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Special Feature Article: I the Poem

Ralph Burns

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I am a poem
a simple little serious poem
I like the way I am
and I shall stay this way.
—Skip Erfle

Editors' Note: When Ralph Burns showed us some of the student poems from his residencies in Montana's Poetry in the School's program, we were amazed, as we think you'll be.

Our special thanks to the teachers and principals at Fort Smith, Mt. Rapelje, and Crow Agency. Also to Pat Simmons, coordinator for Montana's Poetry in the Schools program.

But most important, thanks to the authors who have given us these poems.
Poetry-in-the-Schools' unique aim is to illuminate for students a thing already their own, their "voice." When a poem issues an acceptance of itself, (informing what Stanley Plumly terms "the mind neutral in its own nuance") it necessarily assumes an emotional accuracy. The following poem speaks explicitly about self-acceptance, and it was written, appropriately enough, in lieu of an exercise I had "assigned":

**THE CLOWN**

Because I am a clown
people laugh at me
because why I wish I knew
because maybe they think
I'm crazy
because maybe they do like
me and I just don't know it
because I am wonderful
I am going to do some magic
for you
because I have a purple
hat with a dinosaur sticking out
because maybe I am
a good clown.
—Melanie Dianne Potts — Fort Smith

These kids, for the duration of the poem, trust themselves, and their poems shape their experience — the poetry is more interesting, more assertive. Best to listen, then, for their individual imagination's logic, suggesting certain guidelines (possibly using one or more of the five senses), or forms (often the villanelle renders surprising results, especially in younger grades, shaping the obsessive sounds particular to a more random and subjective landscape.) Regardless, I push these poets to travel largely by their own landmarks. Best to let them tell in their unashamed way which mountains "talk about their lives and
how things are going” and where they can be found. The following Mt. Rapelje poems were written by grades 5-12. Notice the poems that draw their strength from refrain or motif lines — these were written by the 5-6 grades after writing a group villanelle:

THE MOUNTAINS

Some mountains go crazy
they talk about their lives and how things are going
Sometimes I wish I could fly

The cows got it made at the fence post
The bulls got upset at the barn
Some mountains go crazy

A man just got a pie
A girl found a penny
Sometimes I wish I could fly

The wheat jumped at the barley
The crows landed on the scarecrow
Some mountains go crazy
Sometimes I wish I could fly

—Deanne Maatta—

DAYS

The children work fingers to the bone
Their fathers work till dusk
The earth is tingling at their feet
The chalkboards get hay fever
The clouds are jumping to conclusions
The earth is tingling at their feet
The day is marching by quickly
My nose is green with envy
The earth is tingling at their feet.

—Nancy Erfle
TWO MEN IN A BOWL

Two men in a bowl and beer
some crackers look out.

On the rims with some
rocks a gun and a moose.

I like her she likes me
I love her she loves me
my mother of course.

Beer some crackers look out

In the dungeon I lay sad
yet gay hurray.
On the rims with some
rocks a gun and a moose.
—Skip Erfle

FEAR, SCHOOL, SUNDAY

What if a man were to dive
and in diving learned it was bottomless?
—Tammy Wodrich

The spine takes a long time
to develop
but ice can make it crumble
on and on through
time.
—Connie Hassfield

SQUARES ON THE CEILING

The number one
smells like
wind blowing over mahogany,
the color orange, the wings
of a deceitful angel,
a blue day.
The color black
sounds like footsteps
in the hall, the turning
of pages,
a person crying.

The voice of a dime
sounds like the color
green, a baby
crying, a sad song.

A circle feels like
a black stripe,
a giraffe's spots,
Sunday.

The taste of ice looks
like a piece of bacon,
a corvette, a prefix.

A triangle tastes like
the color pink,
a jaguar's dinner,
a song.
— Connie Hassfield

THE BURNING OF BOOKS
Mona Lisa lost her originality
and was just another detailed painting.
There were no more words left
to describe
her face no one left
to decipher her casual mood.
— Charla McFarland

REMOVAL OF WORDS
This room is the ending of
history, enjoyment and silly
love poems. The only table
is a hard oak with no
special designs at all.
The ground is cold and waiting
to be written about.
— Kenny Mosdal
NOAH

