

Fieldtrips to Find Poetry

by Steve Zeitlin

Several summers ago, on a family vacation to Edisto Island, South Carolina, I stopped to buy a few groceries at the local market. On the way out, a handwritten sign on the bulletin board caught my eye, and I wrote down its message to summer visitors. Later, with my children Ben and Eliza, we broke apart the lines to create a found poem:

From July to October
Loggerhead hatchlings
Make their journey to the sea
Guided by the reflection of the
moonlight on the water

Please turn off all porch lights and
flashlights
To keep confused hatchlings
From losing their way.

What a beautiful, though wholly unintended poem!

The *Handbook of Poetic Forms* published by Teachers & Writers Collaborative regards a “found poem” as a piece of writing that was not intended as a poem, but is declared to be by its “finder.” The more the piece of writing was intended as a poem, the writer argues, the less it qualifies as a found poem. The object of writing a found poem is to locate in the words that bombard us every day, intensified language, sharply presented, sometimes suggesting a story in just a few words. Poems

can be “found” in everything from newspaper articles, store signs, lists, scraps of conversation, and other everyday uses of language. The *Handbook* gives an example of a poet creating a found poem by adding line breaks to a brief note he saw taped to the refrigerator door:

Dear Mom,
I ate all my lunch
And went back to school.
I am all washed up.

According to the *Handbook*, “Writing a found poem often requires creative skills similar to those used in the actual creation of the art, deciding the poem’s limits and line-breaks. The poet does not enjoy the license to change, add, or omit words.” But a teacher, wanting to tune the eyes and ears of students to language, may want to give the students a little more latitude.

I remember reading that John Lennon did much of his writing with the television providing a backdrop of sounds. “For the benefit of Mr. Kite there will be a show tonight on trampoline” from *Sargeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* was adapted from an ad coming across the TV screen. Other poets have identified found poems in law books and medical textbooks.

A found poem fieldtrip is a useful way of tuning young minds to the music and richness of language which is all around

them. A walk around the block or to a specific destination can yield a rich trove of language for students to work with back in their classroom. (Keep in mind that a fieldtrip to find poems can be combined with trips to museums and other places as well!)

To test out this idea, on a recent Sunday, my wife, daughter Eliza, and I piled into the car and took a long drive all the way down Broadway, in New York City, from the Bronx down to Houston Street and then over the Lower East Side. My daughter was not so keen on the idea at first. But she claimed to have finished all her homework, and reluctantly agreed to bring a pad of paper and tag along.

I was struck by how the fieldtrip mirrors the creative process. All poets, writers, songwriters, and visual artists, must be tuned into the signs and signals of the world around them that spark inspiration. The catchy lines written on bodega signs, posted in capuccino shops, and flashing on and off in bright neon can generate ideas for poems and fresh language.

No sooner had we pulled out of our driveway than we started to jot down local signs we had never noticed before: “Keep your smile,” on a wooden sign outside a dentist’s office. And on our local deli, Amjos:

Espresso
Cafe, Latte
Cappuccino
Mochaccino
French Vanilla

We discovered that the poetry to be found on signs and storefronts is a little richer in the downtown areas — Times



A street of storefronts is full of possibilities for found poetry

Square with its flashing words and signs was an especially rich source. "Excite Your Senses" flashed a sign for record store. We spotted the Bellydely Deli, and a video store called "Mixed Emotions." Sometimes the way the words were written suggested a poem:

W
I
N
N
E
R
S
CIRCLE

The funky Lower East Side, with its old Jewish shops and new immigrant clothing spilling out into the street was a poetry banquet too. We jotted down the famous sign in Katz's Deli that has been up since World War II, "Send a Salami to Your Boy in the Army." Nearby, Russ 'n Daughters, an aromatic shop selling fresh lox and herring, halvah, and other delicacies had a sign up for exotic cheeses, such as: "From the French Pyrenees, Ossau-Iraty," "From Spain, Drunken Goat Cheese," "From La Manche Spain, Aged Manchego." On Orchard Street a sign struck us as a great beginning for a poem, "Everything Must Go."

