



# “Oh that wonderful stuff”: Selected Poetry by College and Middle School Students

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When students use poetry to imagine and explore academic subjects, they examine the topic in new, creative ways, resulting in interesting and lively writings that stimulate thought and class discussions. The following poems are examples of student poetry written in a variety of classes throughout the curriculum. I am pleased to showcase student writing in this section, and I hope reading these poems will suggest possibilities and adaptations for teachers and students elsewhere.

Students at Clemson University in South Carolina participating in a Communication-Across-the-Curriculum (CAC) project wrote poetry as part of their classroom experience. Professors from a wide range of disciplines assigned the poems to help students engage course material through their creative thinking and writing abilities, so that they, and their classmates, might discover new perspectives on the subject of study. The endnotes on the title of these poems detail the teacher, course, and assignment given to the student.

Middle School students at The Park School of Baltimore (a K-12 independent school in Maryland) wrote the second group of poems as part of a language arts and science collaboration. Students wrote the poems based on their research and experience with nature after being taught the skills of close observation, note-taking, and metaphorical thinking. Teachers involved were Nancy Abrams, science; and Nadine Feiler, language arts and social studies. The essay they co-authored immediately follows these poems and describes the interdisciplinary project in which the students composed the poems.

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The poem was submitted in the circular form on the prior page, in a format that is readable, but that we were not able to reproduce, so here is the “translation,” so to speak:

**Fertilization Poem <sup>1</sup>**  
*Maureen McHugh*

**Sperm:**

*I've lost my phone number may I borrow yours?  
They call me coffee because I grind fine  
Hey baby, are your feet tired? Cause you been running  
through my mind all day.  
Are you from Tennessee? Cause you're the only 10 I see  
Do you know karate? Cause your body is really kicking  
You must be a parking ticket because you have “fine”  
written all over you.*

**Egg:**

*Go ahead and break through my gelatinous veil.  
Many have tried and many will fail.  
You've already been through a dangerous road;  
the acids did many of your friends corrode.  
But you have made it through the difficult trial,  
and you've reached me whom you so desire.  
You want to combine your DNA with mine?  
Haploid to diploid, or so you pine.  
Well go ahead and pine after me.  
We'll see which one's the most lucky.  
We've only this chance to fulfill our fate,  
so put away your tired lines, come on, let's mate*

**“I watch those hands...”<sup>2</sup>**

*Amanda Oberdorff*

**I watch those hands that are still too small  
To grasp what I carry with ease.  
But while my own hands resign themselves  
To the tasks that comprise adulthood  
His move with frantic fascination  
To interpret the details of life.  
With black ink and pencil lead  
I record the Crayola spectrum of his day.  
And while he touches the worms and critters  
Whose sensation I've long since abandoned  
I look at my own hands and wonder  
Do my fingers point direction for him  
Or is his easy grip pulling me  
To the memories and excitement that age forgets?**

### **Chemical Equilibrium <sup>3</sup>**

*Catherine Taylor*

**Chemical equilibrium may be confusing to some  
I may leave them frustrated and feeling quite glum.  
Why can't a reaction just happen one way?  
What's this  $K_w$ ,  $K_c$ , and  $K_a$ ?  
If you'll sit back and listen, I'll show the way  
All you need is the principle of LeChatelier.  
When you listen to him, it will help you decide  
If the reaction will shift to the right or left side.  
When the products are large, the reaction moves right  
Don't let all the  $K$  business give you a fright.  
When the products are many,  $K$  is greater than one  
... Oh wait!! Please don't go—your lesson's not done.  
When the reactants are large,  $K$  is smaller than one  
And it's the left side this time that has all the fun.  
I can see you're not listening—you're bored as can be  
So I hope on the test you improve on your D.**

**Going Downtown** <sup>4</sup>  
*Hayley Shilling*

We wear few layers  
And go out into rainy February looking for warmth.  
Our twenty white toes, pinched by high shoes, strappy  
shoes, click on the side walk and  
Pinking from cold air, and the friction of  
Going downtown.  
We open doors, present ourselves to bouncers—bona fide  
by age.  
We present ourselves to men inside  
All the time casting our eyes around for a tall body, a  
shock of dark hair,  
Someone  
Not too drunk to speak, but drunk enough to say hello  
(to the likes of us) we think.  
Often the place is only partially filled and we move on.  
Two approaches, stools change, bouncers change  
(They know our faces, if not our names)  
And again we slip out into the rain  
Hunting and hunted, going downtown.

