



Joan Bransfield Graham

Poet

## Dancing with words, shapes, and poetry

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In his poem “Keepsakes” William Stafford said, “Children dance before they learn there is anything that isn’t music.” Words can dance, too; they can spray into the air, drift down like snowflakes, bounce on the lawn like hail, click against a glass like ice cubes. Every poem, in essence, is a *shape* poem because a poem is a place where we give shape to our thoughts. We write poems to find out how we feel and what we think.

One of the best parts of writing poetry is surprising yourself. I’m never sure where my poems will take me. Each poem is an act of discovery. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz said, “A common fallacy is to think that a poem begins with a meaning which then gets dressed up in words. On the contrary, a poem is language surprised in the act of changing into meaning.” (Poetspeak, 1983)

I grew up on an island along the southern coast of New Jersey on the Atlantic Ocean. My mother read to me, my grandmother sang to me, and my father told my brother and me stories about a family that traveled and had adventures. And, always, there were those dancing waves—that lulling, fierce, intriguing, rhythmic ocean. Would I ever see what was on the other side?

As things turned out, I became a teacher and spent a summer abroad studying art—landscape painting and drawing—and living with a Spanish family on the island of Majorca, almost directly east of New Jersey! I married an FBI agent and lived in the north, south, east, and west United States. As we were moving around the country, I began publishing poems in magazines. A friend calls us “Rhymes and Crimes”—I’m going to use that as a title for a future project. Now I live near the Pacific Ocean in California.

One of my favorite places in California is Yosemite National Park. Once when we were there

on a family camping trip, we climbed to the top of Vernal Falls on the Cold Shower Trail. After we returned home, I wrote a waterfall poem. When I considered how my poem might look on the page, I decided maybe it could look like a real waterfall—dropping down at the end of each line, then splashing up at the bottom. I experimented with shaping the poem on my computer.

The next thing I knew, whole stanzas were solidifying into ice cubes. I froze words into a “Popsicle,” boiled words in a pot to make “Steam”—I even took a “Shower” in words. I was having a great time and realized I had never seen a book of *water* poems. What better way to explore all the shapes of water than with shape itself—concrete poetry? A concrete poem is written in the shape of its topic. The only books of concrete poetry for children I remembered seeing were two by Robert Froman—**Seeing Things** and **Street Poems**—in the 70’s.

My water poems became the book **Splish Splash** (Houghton Mifflin, 1994). I had shaped all the poems myself, but then illustrator Steve Scott created an environment for the words. I believe this helps children to notice that poetry is all around them. Shape can add an extra dimension to a poem, but, as with rhyme, if it’s not working, don’t force it—it’s always more important to say what you want to say. I tell children that rhyme can be like a wild horse and take you in a direction you might not want to go. You have to be the one to hold the reins and guide your poem. Barbara Juster Esbensen in her excellent **A Celebration of Bees: Helping Children to Write Poetry** (1995) advocated starting out with cinquain, haiku, and no rhyme.

“Who’s ready to do some splishing and splashing?” I ask at school assemblies. A sea of hands waves in the air. Children can tell I’m ready

because I'm in my "Splish Splash" skirt, covered with colorful fish and watery designs—I'm wearing my book. Before I share the introductory "Water" poem, I ask children to think like artists and imagine how they would illustrate this poem. As with all artists, there are many interpretations. I remind them that I said no matter what shape water takes "it's always WET!" Then I show them how Steve submerged my poem underwater and has fish reading it.

After interactively sharing the poem "Crocodile Tears" (shaped like a weeping crocodile)—"Oh, crocodile poor crocodillo/cried so hard you soaked your pillow/kept it up for such a while/that's how we got the river Nile"—I ask students if it's true. They say "no," unless I'm speaking to kindergarten, and they all shake their heads "yes"! I tell them I made up my own legend, and I'm allowed to do that because I have my "poetic license", which I show them. We all have a "poetic license" and it lets us have fun with our words, shapes, and ideas. You might like to have students bring in books about legends or let them make up their own. One school did the most amazing bulletin board displaying "Crocodile Tears" and the children's own work, complete with a tissue paper palm tree and River Nile!

There is a lot of alliteration in the "Sprinkler" poem. I ask children to listen for what letter sound I keep repeating, then I read each spray of words and the children echo it back. We run through the sprinkler together and don't even get wet! They realize there are a lot of "s" sounds—12 words that begin with "s." Not only do I want my poem to *look* like a "Sprinkler," I want it to *sound* like one, too. Sound is an important aspect of poetry.

