TEACHING FOR JOY AND JUSTICE
RE-IMAGINING THE LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

Linda Christensen

A Rethinking Schools Publication
1: Writing Poetry
The Role of Poetry: Community Builder, Grammar Text, and Literary Tutor

Poetry is the synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits.

— Carl Sandberg

Poetry levels the writing playing field. Students who struggle in other areas of literacy education often succeed in poetry—if it’s not taught as a memory Olympics for literary terminology: assonance, dissonance, dactyl, couplet, enjambment, hexameter, pentameter. Many of my students who wrestle with essays write amazing poetry. Poetry unleashes their verbal dexterity—it’s break dancing for the tongue.

Poetry is lively, accessible. And poetry, especially spoken word or performance poetry, has close ties to music and the hip hop community that many of my students love. I agree with poet Ruth Forman who wrote in her poem "Poetry Should Ride the Bus": “poetry should hopscotch in a polka dot dress/wheel cartwheels/n hold your hand/when you walk past the yellow crackhouse.”

Because of the rise in popularity of Slam Poetry, poems have slid out of the academy and into the streets. Now, poetry needs to move back into the classroom “n not be so educated that it don’t stop in/every now n then to sit on the porch/and talk about the comins and goins of the world.” Poetry can heal, teach, and unite.
Although poetry month is celebrated in April, we write poetry all year— it's part of every unit I teach. Poetry helps me build community and teach literary analysis. I call poetry my language weightlifting. Students learn to play with language, develop strong verbs, and saturate their readers with details. Through students' poetic responses, I glean insights into their knowledge about literature and history that quizzes and tests don't surrender.

**Poetry as Community Builder: Sharing Our Lives—Laughter and Tears**

We don't build communities *instead* of working on academics. We build communities *while* we work on academics. Students need to feel safe enough to ask for help, but a safe community is also essential if students are going to take academic risks, to care enough about their writing to persist in working through a number of drafts. As the poet Adrienne Rich wrote, “When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.” Too often when I see student failure, I see students who have looked into the mirror of their school and their image is not reflected—in the curriculum, in the portraits that line the hallways, in the choir, in the theater productions, or on the honor society roster.

Through poetry, the mirror we hold up in class reflects students' lives. When we write “Raised by Women” poems, for example, we celebrate students' roots, multiple heritages, and languages that tie them to their families. When I teach Margaret Walker's “For My People,” students' histories as members of a particular race, class, or even illness become part of our classroom anthology. The smell of curry, the shape of matzo balls, and the tang of tropical Kool-Aid fill the class as students write praise poems to traditional family foods. Through poetry, we reclaim any part of our lives that society has degraded, humiliated, or shamed.

When school becomes one grim, rainy day after another, tied together with due dates and hard work, I construct activities so that students can laugh and play together—and still tackle their literacy skills. Both the “Age Poem” and the “I Love” writing evoke shared memories from students who grew up in this culture and opportunities to learn about other societies when immigrant students share their experiences.

Many of my students have not had easy lives, so to create real communities also means sharing our hardships as well as our joys. Growing up I felt that I had to mask who I really was in order to fit in. When I was 13, my father died of a heart attack brought about by an alcoholic binge, and my mother started dating other men. When I looked around, it seemed that other people had “normal” families—mothers and fathers who ate dinner together and said grace. Once a classmate said, “I saw your mom walking on Broadway with some man.” My mother was single. Lonely. She had a right to have a relationship with men, but Mike pulled her out like dirty laundry to humiliate me in front of our friends.

**We don't build communities *instead* of working on academics. We build communities *while* we work on academics.**

My two best friends both had alcoholic parents. Trudy became her mother's keeper after her father moved out when we were in junior high school. She picked her mother up off the heater vent where she passed out, and she put ointment on the waffle-like burns on her mother's back. She learned to keep vanilla and cough medicines out of the house; she cooked dinner for her younger sister and made sure she did her homework. At 13 she became the parent in her family. Alcoholism bound the three of us. But no one talked about these issues at school. We read literature. We wrote essays. We pretended like everyone went home to dinner and happy lives.

