This teaching guide packet is designed to be used with the television documentary "Fooling with Words" hosted by Bill Moyers featuring the 1998 Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival, during which thousands of people gathered for four days to listen to, read, discuss, and celebrate contemporary poetry. The packet can be used in arts and social studies classes as well as in English and literature classes. Featured poets represent different cultural perspectives, determined in part by differences in gender, age, and ethnic background. Included in the packet are "poet cards" (featuring poems, poets' statements, biographical notes, photographs, discussion questions, and suggested activities), time grid, selected bibliography, and a guide to building a core high school poetry collection. It is recommended that teachers use the packet's materials in the following ways: preview the programs and read each poem carefully before making class assignments (there may be sensitive and/or disturbing subjects); decide which segment and/or specific poems to offer to the class, and use the time code on the folder to identify and cue each segment; become familiar with all "poet cards"; use quoted statements by each poet to spark discussion about the poet's perspective on poetry and/or about poetry in general; use the single, introductory question for each poet to help students enter a poem by reminding them that poetry connects directly to their lives; stimulate imaginative experimentation and cross-fertilization by modifying, adapting, and re-applying "poet card" activities to students' capacities; consider the relationship of printed text to actual performance; and consult the "Fooling with Words" World Wide Web site for additional poems and expanded statements about poetry. (NKA)
FOOLING WITH WORDS
WITH BILL MOYERS
THE 1998 GERALDINE R. DODGE POETRY FESTIVAL
TEACHER'S GUIDE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."
Dear Educator:

This is about something I think you will enjoy personally and find helpful in your work with students.

Fooling with Words is a PBS documentary special produced with young people in mind. We wanted them to see just how vital, compelling, and enjoyable poetry can be. So we took our cameras to the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival in Waterloo, New Jersey, to capture the excitement of "the Woodstock of Poetry." We covered the festival as if it were a sporting event, with cameras everywhere—on the poets as they performed; the audience as it watched, laughed, wept, and cheered; workshops where students and aspiring bards talked face-to-face with the poets about their craft and their lives.

The result is a film that will introduce your students to the power and pleasure of poetry in many guises—from the rhythmic cadences of Amiri Baraka and Kurtis Lamkin (who accompanies his poems on the kora, the African ancestor of the harp) to the haunting evocations of Lorna Dee Cervantes and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, the puckish wit of Paul Muldoon, the spiritual power of Jane Hirshfield, the wry commentary by Deborah Garrison on the life of women in the workplace, and the moving remembrances of "Halley’s Comet" by Stanley Kunitz, at 95 the dean of American poets.

This smorgasbord of contemporary American poetry comes at a timely moment. The New York Times says poetry is enjoying a resurgence in America. The Atlantic Monthly says, "the nation’s hot romance with poetry shows no sign of cooling off." Esquire predicts poetry will be the pop-culture event at the opening of the new millennium. Volkswagen included poetry books as a “standard feature” in all its new cars during National Poetry Month, and poetry is being celebrated at events from the recent White House gathering of poets to poetry slams in smoky downtown bars.

Fooling with Words captures the spirit of this phenomenon. We hope you will tape the program and use the accompanying materials.

Sincerely,

Bill Moyers

"We have fallen into the place where everything is music. That’s what the Festival feels like—we feel this vast interconnectedness. It’s amazing that this many people can be really genuinely excited about fooling with words."

—Coleman Barks

“One thing I love about the Festival is seeing the thousands of high school kids trooping in, so excited about the possibility of other ways to live, about the choice that poets make to do something difficult, unlikely, a little bit out of the cultural mainstream.”

—Mark Doty

"The great feature of the Festival is its generosity of spirit, its welcome to different factions in poetry, different schools of poetry, young and old. That demonstration of the democratic spirit is indicative of one of the most important revolutions in the whole history of modern poetry in this country."

—Stanley Kunitz

"The beautiful thing about being at the Festival is that it’s like a carnival, and you’re the ride. You can be a roller coaster, or whatever."

—Kurtis Lamkin
MARGE PIERCY

"Poetry is very diverse. Different poets speak to different people. Different poets strike different chords. We all belong to a great endeavor, and the more good poets there are, the more people will read poetry."

COLEMAN BARKS

“When I was about twelve I kept a little black notebook and wrote down words that I loved the taste of, like ‘azalea,’ or, for some reason, ‘halcyon,’ the bird that calms the waters with its wings, and other odd words, and images too.”

LORNA DEE CERVANTES

“They didn’t teach poetry in the barrio school. I thought poems were songs for people with bad voices, and my brother, a musician, always assured me that’s what I had. So I just always wrote poetry. I don’t think there was a time in my life when poetry wasn’t at the center.”

MARK DOTY

“The act of making a poem implies that somebody’s listening. So we’re reaching toward, imaginatively, another consciousness, another listener.”

Remarks About Being a Poet and About Poetry

JANE HIRSHFIELD

“Poetry was the field in which I developed the self I became. We write in order to find out who we are.”

AMIRI BARAKA

“You think your stuff is good? See those guys digging a hole in the street there? When they get a minute off to eat a sandwich, go read them a poem. See if you get hit on the head. If you don’t get hit on the head, you’ve got a future.”

SHIRLEY GEOK-LIN LIM

“If a poem does not move or give pleasure, then I don’t think it really succeeds as art. Isn’t it important for us to get pleasure in some way, even in the deep pain and grief, to survive? Maybe pleasure is the oar that we need not to drown.”

LUCILLE CLIFTON

“I am interested in being understood, not admired.”

Funding for this guide is provided by the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.
INTRODUCTION

Since 1986, the restored nineteenth-century village of Waterloo, New Jersey, has hosted the largest poetry gathering in North America—the biennial Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival. For four days, thousands of people gather to listen to, read, discuss, and celebrate poetry.

FOOLING WITH WORDS with Bill Moyers captures the excitement of the 1998 Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival. It features performances by and interviews with some of the most accomplished poets of our time.

BROADCAST: September 26, 1999 on PBS (check local listings)

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Preview the programs and read each poem carefully before making class assignments, as some poets may deal with potentially sensitive and/or disturbing subjects.

Decide which segments and/or specific poems to offer to your class, and use the time code on the folder to identify and cue up each segment. Remember: You can tape programs from FOOLING WITH WORDS or SOUNDS OF POETRY and use them in the classroom for one year after each broadcast.

Familiarize yourself with all Poet Cards, noting that some poets are presented on two sides of a Poet Card, others only on a single side. Designed for photocopying, these cards offer poems and a range of other resources for each poet represented: a photograph, a bio note, a statement relating to poetry or being a poet, an introductory question, several questions designed to stimulate discussion, and suggested follow-up activities.

Use quoted statements by each poet to spark discussion about this poet’s perspective on poetry and/or about poetry in general. Much can be gained by choosing and comparing favorites, by discussing how each statement relates to that poet’s poems, by discussing how a statement by one poet relates to the poems of another poet, or by assembling these statements into a collage.

