When a Student Hands Me a Line Like This

GEORGIA TIFFANY

An impulsive act that had originally been intended as an effort to celebrate the poetry of one class has become a tradition. Now, every year my students ask, “When are you going to write our poem?”

Blue is an ice cream headache.

When a student hands me a line like this, how can I help but love it? Immediately the class comes alive. Songs from the blue guitar, green wind in a grandfather’s palm, blue-green sugar spilling out of the sun, blue, green, blue sundown, green dusk, blue-green sleep, blue . . . green . . . blue-green.

A huge sugar pot she flung against the dried continent.

That night I dream I am dancing like sugar through dark sap. And when I wake up I am tasting line after line, poem after poem after poem. Writing startles us into question. From moment to moment it affirms the question in the mirror.

I can almost taste the broken glass.

Every class I have ever taught, every class I will ever teach, has a heartbeat. And when lines like this touch us, it seems that inside that heartbeat lies the energy of the universe, and inside that energy, moments that propel meaning into our lives.

And now you open like a red tree.

How can I thank them for the questions, for the heartbeat; for the hawk spiraling toward me from the underbelly of a gray-blue cloud; for stars beating faster than my pulse; for the smell of Grandmother’s just washed hair. Their images rush at me.

They are searching the eye of the world.

When a student hands me a line like this . . .

At the end of school five years ago, in search of Thanksgiving and a good-bye that would in some way let them know how much our writing and discoveries together meant to me, from each student’s final portfolio I began selecting random lines that startled me into question, lines that challenged or caressed, lines flung against the continent of our semester’s journey. The process of gathering seemed sinfully delightful, as delightful as picking flowers from a cottage garden.

Since then, every year, the experience evokes strong emotion and the poem I create from their lines has been every bit as meaningful as that first time. Perhaps teachers, like poets, work in an echo. When echoes resonate, there’s a passion that touches us, a passion greater than the sum of its parts.

This year, as I was reading the final portfolios, I tried to limit myself to no more than ten lines from each student. Some were surprises from revisions I’d never seen, others I had read or heard in various forms during the semester. Once I had finished the portfolio evaluations, I printed out the collection of student lines I had gathered and read and reread them, marking the ones which shouted at me, looking for one with which to begin. Almost immediately, Char’s lines seemed comfortable, a natural way for me to begin, a way to distance my impending loss, that loss teachers inevitably feel at the end of every year when young people we have grown to love are leaving.

Outside, a willow leaf twirls in the wind.
Sun filters through its fragile skin,
then breaks against the dirt-smeared window.
A Line Like This

Yes. The sun was attempting to throw some light. I immediately saw my classroom, and Dan's image of the dusty windowsill lined with Mountain Dew cans. Almost immediately other lines began calling for each other.

Patrick's poem, “Camouflage,” about a student who is trying unsuccessfully to fit in, begins with I'm crying in the back corner of the classroom. I knew the spirit of that student somehow needed to be in my poem, as well as sections from Brianna's lines, As you bend over your work/I can't take my eyes off you./ You glance my way, a wrinkle of concentration has burrowed its way into your forehead.

Courtney's exit like kisses and pain spiders across my heart had haunted me since the first time they crossed my desk. I knew they would eventually insist on being a part of my poem.

Because so many of the students filled their writing with evocative images, I had a wonderful selection to choose from. Jennifer writes almost entirely out of the image experience. From her poem “Swallowing Memories” came many possibilities.

Red like the meat of guava fruit,
the sun sinks into the sandy belly of the sea.
I sit on the outstretched finger of lava—
and watch hungry waves swallow more of the beach.

From a barricade of trees,
pulmarias flowers, their scent
like the taste of brown sugar,
float lazily down to my bare feet.
I tuck a white star
behind my ear.
The tide swallows the shell-freckled shore,
swallows footprints,
mine and the tiny black crab's.

A Teacher's Lament in Springtime

GEORGIA TIFFANY

For my creative writing students, June 2000

Outside, a willow leaf twirls in the wind.
Sun filters through the fragile skin
then breaks against a dirt-smeared window,
the sill lined with Mountain Dew cans.
I see a hawk spiral toward me
from the underbelly of a gray-blue cloud.

Just this side of light,
you move down the hall, your shadows
bending past the library, turning the corner
in one fluid human movement,
and stand frozen in the doorway gazing into the room.
Am I dreaming?

I have imagined the leaf, the sun, the cloud.
I have imagined the hawk. Have I imagined you?
The universe dims and starts to go dark,
darkness floating in
on this dusty June night.
Perhaps I never did understand the rules of the game.

How long have I sat at this same desk,
how long have I taught in this same windowless room
with these same filing cabinets
and stacks of papers,
with these same ideas as old as ink?
Can I recycle them forever?