I want my students to know that they are not alone in their struggles, that other people face similar challenges, so I share my stories about my father's battle with alcoholism, my niece's struggle with Tourette's syndrome and drug addiction, and the physical abuse I ran away from during my first marriage. Of course, not all students—or teachers —face these problems, but over my 30 years in schools, I've discovered that sharing our lives gives students hope, courage, strategies, and allies as they wrestle with hard times. Lakeitha Elliot, one of my former students and now an education activist, talks openly about her father's imprisonment and her mother's drug addiction. She said, “It helped to know that I wasn't the only one with problems. When you shared your stories, I could see a teacher who made it out.” Students—and teachers—who don't face these struggles gain compassion by listening to their classmates' stories.
Poetry takes that pain and makes it art. In her interview with Bill Moyers during the Fooling with Words series, Jane Hirshfield says, "A good poem takes something you already know as a human being and raises your ability to feel that to a higher degree so you can know your own life more intensely. When you meet your own life in a great poem, your life becomes expanded, extended, clarified, magnified, deeper in color, deeper in feeling. I feel like almost all I know about being a human being has been deepened by the poems I've read. They have taught me how to be a human being." Daniel Beaty's poem "Knock Knock" helps students turn their pain into power and poetry. (See “Knock Knock: Turning Pain into Power,” p. 33.) Sharing these stories helps lay our burdens down and makes us feel less lonely.

Poetry: Literary Tutor
When I stopped trying to turn my language arts classroom into graduate seminars for literary critics, I discovered that writing poetry brings a different level of critical examination of literature to the classroom. After students have written odes, elegies, sonnets, as well as free verse, they enter literary analysis with greater understanding, patience, and knowledge. The difference between the praise of an ode and the sorrow of an elegy is manifest in their own writing. They know the terms from the inside out.

Their study of poetry is enlarged because they know how poetry works. Instead of drilling them on literary terms or taking a scalpel to dissect Adrienne Rich or Richard Hugo's poems, students learn how pace, line breaks, and allusion work in their poems, so they can take that knowledge and language back to their work when they analyze poetry. Too often in the name of "rigor," we separate the naming of literature from the creation of literature, and it doesn't have to be that way.
"Raised by Women": Celebrating Our Homes

When I first read "Raised by Women" by Kelly Norman Ellis, I knew the poem would be a hit with my students. I love Ellis' celebration of the women in her life, her use of home language, and the wit and wisdom of her rhythmic lines. And from reading student tributes to their mothers over the years, I knew most of my students would relate to the topic. "Raised by Women" also had qualities I look for in poems I use to build community and teach poetic traits: a repeating line that lays down a heartbeat for the students to follow, delicious details from the writer's life that could evoke delicious details from my students' lives, and a rhythm so alive, I want to dance when I read it.

Part of my job as a teacher is to awaken students to the joy and love that they may take for granted, so I use poetry and narrative prompts that help them "see" daily gifts, to celebrate their homes and heritages. Ellis' poetry provides a perfect example. As she wrote, "I was just lucky enough to have been born into a loving southern, black family. I want these poems to stand as witness to the beauty and abundance of that life: a black southern woman's life, a good life, a proud life, a life as rich and sweet as the pies I bake with Mississippi pecans. There are others like me, folks raised in the brown loving arms of family."

I also use poetry to build relationships with students and between students. Ellis' smart and sassy poem helped launch our yearlong journey to establish relationships as the students and I learned about each other, but also their journey in developing their writing.

In each stanza of the poem, Ellis lists the kinds of women who raised her—from "chitterling eating" to "some PhD toten" kind of women. Ellis' poem follows a repeating but changing pattern. She writes that she was raised by women, sisters, and queens. She includes both description and dialogue in most stanzas:

I was raised by
Chitterling eating,
Vegetarian cooking,
Cornbread so good you want to lay
down and die baking
"Go on baby, get yo'self a plate"
Kind of Women.

Part of my job as a teacher is to awaken students to the joy and love that they may take for granted, so I use poetry and narrative prompts that help them "see" daily gifts, to celebrate their homes and heritages.
TEACHING FOR JOY AND JUSTICE

The full poem, as well as a video clip of Ellis reading the poem, can be found at the Coal Black Voices website, which was developed by Media Working Group to "honor contemporary African American culture and celebrate regional expressions of the African Diaspora through the works of the Affrilachian Poets."

Filling the Bucket with Delicious Details and Style
After reading "Raised by Women" twice, I asked students, "Who were you raised by?" Although Ellis discusses only women, I wanted to open other possibilities. I salted the pot by generating a few: mother, father, coaches, church. I also wanted them to reach out beyond the traditional, so I encouraged them to think about neighbors, neighborhoods, musicians, novelists, civil rights activists, the halls at Grant.