Use the single, introductory question for each poet to help students enter a poem by reminding them that poetry connects directly to their own lives. For example, start the discussion of a poet by asking students to determine which poem the large-print, introductory question addresses. Follow the question as it goes into that poem and back out into life. Encourage ongoing reflection by asking students to make up their own introductory questions.

Stimulate imaginative experimentation and cross-fertilization by modifying, adapting, and re-applying Poet Card activities as your inclinations and your students’ capacities suggest.

Consider the relationship of printed text to actual performance, including on-the-spot improvisation—as with Amiri Baraka, Coleman Barks, and Kurtis Lamkin.

Consult FOOLING WITH WORDS Online for additional poems, expanded statements about poetry, and a wide range of other program-related resources.

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS:

1) Enlarge statements by poets on the Poet Cards and post them around your classroom.
2) Let students choose poems to read aloud, then review how the poets actually perform these poems on the video.
3) Distribute copies of selected Poet Cards to small groups of students, and ask each group to define linkages among the poets and the poems.
4) Provide students with copies of the complete set of Poet Cards and ask them to organize their own anthologies, according to their own principles.

A Note on Interdisciplinary Use

This FOOLING WITH WORDS Teacher’s Guide can be used in classes in the arts and social studies as well as in English and literature classes. The poets in FOOLING WITH WORDS and THE SOUNDS OF POETRY represent different cultural perspectives, determined in part by differences in gender, age, and ethnic background. Their voices can spark interest in events, places, or historical periods and bring a human scale to large, abstract concepts. In addition to sharing these materials with colleagues teaching other subjects, many teachers regularly invite students to choose poets and poems relevant to their other courses of study.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


PHILIP ANTONIO


MORE GOOD BROWSING


MORE POETRY OF DIVERSE CULTURES


SUPPLEMENTARY

GOING DEEPER


MORE ABOUT POETRY

We want to know what you think of the FOOLING WITH WORDS Teacher's Guide. Your response will be enormously helpful when we develop future teacher's guides.

We won't share your address or phone number with telemarketers or others. If you don't mind receiving a follow-up call from WNET to find out how you used the guide, please include your school phone number. Only a small number of respondents will be called.

If you'd like to be included on a mailing list to receive information about future Poetry Festivals, please check the box below. And, if you're interested, we'd be happy to send you another FREE teacher's guide—POETRY HEAVEN, featuring the 1996 Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival—while supplies last.

1. In which classes did you use FOOLING WITH WORDS?
2. How many students used these materials? ______
3. Estimate how many students will use these materials in the future. ______
4. How many teachers did you share the guide with? ______
5. On a scale of 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent), please rate the guide. ______
6. Did students view the program at home? ______ In class? ______
7. Is this the first time you've taught contemporary poetry? ______
8. Which component of the guide was most valuable? ______
   Which was least valuable? ______
9. Which Poet Cards did you use? ______
10. Comments ______
11. Please send me more information about future Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festivals ______
12. Please send me a copy of the POETRY HEAVEN Teacher's Guide ______

The 1998 Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival was funded, organized, and produced by the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

GERALDINE R. DODGE FOUNDATION
163 Madison Avenue
P.O. Box 1239
Morristown, NJ 07962-1239

POET CARDS
Amiri Baraka
Coleman Barks
Lorna Dee Cervantes (one side)
Lucille Clifton
Mark Doty
Deborah Garrison (one side)
Jane Hirshfield (one side)
Stanley Kunitz
Kurtis Lamkin
Shirley Geok-lin Lim
Paul Muldoon (one side)
Sharon Olds (one side)
Marge Piercy
Robert Pinsky
Poem Subjects and Themes (one side)

LOG ON
FOOLING WITH WORDS Online, at www.wnet.org/foolingwithwords or www.pbs.org/foolingwithwords, provides a downloadable version of this teacher's guide plus a wide range of additional related resources—a Web-based lesson plan, a series of teaching strategies, additional poems by the poets appearing in FOOLING WITH WORDS and SOUNDS OF POETRY, and a library of video clips of the poets reading and discussing poetry. An online discussion forum will allow teachers to talk about issues of interest and concern. A special survey section will allow teachers to give feedback on the educational materials and on the program. Of course, the site will include a resource section, with information about materials available in book form, on audio and videotape, and on the Web.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE
"I believe you have to be true to people. You have to be writing something that people understand but, at the same time, something that's profound enough to have meaning past, say, the six o'clock news."

Born in 1934 in Newark, New Jersey, Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones) has international stature as a poet, dramatist, essayist, and political activist. Associated with the Beats in the 1950s, he became a leader in the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s. Much of his work considers the political situation of people of color in capitalist America.

**Wise I**

WHY's (Nobody Knows The Trouble I Seen)
Trad.

If you ever find yourself, somewhere lost and surrounded by enemies who won't let you speak in your own language who destroy your statues & instruments, who ban your oom boom ba boom then you are in trouble deep trouble they ban your oom boom ba boom you in deep deep trouble humph!

probably take you several hundred years to get out!

**Monday in B Flat**

I can pray all day & God won't come.

But if I call 911 The Devil Be here in a minute!

Baraka's Poetry Reading as Jazz Performance

Like a jazz musician, Amiri Baraka generally begins with a set text but allows himself liberty to improvise freely in response to the moment and his immediate context. In addition to deleting from and adding to his printed text, even dropping or repeating whole stanzas, he also sometimes performs long passages which have no direct print analogues. While his allegiance is always to the live poem happening now, he bases that living poem on dedicated practice and preparation.

"Wise, Why's, Y's (Africa Section)" includes excerpts from published poems and improvised material. A complete transcript showing these distinctions appears on FOOLING WITH WORDS Online.
Amiri Baraka

from Wise, Why's, Y'z (Africa Section)

The chains
& dark
dark &
dark, if there was “light”
it meant
Ghoosts

Rotting family we
ghost ate
three
A people flattened & chained &
bathed & degraded
in their own hysterical waste

below
beneath
under neath
depth down
up under

grave cave pit
lower & deeper

weeping miles below
skyscraper gutters

Blue blood hole into which blueness
is the terror, massacre, torture
& original western
holocaust

Beneath the violent philosophy
of primitive
cannibals

Primitivism
Violent
Steam driven
Cannibals*

... It's my brother, my sister.
At the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean there's a
railroad made of human bones.
Black ivory
Black ivory

... Think of Slavery
as
Educational!**

*from "So The King Sold the Farmer #39"  **from "Y The Link Will Not Always Be "Missing"#40"

QUESTIONS

1. Although "Wise I" directly addresses the history of
African Americans, its language remains open to broader
application. What else could it address?