A local CPA told me one day, "I bought your book, **Splish Splash**, for my son. He was having some speech problems, especially with his "s"s" and your book really helped—it was perfect!" ESL teachers have told me the books work well for them because they are so visual and offer many clues for unlocking words. In some districts they are used for phonemic awareness.

The more you can involve children in poems—have them participate—the better. We crunch through "Ice Cubes" and listen for what letter makes the crunchy sound; we munch our way through the tongue twister "Popsicle" poem. On

my Web site you can print out a master for "Popsicle" bookmarks and run them off in your favorite *flavor* of card stock. "Snow" reminds us you can ask a question in a poem, something you wonder about. "Babbling Brook" and "Shower" are also fun to do in a call and response, echo mode.

I've learned to bring my camera to capture all the incredible bulletin board ideas—cut-out snowflakes with poems underneath, water haiku written on large white raindrops edged with blue, a waterfall of hand shapes with water-related words ("cold," "slippery," "wet") written on them. A special education class experimented with their own small "Pool" and guessed, then tested, to see what objects would sink or float. Colorful fish bowls and fish made from paper plates, red and white gingham place mats woven from strips of paper and laminated—so many great ideas.

One class of first graders were "IN THE SWIM" in their own wonderful "Pool" filled with poems and paintings, including

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two feet sticking out of the water and the poem "I dive in the pool/and I find stuff that's cool!" Another said, "I feel so alive/now that I can dive!"

At a school I visited in Lakewood, CA, a magnet for hearing-impaired students, I asked one of the sign language interpreters if she could show us how to *sign* one of the poems. We chose "Wave." Now whenever I visit a school, I show children how to do the "Wave" poem in sign language—it is so beautiful, a poem in the air, a three-dimensional shape poem... words dancing.

Memory is enhanced when we use many senses. When I do school visits, I show slides and bring rainsticks, puppets, and my ocean drum—it's filled with tiny ball bearings and, when rocked, sounds like crashing waves. On my Web site are teacher idea sheets and suggestions for making your own rainsticks. A teacher in Murrieta, CA made a fabulous rainstick by taping two large mailing tubes together and then covering it with strips of laminated paper—kente cloth which each student had designed. She twisted wire into a big coil, stuffed it inside, and added beans.

Try breaking the "River" poem into eight parts on note cards and let children stand up, read them, and *be* a "river of words." The Library of Congress sponsors a terrific annual Environmental Poetry and Art contest, *River of Words*. Grand prize winners are flown to Washington, D.C. to have

lunch at the Library of Congress, take a canoe ride on the Potomac, and enjoy a VIP tour of the White House. All who enter receive a certificate. You can find out more about it by visiting their Web site.

A school in the Bakersfield, CA area hosted the most marvelous parade. The principal wore a colorful Mad Hatter chapeau and held a baton. Two girls carried a banner with wonderful artwork relating to **Splish Splash**. We marched through the playground to claps and cheers. Each first grade class had made amazing hats—daisy hats for the “Rain” poem, frog hats for “Babbling Brook,” crocodile hats for “Crocodile Tears”... one class wore shower caps, had towels around their necks, and a rubber duck for “Shower.” Later, over the loud speaker came the music “Splish, splash I was taking a bath...” and everyone started dancing! Now that’s appreciating poetry!

At a school in Torrance, CA after I had presented some assemblies, a teacher walked up with a child and said, “He would like to give you a hug, if you don’t mind.” I happily received and returned my hug, and then she went on to explain. The child was not only developmentally-challenged but also had come to the school speaking a language other than English and was having a difficult time. She said, “After your assembly, when we went back to the classroom, he picked up your book and started reading, singing the words—he was so excited! He wanted to thank you.”

Poetry is too BIG to confine to a poetry unit. Let it flow throughout the curriculum all year long, every day. A fourth grade teacher in New Jersey encouraged students to bring in poetry books from home to share with the class. I got a lovely letter from her before **Flicker Flash** (Houghton Mifflin, 1999) came out. I sent her a list of the poem titles from that book and suggested she have her children brainstorm what I might write about in a book of poems exploring the shapes of light; then she could tell them what my titles were. They had fun “guessing” and writing their own “light”



poems. She wrote, “the children are in no doubt now that poetry is a living language and can brighten our days.”

**Flicker Flash** began after our Northridge earthquake which happened in early morning darkness. Afterward I thought how important it was to have a flashlight right next to the bed and how eager we were to see the sun. I started to think about all the shapes that light could take—from fireflies to fireworks.

