

Writing and Sharing Poems (Tips for Tutors)

I have taught poetry to both adults and children for many years. Children always seem more spontaneous and they are quick to place words on paper. For the most part, the adult learners are cautious, worried about spelling and what others might think. I never felt that being a poet was something you learned in a writer's workshop or a creative writing class. To me, it is a way of thinking and feeling that is always a bit different, a way of looking around a corner and seeing things others might miss. The poet Naomi Shihab Nye writes, "Poets are explorers, pilgrims. Most of the poets I know are not the least bit frilly. Poets are also regular people who live down the block and do simple things like wash clothes and stir soup." I like finding poets among the students that I work with and this winter, I have met one here in Prospect, Virginia.

Ivona Kopečna is from the Czech Republic and has been in the United States for about ten years. Ivona brings to each lesson a strong work ethic as well as vivid recollections of her homeland. We are studying short biographies of famous Americans and reading a variety of short stories. At the end of each lesson, I introduce Ivona to a poet and a poem. I am using poets that many of us know. Poets whose work has been used in classrooms for generations. We read poems by Niki Giovanni, Langston Hughes, William Carlos Williams, among others. Poets that you can find in any library or bookstore.

In the poem "This Is Just to Say," William Carlos Williams uses plain, sparse language to write an apology for something that he was glad he did. Ivona enjoyed that idea and wrote the following poem of her own.

This Is Just to Say

Oops

I did it again!

Your leather skirt is gone

Do not look for it

I have it

Oops,

I did it again!

Sorry, I could not help it

It fit perfectly

And I do not even care

Because I'm looking good

Oops,
I did it again!

You will be mad
But not too long
I'm your sister and wearing your skirt.

Ooops
I did it again!

Eve Merriam writes, "What I'd like to stress above everything else is the joy of the sounds of language. I have only one rule for reading it: please read a poem OUT LOUD." You can sense Ivona's joy when you read the above poem out loud, how the words just dance on a page. In her book *Fresh Paint*, Eve Merriam writes short poems in which the title suggests a list. Here are a few of Ivona's responses to those poems.

Anticipations
My secret wish
A walk with my dogs
Sunny day

Pillows
Clouds in the sky
Favorite place where the cat sleeps
Inside the mother where the baby is born

In some of her poems, Ivona uses her words to remember her family in the Czech Republic. She has sent poems to her mother, father, and her sister. Here are a few lines from Ivona's poem "My Grandfather Spoke of Apples."

It is not just talking
Is it work or fun?
Picking up apples
Storing them
My grandfather spoke of apples.
He liked to smell them
He liked to taste them
He liked to name them
He knew it all

He spoke of apples, and I listened!

Siv Cedering writes, "So when you see a poem, read it carefully as you would open a surprise package. And someday when it is snowing, or some night when everyone is asleep, try writing a little poem." I know there are other tutors reading poems with their students. Try sharing ones you read as a child, ones that mean something to you. It shows our students the magic of inventing with words. Perhaps your student will surprise you with a poem of his/her own. I know I look forward each week to what Ivona will bring to class in her yellow notebook. I look forward to hearing the joy in her voice as she reads each important word aloud.

So much depends
Upon
Socks
Should match clothes
Perfectly!

Should be tight
Pull up nicely

Clean
Fresh
Socks.

Emma
what name could
be perfect
for
a little baby dog

Emma goes with
cute
puppy
good girl
beautiful...
it is short
and
sounds like love to me.

Emma, Emma, Emma!

Works Cited: All quotes from:

Janeczka, Paul B. *The Place My Words Are Looking For*. 1990.
Simon & Schuster. New York, NY.

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