

We are all Beginners

by Rebecca McClanahan

I've just completed a poetry lesson with twenty-seven children, and now it's time to write. Usually I circulate to help, but lately I've felt like a beginner and I'm hoping that if I watch long enough, I'll remember what to do. I squeeze myself into a tiny wooden desk and wait to see what will happen. How do twenty-seven eight-year-olds approach the task of writing a poem? Here is what I see: They move their mouths silently, they hesitate, blow eraser dust away, lean on one elbow, talk to the air, nudge their neighbor, smile, scratch their heads, whisk the erasures with the heel of their hand, put their tongues between their teeth, chew on their erasers, wonder, hum, point, peek at their neighbor's paper, make their own space, sniff their pencils, suck their fingers, lean on the other elbow, peek at their neighbor's paper again, cry, laugh, thump their shoes, twirl their hair around their fingers, bite their thumbnails, push their glasses onto their noses, bear down so hard on their pencils they leave imprints on their notebook pad, clasp their hands tightly as if in prayer until their knuckles are white.

In other words, they act the same way I do when trying to enter that mysterious place where poems are planted, except for them it's more difficult. I think of that old joke about Ginger Rogers: She did everything Fred Astaire did, only she did it backwards and in heels. This little boy beside me is doing the same things I do in my study, only he's doing it in a hard wooden desk, surrounded by twenty-six other hard-breathing strugglers, while the gerbil is squeaking in its cage and the intercom is hissing its afternoon pronouncements. If he can do it, so can I. I take my pen from my pocket and begin.

The poet Stanley Kunitz once said that writing is hard because words get tired; they must be "bathed anew," he said, "in the pristine waters." I think of the hundreds of baptisms I witnessed in the fundamentalist church of my youth. "Except you become as a little child," the minister warned, "you shall not enter the kingdom of God." So we were all dunked equally-- the teenager, the mascara-lashed divorcee' whose bouffant dissolved beneath the waters, the banker shorn of his three-piece suit. We died to the old self, were buried in the dark waters of death, then were born anew, like babies emerging from the waters of the womb.

Proust said that a painter must become stupid before the canvas. So tomorrow morning all over the world, we writers will sit at our desks and become stupid again, searching better words (or perhaps poorer words,) for that which lies below the naming. Starting from scratch, scratching from start, we will labor to unearth the words from their hiding places. Sometimes the words will show their heads and the universe will sing out its kept secret. More often, however, we will fail. And when we do, we must remind ourselves that even Lir, the Irish god of creation, had only half a tongue. How can we expect to have more?

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