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Writing Poetry in the Chat Room

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It's June and school is out. Instead of taking a well-earned walk in the afternoon sunshine or simply sitting under a shade tree to read that book you've been itching to get to all year, you find yourself at your computer, doing research online for the poetry writing workshop you plan to teach next year. You're downloading an e. e. cummings poem and wondering if it is too erotic for your eighth graders, when suddenly you hear a strange little beep. A small window appears on your computer screen, announcing an "Invitation to Chat." The invitation is from a colleague you met at an NEH summer program last year, a colleague who has become a better friend through email during the year. Your colleague asks you if you feel like writing a poem. You type back, "Right now? Write a poem now?!"

Your friend assures you it will be fun, like a game. Even though it seems silly, you agree because you're in a spontaneous mood. But you immediately feel pressure--pressure to respond, to be creative, to not make mistakes. Your colleague asks you to write the first line.

"What should I write?" you type.

"I don't know," he responds. "How about beginning with a simile?"

You write, "My mind is blank like a billboard waiting for the paper."

Your colleague adds, "The mangoes taste like Mozart."

You write line by line. It gets easier. You and your colleague challenge each other to daring literary feats including personification, simile, and imagery. Somehow the verses begin to coalesce around common ideas: a beach with palm trees becomes the setting where a brown-skinned boy meets a stranger; a sale is transacted. Your words mixed with those of your colleague are a jumble on the computer screen, and you wonder if you're making any sense. "Enough," you cry and plead for a timeout.

"Let's each take these lines and ideas, write our own poem, and then compare," you suggest.

Later that week as you're putting the final keystrokes on your poem, you find your colleague's poem in your email. You marvel at how similar the poems are, yet so different, like complementary panels to a diptych. You send your poem to your colleague.

During the next couple weeks, you and your colleague revise, edit, and email the poems back and forth, both of you working on both poems. At one point, you forget which poem was yours, but you realize it doesn't matter anymore. You've stopped wondering which is whose. You're immersed in a kind of creative collaboration in which ownership of the writing becomes unimportant. The poems have their own lives now.

BROWN-SKINNED BOY

Slender brown-skinned boy
Lopes down the lonely beach
In search of someone
Who will buy
Mangoes that surely taste
Like Mozart.

A circle of palms
Bends low in prayer
For the young mother
Who waits in a house
Built of tin and poverty.

"Mangoes! ¿Quiere mangoes?
¿Quien quiere mangoes?"
The curandera is waiting.
Her magic is not without cost,
Not even for the poor.

"Help me, Señor.
Buy just one, Señora.
Little Jesus is sick.
My mother cries
For the evil to leave.
For you they will be cheap."

ON THE BEACH

In Puerto Angel my mind
is like a blank billboard
waiting for the paper.
I walk the edge on Mexican sand
bounding a hot soupy sea,
where mangoes are
bitter & palm fronds hiss
in the dry gusts before a storm.
The wind, scorched & wild,
tousles the purpleblack hair
of a brown-skinned boy shambling
across sizzling white sand,
with a dirty sack of Chicklets
under his arm & a sad hustle on his face.

"¿Quire Chickie?"

"¿Cuanto?" I say.

"Dos cajas, uno dollar."

"Bueno. Dame dos." I reach inside
my pocket for a dollar bill
& place it in the grimy hand
of poverty.

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