2. If we "Think of Slavery / as / Educational," what can
slavery teach us?

3. How do these three poems reflect or comment upon
one another? How is each unique?

"Wise I" and sections of "Wise, Why's, Y'z (Africa Section)," including excerpts
from "So the King Sold the Farmer #39" and "Y the Link Will Not Always Be
"Missing"#40" from TRANSBLUESENCY, The Selected Poems of Amiri
Baraka/LeRoi Jones (1961-1995), reprinted by permission of Sterling Lord
Literistic, Inc. Copyright by Amiri Baraka.

"Monday in B-Flat" by Amiri Baraka, from FUNKLORE: New Poems, 1984-1995,
Littoral Press, Los Angeles. Reprinted by permission of Sterling Lord Literistic,
Inc. Copyright by Amiri Baraka.

ACTIVITIES

1. Consider what happens when Baraka repeats, with
subtle variations, the word "slave." Try to do something
similar with a word that carries strong feeling for you.

2. Develop a chant of your own, using percussive rhythm.

3. Research the history of slavery, focusing on its practice:
in North America, in your state, in your town, or in your
family. Report on your research, in prose or in poetry.

4. Make an object, mural, dance, or piece of music that
expresses the Middle Passage as portrayed in "Wise,
Why's, Y'z (Africa Section)."
Coleman Barks

“I like both translating Rumi and writing my own poems. But in one, I have to disappear—with Rumi. In the other, I have to get in the way—get my personality and my delights and my shame into the poem.”

Where Everything Is Music

Don’t worry about saving these songs! And if one of our instruments breaks, it doesn’t matter.

We have fallen into the place where everything is music.

The strumming and the flute notes rise into the atmosphere, and even if the whole world’s harp should burn up, there will still be hidden instruments playing.

So the candle flickers and goes out. We have a piece of flint, and a spark.

This singing art is sea foam. The graceful movements come from a pearl somewhere on the ocean floor.

Poems reach up like spindrift and the edge of driftwood along the beach, wanting!

They derive from a slow and powerful root that we can’t see.

Stop the words now. Open the window in the center of your chest, and let the spirits fly in and out.

by Jelaluddin Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

In 1976 Coleman Barks began translating the poems of Jelaluddin Rumi, a thirteenth-century Sufi mystic, a poet as famous in the Islamic world as Shakespeare is in the West. He has since become the primary translator bringing Rumi’s poems into contemporary English. Born in Tennessee in 1937, he now lives in Athens, Georgia.

How fully is the beauty you love what you do?

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened. Don’t open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.

Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

by Jelaluddin Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks
**Jars of Springwater**

Jars of springwater are not enough anymore. Take us down to the river!

The face of peace, the sun itself.
No more the slippery cloudlike moon.

Give us one clear morning after another and the one whose work remains unfinished,

who is our work as we diminish, idle, though occupied, empty, and open.

by Jelaluddin Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

---

**from New Year's Day Nap**

Fiesta Bowl on low.
My son lying here on the couch on the "Dad" pillow he made for me in the Seventh Grade. Now a sophomore at Georgia Southern, driving back later today, he sleeps with his white top hat over his face.

*I'm a dancin' fool.*

Twenty years ago, half the form he sleeps within came out of nowhere with a million micro-lemmings who all died but one piercer of membrane, specially picked to start a brainmaking, egg-drop soup, that stirred two sun and moon centers for a new-painted sky in the tiniest ballroom imaginable.

Now he's rousing, six feet long, turning on his side. Now he's gone.

---

**QUESTIONS**

1. What qualities of "Jars of Springwater" suggest that its translator was successful in disappearing?

2. What qualities of the passage from "New Year's Day Nap" suggest that Coleman Barks was successful in getting his personality, delights, and shame into the poem?

3. Why do we fall "into the place / where everything is music"? Why don't we climb up to that place?

---

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Translate something from another language or from another medium of expression and concentrate on trying to disappear from the process of translation.

2. Write something or make something—a picture, a dance, a sculpture—in which you deliberately let yourself "get in the way."

3. In the program Coleman Barks says, "When you’re in a place where music is, you can say things over and over and over." With music as a background, say something over and over, as the music invites. With others, let each person repeat his or her own language to the same music. Discuss what you learn about the rhythm of words.

4. Research the life and work of Jelaluddin Rumi and Sufi spiritual traditions. Report on your research or create a display (visual or aural) that allows others to experience some part of what you learned.
"When you grow up as I did—a Chican-India in a barrio, in a Mexican neighborhood in California, welfare class—you’re not expected to speak. You’re ignored. You’re something in the periphery, emptying garbage cans or washing plates. You’re not expected to speak, much less write."

---

**Poet’s Progress**

for Sandra Cisneros

I haven’t been much of anywhere, books my only voyage, crossed no bodies of water, seen anything other than trees change, birds take shape—like the rare Bee Hummingbird that once hovered over the promise of salsa in my garden: a fur feathered vision from Cuba in Boulder, a wetback, stowaway, refugee, farther from home than me. Now, snow spatters its foreign starch across the lawn gone crisp with freeze. I know nothing tropical survives long in this season. I pull the last leeks from the frozen earth, smell their slender tubercular lives, stand in the sleet whiteout of December: roots draw in, threads of relatives expand while solitude, the core, that slick-headed fist of self, is cool as my dog’s nose and pungent with resistance. Now when the red-bellied woodpecker calls his response to a California owl, now, when the wound transformer in the womb slackens, and I wait for potential: all the lives I have yet to name, all my life I have willed into being alive and brittle with the icy past. And it’s enough now, listening, counting the unknown arachnids and hormigas who share my love of less sweeping. For this is what I wanted, come to, left alone with anything but the girlhood horrors, the touching, the hungry leden melt down of the hours. Or the future—a round negation, black suction of the heart’s conception. Save me from a stupid life! I prayed. Leave me anything but a stupid life. And that’s poetry.

---

**FOOLING WITH WORDS**

**QUESTIONS**

1. In “Poet’s Progress” Lorna Dee Cervantes describes the course of her life as a poet. Where has she been? Where is she going?

2. What do the animals and plants in “Poet’s Progress” tell us about the poet at the center of the poem?

3. According to “Poet’s Progress,” what is poetry? What is “a stupid life”?

4. What effects does the poet achieve by describing a Bee Hummingbird as “a wetback, stowaway, refugee”?

**ACTIVITIES**

1. Keep a journal of your encounters with animals and plants, of all sorts. Note how these encounters stimulate or reflect your feelings and ideas.

2. Write your own “Poet’s Progress” about yourself or a poet you admire.

3. Create a bulletin board entitled “And that’s poetry.” Let everyone contribute something—a drawing, a photograph, a phrase, a poem, etc.—until it is entirely covered.

---

What do you risk in praying for “anything but a stupid life”?

---

Deborah Garrison

"I need to feel that the language in my poems is alive, in the sense of talking on the phone to a friend, sharing gossip."

