

MY TORTOISE DIED: the poem, how I wrote the poem, and a writing exercise

MY TORTOISE DIED

by April Halprin Wayland

The grass asks
And the sugar snap pea
And the cat asks
Where is she?

The rain says
She caught the flu
And the tree tells me
You did all you could do.

Little dinosaur cow
You grazed on the lawn
And now you are gone.

The grass says
we wish she lived,
And the winds tell me
We forgive.

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About writing this poem:

I often write a poem in response to a prompt. Perhaps a friend is putting together an anthology about bugs and needs a bug poem. Or a magazine wants a poem about a specific topic. Or I am writing a novel-in-poems and my main character is mad at her father. I have to write a poem showing why she is mad at him.

When my picture book, NEW YEAR AT THE PIER—A Rosh Hashanah Story was about to be published, one of my friends who puts poetry on postcards wanted me to write a poem for one of his postcards.

I thought I'd write one that somehow tied into the theme of my book, which is apologizing and forgiving.

So, first I did what my mentor, Myra Cohn Livingston taught me...I brainstormed. Myra called this brainstorming the “raw spillage of emotion”—writing down everything you

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can think of about the topic. I keep writing, trying to get something that I feel passionate about...because I'm going to spend a few hours or days or weeks with this poem—so I'd better feel passionate about it!

I remembered when my friend Debi gave me a California Desert Tortoise. I've always loved tortoises—they remind me of dinosaurs. The tortoise's name was Clementine and Debi told me to take good care of her because she could live to be 150 years old. Wow!

I made her a home in our living room and every morning I took her outside to graze like a little cow on our grass. I gave her broccoli, kale, and picked fresh sugar snap peas—her favorite food—from our garden.

But one day she stayed out in the rain. And the next day she had a runny nose. The following day her eyes didn't look clear. And the next morning she was dead.

I stood above her. My heart felt wooden. Oh, *no*. I've killed her. I've killed this wonderful creature. I'm a terrible person. What will Debi think of me? I sat down on the wood floor next to my beautiful tortoise and wept.

I wrote about it. I prayed. Finally I called Debi one night. "Can I come over and talk to you about something?" My voice trembled.

I drove to her house and parked. I trudged to her door. I lifted my finger. I pushed the doorbell. I waited in darkness.

The porch light flashed on. Debi wrinkled her forehead. "Are you okay?"

"No," I said, and then I burst out crying. "Clementine died."

"Oh, dear," she said. "Oh, dear. How?"

"I think she died from being in the rain," I said. "I am so, so, so, so sorry."

"Oh, honey," she said, hugging me. "Oh, honey, these things happen. It's not your fault."

We talked. She said that maybe Clementine was 149 years old when I got her. We laughed. I left feeling limp. I also felt better. But I still missed my little dinosaur that grazed on the grass.

So...I wanted to write a poem about all of this. And I wanted to write a SHORT poem. How? I decided to write what I call a "copy cat" poem.

I went to my poetry book shelf and pulled down a favorite anthology of poems. I flipped through it and found this lovely poem that says so much in so few words:

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Who Am I?
by Felice Holman

The trees ask me,
And the sky,
And the sea asks me
Who am I?

The grass asks me,
And the sand,
And the rocks ask me
Who I am.

The winds tells me
At nightfall,
And the rain tells me
Someone small.

Someone small
Someone small
But a piece
of
it
all.

Then, using this structure, I tried to talk about Clementine and feeling bad and about forgiveness. As you can see, I ended up changing the structure a bit...but it's wonderful to have someone else's poem as a jumping off point.

Now it's your turn to write a copy cat poem.

name: _____ date: _____

WRITING A COPY CAT POEM

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- 1) Think of a subject you'd like to write about.
- 2) On the back of this page, write down everything you can remember about this topic— let your mind go, taking yourself back to every detail, every smell, every emotion. Write quickly—you don't have to write in complete sentences—these are just notes for you. Use more pages if you need to.
- 3) Circle one incident or one emotion or one detail among all that you've written which fires you up.
- 4) Find a published poem that you like and type it into a file.
- 5) Now, using your own subject, copy the poem's structure, meter, use of sounds, and word choices.
- 6) Read it aloud to yourself.
- 7) Read it again. And again. Change what doesn't work.
- 8) Revel in it. Enjoy it. Do a happy poet dance.
- 9) Share your poem with your friends and family.

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