

Statement

The Journal of the Colorado Language Arts Society
Summer 2008, Volume 44, Number 3



In This Issue:

Teaching Poetry

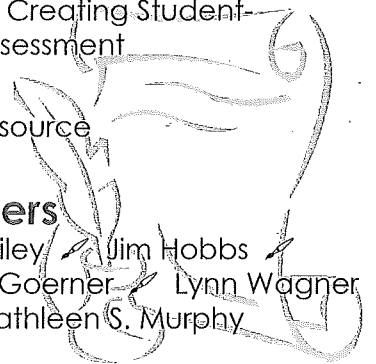
- Colorado Poets for Colorado Classrooms
- Poetry as Mediator and Authority: Connecting Poems to *Of Mice and Men*
- Artist's Perspective
- Touching the Future: How Form Can Reinforce Content

Reading, Assessing, and Reflecting

- Recent Trends in Literature about the Middle East
- From Ugly to Lovely: Creating Student-Centered Writing Assessment
- Reflecting with a Resource

Teachers as Writers

Submissions by: Julie Bailey / Jim Hobbs /
John Friedrich / Sally Goerner / Lynn Wagner
/ Kim Watchorn / Kathleen S. Murphy



Teaching Poetry

This strange craft has been likened to sticking pins in butterflies and displaying them under glass. Can a thing of beauty remain beautiful under the scrutiny of analysis? Sadly, swarms of teachers think not and have given up teaching the art of reading and writing poetry.

Perhaps studying *The Poem* in its natural environment, allowing it to drift where it chooses, might be the trick to keeping poetry alive in our classrooms. Several Colorado educators offer ideas and lesson plans that honor poetry in its wild environs--struggling to get free from the cocoon pen (or for 21st century students, the word processor). When students are encouraged to play with the words, when they see how the experts train their eye to follow the movement of sounds, poetry comes back to life.

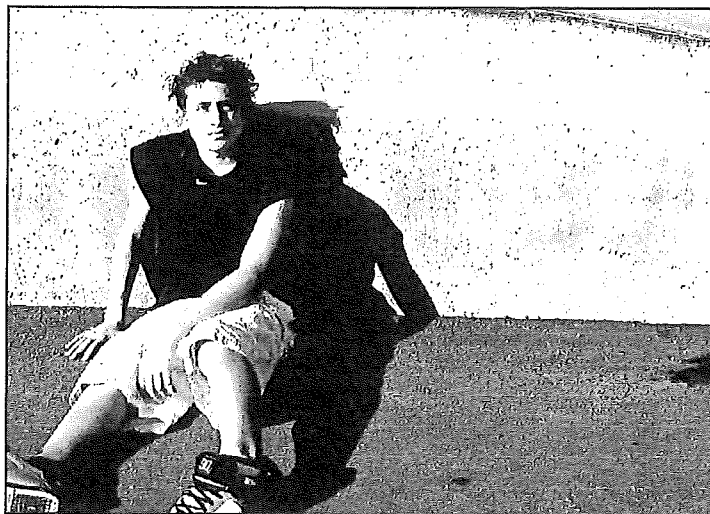
Title: "B'ball Court"

Artist: *Brittney Terry, 8th Grade*

School: Wayne Carle Middle School

District: Jefferson County Public Schools

Medium: Digital, Picasa2



Colorado Poets for Colorado Classrooms

by *Dr. Robert King and Dr. Beth Franklin*

There are several reasons middle and high school students may find poetry unattractive; lacking a meaningful connection to local or contemporary poets may be one significant reason. Using a website of Colorado poets may help students overcome their aversion to reading and writing poems.

For five years now, we've been putting together the Colorado Poets Center, a website of biographies and sample poems of over a hundred published Colorado poets (<http://colopoets.unco.edu>). Sponsored by the University of Northern Colorado, it contains a variety of poets with training and experience, including the poets laureate of Colorado and Denver (Mary Crow and Chris Ransick) and recent winners of the Colorado Book Award for Poetry (Abeyta, Tremblay, Irwin, Hilberry, Keplinger).

Poets are listed alphabetically and by region, and their availability for readings or work in schools is indicated along with their contact information. There are also pages for announcements, schedules of readings in the state, writing news, and the quarterly poetry newsletter, *E-Words*. You and your students may gain insight or inspiration, either individually or as a class.

For reading purposes, students could be asked to search the site the way they would an anthology and find a poet or poem they like and share it with each other, or write a response or even a paper. Probably none of the poems are "young adult" but most are "available"—to use a current *Vol. 44, No. 3*

term in poetic criticism—to the general reader.

