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ABSTRACT

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)

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# FOOLING WITH WORDS

## WITH BILL MOYERS

THE 1998 GERALDINE R. DODGE POETRY FESTIVAL

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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# THE GERALDINE R. DODGE POETRY FESTIVAL

The Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival is the largest poetry event in North America. The Festival, held every other year, was inaugurated in 1986 by the Dodge Foundation to help poetry assume its rightful place in the center of our imaginative and emotional lives.

Situated in historic Waterloo Village in Northern New Jersey, the Festival offers four days of poetry readings and poetry-centered events—discussions, conversations, and workshops—for students, teachers, and the general public.

For more information, visit the Festival Web site at [www.grdodge.org/poetry/](http://www.grdodge.org/poetry/), fax (973) 540-1211, call (973) 540-8443 ext. 139, or write to Poetry Festival, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, 163 Madison Avenue, P.O. Box 1239, Morristown, NJ 07962-1239.

2000 Festival—September 21, 22, 23 & 24

"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

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 Amira 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

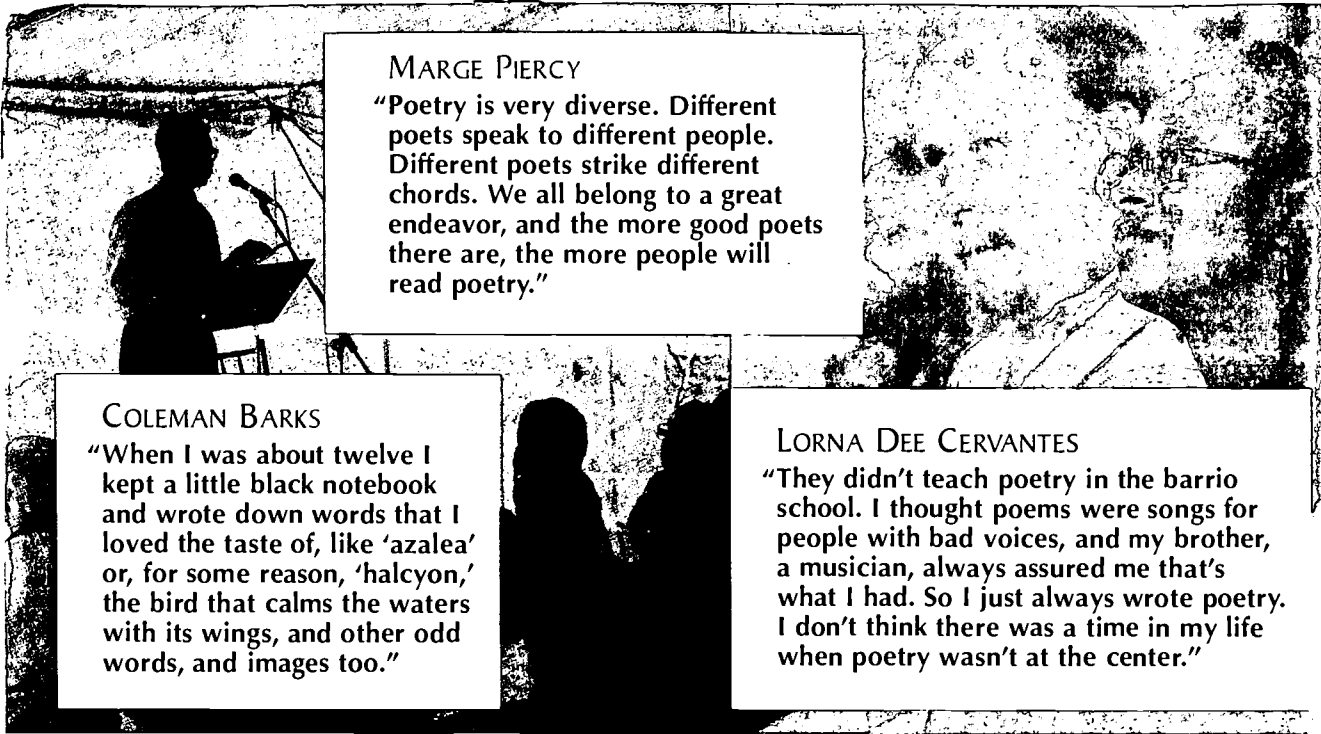


SOUNDS OF POETRY—nine half hours of poems by and interviews with many of the poets featured in FOOLING WITH WORDS—will be available from PBS stations after the September 2, 1999 broadcast of the two-hour special. Please check with your local public television station for the availability and schedule of these programs. These are the poets included:

Amiri Baraka	Stanley Kunitz
Robert Pinsky	Jane Hirshfield
Marge Piercy	Lucille Clifton and
Coleman Barks	Mark Doty
Lorna Dee Cervantes and	Deborah Garrison
Shirley Geok-lin Lim	

SOUNDS OF POETRY may be ordered from Films for the Humanities and Sciences, ordering information inside.

