

Remember Me

A farewell poem

BY LINDA CHRISTENSEN



MARY TREMONTE

On the last day of school, there is no final, no “free day,” no signing of yearbooks in my classroom. Instead, as a going away present to my students, I make a book of their favorite writings from the year. In addition to the poem, story, or essay that students submit to the book, each student writes one “Remember Me” poem about a fellow classmate. As we gather for the last time in our circle, students honor each other in a final read-around with a poem in their classmate’s memory, and a sparkling apple juice toast.

Many years ago I ran across a short paragraph by the Irish writer Dylan Thomas that delighted me. I loved his playful language, rift of r-words—round, red, robustly raddled—his comical metaphors and oddball list of details about himself:

Remember me? Round, red, robustly raddled, a bulging apple among poets, hard as nails made of cream cheese, gap-toothed, balding, noisome, a great collector of dust and a magnet for moths, mad for beer, frightened of priests, women, Chicago, writers, distance, time, children, geese, death, in love, frightened of love, liable to drip.

Thomas' paragraph inspired my farewell poem.

One year, when the new schedule crunched the ending of the year into a mad scramble to finish up portfolios, I decided to forgo the poem with my juniors. A few seniors stopped by my room, and I discussed my decision with them, weighing the merits of a portfolio review and the "Remember Me" poems. They convinced me that I had to continue the tradition.

Jalean Webb was the ringleader advocating me to keep the "Remember Me" poem. "These poems create bonds between students that carry into their senior year. The person I got I didn't know at all. I never noticed her before I drew her name. We never talked once during our first three years of high school. We talk all of the time this year," Jalean said when I asked the group why these poems were worth writing.

The three other visiting seniors agreed that the poems had to stay. Desiree Duboise said, "I drew the name of someone who I knew since middle school. I had a lot of memories. [The poem] was a great way to showcase that, to go back in time and write those memories. Also, at the end of the year, it was a great way to end on a personal note. Everyone is stressed; people don't even like each other any more. This poem made the class end on a positive note."

When I asked students to describe their process for creating the poem, Jalean responded, "I interviewed Desi and Gabby about Loan because they had classes with her. Desi told me, 'When Loan asks me for help, I feel smart.' I incorporated their quotes into the poem. Loan is Vietnamese, so I put that in the poem to make her feel special. I think that's the point of these poems—to make our classmates feel special."

Desiree Barksdale said, "I drew Antonio, who I didn't know, but everyone else did. Antonio is a dancer, and I've seen him dance, so I knew I wanted to put that in the poem. From talking to other people, I found out

that he's a fantastic brother, and he has a younger sister who he takes to school. I put all of that in my poem."

"I also interviewed other classmates to get quotes in my poem about Sinnamon," Gabby said. "But I know Sinnamon well, so I included things I could praise about her."

Teaching Strategy

1. I ask students to write their names on slips of paper and place them in a basket. After everyone's name is included—those who are absent as well as the teacher—each student draws one name out of the bowl. If students draw their own names, they put them back. In some classes, I remind students not to groan, roll their eyes, or say they don't

Students honor each other with a poem in their classmate's memory.

want to write about someone. I create a master list of who is writing about whom, so I make sure everyone has a poem on the final day—and I know who to nag.

2. I talk about the necessity of grounding their poems in details about their classmates. I select one student in the class and talk about some positive things the class will remember about this person to get students beyond the "he was nice" generalities in their poem. For example, in our class we might remember that Matt was always the first one in the door in the morning. We might remember that he wrote wonderful historical fiction and was passionate about chess. We might talk about how he remained friends with his buddies from Ockley Green Middle School or tell about the day he played Raheem's grandfather in the improvisation.
3. I read Jessica Rawlins' poem "Remember Sihaya?" (see p. 93). It is playful—evoking Sihaya Buntin's love of dance with the "tap, shuffle, tap" and the "electric angel with the dancer's feet" references. Jessica shares details about Sihaya that we remember: her tardiness, the fact that she was a

Jefferson dancer, her constant movement in class. We also read Jalean’s tribute to Loan. The diverse models help students see a way into the poem if they are stuck.

4. After looking at the models, the class creates a list of items that may be included in the poem. We keep the list on the board, so students can look up and remind themselves if they run out of ideas: Quotes about the person, things the person said in class, memorable poems, stories, or essays that she or he shared in class, a list of details about the person—from where she sat to what he wore, to sports, hobbies, sayings, and a metaphor or simile about the person.
5. I start this process a couple of weeks before the end of the year, so students have time to watch their assigned classmate and collect ideas from

Students need to learn how to build new traditions—ones that don’t involve corporations telling them how to think and feel about death, birth, illness, goodbyes, celebrations, or each other. By creating practices in our classrooms that honor our time together, our work, and our community, we can teach students how to develop meaningful new traditions and remind them of the power of poetry up until the last minutes of the school year. ✨

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These poems create bonds between students.

others before they write. This needn’t be a “private” piece of writing. I urge students to ask their classmates or me for details they might include. Also, I make sure that everyone has a poem written about them and that all poems are positive. In my class, students keep the name of their person secret until the last day when the class books are distributed and the poems read.

