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Finding Poems in Small, Ordinary Things

Sometimes I'll start writing a poem in bed Early in the morning the mind is still half-dreaming, swarming with vague, woozy thoughts, and some of those turn into poems. —X. J. Kennedy

One of our goals in teaching poetry is to guide young poets in learning that the seeds of poems are all around us, and that a poet can write about anything no matter how small or ordinary. I frequently launch a poetry writing unit with this lesson because I want young poets to create an ongoing list of ideas for poems, and to be truly inspired by this list (not a list that sits unused on a wall or in a notebook). From this lesson children can learn:

- ☉ That poetry is all around them, even in the ordinary and small
- ☉ That one place where poetry hides can be the source for several poems
- ☉ To use oral language as a scaffold for drawing and writing
- ☉ To create an ongoing poetry topic list from which to write poems

On the list, write down students' words exactly as they say them. It's the unusual, not-perfect way of speaking that sometimes makes a thought more poetic.

Minilesson

Poetry hides all around us. Poetry sometimes hides in places where most people wouldn't think of looking, like under your bed, in a rain puddle on the street, or in a spider's web. Or sometimes poetry hides in ordinary places, like in a paper clip, a button, and even in a dog barking at a noisy vacuum cleaner—all of these are subjects for actual poems. Poetry is all around us if we just look for it. I'm going to read you part of a poem about where one poet found poetry.

Let's look at a poem, and pay particular attention to the lines in bold.

"Valentine for Ernest Mann"

Naomi Shihab Nye

You can't order a poem like you order a taco.
Walk up to the counter, say, "I'll take two"
and expect it to be handed back to you
on a shiny plate.
Still, I like your spirit.

Anyone who says, "Here's my address,
write me a poem," deserves something in reply.
So I'll tell you a secret instead:

**poems hide. In the bottoms of our shoes,
they are sleeping. They are the shadows
drifting across our ceilings the moment
before we wake up.** What we have to do

is live in a way that lets us find them.

Once I knew a man who gave his wife
two skunks for a valentine.

He couldn't understand why she was crying.

"I thought they had such beautiful eyes."

And he was serious. He was a serious man
who lived in a serious way. Nothing was ugly
just because the world said so. He really
liked those skunks. So, he re-invented them
as valentines and they became beautiful.

At least, to him. And the poems that had been hiding
in the eyes of skunks for centuries
crawled out and curled up at his feet.

Maybe if we re-invent whatever our lives give us
we find poems. Check your garage, the odd sock
in your drawer, the person you almost like, but not quite
And let me know.

Poems are sometimes hiding in places where people don't even think of
looking. For me, poems hide in soapsuds, in my box of mints, and behind my
son's ear! In one kindergarten class, the students illustrated a chart of where
poetry hides for them. Here are some of the places where students found
poetry hiding:

In leaves (Jordon)

In the sound of rain on the roof (Alex)

In a rainbow's pot of gold(Daisy)

In the trees(Leo)

Here are some other places where other young poets found poetry hiding. Let
me read you two poems.



Poetry hides
in a bag of
chips because
it crunches like



leaves in the fall.
by Marissa
foran

Poetry hides
in a bag of
chips because
it crunches like
leaves in the fall.

Poetry hides
in music in the
Limbo
Poetry hides
in your shoe
when it walks
Poetry hides
in a clock
in the numbers
By Paul

Poetry hides
in a baby's
giggle
Poetry hides
in a spring
picture.
By Paul

Poetry hides
in music in the
limbo
Poetry hides
in your shoe
when it walks
Poetry hides
in a clock
in the numbers

Poetry hides
in a baby's
giggle
Poetry hides
in a spring
picture

Why don't you close your eyes and think for a minute of where poetry hides for you. Now turn to someone next to you and whisper one place where you can find poetry. Who would like to share? As you tell me where you find poetry, I'll write it here on this Where Poetry Hides chart we'll keep in the classroom.

Extensions

- ☉ You can make a class book of places where poetry hides by collecting one idea from each student with their accompanying illustrations.
- ☉ Young poets can add the Where Poetry Hides list to their notebooks for ideas for future poems. Older children can check off one place that they might want to write more about.

Be sure to point out that the Where Poetry Hides list is, in fact, a poem in itself, called a list poem.

Book Links

These books can help you extend the minilesson.

Karla Kuskin
Near the Window Tree: Poems and Notes
HarperCollins (1975)

Lee Bennett Hopkins
Good Books, Good Times!
Harper & Row (1990)

Paul Janeczko
The Place My Words Are Looking For: What Poets Say About and Through Their Work
Simon & Schuster (1990)

Paul Janeczko
Seeing the Blue Between: Advice and Inspiration for Young Poets
Candlewick (2002)