A list of the poems in SOUNDS OF POETRY can be found on the FOOLING WITH WORDS Web site: [www.wnet.org/foolingwithwords](http://www.wnet.org/foolingwithwords) or [www.pbs.org/foolingwithwords](http://www.pbs.org/foolingwithwords)



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."

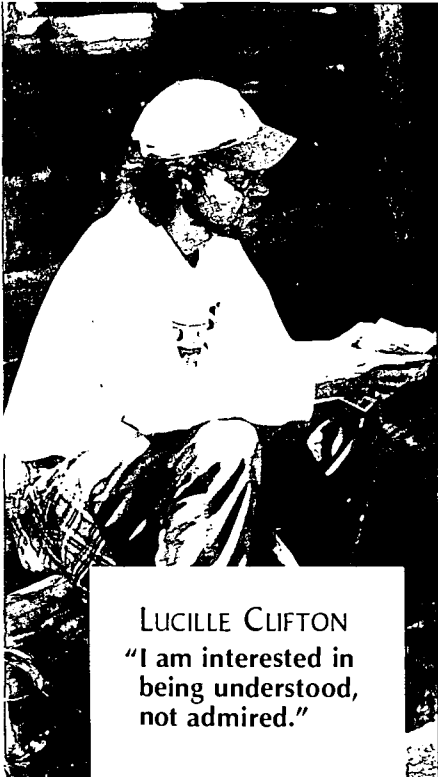
COLEMAN BARKS  
 "When I was about twelve I kept a little black notebook and wrote down words that I loved the taste of, like 'azalea' or, for some reason, 'halcyon,' the bird that calms the waters with its wings, and other odd words, and images too."

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.

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# 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 poems and poems relevant to their other courses of study.



PHOTO: JAMES SAWYER

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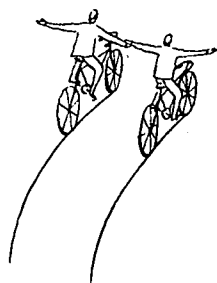
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 163 Madison Avenue  
 P.O. Box 1239  
 Morristown, NJ 07962-1239

## FOOLING WITH WORDS WITH BILL MOYERS

### 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)

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**PUBLISHER:** Robert A. Miller  
**EDITOR:** David Reisman, Ed.D.  
**DESIGN:** B.T. Whitehill  
**WRITERS:** James Haba, Richard Kelso  
**PERMISSIONS EDITOR:** Christina L. Draper  
**COPY EDITOR AND PROOFREADER:**  
Sue Young Wilson  
**EDITORIAL ASSISTANT:** Kimberly Yuen

**COVER PHOTOGRAPHY:** Lynn Saville

### ADVISERS:

James Haba, Poetry Director,  
Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation

Lois Harrod, Voorhees High School,  
Glen Gardner, New Jersey

Peter E. Murphy, Atlantic City High School,  
Atlantic City, New Jersey

Suzanne Snyder Carroll,  
Hopewell Valley Central High School,  
Pennington, New Jersey

Ellen June Wright, Teaneck High School,  
Teaneck, New Jersey

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Coordinators), and Egan Davson  
(Program Assistant)

### FOOLING WITH WORDS WITH BILL MOYERS

**PRODUCER:** Dominique Lasseur  
**DIRECTOR:** Catherine Tatge  
**EDITOR:** Joel Katz  
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hour special, and SOUNDS OF POETRY,  
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A Time Grid for the poems from SOUNDS OF POETRY can be found on  
FOOLING WITH WORDS Online, [www.wnet.org/foolingwithwords](http://www.wnet.org/foolingwithwords)

# Amiri Baraka

FOOLING  
WITH WORDS  
WITH BILL MOYERS

“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, some where  
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!

Who would ban your  
“oom boom ba boom”?  
Why?



## Monday in B Flat

I can pray  
all day  
& God  
wont 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’z (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  
                Ghosts

Rotting family we  
    ghost ate  
                three

A people flattened & chained &  
    bathed & degraded  
    in their own hysterical waste

below  
beneath  
underneath  
deep 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

Slavery

We were slaves

Slaves

Slaves

...

We were

Slaves

...

They threw  
    our lives  
    a way

Beneath the violent philosophy  
    of primitive  
    cannibals

Primitive  
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?