Please Fire Me

Here comes another alpha male, and all the other alphas are snorting and pawing, kicking up puffs of acrid dust while the silly little hens clatter back and forth on quivering claws and raise a titter about the fuss.

Here comes another alpha male—a man's man, a dealmaker, holds tanks of liquor, charms them pantsless at lunch:

I've never been sicker. Do I have to stare into his eyes and sympathize? If I want my job I do. Well I think I'm through with the working world, through with warming eggs and being Zenlike in my detachment from all things Ego.

I'd like to go somewhere else entirely, and I don't mean Europe.

Father, R.I.P., Sums Me Up at Twenty-Three

She has no head for politics, craves good jewelry, trusts too readily, marries too early. Then one by one she sends away her friends and stands apart, smug sapphire, her answer to everything a slender zero, a silent shrug—and every day still hears me say she'll never be pretty.

Instead she reads novels, instead her belt matches her shoes. She is master of the condolence letter, and knows how to please a man with her mouth:

Good. Nose too large, eyes too closely set, hair not glorious blonde, not her mother's red, nor the glossy black her younger sister has, the little raven I loved best.

What makes you want "to go / somewhere else entirely"?

QUESTIONS
1. In "Please Fire Me," the poet talks about people as if they were particular kinds of animals. What does her choice of animals suggest about her attitude toward her situation? About her attitude toward herself?
2. What might have led Deborah Garrison to write "Father, R.I.P. . . ."? Explain why you would or would not write such a poem.

ACTIVITIES
1. Based on what Deborah Garrison describes in her poem "Please Fire Me," write new "rules for the workplace" or "rules for the world."
2. Suppose you were Deborah Garrison's boss or coworker. What would you do after reading "Please Fire Me"? Describe or role-play the conversation you would have with her.
Lucille Clifton

"What they call you is one thing. What you answer to is something else."

Self-taught, Lucille Clifton uses plain language to explore life's complexities and to affirm the spirit's endurance. Recently named a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, she has served on faculties of universities across the country and is currently Distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary's College of Maryland.

adam thinking

she
stolen from my bone
is it any wonder
i hunger to tunnel back
inside desperate
to reconnect the rib and clay
and to be whole again

some need is in me
struggling to roar through my
mouth into a name
this creation is so fierce
i would rather have been born

eve thinking

it is wild country here
brothers and sisters coupling
claw and wing
groping one another

i wait
while the clay two-foot
rumbles in his chest
searching for language to
call me
but he is slow
tonight as he sleeps
i will whisper into his mouth
our names

Who have you turned yourself from, and toward, at once?
Lucille Clifton

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

oh absalom my son my son

even as i turned myself from you
i longed to hold you oh
my wild haired son

running in the wilderness away
from me from us
into a thicket you could not foresee

if you had stayed
i feared you would kill me
if you left i feared you would die

oh my son
my son
what does the Lord require

QUESTIONS

1. In “won’t you celebrate with me,” Lucille Clifton says she had “no model” when she was growing up. How, then, did she become who she is?

2. Lucille Clifton uses biblical titles in three of these poems—“adam thinking,” “eve thinking,” and “oh absalom my son my son.” Create alternative titles for these poems. What would you gain or lose by eliminating the biblical allusions?

3. Listen to the words Lucille Clifton emphasizes when she reads “adam thinking” and “eve thinking.” How does your listening experience differ from your reading experience?

ACTIVITIES

1. Choose something about yourself that you would like others to celebrate with you. Create an invitation in words or pictures that expresses what it is you’re celebrating and why.

2. Do research in the library to find out more about who Absalom was and what the name has come to mean in modern times. If there is an “Absalom” in your life or in the life of someone you know, think of what you would like to say to him or her. Express yourself in any medium you like.

3. Choose two figures from history, mythology, fiction, movies, or television who have a relationship with each other. What secret or surprising things might each think about the other? Develop your own scenario any way you like—for example, in poetry, as a cartoon or comic strip, photo essay, two monologues, a dialogue, or pantomime.

"adam thinking" and "eve thinking" © 1991 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted from QUILTING: POEMS 1987-1990 with the permission of BOA Editions, Ltd.

"won’t you celebrate with me" from The book of light © 1993 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted by permission of Copper Canyon Press, Post Office Box 271, Port Townsend, WA 98368.

"oh absalom my son my son," © 1996 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted from THE TERRIBLE STORIES with the permission of BOA Editions, Ltd.
New Dog

Jimi and Tony can’t keep Dino, their cocker spaniel; Tony’s too sick, the daily walks more pressure than pleasure, one more obligation that can’t be met.

And though we already have a dog, Wally wants to adopt, wants something small and golden to sleep next to him and lick his face. He’s paralyzed now from the waist down, whatever’s ruining him moving upward, and we don’t know how much longer he’ll be able to pet a dog. How many men want another attachment, just as they’re leaving the world?

Wally sits up nights and says, I’d like some lizards, a talking bird, some fish. A little rat.

So after I drive to Jimi and Tony’s in the Village and they meet me at the door and say, We can’t go through with it, we can’t give up our dog, I drive to the shelter—just to look—and there is Beau: bounding and practically boundless, one brass concatenation of tongue and tail, unmediated energy, too big, wild, perfect. He not only licks Wally’s face but bathes every irreplaceable inch of his head, and though Wally can no longer feed himself he can lift his hand, and bring it to rest on the rough gilt flanks when they are, for a moment, still. I have never seen a touch so deliberate. It isn’t about grasping; the hand itself seems almost blurred now, softened, though tentative only because so much will must be summoned, such attention brought to the work—which is all he is now, this gesture toward the restless splendor, the unruly, the golden, the animal, the new.

Golden Retrievals

Fetch? Balls and sticks capture my attention seconds at a time. Catch? I don’t think so. Bunny, tumbling leaf, a squirrel who’s—oh joy—actually scared. Sniff the wind, then I’m off again: muck, pond, ditch, residue of any thrillingly dead thing. And you? Either you’re sunk in the past, half our walk, thinking of what you can never bring back, or else you’re off in some fog concerning—tomorrow, is that what you call it? My work: to unsnare time’s warp (and woof!), retrieving, my haze-headed friend, you. This shining bark, a Zen master’s bronzy gong, calls you here, entirely, now: bow-wow, bow-wow, bow-wow.
Who'd have thought
they'd be so good? Every valley,
proclaims the solo tenor,
(a sleek blonde
I've seen somewhere before
—the liquor store?) shall be exalted,
and in his handsome mouth the word
is lifted and opened
into more syllables
than we could count, central ah
dilated in a baroque melisma,
liquefied; the pour
of voice seems
to make the unplanned landscape
the text predicts the Lord
will heighten and tame.