Besides finding original poems, you might discover the possibility of compare and contrast with more well-known poems. Comparing William Stafford's often-anthologized poem "Traveling through the Dark," in which the narrator discovers a road-killed deer, to Colorado poet Art Goodtime's "Roadkill Coyote" would, as they have similar subjects, reveal differences in technique and theme.

But we're more concerned with instruction in writing poetry, and there are several techniques or approaches we've used that can be applied to some poems on the website and which might prove useful in your classroom. We have, for example, often used poems as "models" for writing. We've found the use of an actual poem as a take-off point for the student's own creative work is often more successful than assigning only a topic ("write a poem about spring") or only a form ("write a haiku"). Such sink-or-swim assignments don't necessarily involve learning; however, reading and reacting to a particular poem, and then finding something in that poem—its subject or form or approach—to jump-start writing, helps the student learn something about poetry while actually writing it.

For example, there is the idea of writing a poem in which something inanimate is the "speaker" of a poem. One could simply assign this as an idea and then receive, as we used to, a poem spoken by the classroom floor which does not get beyond "I hate being a floor!" But if students read

Statement

an actual poem, the creativity within it can often teach them something new.

Here is Colorado poet Michael Knisely's "Wind," available at the Colorado Poets Center website:

I am blowing
weather toward you.
I will change your lives
for better and worse.
We are married to
each other; you can-
not run away from
me. Even in death
your family may
let me scatter your
ashes. Accept me.
I will make your life
an amazing thing.

We're not suggesting here a particular lesson plan, as teachers will have their own successful ways to approach a poem after a class reading, but we do try to engage students by not immediately looking for right answers. Instead we ask, "What do you notice about this poem?" and we keep asking until the poem has been discussed. Some student may brusquely reply, "I notice it's weird," and assume this is the end of the discussion. But we attempt to take this at face value: "Yeah, it is a little weird. What makes it seem weird to you?" (And, later on, "Can you write something weird like this?")

If a class prefers to remain silent and blank, we've been known to ask, "Well, how many sentences does it have?" Once that information is ascertained, we can discover how the sentences are different, how "blowing weather toward you," the actual physical property of wind, is different than "we are married to each other," a metaphorical statement.

We would want to show how Knisely's poem goes beyond the conventional activities of wind ("I am the wind. I can carry snow. I can carry rain," etc.). As a real poem, it shows an intimate and unconventional way of conceiving of the subject. The first two lines may be a standard enough thing for "wind" to say, but the next two are not. And the poem continues by going farther from the natural subject of weather than we would have expected from the title. A student attracted to this kind of poem may realize that a poem in which "rain" is talking does not have to be simply about the physical facts of rain.

Class discussion about a real poem like "Wind" can also reveal something about the poet's techniques: "What do you notice about the lines? Yes, they're short and seem to be about the same length. In what way are they the same length?" Through discussion students may discover the form of the poem is free verse in which almost every line is five syllables long. Students who are interested in the

poem might be interested in trying out that style, even with another subject or approach. The difference in this approach is that an assignment without using Knisely's poem as a model would read: "Write a poem in which some element of weather is talking and make each line five syllables long." Such assignments may sound creative or artistic, but they give the student little else to go on. And we have seen many cases where these "great" assignments prompts less than great responses because they don't seem to be connected to any reality other than teacher-instruction. In the model-poem approach, the poem is the reality, the instruction.

"Perfect Afternoon," by Colorado poet Linda Keller, is another example of a possible poem-based assignment:

Above
a curved roof of woven branches
triangles of light
enter
draw a patchwork quilt
below

Tucked under
the comfort of
shadows weight
slivers of crystal blue
peek in

Time stops

The deep perfume
of summer bliss
inhaled

Keller's poem, from her book *Comet Dreams* (2004), is a very lyrical description of one moment in one location. "What do you notice about this?" a teacher might inquire. "There's no punctuation!" students might answer. "That's right. So it means you can write a poem without any punctuation. But are some lines sentences? How do you know? Are other passages incomplete sentences?" As writing teachers, we can use this poem as a model. Having read and discussed it, realizing that it contains a description of a "perfect" place and a time, the assignment would be to pick a place known to the student and a particular time, and describe it in concise language. In such a case, we'd trust the student to apply what was learned from discussing the poem to his/her own 'perfect' place and time.

It could go farther, depending on the students' willingness. Indeed, one could demand that a student strictly follow the "form" of the poem: one stanza of one sentence with the words 'broken up' in free-verse; a 2nd stanza in the same style; a 3rd stanza that contains a short emphatic sentence; and a final stanza that is an incomplete sentence and seems to conclude the poem.

Understand that such a formal assignment would be ridiculous if presented as an abstract task. But it happens to be this one particular poem's form, and trying to follow it would both help in reading future poems as well as help in writing one.

