



On Poetry: Good Poems Convey the Truth but Often Lie

By JoANN BALINGIT, Special to The News Journal
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I wrote my first prose poem when I was ten. The setting was my family's cottage on a winter day, when the fireplace glowed and fat snowflakes fell. I described a soundless landscape outside and warm safety inside.

Our house was a Colonial with eight-paned sashes and an earth-toned braided rug before the hearth. I recall a super-natural contentment flooding my veins as I penned the last line at my rough desk: "Before our glowing fire, the cat purrs and the dog sleeps."

The present tense makes a scene feel more immediate. The device is sophisticated for fifth grade. How conscious was I of writing with purpose and believability? I wonder.

Mrs. Brierley liked my paragraph. She pulled me out of Reading to give me poster board, Magic Markers and paint jars. Why does JoAnn get to paint? demanded classmates. "She's making a winter display for our room," said my teacher. "Get back to work."

For weeks, my neatly lettered paragraph and giant illustration hung on the bulletin board in a place of honor. The snow, a whole jar of lathered tempera, cracked and fell off as it dried. But like the stories in stained glass that mesmerized me on Sundays, my story came alive in iconic images. To me this felt miraculous.

My big family lived in a cinder-block home surrounded by steamy grapefruit groves. I didn't know much about fireplaces or snow. However, Mrs. Brierley understood the truth of my story. It was a wish for family warmth and harmony.

The writer and artist Jean Cocteau said, "The poet is a liar who always speaks the truth." Good poems and stories convey human truths, but they do not always have to tell the truth. One of the best books about teaching children to write poetry is "Wishes, Lies, and Dreams" by Kenneth Koch.

The late great New York poet worked in public schools with children who had difficulty writing. He lit their imaginations by asking them to make up wishes and lies. "Asking them to do so gives them a whole lot of subject matter they usually don't think about in school," Koch explained.

Thank you, Mrs. Brierley, and Kudos to teachers everywhere who keep poetry and poets alive in our nation's schools. To welcome April and National Poetry Month, here are some wishes, lies and dreams by a few young people I have taught.

CHUNKY MIX

My life is like a bouncy bed
and this is why:
I feel joyful like a rabbit
getting its crunchy carrot.

One place I know is my home:
friendly with toys, books, greetings
and smiling faces.
It sounds so loud and happy
like a surprise birthday party.

The beautiful sky is blue--
but like the ocean,
nervous.

--Jonah B. Grade 4

NOW WHO AM I?

I used to be Albert Einstein now I'm me.
I used to be me but now I'm the dude in the laundry room.
Now I'm a piece of paper being written on
By that guy I used to be, the dude in the laundry room
& now I'm the piece of paper
Being typed on by that guy.
I used to be the piece of paper being typed on.
Now I'm the guy who wrote on me. Ha!
Now I want more..... money! Yeah!
Now I'm Californian breaking off the U. S
to hang with Hawaii. Hello Alaska!
No! No! I'm the earth now! I'm sad!
Wow, what a wonderful day. I've been six different things.
Well, now I'm happy— I'm the economy, YAY!

--Patrick H. Grade 5

Fishing: An ABECEDARIAN

AT the lake, you can feel the breeze
Beginning to start early
Continuing toward your beloved reflex
Dissipating your hook of sorrow
Eager to send the bait to its grave.

Firmly you hope luck is with you.
Good—you feel a tug on the float.
Hesitation will be your weakness.
Impulse will be your disorder,
Jaded with thoughts of Iraq...
Keep your eye on the trap!
Let the line go.
Master of this recreation.

--Denzel B. Grade 6

[These poems were written in Mrs. Ventresca's classes at Marshall Elementary & Mrs. Koster's class at A.G. Waters Middle School.]

JoAnn Balingit, Delaware's poet laureate, writes weekly columns to celebrate National Poetry Month. Contact her at <http://joannbalingit.org>. JoAnn will offer poetry summer camps this July at Cab Calloway Summer School of the Arts. <http://www.cabsummer.org>.