up with thie following poem:

La poesía del fregadero

Yo soy muy bueno lavando los platos.
El fregadero se parece come humo y arena movediza.
¡No entren! ¡Es peligroso!

The Poem of the Sink

I'm very good at washing the dishes.
The sink looks like smoke and quicksand.
Keep out! Danger!

—Bilingual class, P.S. 19, New York

Older students might also enjoy Parra's "The Teachers," which begins:

Los profesores nos volvieron locos
a preguntas que no venían al caso
cómo se suman números complejos
hay o no hay arañas en la luna
cómo murió la familia del zar
¿es posible cantar con la boca cerrada?
quién le pintó bigotes al la Gioconda
cómo se llaman los habitantes de Jerusalén
hay o no hay oxígeno en el aire
cuántos son los apóstoles de Cristo
cuál es el significado de la palabra consueta
cuáles fueron las palabras que dijo Cristo el la cruz
quién es el autor de Madame Bovary

In William Jay Smith's translation:

Our teachers drove us nuts
with their irrelevant questions:
how do you add compound numbers
are there or are there not spiders on the moon
how did the family of the czar die
can one sing with one's mouth shut
who painted the mustache on the Mona Lisa
what are the inhabitants of Jerusalem called
is there or is there not oxygen in the air
how many apostles did Christ have
what is the meaning of "consubstantial"
what were the words Christ spoke on the cross
who is the author of *Madame Bovary*

Parra goes on with this list, interspersing descriptions of his teachers and his bad attitude as a student. The ironic thing is that the poem suggests that he was actually quite a good student.

Vicente Huidobro

Vicente Huidobro (1893–1948) was influenced by the modern art and poetry he encountered when he lived in Paris around the time of the First World War. In the following somewhat surrealistic poem, Huidobro uses the list form:

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Fuerzas naturales

Una mirada
para abatir al albatros

Dos miradas
para detener el paisaje
al borde del río

Tres miradas
para cambiar la niña en
volantín

Cuatro miradas
para sujetar el tren que
cae en abismo

Cinco miradas
para volver a encender las estrellas
apagadas por el huracán

Seis miradas
para impedir el nacimiento
del niño acuático

Siete miradas
para prolongar la vida de
la novia

Ocho miradas
para cambiar el mar
en cielo

Nueve miradas
para hacer bailar los
árboles del bosque

Diez miradas
para ver la belleza que se presenta
entre sueño y una catástrofe

Natural Forces

One glance
to knock down the albatross

Two glances
to stop the landscape
at the river's edge

Three glances
to change the girl into
a kite

Four glances
to hold back the train which
falls in the chasm

Five glances
to relight the stars
blown out by the hurricane

Six glances
to prevent the birth
of the aquatic child

Seven glances
to prolong the life of
the bride

Eight glances
to change the sea
into sky

Nine glances
to make the trees in the wood
dance

Ten glances
to see the beauty that is present
between a dream and a catastrophe

—Translated by David Ossman and Carlos Hagen

Victor Hernández Cruz

Born in Puerto Rico and raised in New York, Victor Hernández Cruz (b. 1949) is a highly inventive and often witty poet who writes English poems, Spanish poems, and bilingual poems. His first book, *Snaps*, published when Cruz was nineteen, is filled with the musicality of Cruz's neighborhood and culture. The following poem is from *Snaps*:

going uptown to visit miriam

on the train
old ladies playing football
going for empty seats

very funny persons

the train riders
are silly people
I am a train rider

but no one knows where i am
going to take this train

to take this train
to take this train

the ladies read popular
paperbacks because they
are popular they get off
at 42 to change for the
westside line or off
59 for the department store

the train pulls in & out
the white walls dark-
ness white walls dark-
ness

ladies looking up I
wonder where they going
the dentist pick up
husband pick up wife
pick up kids
pick up ?grass?
to library to museum
to laundromat to school

but no one knows where i am
going to take this train

to take this train

to visit miriam
to visit miriam

& to kiss her
on the cheek
& hope i don't
see sonia on the
street

But no one knows where i'm taking
this train
taking this train
to visit miriam.

Adolescents like this poem for many reasons: the clarity and simplicity of its language, its humor, its romance, the speaker's distance from the adult world, and the drama of having a secret. After reading and hearing this poem, students could write about a moment in which they are aware of the sharp border between their internal and external experiences.

Other books by Cruz include *Mainland*; *Tropicalization*; *By Lingual Wholes*; *Rhythm, Content and Flavor*; and *Red Beans*.

Gabriela Mistral

This poem by the Chilean Nobel laureate introduces the power of the symbol, an object (or image) that embodies a complex structure of ideas that could be difficult to express in words. In this instance, bread symbolizes a union with the whole world, basic human needs, the cycles of cultivation and harvest, the history of humanity. Have your students think of a single thing that can contain or suggest many feelings or pictures. If this poem is a bit long for younger students, excerpt the first five stanzas, which retain the essential idea of the symbol.