After students wrote their lists, we shared them out loud so they could "steal" more ideas from each other. I pushed students to get more specific as they shared. For example, when Melvin said, "Coaches," I asked which coaches raised him—all of them? What did his football coach say or do that helped raise him? When Alex said the men at the barbershop, I asked which men and what did they contribute. Because the best poetry—and writing in general—resides in specific details, I pushed students to move beyond their first response and get deeper.

I wanted them to see that they weren't limited by the original verb, raised, so I asked, "The verb is the workhorse of the sentence. Look at how it harnesses the rest of the stanza and moves it forward. Think about your verbs. What other verbs could you use besides raised?" We played around with alternatives: brought up, taught, educated, nurtured. This is the weightlifting function of teaching poetry. Instead of grammar worksheets, I teach students about the functions of language as we discuss how verbs work in the poem.

When we completed our initial brainstorming about the repeating line, we went back to the poem. I asked, "What kinds of specific kinds of details does Ellis include?" The first stanza was about food, the second stanza focused on hair, the third was about physical appearance—skin color and clothes—the fourth about choices, the fifth about music, the sixth about attitude, and the seventh about professions. Because I didn't want each poem to turn out the same, I said, "When you write your poem, you can use these as potential categories, but you can use other categories as well. What else could you list in your poem?" Students shouted out: cars, songs, languages. I encouraged them to create a list of categories like Ellis’—food, clothes, music—and to fill in each category with specific details.

After they brainstormed, we returned to the form. "What do you notice about how Ellis developed the poem? Look at the lines. Where does it repeat? Does it repeat in the same way?" Kamaria noticed the repeating, but changing line. Damon talked about how Ellis' dialogue gives her poem flavor. Tanisha noted that she named specific people—Angela Davis and James Brown. Destiny pointed out that Ellis used home language rather than Standard English. As students noticed these details, I listed them on the board. "Take a look at this list—a repeating but changing line, dialogue, naming people, home language. When you write your poems, I want you to try to include some of these techniques. I know some of you speak another language at home. Experiment with using pieces of that language in your poems. Also, notice how Ellis catches a rhythm in her poem. See if you can create a heartbeat when you write."

The Read-around and Collective Text: Structuring Response
Before students read their poems, we arranged the desks in a circle, so they could see and hear the reader. I asked students to pull out a piece of paper to take notes on what they learned about each classmate through their poem: "Who raised them? What's important to them? Who's important to them?" I discovered that students pay more attention during the read-around if I give them a specific task. For the most part, student poems were stellar, and even those that lacked the style and sassiness of their classmates gave us a glimpse into their lives.

Students found their own ways into the poems by celebrating more than one person. Anaiah Rhodes, for example, wrote a stanza each for her mother and father, grandmother and grandfather, church folk, music, cousins, and track. Her classmates loved how she used language and details to capture each one in turn, but they especially loved how Anaiah wrote about her church:

I was taught by a tongue talkin'
Sanctified, holy ghost filled, fire baptized, shoutin’
"Member to keep God first, Baby!"
Kinda church folk

Some aisle runnin', teary-eyed, joy jumpin',
Devil rebukin', seed sowin'
"How you doin', Baby?"
Type of church folk
Ellis’ poem provided an opportunity for us to celebrate the brilliance and linguistic richness of my students’ cultures. Destinee Sanders, who also chose to write about a variety of people in her family—mother, aunts, sisters, and “abuelita”—switched languages throughout her poem:

I was raised by Mi Abuelita,
Es mi abuela favorita,
Ella es mi corazón, mi amor, mi amiga
Mi noche, mi todos los días, mi siempre.
Yo amo a mi abuelita

[I was raised by my Grandma, My favorite grandmother She is my heart, my love, my friend My night, my every day, always. I love my grandma]

Like Destinee, students shared information in the poem that helped us know their family and backgrounds. Jessica Chavez wrote about her “tortilla making/Grease usin’/cumbia dancin’” family. Adriana Wilmot wrote, “I was raised by that/curry goat and chicken cookin’/ ‘Eat your vegetables, pickney,’/type of Jamaican woman.” Kirk Allen wrote about his family—the Allens—rather than selecting out individuals:

I was raised by the gas, brake dipp’n,
Cadillac whip’n, Wood grain grip’n,
Old school, big body, pimp’n,
Ain’t you bullshit’n Allens

I was raised by the show stopp’n,
Hater droppin’,
Hat tilted to the side,
Look like a bad mutha,
Shut yo mouth Allens

In this and all class writing, I encouraged students to abandon the prompt and my suggestions and find their own passion and their own way into the assignment. Shona Curtis did that and forged her way to a poem about music instead of people:

I was raised by smooth jazz
Make you want to sit down and
Cry kind of music

Some move your feet and shake
Those hips feel like you dancin’
Down the streets of Argentina
Kind of music

When students wrote at the end of the assignment, many pointed to Shona’s straying from the prompt as a strength in her poem.