Small light raindrops landing
on my window pane
It might not be too bad of a day
But the delicate taps on my roof
has become like the dance
of a thousand elves shaking
the rafters
Sheets of water at my doorstep
wash the welcome away,
the house of a weird old man with his
finished masterpiece looming up
to the treetops.
Weeks of hammering day and night
truckloads of lumber
that wrecked the neighborhood
But now the yard is silent and the vessel
is locked up tight
I grope my way through the streams
from the sky
and pound on a large wooden door.
Nothing.
—Martha Jones

Outside the step the dog munches
lazily on the morning newspaper and drags
it to his favorite place.
—Tammy Wodrich

Crow Agency was perhaps my most educative visit. Students wrote poems about the most original and simultaneously traditional element of their persons, their names:

CHIEF CHILD

My name is from mud
my name goes into my hand
When I sleep my name goes
out into the woods and hills
It goes to be born and I
am asleep on my bed
My name bothers me when
I sleep and it wears a striped
shirt and tastes like ice-cream
My name leaves from my legs
is an ant and goes back
into my body. Tomorrow
my name is a horse
and it bothers me too
Its fun when she bothers me
—Jennifer Chief Child

WALKS OVER ICE
My name can walk and it is a 12
letter word my daddy's father gave it to him
but you can not take it away. My name
is as long as an elephant's trunk.
I love my name and I am going to keep it.
My great, great grandfather can. I got
my name by him. He was in a war
in the winter crossing the ice.
He was the only man that made it across.
—Roberta Walks Over Ice

KEVIN OLD COYOTE
My name came from young coyote
but they changed it to old coyote
My name is Indian pudding
boiling in a pot. My name looks
like an old man coyote and young
man coyote. My last name kills elk.
—Kevin Old Coyote

The following are random selections written by students from both
Fort Smith and Crow Agency:
I didn't go to school because the sun looked like horses running in the river and a tree looked like a burning lamp.

The sidewalk was a spool of thread and the fence tasted like a dirty sleeping bag.
—Dan Hopley

My name sounds like a waterfall in a tulip.
—Jodie

My name sounds like a cat in the kitchen
—Cindy Rouse

FLOWERS

The flowers are almost dead they will be dead tomorrow The weeds are strings The sky has a big head The stars are glass
—Martha and Lori

GOOD AND BAD LUCK

If you find a horseshoe you will have good luck If you go under a ladder you will have bad luck If you find a feather you will have good luck If you go under a fishing pole you will have bad luck

The cat has six eyes.
—Glynda Rondeau

HAIKU

Time is like a snow crying on the ground over ants and orange roots.
—Frances Deputee

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THE RED ROOM

I touched the wall
and it felt like a zebra
with no eyes. In the room
I heard five bats
that flew away
— Michele Stewart

The wind is wild
The leaves whip
in the wind
The wind is wonderful
— Marlo Moehr

THE EYES

The boy's eyes fell
off his face and
he started to run
after it. Joe with no
eyes went to bed.
— Neta Old Elk

WHERE WORDS COME FROM

A long long time ago I found
a pencil
Long ago you didn't know what
a pencil was
It started to write all kinds
of words
I didn't know what the words were
so I asked my dad
He didn't know either
When I walked back to the pencil
it was trying to say things to me.
— Kendra Forney

Coffee is a brown water
coffee makes us warm
when it is cold
coffee makes you small
coffee makes you feel
like dancing
— Lavonna Little Owl
WHERE WORDS COME FROM

Words come from cow
or tiger or newt
New words come from
things like ants and eels
though they don't wear
pants and a robin flies
through the air and bends
his nose when he crashes
and the eagle likes to eat
even though he loses his claw
by flying after rabbits
and trees lose their leaves
because they don't yell
because they get replacements
everything yells and it
gets replacements but
tomorrow words come from
my brother and he is loud.
—Daniel Redden

THE PURPLE ROOM

A dog sits in a tree
crying
Yesterday I saw
a monkey eating fruit
salad
—Tammy Sue

Copper sounds like an elephant
jumping through the sky
Blue is like a fox rhyming
with a hen
Poetry is like dancing
with all the colors in the world
Colors are like jumping
with a friend.
—Kelly Slattery

Cold is a fat dog.
—Darren McDonald

Cold is a bone.
—Roberta Walks Over Ice
Most Montana Poetry-in-the-Schools residencies last for at least one week, enough time to do a lot of lying. Occasionally, a kid goes crazy (often a "slow learner"), "sees," as Kenneth Patchen might, "Shakespeare in the moon," and lies his/her unique way to the truth. I just like to watch them go crazy.

Ralph Burns