This music
demonstrates what it claims:
glory shall be revealed. If art's
acceptable evidence,
mustn't what lies
behind the world be at least
as beautiful as the human voice?
The tenors lack confidence,

and the soloists,
half of them anyway, don't
have the strength to found
the mighty kingdoms

these passages propose
—but the chorus, all together,
equals my burning clouds,
and seems itself to burn,

commingled powers
deeded to a larger, centering claim.
These aren't anyone we know;
choiring dissolves

familiarity in an up-pouring rush which will not
rest, will not, for a moment,
be still.

Aren't we enlarged
by the scale of what we're able
to desire? Everything,
the choir insists,

might flame;
inside these wrappings
burns another, brighter life,
quickened, now,

by song: hear how
it cascades, in overlapping,
lapidary waves of praise? Still time.
Still time to change.

QUESTIONS
1. In “Messiah (Christmas Portions),” Mark Doty says,
“When’d have thought / they'd be so good?” Describe an event in
which you or someone you know was suddenly or beautifully
transformed—such as in a concert, play, sports event, or
dance. Were you surprised? Why? What did you learn about
yourself or the other person?

2. Doty writes, “Aren’t we enlarged
by the scale of what we’re able
to desire?” List five things you
most desire. List five things
someone you know well desires.
How do our desires define us—
make us seem smaller or larger?

3. Something that at first seemed
crazy—writing a poem from a
dog’s point of view—eventually
produced “Golden Retrievals.”
Describe something that you at
first thought was crazy but that
turned out to have a surprising
result.

ACTIVITIES
1. Choose an animal who could
dictate something to you. What
would the animal say? Include
your observations of some of the
animal's characteristics as well
as its words. What do you think
you might learn from the animal?

2. Choose a moment in time—right
now or some time in the past.
Pretend you’ve taken a three-
dimensional photo of the
moment. Describe as much as
you can about the moment,
including physical descriptions,
feelings, and ideas. What would
you change to make the moment
more vivid?

3. Both Mark and Jimi experienced
their partner’s illness due to
AIDS. Their dogs, Beau and
Dino, helped the ill partners feel
better. Create a poster that helps
people become aware of AIDS
and that suggests possible
things they can do to help peo-
ple who have this disease.
Jane Hirshfield

"I feel like I am in the service of the poem. The poem isn't something I make. The poem is something I serve."

The Poet

She is working now, in a room not unlike this one, the one where I write, or you read. Her table is covered with paper. The light of the lamp would be tempered by a shade, where the bulb's single harshness might dissolve, but it is not, she has taken it off. Her poems? I will never know them, though they are the ones I most need. Even the alphabet she writes in I cannot decipher. Her chair—Let us imagine whether it is leather or canvas, vinyl or wicker. Let her have a chair, her shadeless lamp, the table. Let one or two she loves be in the next room. Let the door be closed, the sleeping ones healthy. Let her have time, and silence, enough paper to make mistakes and go on.

The Envoy

One day in that room, a small rat. Two days later, a snake.

Who, seeing me enter, whipped the long stripe of his body under the bed, then curled like a docile house-pet.

I don't know how either came or left. Later, the flashlight found nothing.

For a year I watched as something—terror? happiness? grief?—entered and then left my body.

Not knowing how it came in, Not knowing how it went out.

It hung where words could not reach it. It slept where light could not go. Its scent was neither snake nor rat, neither sensualist nor ascetic.

There are openings in our lives of which we know nothing.

Through them the belled herds travel at will, long-legged and thirsty, covered with foreign dust.

QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think the poet in "The Poet" prefers a shadeless lamp?
2. What else, besides "enough paper to make mistakes and go on," does the person writing about the poet in "The Poet" want her to have? Why?
3. What is an "envoy"? How does the small rat or snake of "The Envoy" open the way for the "belled" herds? Why are these herds "long-legged," "thirsty," and "covered with foreign dust"?

ACTIVITIES

1. With a group, design and arrange, as if for the stage, the scene described in "The Poet." Take turns directing someone playing the poet. Take turns playing the poet. During rehearsals, decide how long each version of the play will be. Introduce each performance with a reading of the poem.
2. Create a mural presenting the experiences described in "The Envoy." Do this alone or with a group. If you do this with a group, consult first on the images everyone agrees should be part of the mural. Discuss how these images will relate to each other.
Paul Muldoon

"Poetry begins with little glimmers—the sense that there might be an interaction between two things, two often quite unlike things that come together in a metaphor or an image."

Symposium

You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it hold its nose to the grindstone and hunt with the hounds. Every dog has a stitch in time. Two heads? You’ve been sold one good turn. One good turn deserves a bird in the hand.

A bird in the hand is better than no bread. To have your cake is to pay Paul. Make hay while you can still hit the nail on the head. For want of a nail the sky might fall.

People in glass houses can’t see the wood for the new broom. Rome wasn’t built between two stools. Empty vessels wait for no man.

A hair of the dog is a friend indeed. There’s no fool like the fool who’s shot his bolt. There’s no smoke after the horse is gone.

What story has made the context of its telling unforgettable to you?

The Sightseers

My father and mother, my brother and sister and I, with uncle Pat, our dour best-loved uncle, had set out that Sunday afternoon in July in his broken-down Ford not to visit some graveyard—one died of shingles, one of fever, another’s knees turned to jelly—but the brand-new roundabout at Ballygawley, the first in mid-Ulster.

Uncle Pat was telling us how the B-Specials had stopped him one night somewhere near Ballygawley and smashed his bicycle and made him sing the Sash and curse the Pope of Rome. They held a pistol so hard against his forehead there was still the mark of an O when he got home.

Born in Northern Ireland in 1951, Paul Muldoon was a radio and television producer with the BBC before moving to the United States in the late 1980s. His passion for exact description grows from his awareness that what is apparent often contains a deeper, stranger story. He currently teaches at Princeton University and was recently elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford.
The remarkable thing that I feel is that despite the aging of the body—despite those aches and pains and all the rest of what happens to one at this stage of a life—the spirit remains young. It's the same spirit I remember living with during my childhood.

The Portrait

My mother never forgave my father for killing himself, especially at such an awkward time and in a public park, that spring when I was waiting to be born. She locked his name in her deepest cabinet and would not let him out, though I could hear him thumping. When I came down from the attic with the pastel portrait in my hand of a long-lipped stranger with a brave moustache and deep brown level eyes, she ripped it into shreds without a single word and slapped me hard. In my sixty-fourth year I can feel my cheek still burning.

When did you last notice that "Light splashed this morning"?

The Round

Light splashed this morning on the shell-pink anemones swaying on their tall stems; down blue-spik ed veronica light flowed in rivulets over the humps of the honeybees; this morning I saw light kiss the silk of the roses in their second flowering, my late bloomers flushed with their brandy. A curious gladness shook me. So I have shut the doors of my house, so I have trudged downstairs to my cell, so I am sitting in semi-dark hunched over my desk with nothing for a view to tempt me but a bloated compost heap, steamy old stinkpile, under my window; and I pick my notebook up and I start to read aloud the still-wet words I scribbled on the blotted page: "Light splashed . . ."