We order few drinks  
And down them slowly, swirling the ice looking for  
warmth.  
Our beautiful painted lips, pursed around short straws,  
bitter disguised liquid,  
Pinking from Sex on the Beach and  
Going downtown.  
Sometimes the loud music makes it all worth it if it's  
something we recognize,  
And there's someone there too,  
From classes or from last Friday to pretend to be  
interested in shouting at our ears and hearing us over it,  
Or notice we made ourselves up to show them.  
Other girls have longer hair, shorter skirts, higher boots,  
and we're jealous and sorry for them.  
Old men say, "You look like my daughter, want to  
dance?"  
Young men say, "I'll be your daddy, what's in your  
glass?"  
They compliment our clothes and grab our ass  
We're just girls, going downtown.

**Beach Baby** <sup>5</sup>

*Haley Ann Nelson*

Sun kissed cheeks decorated with freckles,  
Golden hair touched by the sun  
Sparkling green eyes that ached to see all.  
The excitement of sand,  
Dunes that became castles,  
Fortresses with princess  
Ruler of the land.  
A Minnie Mouse Bikini  
With Hot Dogs at lunch time  
The taste of saltwater  
The smell of coconut sunscreen  
Brown legs and arms  
Racing towards the water battling the waves  
Becoming the beautiful mermaid.  
Only seven years old and imagination  
That filled a lifetime.  
A wanting, a needing a yearning  
To never grow old  
Knowledge began to gain power,  
Took over the princess  
The beautiful mermaid.  
No more Minnie Mouse Bikinis, but towels  
Wrapped around a tortured body  
That hungered to feel the freedom of dashing in the ocean  
With a stomach full of hotdogs  
And sandcastles with seashell windows.

**Region of Rejection: Gettysburg Address Revised <sup>6</sup>**  
*Bo Gillooly*

**Four score and seven years ago,  
our Tukey, brought forth on this subject,  
a new formula, conceived in the Studentized range,  
and dedicated to the proposition  
that all pair's two corresponding population means  
are not equal.**

**Now we are engaged in a great Bartlett's Test,  
testing whether that variance, or any other variance,  
independent and normal, can long endure.**

**We are met on a great battlefield between two mighty  
tests.**

**We have come to dedicate a portion of the Wilcoxon Rank  
Sum field,  
as a final resting place for those who are ranked and  
independent,  
and another field to ranked and non-normal samples,  
who gave their lives so that Kruskal-Wallis might live.**

**It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.  
But, in a larger sense, we can not forget General  
Friedman,**

**For we can not consecrate a whole block without this  
fallen comrade,**

**And so we hallow this statistical ground, as Anova, sum of  
squares, a treatment.**



**Just a Thought <sup>7</sup>**

*Felisia A. Sims*

**What if Stanley dug the hole Alice fell in?  
Would her bottle of fizzy drink really be ploosh?**

**What if Pinocchio crossed a tarbaby in his path instead  
of a serpent?  
Would that sly fox still lay low?**

**What if Max’s journey was across desert sands instead  
of the wide ocean?  
Would the wild things be bearded ladies selling *paan*?**