The poems are written in many voices. Myra Cohn Livingston’s **Poem-Making: Ways to Begin Writing Poetry** (1991) offers a very comprehensive guide to voice, forms, and much more. Children love to dress up for Halloween, wear a costume and mask, and be someone or something else for a day. They can do the same thing when they write a *mask* poem, speaking as an object itself. You can be the sun, the moon, a pair of sneakers! How would the world look to you, what would you say? My “Sun” is loud and “solar powers” someone out of bed. “Sun,” “Porch Light,” and “Flashlight” are all *mask* poems.

Some poems use the dramatic voice of “apostrophe” or “direct address,” speaking to something—as in “Light,” “Candle,” “Firefly,” “Birthday Candles,” and “Lighthouse.” Other poems are *narrative*, storytelling poems, or *lyrical* poems which include personal pronouns such as *I*, *my*, *mine*, *we*. Experimenting with voice can add richness and variety to poetry.

Thinking like a photographer, I challenge students to write *self-portrait* shape poems. I explain that “Camera” is my self-portrait because I love to take pictures and always have my camera with me; it says something about who I am. What hobbies or sports do they enjoy? Ask students to write a *self-portrait* shape poem, one that tells something about them—a favorite food, a hobby, a sport, something they love. Children have done a football, hockey goal, basketball backboard, ballet slipper, balance beam (“sometimes I can fly”), microphone, book, ice skate, soccer ball, horse, and much more—an amazing array of interests to which they bring personal knowledge and strong feelings.

While with older grades I concentrate more on poetic techniques, with younger children I try to involve them in the poems as much as possible. I invite eight children to put on “star crowns” to read the “Stars” poem—one for the title, one for each “star” in the Big Dipper. An “Incubator Bulb” volunteer sits on the floor thinking *warm* thoughts while, above, assistants hold a large foamboard egg



with a crack, and we *echo* the poem to “hatch” a chick puppet.

Ben Franklin figures prominently in my “Lightning Bolt” poem (See **Book Links**, April/May 2001). The Franklin Institute Science Museum, located in Philadelphia, PA has an intriguing Web Site where students can find out more about the multi-talented Franklin, hear thunder, and access information on lightning from the National Weather Service.

It would be great fun to use **Flicker Flash** for a classroom play or performance. Several children could work on presenting each poem, being creative with simple costumes and props. In between the poems narrators could provide fascinating facts about each source of light. Save the “Spotlight” poem for the end so that everyone can “take a bow.”

Some years ago my husband and I both joined a Toastmasters club, and we learned so much—it was an invaluable resource. Why not invite someone from a local club to offer public speaking tips to your students? If children are able to read poems aloud, express themselves—become comfortable with both written and spoken words—it empowers them in whatever they chose to do with their lives.

Once a teacher, always a teacher. One of my biggest thrills as a teacher, besides the joy of seeing children master new skills was to see them step beyond knowledge into creativity. All too often science and language are considered poles apart, but I had fun letting them do a tango in both of my books. The same creative, divergent thinking skills that got us to the moon can help us write poems here on earth.

Glenna Sloan (2001) reminds us “we need to respect the old educational adage that tells us to begin where children are”—children are splashing and splashing in water and feeling the sun on their faces, they are living in a world where they are surrounded with the poetry of shapes and sounds, where words can taste as delicious on your tongue as a “Popsicle.” What a pleasure to share this discovery together!

Let’s keep dancing to the music of poetry and invite everyone to join in. When I receive letters or poems from children saying things like “We had fun speaking the poetry language. I can feel it in my skin that poetry is for me.” I am delighted. A third grade

student from Glendale, CA wrote this in a letter: “Dear Mrs. Graham, I can’t wait to hear a new poem of yours. I can learn from your poems. They give me exciting thoughts. I think of new ideas. I can’t believe these ideas come from your head. How can so many ideas fit in one head?... A book is a gift.”

Yes, indeed. It is a gift to me every day that I am able to do what I love, share my work with children, encourage their own writing, help open their eyes to the joys and possibilities of poetry. Thank you for being the gift-givers you are, for sharing your love of books, for all you do every day to put books and poems into the hands and hearts of children. It makes all the difference.

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## INTERNET SITES

### THAT MAY INTEREST CHILDREN

<http://www.joangraham.com> (Print out “Popsicle” poem bookmarks)

<http://www.riverofwords.org> (Find out about an annual Environmental Art and Poetry contest)

<http://www.fi.edu> (The Franklin Institute Science Museum in Philadelphia, PA)