But even the more repetitive storefronts in the neighborhoods of the Bronx and upper Broadway had their poetry,

U Store It
U Lock It
U Keep the Key

Sermon topics and greetings to passers-by on the bulletins posted at churches were also potential poems or titles for poems. "If God Were a Woman," read the sermon topic at the Broadway Presbyterian Church at 114th and Broadway; "Come on In or Smile as You Pass," read the sign at Rev. Ike's Church on 175th and Broadway.

My daughter had hemmed and hawed about having to come with us on the fieldtrip, but she was jotting down lines faster than we were. Her enthusiasm confirmed for us how a fieldtrip to find poetry and language for poetry can spark images and ideas. She remembered that, in fact, she hadn't finished all her homework. She had a creative writing assignment to write a poem due the very next day. This found language gave her the perfect idea.

On the outside,
Houses and storefronts march by like rows of shining Legos within the frame of the car window
Real estate establishments nail salons football fields gas stations and expensive toy stores
Snicker uninvitingly behind glass doors
As vegetables with arms paddle across the surface of a sickly sweet table-spoon of suburban soup.
Keep your smile, a sign outside the dentist office warns,
Keep your smile.
I remember this as a gray Toyota propels my body south along Broadway

Billboards sprout like mushrooms and factories belch smoke into the thickening air
Espresso
Café Latte
Cappuccino
Mocaccino
French Vanilla
Hot Chocolate
8 O Clock Coffee.
Cold metal posts collect signs like barnacles
No Standing Except Trucks
No Parking Thursdays to Sundays
W 115th Broadway
One Way
Citibank banners instruct me to get in touch with my inner financial planner.
Deeper into the city, bikers begin to flock like flamboyant pigeons in vibrant latex
I open the window and let the city fill the stale air with the aromas of Belgian fries pizza dripping with grease and cheese honey roasted peanuts subways and leather shoes
White tee shirts with backwards baseball hats wrangle out of the Paramount Plaza
Silver chains swinging like pendulums around their necks
And the sidewalks shine with *Bare Elegance--A Gentlemen's Club and Lounge*
Looking like a run down *Garden of Eden-- Specialty Foods*.
Yo Yo Ma's voice speaks to me from the open window of a taxi cab
Cordially suggesting that I remember to take all of my personal belongings upon exiting
Mahn's Fish Market and *Excite Your Senses Video* whisper advertisements in my ear
Forming a hazy repertoire with rippling opera notes from a street performer
The jingling of keys
And the tapping of a blindman's cane.
Thank God its Friday, I think to myself

Thank God.
The Spanish parts of town are poetry
Long elegant words tumble from the mouths of dark men with cigarette fingers
Leaning against shop windows under the overhang of *Floridita Floridita*,
Cuando se venden flores vivas debajo de los rótulos verdes.
Something vaguely reminiscent of humid summers resides in these neighborhoods
Something that somehow outlived *La Pregunta del Tiempo-reloj venta y reparan*.

I step out of the car and into a spider web of fire escapes
Delis peddle chocolate-covered halvah logs
Spanish drunken goat cheese
And Swedish herring salad
For \$5.99, \$6.50, \$4.00 a pound
Rolls of wrinkled sausage links like unraveled brains
And rows of fish corpses hang ominously in store windows
With hollow eyes like the
Old woman sitting in the window of a button store
A crumbling mannequin
Smiling and shaking her toothless head as her son who owns the store tells me stories
Of how things were
In the 60s
Before the woman who owns the store around the corner bought his 99-cent products
And sold them for hundreds.
Further on there's Rose's carpet with sparkling delicate roses painted on the overhang
Looking like spun sugar
Broken neon signs line the streets here like old dogs
And the people become the architecture
The pavement swelling up with pride to meet the soles of their shoes.
Speeding north along Broadway in the fading light
The naked bodies of trees paint long shadows on still streets
Past Amjo's and the purple house
Past wooden fences and neatly trimmed lawns
Past five corners and the shining lights of the Food Emporium
Till I can see my own window
Filtering purplish light into the quiet
An eternal ending
On the inside.

Eliza Zeitlin, age 16