I can scarcely wait till tomorrow when a new life begins for me, as it does each day, as it does each day.
Halley's Comet

Miss Murphy in first grade
wrote its name in chalk
across the board and told us
it was roaring down the stormtracks
of the Milky Way at frightful speed
and if it wandered off its course
and smashed into the earth
there'd be no school tomorrow.
A red-bearded preacher from the hills
with a wild look in his eyes
stood in the public square
at the playground's edge
proclaiming he was sent by God
to save every one of us,
even the little children.
“Repent, ye sinners!” he shouted,
waving his hand-lettered sign.
At supper I felt sad to think
that it was probably
the last meal I'd share
with my mother and my sisters;
but I felt excited too
and scarcely touched my plate.
So mother scolded me
and sent me early to my room.
The whole family's asleep
except for me. They never heard me steal
into the stairwell hall and climb
the ladder to the fresh night air.

Look for me, Father, on the roof
of the red brick building
at the foot of Green Street—
that's where we live, you know, on the top floor.
I'm the boy in the white flannel gown
sprawled on this coarse gravel bed
searching the starry sky,
waiting for the world to end.

QUESTIONS

1. Why does the poet in "The Round" refer to his room as a "cell"? Why do you think he arranged his room downstairs, with his desk offering nothing for a view except "a bloated compost heap"?

2. Why doesn't "The Round" start in the poet's "cell"?

3. How does the poet of "The Round" help a new life to begin for himself each day?

4. Both "Halley's Comet" and "The Portrait" recall childhood memories. Which do you think is the earlier memory? Which the more private memory? Which the more disturbing memory?

ACTIVITIES

1. Stanley Kunitz wrote "Halley's Comet" on the occasion of the comet's second pass by our planet during his lifetime. Find out what you can about Halley's Comet, especially the popular response to those appearances. Write ten lines that connect a major natural event that you have experienced or know about with something in your life.

2. Arrange a choral reading of "The Round" as a musical "round." Assign each of its three stanzas to a different group of readers. Let each group practice separately, repeating the stanza assigned. Then combine the groups by experimenting with ways of layering the stanzas, while keeping them all going at once.
Kurtis Lamkin

"The kora talks, for real. That's why when Africans were brought here all African instruments were banned from the United States—because they could talk."

Kurtis Lamkin accompanies his oral praise poems on the kora, a twenty-one-stringed West African harp-lute used by Djelis (griots, troubadours). His poems explore the counterpoint between the fixed meaning of words and the raw sounds that emerge from and dissolve into feeling. A native of Philadelphia, he lives with his family in Charleston, South Carolina.

**jump mama**

pretty summer day
grammama sittin on her porch
easy
rockin her grandbaby in her wide lap
ol men sittin in their lincoln
tastin and talkin and talkin and tastin
young boys on the corner
milkin a yak yak wild hands baggy pants
young girls halfway up the block
jumpin that double dutch
singin their song
kenny kana paula
be on time
cause school begins
at a quarter to nine
jump one two three and aaaaaaah...

round the corner comes
this young woman
draggin herself heavy home from work
she sees the young boys
sees the old men
but when she sees the girls she just starts smilin
she says let me get a little bit of that
they say you can't jump
you too old

why they say that
o, why they say that

How do you “shake the snake / that coils around our humble lives”?
the million man march

we do right
we do wrong
we do time  overtime
we do what it takes to shake the snake
that coils around our humble lives
whatever we can do
we do

we do lunch
we do meetings
we do fundraisers  we do marches
we send a million men
to carry peace to the heart of a cold cold nation
some say we don’t count
we do
we always do

suppose there’s a god
who thinks that we are god
who loves us so deeply she followed us here
we work so hard every trick looks like a miracle
and then we name the trickster god
if there is a god
who thinks that we are god
do we hear her prayer
do we?

in the deep dark hour
when we are all alone
what is that sound  what is that prayer
what is this faith
we do

QUESTIONS

1. Kurtis Lamkin’s performances often vary considerably from the printed texts of his poems. How might the context of each performance figure in these variations? Would you regard the printed or the performed version as primary? Why?

2. If the kora can talk, what do you hear it saying in Kurtis Lamkin’s performance of “the million man march”?

3. In what ways could our nation be seen as “a cold cold nation”?

4. In what ways does “jump mama” honor the spirit of community?

ACTIVITIES

1. Review the performances of Coleman Barks, Amiri Baraka, and Kurtis Lamkin, paying attention to how each uses a rhythmic, musical background. Apply what you have learned as you perform poems—by these poets or by others—over a rhythmic, musical background.

2. With a group of others, research the Million Man March. Why did it occur? Why was it controversial? How did others who attended respond to it? Compare your findings to Kurtis Lamkin’s poem. Discuss your findings with your research group.

3. Find an instrument that “talks, for real” to you, then read a poem (perhaps one of your own) to its sound.

4. Use a childhood rhyme or game to start a poem.

"jump mama" by Kurtis Lamkin, © 1997 by Kurtis Lamkin; “the million man march” by Kurtis Lamkin, © 1997 by Kurtis Lamkin. Reprinted by permission of Kurtis Lamkin.
"I started writing when I was about nine. I loved the idea of going into a space where there is language which is yours, which is completely private, and which you can do anything with—you can curse someone you cannot curse otherwise, you can create a space of beauty when all around you there is poverty and deprivation. The act of writing poems is the act that has centered me all my life."

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, born in the historic British colony of Malacca, writes from her Chinese-Malaysian heritage and the landscape of the United States, of which she is now a citizen. Her books of poetry have received the Commonwealth Poetry Prize and the American Book Award. She is professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is currently on leave as Chair Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong.

Riding into California

If you come to a land with no ancestors to bless you, you have to be your own ancestor. The veterans in the mobile home park don’t want to be there. It isn’t easy. Oil rigs litter the land like giant frozen birds. Ghosts welcome us to a new life, and an immigrant without home ghosts cannot believe the land is real. So you’re grateful for familiarity, and Bruce Lee becomes your hero. Coming into Fullerton, everyone waiting at the station is white. The good thing about being Chinese on Amtrack is no one sits next to you. The bad thing is you sit alone all the way to Irvine.

What ghosts have welcomed you to a new life?
Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Pantoun for Chinese Women

"At present, the phenomena of butchering, drowning and leaving to die female infants have been very serious."
(The People's Daily, Peking, March 3rd, 1983)

They say a child with two mouths is no good.
In the slippery wet, a hollow space.
Smooth, gumming, echoing wide for food.
No wonder my man is not here at his place.

In the slippery wet, a hollow space,
A slit narrowly sheathed within its hood.
No wonder my man is not here at his place:
He is digging for the dragon jar of soot.

That slit narrowly sheathed within its hood!
His mother, squatting, coughs by the fire's blaze
While he digs for the dragon jar of soot.
We had saved ashes for a hundred days.