**What if Flopsy wore a blue jacket?  
Would she have eaten so many radishes?**

**What if Harriet was in the Ceremony of the Twelves?  
Would her assignment be “Busybody”?**

**What if Disney had known Carroll?  
Would they have had profound conversations while  
sharing a hooka?**

**What if Pinocchio’s Fairy with the Azure hair had really  
been The Warden?**

**What if the toad Harriet hid in her classmate’s desk was  
really a prince?**

**What if Ole Golly had nappy hair?**

**Just a thought.**

**Poem <sup>8</sup>**

***Amanda Brown***

**The war in my head over getting help or fighting on my own  
A constant struggle to show no signs  
Feeling desperate and alone  
Try to exert control, calm, breathe  
Push through the fog of the mind to be like everyone else  
All the Average Joes of the world with their families  
Their nine to fives and cups of coffee  
While I sit within my own work group  
But not working on projects, figures, company reports  
Although something is under construction- or rather  
Reconstruction-  
The mind being slowly twisted back into shape  
Carefully molded with imperfect hands  
Trying to fix the wrongs even a Perfect Hand couldn't fix  
Soft voices trying to soothe the tantrums within  
To the point where Reason can be heard speaking  
A constant struggle to show no signs  
The war in my head over getting help or fighting on my own**

**Passing the Old Kitfield Inn, Monck's Corner, SC <sup>9</sup>**  
*Matt Creech*

**Of course, you no longer shoot and instead  
Travel daily to the fields, coming first to a strange  
Convergence  
Of dirt and asphalt roads, the sun-blached sign  
"Kitfield Inn"  
Left towards the big oak (the base strewn with the cigarettes  
and cheap beer cans of bored teens)  
Through the trailers and lines of scuppernong, and finally  
To the graffiti covered Inn itself. You unhinge the gate, follow  
The worn road, and begin another day of work.  
After all, you no longer shoot, and the preparation is all.  
Walking along the raw ruts of new earth  
You kneel suddenly, as if genuflecting to some pagan god—  
mother, father, a bitch, or a bore—  
And rise slowly under the bend and weight of arthritic age.  
Between the broomstraw and sorghum strips,  
Out toward the traces of loblolly and brambles,  
Cracked corn and seeds powder the soil.  
Sifting your weary (but still strong) hands through the work of  
An old man's autumn, your soil will not yield crops, but the  
Restrained and familiar sunrise violence of falling doves.  
The preparation is all.**

**Math the Deceiver<sup>10</sup>**

*Bridgett R. Duggins*

**I see you Math  
hiding behind your a's and b's  
sometimes x, y, and z's  
I see you.....**

**You think slick  
I'm sure  $1 + 1 = 2$   
but you question my integrity  
had the nerve to ask me  
to come up with a proof.**

**Proof by Contradiction  
more like proof by lies  
nevertheless math I see you  
so don't try to hide....**

**You hide behind E's, N's, Z's and R's  
but I see you math  
I know who you are**

**You're nothing but a number  
too much of a coward  
to be straight forward  
I swear there's always a twist  
making me go through theorems  
and identities just to prove you exist**

**In the end  
Math, I'll break you down  
and I'll expose you  
cause I see you  
and I know who you are....**

**Ode to Math (With strategically placed vocabulary)<sup>11</sup>**  
*Maureen McHugh*

**Humor me, as I become reflexive.  
I wish to relate to you the transformation  
Of my composition as a student.  
One-to-one, myself and I (the unique identity)  
I seek to find mathematical relations, and to  
Generate some finite order in my infinite mind.**

**The field of math, it seems, is cyclic,  
A ring mapped onto itself.  
All classes appear equivalent, a symmetric group,  
Each partition taken as a subgroup of the whole.  
Outwardly prime (relatively, at least),  
But the domain of math is eternal, and  
All ideas become congruent; it's just a function of time.**

**This is the unity that compels my mind;  
This is the beauty that satisfies my soul;  
This is pure, this is abstract, this is the science of our world.**

**This is math.**

**Wacko-Tobacco<sup>12</sup>**

*Kara Davis*

**Dear Stevie:**

**Roomie, I do love you so,  
But this chewing snuff has got to go!  
Our room is laced in bottles and cans,  
And a smell that lingers with your hair and hands.  
Your constant spitting while I'm trying to work  
Has led me to act a bit like a jerk.  
I'm sorry, really, but think how I feel,  
When you're sucking your teeth and tapping your wheel.  
And what about Josie when he kisses you sweet?  
A surprise sure awaits that tastes of rank feet!  
If not for us, then quit for just you,  
The scary stats prove all too true.  
Ulcers, cancer, heart disease, even death,  
A hell of a case of God-awful bad breath!  
Besides that, darling, you are a girl!  
Think of social stigmas, your place in the world.  
If you're stressed take runs, naps, showers.  
Set small goals; a few days, several hours.  
Baby steps, baby steps, you'll pull right through,  
And there'll be a much happier, healthier you!**