## 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)."

"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.  
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# Coleman Barks

FOOLING  
WITH WORDS  
WITH BILL MOYERS

“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.



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

---

How fully is the beauty  
you love what you do?



# 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.

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# Lorna Dee Cervantes

**FOOLING  
WITH WORDS**  
WITH BILL MOYERS

.....  
 "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  
 leaden meltdown 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.

.....  
 Born in San  
 Francisco's Mission  
 district of Native  
 American and Mexican  
 ancestry, Lorna Dee  
 Cervantes discovered  
 Shakespeare and the  
 English Romantic poets in  
 the houses her mother  
 cleaned. As an adult, she  
 has worked to put into  
 language the once-word-  
 less histories of Mexican  
 Americans and especially  
 Chican-Indias. She teaches  
 at the University of  
 Colorado at Boulder.

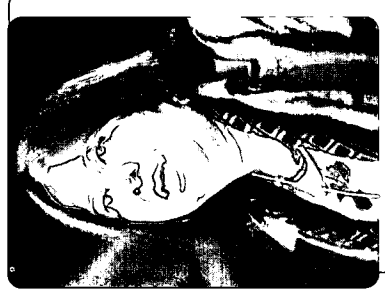


PHOTO: LYNN SAVILLE

## 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.

"Please Fire Me" and "Father, R.I.P., Sums Me Up at Twenty-Three" from *A Working Girl Can't Win* by Deborah Garrison, © 1998 by Deborah Garrison. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

.....  
 Born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1965, Deborah Garrison joined the editorial staff of *The New Yorker* magazine after graduating from Brown University. The poems in her first collection, *A Working Girl Can't Win*, juxtapose our working and personal realities with honesty and humor. She lives in Montclair, New Jersey.  
 .....

## 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"?



PHOTO: LYNN SAVILLE

## 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

FOOLING  
WITH WORDS  
WITH BILL MOYERS

“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.



PHOTO: LYNN SAVILLE

## *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.

# Mark Doty

FOOLING  
WITH WORDS  
WITH BILL MOYERS

“The poet’s craft—love of the sheer physical pleasures of language: its sonics, its textures, its rhythms—is an enormous ally.”

## 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,*

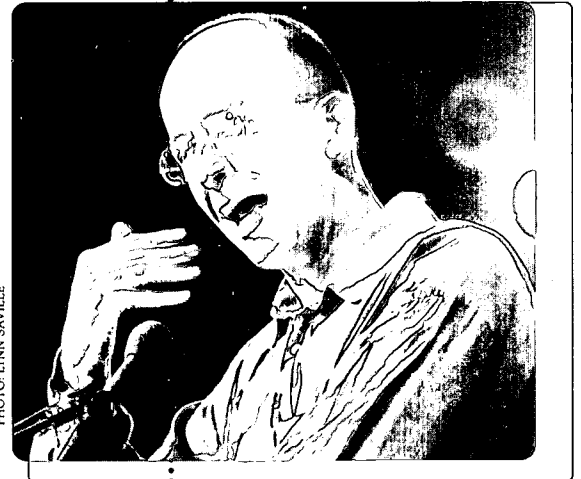
Born in 1953 in Maryville, Tennessee, Mark Doty explores our preoccupation with the past and the future and encourages us to live more in the present. Central to his work are animals and his concern for the need to cope nobly and gracefully with what is beyond our control. He teaches at the University of Houston.

*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.

What calls you here,  
entirely, now?

# Mark Doty

## from *Messiah (Christmas Portions)*

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, "Who'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 people 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.

## Which animals have signaled unknown openings in your life?

"The Poet" from *THE LIVES OF THE HEART* by Jane Hirshfield, © 1997 by Jane Hirshfield. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.  
 "The Envoy" © 1998 by Jane Hirshfield first appeared in the magazine *Blue Sofa* and also can be found in *THE BEST AMERICAN POETRY*, edited by Robert Bly, published by Scribners, 1999. Used by permission of the author.



PHOTO: LYNN SAVILLE

## 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.

Born in New York City and educated at Princeton, Jane Hirshfield has lived in Northern California for the past twenty-five years. A student of Zen and a great woman poet of spirituality, love, and the natural world, she writes with plain reverence of the heart and mind, broadening our awareness of the rich currents of our daily life.

## 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?

“Symposium” from *Hay* by Paul Muldoon, © 1998 by Paul Muldoon. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc. “The Sightseers” from *Quoof* by Paul Muldoon, © 1983 by Paul Muldoon. Reprinted by permission of Wake Forest University Press.