Details from poems brought shouts of laughter or nods as students recognized their own family in Destiny Spruill’s description of her family’s “Found Jesus/Church goin’ /You mouth can get you in trouble” and “Gumbo makin’/Hat wearin’ /Mother of the church/Kinda grandmothers.” They understood Ebony Ross’ “I was raised to get the belt / If I was talking that lip.” But it was Jessica’s repeating line, “I wasn’t raised by my daddy,” that brought the most affirmations from other students.

Framing Reflection: Milking the Learning

After students shared, I handed out note cards and asked them to look back over their notes and write about what they learned about each other and poetry through our lesson. Kayla Anderson wrote that she learned “that you can completely change a poem but still keep the meaning. Shona made her poem fun by using words like ‘hip-hoppin’, pop lockin’, shake your dreads.’” She noted that many students used strong verbs and imagery. Shona pointed out that “when you say your poem with attitude it sounds better.”

But it was students’ revelations about each other that made me realize this poetry assignment is a keeper. Students wrote about how much they learned about each other in a short amount of time. “I learned that Adiana is from Jamaica, that Bree was raised by foster parents, and that a lot of us have been let down by our fathers.” Destinee wrote:

I learned that I have something in common with every single person in this room. I realize that we have all been through a lot of the same things. I learned that most of us weren’t raised by our dads. I learned that Shaquala loves soul food. I learned that although Bree is Latino like me, she was raised by different types of Latinos, and I can relate to that. … I learned that we’re different … yet we’re the same.

Out of the 30 students in the class, the majority were raised without fathers. This became a repeating “aha” for most of the class. Virginia Hankins, for example, wrote that she “learned a lot about my classmates that I would have never known. I was surprised that so many of us were raised without our fathers.”

Knitting together poetry that teaches about our lives as well as the craft of writing builds the kind of caring, risk-taking community I hope to create.
Raised

by Anaiah Rhodes

I was raised by a lovin’
Church goin’, home cookin’, belt whoppin’,
Non-stop children bearin’
Money arguin’,
“You’re going to be something great one day.”
Mom and Dad

I was raised by a Jesus lovin’, behind tearin’
Bomb cookin’, hair pressin’, garage sale givin’
Grandma

A politic lovin’, money givin’, pipe puffin’,
Fish fryin’, Cadillac whippin’, wine sippin’,
“Study hard now!”
Grandpa

I was taught by a tongue talkin’,
Sanctified, holy ghost filled, fire baptized, shoutin’,
“’Member to keep God first, Baby!”
Kinda church folk

Some aisle runnin’, teary-eyed, joy jumpin’,
Devil rebukin’, seed sowin’,
“How you doin’, Baby?”
Type of church folk

I was brought up with that hold on,
Wait on God, don’t give up,
Weepin’ may endure for the night,

But joy comes in the mornin’
What a friend we have in Jesus, music
By some double darin’, house playin’,
Fightin’, scratchin’, teasin’, tauntin’,
Crumb snatchin’
To football playin’ and track runnin’
“I got cha back!”
Cousins

I was brought up by that race
Everybody on the block, barefoot, wind in my face, win or lose, spirit of runnin’
To that sweatin’, trainin’, muscle tearin’,
Shin splintin’, intense burnin’
Heavy workout, deep breathin’ crazy
Type of runnin’.
Raised.
Music
by Shona Curtis

I was raised by smooth jazz
Make you want to sit down and
Cry kind of music

Some move your feet and shake
Those hips feel like you dancin’
Down the streets of Argentina
Kind of music

Some hip hop and you don’t stop
Movin’ to those beats feel the energy
Comin’ out of the radio
Kind of music

Some hit right where you need it soul
Music make you think of the old days
When that was all we had
Kind of music

Some jump up and down slam to
The beat of the rock
Kind of music

Some poppin’ pop grab your
Best friend and put on your
Favorite costume and dance
Kind of music

I was raised by music

I Was Raised by Video Games
by Seth Lee

Some x tappin’
Joystick swirlin’
“Drive me crazy til I
throw my controller”
type of videogames.

I was raised by cuts and bruises.

Some knee scrapin’
bone breakin’
fallin’ out of trees
and landing on my head
kinds of cuts and bruises.