A final example from the Colorado Poets Center website is a poem by Lonnie Hodges, entitled "Teaching":

I want to be
 witches' knees and elbows:
 roots just barely visible
 enough above ground
 to stumble into a child's
 imagination forever.
 I want to be
 the breeze in the aspens,
 barely loud enough
 to waken the leaves
 but not quiet the birds.
 I want to be
 the loneliness
 in the center
 of a Japanese pine seed,
 dropped from some kid's pocket
 in the Colorado Sand Dunes,
 and have everyone wondering
 how it is I came to be there.

We picked this one because frankly, as teachers, we find the subject matter automatically interesting, although we agree some students may not.

But what do we notice about the poem? It has a subject which is represented by the title. But nothing in the poem following seems to be about teaching—no papers to grade, no assignments to make, no deadlines. It must be, then, a series of metaphorical statements: e.g. I want to teach the way roots just above ground can cause a student to stumble into some awareness.

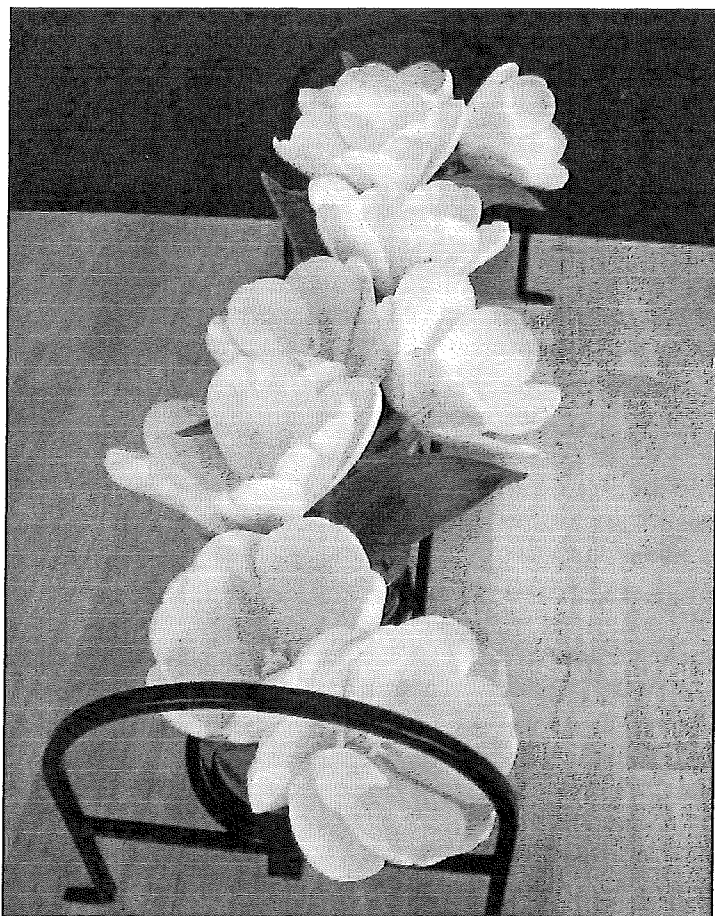
Furthermore, we notice the poem is a series of three such statements or images, each begun by "I want to be...." It is, therefore, a parallel poem (anaphora is the fancy Greek term, the accent on the second syllable) in which each statement begins with the same wording. As such, it has a connection to Walt Whitman's technique of parallelism, as well as Kenneth Koch's suggestion that children write a long poem where each line begins with "I wish...." (*Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, 1970). After discussion, therefore, writing a poem "like this" on any subject means to pick a topic in which you're involved (swimming, playing video games, being a student, etc.) and write three or four sentences that say something about how you feel or how you'd like to be in that activity but without actual details of the title. If you're writing about swimming, the metaphorical lines couldn't contain references to moving in the water—they would have to be other images that seem

to touch on that activity: perhaps flying a certain way in the air, perhaps feeling like a locomotive, and the like.

Although we've sometimes made assignments for younger children that simply ask for parallelism, for beginning each line in a poem with the same words (At night..., When I dream..., I wish..., etc.), an exercise that often stimulates creativity because one can't write the same thing over and over, we find that actually beginning with a parallel poem, discussing it, and

then directing students to use that technique as a model for their own subject, is more effective with older students.

Using a model-poem approach emphasizes the fact that the poem is real, that other poets have done the same thing, thus avoiding the possible stigma of a teacher-initiated structure or form. So, we invite you to visit <http://colopoets.unco.edu> to find other poems from a variety of living and local writers that could be used as models for classroom writing. Or, at least, find some poems for you to enjoy some evening when the grading is done.



Title: "Fresh Tulips on My Table"

Artist: K. Murphy

Medium: Digital Photo