**Victoria's Secret (a poem for two voices)<sup>13</sup>**  
*Victoria Ward*

**I am Pedro.**

**I am Max.**

**We are the secrets  
of Victoria's house.**

**We are the secrets  
of Victoria's house.**

**I am white and  
I am black.**

**I am both, all of that.**

**We are the rulers.  
We are the cats.**

**We are the rulers.  
We are the cats.**

**There are two others.**

**There are two others.**

**Just like the rest.**

**But we are the best.**

**We are the cats  
Pedro and Max.**

**We are the cats  
Max and Pedro.**

**The landlord's**

**Name is Erik.**

**If he knew about us**

**We'd be gone on the bus.**

**But what he doesn't know**

**Won't hurt him.**

**We are the cats,**

**We are the cats,**

**We are the rulers,**

**We are the rulers,**

**And we are the secrets**

**And we are the secrets**

**Of Victoria's house.**

**Of Victoria's house.**

## **Of Carrots and Sticks<sup>14</sup>**

*Jason Meadows*

**Some shout “*Only carrots!*”  
Others cry “*Only sticks!*”  
And still are those who ask for “*Neither!*”  
    (to whom I say “*Get Real!*”)  
Alas! If the people were smart  
I would give them only carrots  
Or, if stubborn and cattle, only sticks  
But in my experience they are both  
And such requires a mix.**

**For remember:  
When they are big,  
    carrots are of poorer quality  
When they are big,  
    sticks frighten more  
When they are small,  
    carrots are more alluring  
When they are small,  
    sticks are called twigs**

**Wise mothers say,  
“*Eat your carrots!*”  
    and  
“*Don’t play with sticks!*”  
Both to the benefit of your eyes  
So to see with clear vision,  
My own wisdom is this:  
Carrots are the measure of a gem  
    take them while you can  
On the far side of sticks is Hades  
    avoid them while you can**



**Detritus** <sup>15</sup>  
*Michael Roswell*

**Oh that wonderful stuff,  
Muddy,  
Goopy detritus.  
Some would say  
It smells  
Like sulfur,  
With a bit of methane,  
And rotting dung  
Mixed in  
So bad,  
Not me.  
Hungry,  
Eat it.  
Dying,  
Become it.  
Need a home  
Knead a home.  
Why bother  
Making any landfills,  
Mountains of trash  
Filling our planet  
The way  
Water gets soaked up  
Into a napkin  
When you  
Can make  
Detritus?  
Why make  
A sandwich  
When detritus  
Is over there?  
Why make  
Mud bricks  
Or concrete,  
If you can  
Dig a hole?  
Potpourri,  
Detritus will do.  
Detritus.**

**Sun Rise Walk <sup>16</sup>**

***Maggie Sachs***

**I walk along a road of sand, never ending.  
Along my side, the black water,  
Sloshing and writhing  
Like a fire, in the ocean.  
Darkness surrounds me.  
In the far distance, there is a tiny gleam of light,  
As if someone had ripped a hole  
In a black sheet that resembled the sky.  
At the beach, music plays.  
The waves crashing in furiously  
Keeping the beat  
Seagulls sound the melody  
And the sandpipers dance to the music.  
I keep walking, and walking  
Miles and miles  
Slowly vanishing into the distance.  
Soon, the sun begins to rise,  
Fast,  
Faster than an Olympic runner.**

**The Wonders of Assateague** <sup>17</sup>  
*Sami Winer*

**I take back memories of...  
The beach,  
The cold, cool water  
Shimmering in the sunlight.**

**The salt marsh,  
That unforgettable smell,  
Of the mud that smelt of  
Rotten eggs.**

**The dunes,  
Ever changing...  
Animals landing there,  
Then the sand, tumbling down.**

**The forest,  
Where the animals run freely,  
The trees folding over you,  
Like you wrap in a blanket,  
On a cold night**