His mother, squatting, coughs by the fire's blaze.
The child kicks against me mewing like a flute.
We had saved ashes for a hundred days.
Knowing, if the time came, that we would.

The child kicks against me crying like a flute
Through its two weak mouths. His mother prays
Knowing when the time comes that we would,
For broken clay is never set in glaze.

Through her two weak mouths his mother prays.
She will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood,
For broken clay is never set in glaze:
Women are made of river sand and wood.

She will not pluck the rooster nor serve its blood.
My husband frowns, pretending in his haste
Women are made of river sand and wood.
Milk soaks the bedding. I cannot bear the waste.

My husband frowns, pretending in his haste.
Oh clean the girl, dress her in ashy soot!
Milks soaks our bedding, I cannot bear the waste.
They say a child with two mouths is no good.

QUESTIONS

1. Shirley Geok-lin Lim writes that "you have to be your own ancestor," while Lucille Clifton writes that she grew up with "no model." How are these two women's statements and the experiences they describe similar? Different?

2. Study Shirley Geok-lin Lim's pantoun and then explain how to write one. Why do you think Shirley Geok-lin Lim chose this form to talk about Chinese women? What happens when you hear a line the second time? For what subject or group would you like to write a pantoun?

3. How does the epigraph from the newspaper aid or distract you in your appreciation of "Pantoun for Chinese Women"?

ACTIVITIES

1. Create a work for a group that suffers oppression. Your work might be a poem (such as a pantoun), a dance, a film, a photo essay, a song, or any other form of expression. Explain whom the work is for and why you made it.

2. Suppose you've come to a country or planet where no one like you has been before. "You have to be your own ancestor," as Shirley Geok-lin Lim says. Write a story or narrative poem describing how you make yourself feel at home. Describe some of the things that are challenging and some of the things that are enjoyable.
There is something exciting to me about writing about something that I haven't written about before and that maybe I haven't read a lot of poems about. ...When I grew up there were so few poems about women from a woman's point of view, so few poems about children from a child's point of view."

The Clasp

She was four, he was one, it was raining, we had colds, we had been in the apartment two weeks straight, I grabbed her to keep her from shoving him over on his face, again, and when I had her wrist in my grasp I compressed it, fiercely, for a couple of seconds, to make an impression on her, to hurt her, our beloved firstborn, I even almost savored the stinging sensation of the squeezing, the expression, into her, of my anger, "Never, never, again," the righteous chant accompanying the clasp. It happened very fast—grab, crush, crush, crush, release—and at the first extra force, she swung her head, as if checking who this was, and looked at me, and saw me—yes, this was her mom, her mom was doing this. Her dark, deeply open eyes took me in, she knew me, in the shock of the moment she learned me. This was her mother, one of the two whom she most loved, the two who loved her most, near the source of love was this.

Born in San Francisco in 1942, Sharon Olds was raised as a "hellfire Calvinist" in Berkeley, California. Her work has been praised for its courage, emotional power, and extraordinary physicality. She teaches in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at New York University and is the State Poet of New York from 1998-2000.

What "in the shock of the moment" have you seen "near the source of love"?
Poem Subjects and Themes

Poems from FOOLING WITH WORDS WITH BILL MOYERS can be mixed and matched according to the following subjects and themes—or you can create your own connections. Here are a few of the possibilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POEMS OF CHILDHOOD</th>
<th>POEMS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul Muldoon, “The Sightseers”</td>
<td>Lucille Clifton, “won’t you celebrate with me”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurtis Lamkin, “jump mama”</td>
<td>Marge Piercy, “What are big girls made of?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley Kunitz, “Halley’s Comet”</td>
<td>Deborah Garrison, “Please Fire Me”</td>
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<td>Jane Hirshfield, “The Poet”</td>
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</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>POEMS OF POLITICS AND HISTORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mark Doty, “Golden Retrievals”</td>
<td>Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Pantoun for Chinese Women”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Hirshfield, “The Envoy”</td>
<td>Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Riding into California”</td>
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</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>POEMS OF FAMILY LIFE</th>
<th>POEMS OF MUSIC AND DANCE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lucille Clifton, “oh absalom my son my son”</td>
<td>Mark Doty, “Messiah (Christmas Portions)”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul Muldoon, “The Sightseers”</td>
<td>Coleman Barks/Rumi, “Today, like every other day”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert Pinsky, “To Television”</td>
<td>Kurtis Lamkin, “jump mama”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<th>POEMS OF WORDPLAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lucille Clifton, “won’t you celebrate with me”</td>
<td>Paul Muldoon, “Symposium”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Riding into California”</td>
<td>Robert Pinsky, “ABC”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lorna Dee Cervantes, “Poet’s Progress”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stanley Kunitz, “The Round”</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Doty, “New Dog”</td>
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<th>POEMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>MarkDoty, “Golden Retrievals”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
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<th>POEMS OF POETS AND POETRY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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"When I first found poetry that spoke to me—a street kid from Detroit, from a poor family—it was validation that I wasn’t crazy, wasn’t bizarre, wasn’t totally nutty. There were other people who felt the way I felt."

The chuppah

The chuppah stands on four poles.
The home has its four corners.
The chuppah stands on four poles.
The marriage stands on four legs.
Four points lose the winds
that blow on the walls of the house,
the south wind that brings the warm rain,
the east wind that brings the cold rain,
the north wind that brings the cold sun
and the snow, the long west wind
bringing the weather off the far plains.

Here we live open to the seasons.
Here the winds caress and cuff us
contrary and fierce as bears.
Here the winds are caught and snarling
in the pines, a cat in a net clawing
breaking twigs to fight loose.
Here the winds brush our faces
soft in the morning as feathers
that float down from a dove’s breast.

Here the moon sails up out of the ocean
dripping like a just washed apple.
Here the sun wakes us like a baby.
Therefore the chuppah has no sides.

"Why should we want to live inside ads?"

It is not a box.
It is not a coffin.
It is not a dead end.
Therefore the chuppah has no walls.
We have made a home together
open to the weather of our time.
We are mills that turn in the winds of struggle
converting fierce energy into bread.

The canopy is the cloth of our table
where we share fruit and vegetables
of our labor, where our care for the earth
comes back and we take its body in ours.

The canopy is the cover of our bed
where our bodies open their portals wide,
where we eat and drink the blood
of our love, where the skin shines red
as a swallowed sunrise and we burn
in one furnace of joy molten as steel
and the dream is flesh and flower.

O my love O my love we dance
under the chuppah standing over us
like an animal on its four legs,
like a table on which we set our love
as a feast, like a tent
under which we work
not safe but no longer solitary
in the searing heat of our time.
Marge Piercy

from What are big girls made of?

The construction of a woman:
a woman is not made of flesh
of bone and sinew
belly and breasts, elbows and liver and toe.
She is manufactured like a sports sedan.
She is retooled, refitted and redesigned
every decade.