## QUESTIONS

1. Look up the definition of “symposium.” How is Muldoon’s poem similar to and different from the definition? Explain why you think the title works or doesn’t work.
2. Based on the setting of “The Sightseers,” what are the “B-Specials,” and why did they stop Uncle Pat and terrorize him? Why do you think Muldoon juxtaposed the story of the roundabout with Uncle Pat’s story of brutality? What does an “o” have to do with it? What are some other stories of recurring violence?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Create your own verbal “symposium,” using parts of well-known aphorisms, proverbs, or folk sayings. Create your own visual “symposium,” using widely different kinds of images from magazines, newspapers, and photographs.
2. After listening to Paul Muldoon read “The Sightseers,” write about a family event you experienced and describe it in relation to a place in your neighborhood or city.

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



PHOTO: LYNN SAVILLE

contains a deeper, stranger story. He currently teaches at Princeton University and was recently elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford.

## 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 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.

# Stanley Kunitz

FOOLING  
WITH WORDS  
WITH BILL MOYERS

“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.”



PHOTO: LYNN SAVILLE

Stanley Kunitz welcomed his ninetieth year in 1995 with a new collection of luminous, life-affirming poems titled *Passing Through*. Exceptionally generous and encouraging to younger artists, Stanley Kunitz has received nearly every honor our culture can bestow upon a poet. He and his wife summer in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and winter in New York City.

## 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.

## The Round

Light splashed this morning  
on the shell-pink anemones  
swaying on their tall stems;  
down blue-spiked 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.

---

When did you last notice that  
“Light splashed this morning”?

## 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

FOOLING  
WITH WORDS  
WITH BILL MOYERS

“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



she says tanya you hold my work bag  
chaniqua come over here girl i want you to hold my handbag  
josie could you hold my grocery bag  
please

kebè take my purse  
she starts bobbin her head, jackin her arms  
tryin to catch the rhythm of the ropes  
and when she jumps inside those turning loops  
the girls crowd her sing their song  
*kenny kana paula*  
*be on time*  
*cause school begins*  
*at a quarter to nine*  
*jump one two three and*  
*aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah*  
she jumps on one leg—aaaaah  
she dances sassy saucy—aaaaah  
jump for the girls mama  
jump for the stars mama  
jump for the young boys sayin  
jump mama! jump mama!  
jump for the old woman sayin—aww, go head baby

and what the young girls say  
what the young girls say  
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah

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.



# Shirley Geok-lin Lim

FOOLING  
WITH WORDS  
WITH BILL MOYERS

“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 3<sup>rd</sup>, 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 mewling 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.

"Pantoun for Chinese Women" by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, © 1982, 1983 by Shirley Geok-lin Lim. Reprinted by permission of Shirley Geok-lin Lim.

"Riding into California" from *What the Fortune Teller Didn't Say* by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, © 1998 by Shirley Geok-lin Lim. Reprinted by permission of West End Press.

# Sharon Olds

“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.



PHOTO: LYNN SAVILLE

## QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe the family presented in the “The Clasp”? How is the daughter like or unlike her mother?
2. How does the information provided in the first two lines of “The Clasp” affect your response to the central event in the poem? What about the information provided in the third and fourth lines?
3. How does “The Clasp” introduce the poem differently from, say, “The Grab”?

## ACTIVITIES

1. With one or two others, read “The Clasp” aloud, listening to what different readers emphasize and paying particular attention to the contrast between how each naturally reads the “righteous chant” and the lines that follow it.
2. With a small group, act out Sharon Olds’s “The Clasp” and Stanley Kunitz’s “The Portrait.” Discuss which was more challenging to act out. Discuss which was more shocking to experience.

What “in the shock of the moment” have you seen “near the source of love”?

# Poem Subjects and Themes

**FOOLING  
WITH WORDS**  
WITH BILL MOYERS

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.

## POEMS OF CHILDHOOD

Paul Muldoon, "The Sightseers"  
Kurtis Lamkin, "jump mama"  
Stanley Kunitz, "Halley's Comet"  
Stanley Kunitz, "The Portrait"

## POEMS OF ANIMALS

Mark Doty, "New Dog"  
Mark Doty, "Golden Retrievals"  
Jane Hirshfield, "The Envoy"  
Deborah Garrison, "Please Fire Me"  
Robert Pinsky, "The Want Bone"

## POEMS OF FAMILY LIFE

Lucille Clifton, "oh absalom my son my son"  
Deborah Garrison, "Father, R.I.P., Sums Me Up at Twenty-Three"  
Paul Muldoon, "The Sightseers"  
Robert Pinsky, "To Television"  
Stanley Kunitz, "Halley's Comet"  
Stanley Kunitz, "The Portrait"  
Sharon Olds, "The Clasp"