**The bay,  
The fish swimming,  
Without any fears,  
The cool air,  
Blowing in your hair.**

**Will you ever return?**

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Professor: Jerry Waldvogel; Course: General Biology; Assignment: Students were asked to accurately portray some aspect of the biology covered in the course.
- <sup>2</sup> Professor: Jan Murdoch; Course: Psychology, Clinical Practicum; Assignment: After hands-on clinical experience with individuals having diagnosed mental disorders, students were asked to write a poem from their perspective or from the perspective of a person with a diagnosed mental disorder.
- <sup>3</sup> Professor: Melanie Cooper; Course: General Chemistry; Assignment: Students were given the topic Equilibrium and asked to write a poem that incorporates both the everyday “real world” meaning and the chemical definition of equilibrium.
- <sup>4</sup> Professor: Judith M. Melton; Course: Women’s Body Image in Popular Culture; Assignment: Students were asked to create two poems dealing with the themes of the class.
- <sup>5</sup> Professor: Judith M. Melton; Course: Women’s Body Image in Popular Culture; Assignment: Students were asked to create two poems dealing with the themes of the class.
- <sup>6</sup> Professor: Wayne Patterson; Course: Intermediate Business Statistics; Assignment: Students were asked to focus on a subset of the basic topics examined in the course, write a poem to inform a non-class member in some way about statistics, and illustrate the ideas using practical examples or illustrations.
- <sup>7</sup> Professor: Lucy Rollin; Course: Children’s Literature; Assignment: Students were asked to experiment with words, think “outside the box,” and imagine new ways to experience a work of children’s literature.
- <sup>8</sup> Professor: Patricia Connor-Greene; Course: Abnormal Psychology; Assignment: Students were asked to write two poems: the first poem was to be written just before visiting a mental health treatment facility (in anticipation of what they might see or feel); the second poem was to be written immediately after the site-visit.
- <sup>9</sup> Professor: Alma Bennett; Course: President’s Seminar, “Place: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Function of Setting”; Assignment: Students were asked to write a poem that reflected an intense but carefully focused response to a place, to place itself.

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- <sup>10</sup> Professor: Joel Brawley; Course: Introduction to Modern Algebra; Assignment: Students were asked to write a poem which had to be at least ten lines but no more than one page and had to pertain to the course in some way.
- <sup>11</sup> Professor: Joel Brawley; Course: Introduction to Modern Algebra; Assignment: Students were asked to write a poem which had to be at least ten lines but no more than one page and had to pertain to the course in some way.
- <sup>12</sup> Professor: Jerry Waldvogel; Course: Honors Biology; Assignment: After discussing topics like drug addiction, cloning, smoking, and abortion, students were asked to write a poem that explores the topic from the perspective of some person or object involved in the issue.
- <sup>13</sup> Professor: Michelle Martin; Course: Children’s Literature; Assignment: Students were asked to write a poem based on the poetry of Paul Fleishman in “I am Phoenix” and “Joyful Noise,” poems which are written for two voices. Directions to read the poem are as follows: the person on the left reads the left column; the person on the right reads the right column, and each is silent when nothing appears on his/her line; when text is printed for both readers, they both read, even if the words are different for the two speakers.
- <sup>14</sup> Professor: Margaret Thompson; Course: Studies in Environmental Science, Law and Policy; Assignment: Students were asked to review the curriculum and find a topic to use in a poem.
- <sup>15</sup> Teachers: Nadine Feiler and Nancy Abrams; Course: Sixth Grade Science and Literature Project. Assignment: At four different points in the project students were given jeweler’s loupes and asked to look at objects, sketch them, write about what they saw, ask themselves what the object reminds them of, and theorize about why the object looks as it does. The notes were used for the poems, three of which are used here. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Detritus is “waste or debris, in particular organic matter produced by decomposition or loose matter produced by erosion.”
- <sup>16</sup> “Sun Rise Walk” and the poem that follows describe the poets’ thoughts and feelings after a field trip to do research on Assateague Island.
- <sup>17</sup> Assateague Island is an ocean park in Maryland.