... 

Look at pictures in French fashion
magazines of the 18th century:
century of the ultimate lady
fantasy wrought of silk and corseting.
Paniers bring her hips out three feet
each way, while the waist is pinched
and the belly flattened under wood.
The breasts are stuffed up and out
offered like apples in a bowl.
The tiny foot is encased in a slipper
never meant for walking.
On top is a grandiose headache:
hair like a museum piece, daily
ornamented with ribbons, vases,
grottoes, mountains, frigates in full
sail, balloons, baboons, the fancy
of a hairdresser turned loose.
The hats were rococo wedding cakes
that would dim the Las Vegas strip.
Here is a woman forced into shape
rigid exoskeleton torturing flesh:
a woman made of pain.

How superior we are now: see the modern woman
thin as a blade of scissors.
She runs on a treadmill every morning,
fits herself into machines of weights
and pulleys to heave and grunt,
an image in her mind she can never
approximate, a body of rosy
glass that never wrinkles,
never grows, never fades. She
sits at the table closing her eyes to food
hungry, always hungry:
a woman made of pain.

... 

If only we could like each other raw.
If only we could love ourselves
like healthy babies burbling in our arms.
If only we were not programmed and reprogrammed
to need what is sold us.
Why should we want to live inside ads?
Why should we want to scourge our softness
to straight lines like a Mondrian painting?
Why should we punish each other with scorn
as if to have a large ass
were worse than being greedy or mean?

When will women not be compelled
to view their bodies as science projects,
gardens to be weeded,
dogs to be trained?
When will a woman cease
to be made of pain?

QUESTIONS

1. A chuppah is a canopy held up by four people in a Jewish
wedding. Tradition calls for the bride and groom to stand
under the chuppah during the ceremony. How does Piercy
use the chuppah as a symbol in her poem? Why do you
think traditions and symbols are important to a culture?

2. Near the end of “What are big girls made of?” Marge
Piercy writes, “If only we could like each other raw. / If only
we could love ourselves / like healthy babies burbling in our
arms.” What messages do you think society gives
teenagers about how they should look? What happens to
people who take those messages too seriously?

ACTIVITIES

1. A chuppah is a physical object that has symbolic meanings. Choose a physical object you find interesting—it could be something unique to your culture, or it could be a personal item. Describe how that object has meaning in your experience or in someone else’s experience.

2. Marge Piercy says, “Observing the contradictions of my mother’s life taught me a lot about women’s lives.” What life have you observed closely? What has it taught you? In writing, dance, or illustration, express what you’ve learned.

3. Research a particular style of clothing or a particular idea about beauty in history or in other cultures. What do you think that style or idea implies about the way people thought of themselves? How was the style or idea different for men and for women? Share your findings in any format you like.
To Television

Not a "window on the world"
But as we call you,
A box a tube

Terrarium of dreams and wonders. 
Coffer of shades, ordained 
Cotillion of phosphors 
Or liquid crystal

Homey miracle, tub 
Of acquiescence, vein of defiance. 
Your patron in the pantheon would be Hermes

Raster dance, 
Quick one, little thief, escort 
Of the dying and comfort of the sick,

In a blue glow my father and little sister sat 
Snuggled in one chair watching you 
Their wife and mother was sick in the head 
I scorned you and them as I scorned so much 

Now I like you best in a hotel room, 
Maybe minutes 
Before I have to face an audience: behind 
The doors of the armoire, box 
Within a box—Tom & Jerry, or also brilliant 
And reassuring, Oprah Winfrey.

Thank you, for I watched, I watched 
Sid Caesar speaking French and Japanese not 
Through knowledge but imagination, 
His quickness, and Thank you, I watched live 
Jackie Robinson stealing 

Home, the image—O strung shell—enduring 
Fleeter than light like these words we 
Remember in: they too are winged 
At the helmet and ankles.

Robert Pinsky

"Poetry is the art of one human voice. Without denigrating art on a mass scale—I love my TV, my computer, and my VCR—there's a craving and a satisfaction available in an art that in its nature is on an individual scale."

The current U.S. Poet Laureate and the first to serve for more than two years, Robert Pinsky grew up in Long Branch, New Jersey. His Favorite Poem Archive will gather a database describing what poetry means to us, as a nation, at the close of the twentieth century. He teaches at Boston University.

ABC

Any body can die, evidently. Few 
Go happily, irradiating joy, 
Knowledge, love. Most 
Need oblivion, painkillers, 
Quickest respite. 
Sweet time unafflicted, 
Various world:

X = your zenith.

What has television's quickness given to you? 
Taken from you?
Robert Pinsky

If You Could Write One Great Poem, What Would You Want It To Be About?
(Asked of four student poets at the Illinois Schools for the Deaf and Visually Impaired)

Fire: because it is quick, and can destroy.
Music: place where anger has its place.
Romantic Love—the cold or stupid ask why.
Sign: that it is a language, full of grace,
That it is visible, invisible, dark and clear,
That it is loud and noiseless and is contained
Inside a body and explodes in air
Out of a body to conquer from the mind.

The Want Bone

The tongue of the waves tolled in the earth's bell.
Blue rippled and soaked in the fire of blue.
The dried mouthbones of a shark in the hot swale
Gaped on nothing but sand on either side.

The bone tasted of nothing and smelled of nothing,
A scalded toothless harp, uncrushed, unstrung.
The joined arcs made the shape of birth and craving
And the welded-open shape kept mouthing O.

Ossified cords held the corners together
In groined spirals pleated like a summer dress.

But where was the limber grin, the gash of pleasure?
Infinitesimal mouths bore it away.

The beach scrubbed and etched and pickled it clean.
But O I love you it sings, my little my country
My food my parent my child I want you my own
My flower my fin my life my lightness my O.

QUESTIONS

1. The specific language describing Sid Caesar and Jackie Robinson in "To Television" gives us important information about each and develops our understanding of Hermes, "Quick one, little thief." According to this poem, what qualities link Caesar, Robinson, and Hermes?

2. Hermes—a Greek messenger god—is also described in "To Television" as "escort / Of the dying and comfort of the sick." How does television perform these functions in this poem?

3. The title "ABC" seems to imply an elementary, predictable experience. In what ways does the poem fulfill or evade this implication?

4. What value would you give to X in "X=your zenith"?

ACTIVITIES

1. Use the alphabet to write a series of stories, sketches, or poems of your own. In your first effort, let the sequence of the alphabet determine every third word. In your second, every other word. In your third, every word.

2. With a group, try different readings of "ABC." Make notes of what you notice in each reading. Discuss what your group could now offer to increase anyone's pleasure in hearing and speaking this poem.

3. Create your own list of metaphors for television or some other object or institution—radio, computer, automobile, shopping mall, school, etc.—that has both personal and social significance.

4. Draw the whole scene described in "To Television."
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