I was raised by roughnecks.

Those country music listenin’
playing football on the gravel road
pickin’ blackberries from the neighbors
wrestlin’ in the mud ‘til dinner’s ready
kind of roughnecks.

I was raised by transformers.

Some Decepticon terrorizin’
optimist prime ass kickin’
Megatron losin’ day in and day out
transformers.

I was raised by sports.

Those ball kickin’
ball throwin’
ball hittin’
stick fools so hard they cry
for their mamas sort of sports.
I was raised by
Chitterling eating
Vegetarian cooking
Cornbread so good you want to lay
down and die baking
“Go on baby, get yo’self a plate”
Kind of Women.
Some thick haired
Angela Davis afro styling
“Girl, lay back
and let me scratch yo head”
Sorta Women.
Some big legged
High yellow, mocha brown
Hip shaking
Miniskirt wearing
Hip huggers hugging
Daring debutantes
Groovin
“I know I look good”
Type of Women.
Some tea sipping
White glove wearing
Got married too soon
Divorced
in just the nick of time
“Better say yes ma’am to me”
Type of Sisters.
Some fingerpopping
Boogaloo dancing
Say it loud

I’m black and I’m proud
James Brown listening
“Go on girl shake that thing”
Kind of Sisters.
Some face slapping
Hands on hips
“Don’t mess with me,
Pack your bags and
get the hell out of my house”
Sort of Women.
Some PhD toten
Poetry writing
Portrait painting
“I’ll see you in court”
World traveling
Stand back, I’m creating
Type of Queens.
I was raised by
Women.
The Age Poem: 
Building a Community of Trust

Poetry is a political action undertaken for the sake of information, the faith, the exorcism, and the lyrical invention, that telling the truth makes possible. Poetry means taking control of the language of your life. Good poems can interdict a suicide, rescue a love affair, and build a revolution in which speaking and listening to somebody becomes the first and last purpose to every social encounter. I would hope that folks throughout the U.S.A. would consider the creation of poems as a foundation for true community: a fearless democratic society.

From the introduction to June Jordan’s 
Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint

Building a community that might contribute to Jordan’s “fearless democratic society” is no small accomplishment in most classrooms. Over the years I’ve learned that poetry helps move students to listen and care about each other while they build literacy skills.

Too often community building happens in the opening days of the school year. Teachers and students engage in a series of games designed to foster group skills and bonding, but in my experience, these activities drop off after the first week—as if community is established with one or two activities. In addition, these opening strategies are frequently divorced from the course content. Creating a community of learners is not at odds with building literacy skills in a language arts classroom. We don’t need to put aside words to develop a classroom where students can share their lives.

We don’t need to put aside words to develop a classroom where students can share their lives.
The age poem is a great community-building activity. Students get to talk about childhood memories—big wheel bikes, the smell of glue in kindergarten, songs, and games—that connect them and allow them to acknowledge their common bonds. This activity also brings in their family stories, languages, and customs that shape their lives. The structured approach to the poem gives students lots of choice—from the age they choose to the details about their lives that they want to reveal.

I start this activity by using Garrett Hongo’s poem “What For” from Yellow Light. Hongo’s poem is rich with details; it tells stories, names foods, uses his grandparents’ language: “At six I lived for spells:/how a few Hawaiian words could call/up the rain, could hymn like the sea.” In later stanzas, he evokes his grandfather: “I lived for stories about the war/my grandfather told over hana cards;” and his grandmother, “I lived for songs my grandmother sang/stirring curry into a thick stew.” “What For” also has a repeating line that helps students scaffold their own poem from stanza to stanza. Hongo’s use of verbs and imagery provides a strong model for student writing.

The age poem teaches students some basic facts about poetry—the power of specifics and repeating lines—two writing “tools” that they can carry over into essay and narrative writing. It teaches them to collect “evidence” prior to writing, to sort their details and then to select the best ones. They learn to shape their poem through the use of a repeating line, followed by a list of specific details.

**The age poem teaches some basic facts about poetry—the power of specifics and repeating lines—two writing “tools” that students can carry over into essay and narrative writing.**

After reading Hongo’s and several student poems (see p. 26), we talk about what the poets valued, what was important enough for them to include in a poem. We also look at the kinds of details the poets used—names of family members, teachers, games they played. After we read, I ask students to write lists that match the ones in the poems we read, and I add a few other categories:

- Names of games they played, including outdoor games like freeze tag, cartoon tag, hide and seek, school games, imaginary games.
- Names of clothes—especially the weird or wacky clothes like days of the week underwear or superhero t-shirts, special occasion clothes.