Pan

Dejaron un pan en la mesa,
mitad quemado, mitad blanco,
pellizcado encima y abierto
en unos migajones de ampo.

Me parece nuevo o como no visto,
y otra cosa que él no me ha alimentado,
pero volteando su miga, sonámbula,
tacto y olor se me olvidaron.

Huele a mi madre cuando dio su leche,
huele a tres valles por donde he pasado:
a Aconagua, a Pátzcuaro, a Elqui,
y a mis entrañas cuando yo canto.

Otros olores no hay en la estancia
y por eso él así me ha llamado;
y no hay nadie tampoco en la casa
sino este pan abierto en un plato,
que con su cuerpo me reconoce
y con el mío yo reconozco.

Se ha comido en todos los climas
el mismo pan en cien hermanos:
pan de Coquimbo, pan de Oaxaca,
pan de Santa Ana y de Santiago.

En mis infancias yo le sabía
forma de sol, de pez o de halo,
y sabía mi mano su miga
y el calor de pichón emplumado...

Después le olvidé hasta este día
en que los dos nos encontramos,
yo con mi cuerpo de Sara vieja
y él con el suyo de cinco años.

Amigos muertos con que comíalo
en otras valles sientan el vaho
de un pan en septiembre molido
y en agosto en Castilla segado.

Es otro y es el que comimos
en tierras donde se acostaron.
Abro la miga y les doy su calor;
lo volteo y les pongo su hálito.

La mano tengo de él rebosada
y la mirada puesta en mi mano;
entrego un llanto arrepentido
por el olvido de tantos años,
y la cara se me envejece
y me renace en este hallazgo.

Como se halla vacía la casa,
estemos juntos los reecontrados,
sobre este mesa sin carne y fruta,
los dos es este silencio humano,
hasta que seamos otra vez uno
y nuestro día haya acabado...

Bread

They've left a loaf of bread
out on the table—half-burnt, half white,
pinched on top and open,
a few snowy crumbs.

It looks fresh, as if
no one had looked at it yet,
and only bread has nourished me.
But turning a piece in my fingers, I drift off,
forget how it feels and smells.

And I can smell my mother's milk,
Aconagua, Pátzcuaro, Elqui,
the three valleys I've passed through,
and my insides when I sing.

Other odors aren't in the room,
it's the bread that calls me.
No one in the house
except for this loaf on a plate
that knows me with its body
as I know it with mine.

In every land they eat this,
the same bread in a hundred brothers:
Coquimbo bread, Oaxaca bread,
the bread of Santiago, Santa Ana.

As a child I knew it
shaped like a sun, fish, or halo;
my hands knew its crumbs,
warm as a young pigeon.

Then I forgot it, until today
we found ourselves together,
my body old as Sarah's
next to a five-year-old child.

Dead friends I've eaten with
in other valleys: feel the mist
of a bread ground in September,
reaped in the August of Castille.

It's a different bread, and the same
we ate together, in the lands
where they lay down to die.
I break the piece, give them its warmth;
turn it in my fingers,
offer them a breath.

My hand is filled with bread,
my gaze is on my hand.
I break into tears, sorry
for forgetting whole years, and my face
grows old on me, or is reborn
in this discovery.

Since the house is empty,
let us, the reencountered, be together
at this table without meat or fruit,
the two of us
in a human silence,
until our day has ended
and we're one again.

—Translated by Marti Moody

Martín Espada

Martín Espada's poem "Tiburón" ("Shark") is reminiscent of the Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias's discussion of how Native Americans turn daily reality into myth: a garbage truck becomes a hungry monster. Have your students turn reality into magic by describing things seen every day, as Espada describes the shark.

Tiburón

East 116th
and a long red car
stalled with the hood up
roaring salsa
like a prize shark
mouth yanked open
and down into the stomach
the radio
of the last fisherman
still tuned
to his lucky station

Ana Castillo

The poet Ana Castillo uses the images of silence and sound in diverse ways in "A Marriage of Mutes." The poem can be used to encourage students to write in their own images the different ways that people say things, even without words or sounds.

A Marriage of Mutes

In the house
that was his house
where the woman who lived there
cut the vegetables
hacked the chicken
boiled on the stove
and waited across the table
as he ate, with eyes that asked
Was it all right? Was it enough?—
the woman who slept with him
changed the linen
scrubbed oil from his coveralls
hung laundry on the line
never sought the face of the woman
across the yard who hung sheets,
coveralls and underwear—
in the house where this man lived
so at peace with himself
the air grew sparse one morning.

The hall to the bathroom narrowed
as his feet grew angular and
head lightened.
He startled himself to hear his first
"caw"—beating black wings against walls,
knocking down picture frames of the woman's
ancestors, the offspring's bronzed shoes
off the buffet.
One could only guess what he might
have said had his beak contained teeth.
The woman who always anticipated
his needs opened a window.
She would have wanted the crow to sit
on the couch
to read with her,
listen to music,
languish in a moment of peace
before the bird who was the man
she had lived with in such gratitude flew off,
but of course, it was too much to ask.

It had always been too much to ask.

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