And now you sit on the floor turning pages of the album,
your hands shaking, and mine.
And now you bend over your work, glance my way,
a wrinkle of concentration burrowed into your forehead.
You say you are searching the eye of the world.
Because light reflects off my glasses, I cannot see your eyes.

In fact, the paints must have smeared
because now the whole picture's blurry.
And now, you are crying in the back corner of the classroom.
And now you open like a red tree,
your eyes weighted down with twin flames of stone.
Stars fall to the ground like broken glass.

I tuck a white star behind my ear, a black crab,
a one-armed teddy bear,
your images rushing at me like the rain that's beginning,
rolling down the skylight,
and I strain to hold my eyes open, afraid if I blink
you'll disappear.

Always alone in these shadows, I stare at my English book,
pages marked with paper clips,
and try to forget the dark is even here.
You exit like kisses.
Pain spiders across my heart.
I stand still and listen to the silent school breathing.
A Line Like This

The last line of my poem came from Jessica’s villanelle, “Moving On,” about a young woman leaving her alcoholic husband. In the permission we gave ourselves with the form, one of her repeated lines changes from and focused only on breathing to she focuses only on breathing to she focuses on his heavy breathing. Jessica’s poem ends like this:

Packed bags on the porch,
she takes her daughter’s hand.
He stands still by the doorway
listening to the silent house breathing.

Because I, too, was focused on breathing—focused on that end-of-the-year breathing, that rhythm —and because Jessica had altered the breathing line each stanza to fit her poem, it seemed not only that her discovery was becoming my discovery, but that I, too, could change her lines to the extent they ended my poem in as significant a way as they ended hers. Originally I wrote, “I stand still in the doorway/listening to the silent breathing.” Then, for the sake of the poem, particularly because these lines were the ending, I did take the liberty of eliminating by the doorway and substituted school for house. Jessica recognized her lines, of course, and thought it was “neat” how I’d used them to end the poem.

At the end of their portfolio presentations the following week, I read the poem to my students, meeting the eyes of each one as I recited his or her respective line or lines. Sometimes I swallowed to avoid tears. They sat silently solemn. And then … and then …

An impulsive act that had originally been intended as an effort to celebrate the poetry of one class has become a tradition. Now, every year my students ask, “When are you going to write our poem?” I suspect that after the first year’s experience, as student writing begins to take shape over the semester, certain lines, like Courtney’s exit like kisses, lie dormant somewhere in my subconscious ready to emerge in this annual thanksgiving poem. But the ease with which such a poem comes together, usually in less than four hours, still surprises me and reaffirms my suspicions that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin knew what he was talking about.

In “Building the Earth” (1965, 31) Chardin asks, “How can we unite all the positive values of civilization in a totality which will also respect individual values?” He answers: “Since everything in the universe, starting from Man, takes place in the personalized being, the ultimate Term of the universal Convergence must also possess (in a supreme degree) the quality of a Person” (61).

I’m sure Chardin did not have writing such a poem in mind when he made this statement. But I’m thinking that the connection is possible. Is each of us all the time in the act of composition, that ongoing emergence? Is the act of writing a convergence, as Chardin says, “the perfection and usefulness of each nucleus of human energy in relation to the whole”?

Continuously on our watch for ways to enlarge our consciousness, are we as writers together searching for the eye of the world?

It’s a mystery, as poetry itself is a mystery, as each student is a mystery. An “I” in the middle of the eye. I’ll probably never understand the mystery, except to understand how meaningful for me as a writing teacher to be able to find a nucleus in the energy of writing, the reciprocity of that energy, an affirmation of the writing process.

And so, once again this year, I say good-bye to my students with a poem (see page 15), constructed almost entirely of lines from their writing. With the permission of my students, they become the poem.

Reference


Note: Indicated lines in the context of the text are from the following student writers in the order in which they appear: Jillian Smith, Chihiro Mochizuki, Stacy Brockner, Courtney Erickson, Beth Willard, Brianna Nash, Dan Absalonson, Char Balyeat. In addition to these students, other students whose lines appear in the poem “A Teacher’s Lament in Springtime” are Jeni Motoyoshi, Trisha Sleeth, Jake Romney, Jessica Fiedler, Claire Cruver, Thomas Caster, Jennifer Harper, Pat Brandenburg, Jessica Roys, Kristina Almon, Emily Pollock.

Georgia Tiffany’s poems have appeared in South Dakota Review, The Malahat Review, Willow Springs, Orbis, Poetry Ireland, Fugue, North Dakota Quarterly, Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review, and many other journals. She is included in the Washington University Press anthology of Northwest Poets, Deep Down Things. She lives in Spokane, Washington, where she teaches world literature and philosophy, humanities, and creative writing. Her students have won local, regional, and national writing awards continguously for the last twelve years. She is a teacher-consultant with the Northwest Inland Writing Project at the University of Idaho.