## POEMS OF SURVIVAL

Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me"  
Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Riding into California"  
Amiri Baraka, "Wise I"  
Lorna Dee Cervantes, "Poet's Progress"  
Stanley Kunitz, "The Round"  
Stanley Kunitz, "Halley's Comet"  
Robert Pinsky, "The Want Bone"  
Mark Doty, "New Dog"

## POEMS OF COMMUNITY

Mark Doty, "Messiah (Christmas Portions)"  
Stanley Kunitz, "Halley's Comet"  
Kurtis Lamkin, "jump mama"

## POEMS OF WORK

Deborah Garrison, "Please Fire Me"  
Coleman Barks/Rumi, "Jars of Springwater"  
Coleman Barks/Rumi, "Today, like every other day"  
Stanley Kunitz, "The Round"  
Amiri Baraka, "Wise, Why's, Y'z (Africa Section)"

## POEMS OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me"  
Marge Piercy, "The chuppah"  
Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Pantoun for Chinese Women"  
Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Riding into California"  
Paul Muldoon, "The Sightseers"  
Lorna Dee Cervantes, "Poet's Progress"  
Amiri Baraka, "Wise, Why's, Y'z (Africa Section)"  
Amiri Baraka, "Wise I"  
Kurtis Lamkin, "the million man march"

## POEMS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me"  
Marge Piercy, "What are big girls made of?"  
Deborah Garrison, "Please Fire Me"  
Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Pantoun for Chinese Women"  
Jane Hirshfield, "The Poet"

## POEMS OF POLITICS AND HISTORY

Paul Muldoon, "The Sightseers"  
Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Pantoun for Chinese Women"  
Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Riding into California"  
Amiri Baraka, "Monday in B Flat"  
Amiri Baraka, "Wise, Why's, Y'z (Africa Section)"  
Amiri Baraka, "Wise I"  
Kurtis Lamkin, "the million man march"

## POEMS OF MUSIC AND DANCE

Mark Doty, "Messiah (Christmas Portions)"  
Coleman Barks/Rumi, "Where Everything Is Music"  
Coleman Barks/Rumi, "Today, like every other day"  
Kurtis Lamkin, "jump mama"  
Amiri Baraka, "Wise I"

## POEMS OF WORDPLAY

Paul Muldoon, "Symposium"  
Robert Pinsky, "ABC"  
Mark Doty, "Golden Retrievals"

## POEMS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Mark Doty, "Golden Retrievals"  
Coleman Barks/Rumi, "Jars of Springwater"  
Coleman Barks/Rumi, "Where Everything Is Music"

## POEMS OF POETS AND POETRY

Coleman Barks/Rumi, "Today, like every other day"  
Coleman Barks/Rumi, "Where Everything is Music"  
Lorna Dee Cervantes, "Poet's Progress"  
Jane Hirshfield, "The Poet"  
Jane Hirshfield, "The Envoy"  
Stanley Kunitz, "The Round"  
Robert Pinsky, "If You Could Write One Great Poem"

## POEMS OF FAITH AND SKEPTICISM

Lucille Clifton, "oh absalom my son my son"  
Mark Doty, "Messiah (Christmas Portions)"  
Stanley Kunitz, "Halley's Comet"  
Amiri Baraka, "Monday in B Flat"  
Coleman Barks/Rumi, "Where Everything Is Music"  
Coleman Barks/Rumi, "Today, like every other day"  
Kurtis Lamkin, "the million man march"

# Marge Piercy

FOOLING  
WITH WORDS

WITH BILL MOYERS

“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.”



Marge Piercy was born in a working-class family in Detroit and attended the University of Michigan on scholarship. She is the author of fifteen volumes of poetry and sixteen novels, in genre as diverse as historical fiction, science fiction, contemporary thrillers, and family sagas. Her themes encompass social justice for men and women, nature and spirituality, especially the “lunar side” of Judaism.

## *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 loose 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.

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.

---

“Why should we want  
to live inside ads?”



# 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.

"The chuppah" from *THE ART OF BLESSING THE DAY* by Marge Piercy,  
© 1985, 1999 by Marge Piercy. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.  
"What are big girls made of?" from *WHAT ARE BIG GIRLS MADE OF?* by Marge  
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# Robert Pinsky

FOOLING  
WITH WORDS  
WITH BILL MOYERS

“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.

## 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.



PHOTO: LYNN SAVILLE

## 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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Organization/Address: <i>Ed. Publishing Dept. Thirteen 450 W. 33 St. NYC 10019</i>	Telephone: <i>(212) 560-6649</i>	Fax: <i>(212) 560-2921</i>	
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