

by Jenny Browne

Jenny Browne is a Texas poet and educator. Her poems have been included in the Poetry Society of America's Poetry in Motion Project in Austin, Texas, and her books include *Glass* and *At Once*.

Flowing Metaphors

I have been sitting on the floor with a class of first-graders for nearly an hour when a girl waves both hands wildly above her head. "Miss," she exclaims, "I am so thirsty with talk." We are working our way towards metaphors, but her inspired declaration reminds me once again that these students don't really need me to "teach" them poetry. They just need some water.

Early on in any residency I try to get students comfortable splashing around words and images, feeling metaphors and talking water. This simple exercise is about getting at controlling metaphors. Since a lot of young poets are prone to "feelings" poetry such as "I'm so sad, can't you see how sad I am. Did I say I was sad....," we start our exercise there.

"Who here has ever been sad?" I ask. Hands shoot up and younger students begin telling stories.

"When my dog died and when I fell and at night" and so on...

I ask "Well what does sadness look like?"

"Somebody crying," one voice invariably offers.

"Yeah, we can see someone crying and know they are sad," I agree. "But can we see a sadness?" After a few puzzled looks, I go on, "We know someone is sad by how they look or sound but we can't see an actual sadness. When we write about feelings and things we can't see, we want to create good pictures that people can see in their minds."

I read them "The Poet Pencil" by a young student named Jesus Carlos Soto Morfin. (You can find this poem in *This Tree is Older Than You Are*, edited by Naomi Shihab Nye.)

Once upon a time a pencil wanted to write poetry but it didn't have a point. One day a boy put it into the sharpener, and in place of a point, a river appeared.

—Jesus Carlos Soto Morfin, Age 8

We talk about Jesus Carlos' poem. Questions I asked included:

- How does it make you feel? (Notice I don't ask them what they think the poem "means.")
- Is there really a river?
- How could a poem or an idea be like a river?
- Can they imagine a picture of a river coming out of a pencil?

I tell them that this poem is the picture Juan Carlos imagined when he thought about writing poems. For him, poems flowed and bubbled out. I encourage them to trust the pictures in their own heads.

We then make a list on the board of feelings or ideas that we can't actually see: anger, love, memory, silence, jealousy, wisdom, hope, loneliness, etc. I ask them to pick a word, close their eyes, and say it to themselves a few times while imagining the different kinds of pictures the word evokes in their minds.

Once everyone has a word to write more from, I ask them to come up with three different pictures related to the word. After we share a few, I ask them to work the three together into one poem or, as an option, to pick one picture that they really like and go more deeply into it. The only catch or "rule" is they cannot use the original word in the poem, although it may be the title. In addition to turning their excitement into thirsty tactile talk, this exercise opens up the possibility of non-linear image-rich lyrics. It is a good way to show that a poem doesn't have to have a beginning, middle, and end like a story.

Sometime during the writing process pick out a few really good student images and read them aloud as metaphors. Once they are already making the metaphors themselves, it means more to point them out. Here are some examples from my students:

- A black boot stomps in a muddy puddle and splashes my heart.
- Hope is a blue piece of glass catching the moon.
- Jealousy is a vine with great big hands.
- A metaphor is a river coming out of your mouth.

I recently did this exercise with second- and third-grade ESL students. It worked equally well during a residency with eighth-graders at a juvenile detention facility.

SADNESS

And some flowers grow and
some flowers die. Because
some people didn't water
the flowers.

—Gina, Grade 3

SILENCE

Silence like fog
The silence is my rough rock.
Silence like one of the deep in the forest.
Silence like alone in the darkness.
Silence is my half of my alone life.

—**Jennifer**, Grade 2

(I let her cheat and use the word in the poem on this one because I liked the repetition. What are poetry rules for anyway?)

SOUL

I take into myself
the power to know the languages
as me being a mix-breed.
For I am Spanish, Aztec, Gypsy, Hispanic
My power shines with a purple light
light of tranquility
I'm the kind of person no one listens to
and commences yelling
Better and perfect is what I live for.

—**Wendy**, Grade 8

ANGER

The flame the flame
it's like it's in my head.
My brain feels like it
Wants to die. Everything
is wrong and nothing
is right because everything
I say everyone says it's
Not true so I got it in my head
that everything I do or say
is wrong and not true so now
my head is all messed up
but it's not me. It's just my life...
something wrong just got inside my head.

—**Carlos**, Grade 8

CHANGE

And I saw the black roses.
All my family was there
To see me fall to my knees.
I remember wanting to scream
And shout but nothing
Ever came out.

—**Viola**, Grade 8