- School memories from early years—teachers’ names, books, special projects.
- Memories of things they were too small to reach, or things they could do because they were small—reaching the light switch, playing with the big kids, going on rides at the carnival.
- Family memories—parents, grandparents, special stories, food, ceremonies. (Hongo’s poem pays special tribute to his Hawaiian grandparents.)
- Strong memories—a memory frozen from that time that replays for them.
- Music they loved, television shows they watched.

Students share their lists out loud after they each brainstorm. This is a huge piece of the community-building aspect of poetry writing. It is time consuming, but it performs several functions. One student’s memory sparks memories for other students, so they can add details to their lists. But students also share common memories and laughter as they tell stories about playing freeze tag at dusk or wearing their Superman t-shirt every day of the week. Sometimes they attended the same elementary school or church, so their collective memory becomes part of the classroom story. This is also the time when students talk about their cultural heritage, including food, religious holidays, names of family members, and words from the language of their ancestors.
The Age Poem: Building a Community of Trust

After students have compiled their brainstorming, I ask them to review their lists and either highlight or circle some of the best items—those details that help the reader understand how the child they were at 5 or 6 became the person they are today. I also encourage them to include words in their “home language” when appropriate.

Once students have selected their best details, I write Garrett Hongo’s and Bea Clark’s opening lines on the board (see p. 26): “At ______ I lived for…” and “I am in the winter of my ______ year.” We play with variations—changing the age, changing the season. I encourage them to incorporate one of these lines into their poem as a repeating line or to create their own repeating line to help move the poem forward. I also tell them to surprise the reader with a memory like Tim McGarry includes in his poem “Six”: “I lived for a year when/Mom’s temper got hidden/behind school and/a new lover.”

After students have written a draft, we “read around.” Seated in our circle, students read their poems. After each student reads, classmates raise their hands to comment on what they like about the piece. The writer calls on his/her classmates and receives feedback about what is good in the poem. I stop from time to time to point out that the use of a list is a technique they might “borrow” from their peer’s poem and include in their next poem or in a revision. I might note that the use of Spanish or their home language adds authenticity to their piece and ask them to see if they could add some to their poem. After a few read-around sessions, I can spot writing techniques that students have “borrowed” from each other and included in their revisions or in their next piece.

Creating community in our classrooms is not at odds with developing student skills. To the contrary. Learning to share pieces of our personal history and listening closely while others share theirs is absolutely necessary if I want students to write deeply and passionately about their lives. This authenticity lays the groundwork for both academic achievement and social insight.

Resources


Other good models for age poems:

“Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros from her book Woman Hollering Creek and “The Thirty-eighth Year” by Lucille Clifton from Good Woman.

“The Summer I Was Sixteen” by Geraldine Connolly can be downloaded from Billy Collins Poetry 180: a poem a day for American high schools (http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/003.html)
**Five**

by Bea Clark

I am in the winter of my fifth year.
My days are filled with kindergarten
And brown readers.
We sit at tiny desks,
In tiny rows
Surrounded by a scaled down world
With giant alphabet men and woodblocks.
We make paper angels, wrapping circles into cones,
Using styrofoam balls for heads,
Silver and gold glitter on heavenly
Tissue paper wings.
Too much glue makes no difference.
Add more glitter, stiffer wings—sharp wings.
We have paper angel fights.
Glitter flies into our hair, on our red faces.
Mrs. Hasselbacker calms us down.
It's time for the next activity.

The juice is gone.
And Denise ate glue on her chocolate.

We climb onto the Magic Carpet
And Mrs. Hasselbacker reads stories
From beat up hardback books.
We clap and laugh and fall asleep
On each other's shoulders.

It's time to go home,
To play,
To build snowmen that glow at night
And wink up at my window
When the moon is out.

Time to sleep,
And dream,
Of reindeer biting my toes,
Pirates' booty found in the yard,
And smiling alligators.

---

**Six**

by Tim McGarry

At six I lived for Evel Knievel
and pop rocks.
Japanese monster movies
on channel 12
flavored our fantasies
of guts and glory

I lived for Donny & Marie
and waited for their plate-class smiles
to lock in a deep kiss

I lived for the snake
at school
that ate white mice whole

I lived for a year when
Mom's temper got hidden
behind school and
a new lover

I lived for Banquet fried chicken
and rocky road ice cream

I lived to be seven
and one day eight

I lived for a security
I never knew again