6. I check over the poems before they are read. I make sure that everyone has a poem and that the poems are tributes, not jibes. I also write a poem about the class as a whole because every class has a personality and shared memories that I want to capture. And, up until the last day, I model myself as a writer and member of the class, not a bystander or evaluator.
7. On the final day of school, our class is arranged in our typical circle. A volunteer starts off our read-around. After students read their poems, they walk across the room and hand the poem to a classmate. Then the classmate reads a poem about the person she drew. I end the class by reading the class poem.

Remember Sihaya?

by Jessica Rawlins

I am the electric angel
with dancer's feet,
the slick sister who grins,
strolls into class only ten minutes late,
toting too many bags for a lady.
I am the laughter that echoes.
With a tap, shuffle, tap,
I practice my moves
to the silent beat in my head.
I am the Jefferson Dancer
who loathes geometry
and classes that I *know* I won't need later in life.
So I roll
and let it all slide by.
When grades come in,
I'm swimming upstream.
I am the party girl,
who lived for my friends
and thinks hell is getting stuck at home.
I am the fire,
who doesn't wait for details.
I'll catch up sooner or later,
just watch me.
I am Sihaya.

Mary

by Erika Howard

Mary, Mary, child of grace.
Long slim fingers, baby face.
When the boys catch at your skirt,
do you kiss or court or flirt?
When you marry charming Jim,
how many kisses will you give him?
Two four six eight ten.
Two four six eight twenty.
Two four six eight thirty.
Two four six eight forty.
Two four six eight. . .
Did you jump rope when you were a very little girl?
Or did you climb
wild in the branches of the play structure?
Perhaps you sat serenely
on the grass with a friend and a doll,
but I doubt it.
You, with the book of bright colors,
bright pictures,
and your own smooth pen.
You, with the smile that never stops.
Do you have sorrow or is your life,
a huge joyous rave?
Sometimes I wonder,
but your smile gives a hand to my limping heart,
and your laugh in the silence
nudges my elbow to include me.
You, with the clogs and wild tights.
You, with the red hair to almost match Lulu's.
You, who sat in the window,
silhouetted by the rich blue sky.
Mary, I'll always remember you.

Jalean

by Uriah Boyd

I recall football
in the front yard,
camping in the back.
Those Bambi eyes
and teddy bear demeanor
remind me of the boy I once knew,
but he is a boy no longer.
He's the big brother I always had:
varying,
protective, cheerful,
the one to make you smile
in the middle of a cry.
He's a poet—once slowly peering
out of his shell.
Now he enters unapologetically:
Fists clenched, uttering spine-chilling words.
I remember him as the class clown,
the kid with a smile that tickled my soul, and
my pigeon-toed neighbor,
but you can just call him
Jalean.

Remember Loan Vu

by Jalean Webb

The petite girl
whose Vietnamese culture brings diversity
to our class.
Her shy intelligence
is the X that marks the spot
on the treasure map that is our class.

She's the woman
Desi, Gabby, and I adorn with praise:
"Her shyness is only matched
by her brains."
"When she asks me questions,
it makes me feel smart."
"A person to look for when
you need a calm moment."

She's the learner
who won't quit,
who hits the books harder
when they hit back,
who strikes to put education
on a pedestal,
who is a quiet thinker
who will achieve greatness.

Remember Loan?
Once she touched our lives
we refused to forget.

Remember Junior English?

by Linda Christensen

Who could forget you?
You came in with your chins up
and fists cocked,
ready to take on two white women
who appeared new to the school,
full of rules like:
put your phones away
respect air time
listen when others speak.

Remember the day I
asked you to sign up to be Scholars
and you said, "Hell, no?"
well maybe,
but I'm not saying, "I will be a scholar."

I fell in love with you that day.
Even when you talked back,
because you didn't bow down to anyone.
You rebelled.
And could never resist cracking silence with your
voices.
And I love you for it.

I love the cross between your Ninja Turtle Trayvon
Martin hoodies'
vulnerability
and the amazing courage
you forged to write your lives.

I love the way you crackled and resisted
at the beginning of each assignment,
then wrote and rewrote.
I loved it when you complained, "I can't stop."
"This is my novel."
You squeezed my brain.
You pounding the keyboard
made poetry,
made literature,
made this old teacher's year.

Father Was a Musician

by Dyan Watson

In the basement they played.
“Jam session” he called it,
halting only to mend a chord or two.

The house swayed from side to side
dancing freely, carelessly
while neighbors shut doors and windows.

Sometimes I would sneak into his bedroom
just to see it, touch it,
pluck a string or two.

At night, I dreamed
of concerts and demos.

I want to be just like him.