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## POETIC PURSUITS: MARCH 2009

### Let's Pretend: The Mask Poem

Kids **love** playing pretend. One of my daughters swore she was Elmo for several years, in fact! I think that's why mask poems are so much fun. A mask poem is one that is written from the point of view of an animal, an object, or even a person (or Muppet) that's not you. They let kids inside the imagined mind of another kind of being. They let kids gain empathy and also use their imagination. They encourage them to look at an object in a whole new way, and isn't that what poetry is all about?

As a writer, it's a blast to create these. They allow you sometimes to express thoughts or emotions you wouldn't say in your own voice. It's safer to say them when they're attributed to some other object.

I feel like a bad mom if I'm tired of my kids. But when I got to write a poem in response to an image of a lemur mother with several babies on her back, I recognized what I felt was a look of frustration and exhaustion on her face. I wrote:

#### **A Lemur Mom in Madagascar**

I searched all day for ripe papaya  
So you could have your snack  
I looked for slinky, sneaky snakes  
To fight off an attack

You bickered all this afternoon,  
I missed our well-worn track  
We're finally home; I need to rest—  
So please, get off my back!

--Laura Purdie Salas, *Chatter, Sing, Roar, Buzz: Poems About the Rain Forest*

Or maybe you have no dark side to foist off on another character. That's ok! If you're doing lighter mask poems, they're just plain fun.

This poem is from the point of view of a bunch of pumpkins:

### **Who Are We?**

We're golden moons dropped from the sky  
We're spicy filling for your pie  
We're hard-knock globes with mushy guts  
We're future faces made of cuts  
We're giant autumn garden gems  
We're wobbly bowling balls--with stems

--Laura Purdie Salas, *Shrinking Days, Frosty Nights: Poems About Fall*

A mask poem doesn't have any defining meter, rhyme pattern, or form of any kind. The only crucial characteristic is its point of view. Because of that, the content of the poem is king. It's essential to come up with something to say, something to reveal about that object, because you get no points just for staying in the right meter.

I start with brainstorming. Sensory words, yes, but also feelings and thoughts. Those are what make this form interesting, in my opinion.

While writing a poem from a pet pot-bellied pig's point of view, I wanted to convey that sense of loneliness, because pets (like little brothers or sisters) frequently are anxiously awaiting the end of the school day!

### **Ponderings of a Pot-Bellied Pig**

You have been riding the bus to school  
    I have been waiting  
You have been adding 12+7  
    I have been waiting  
You have been dipping fries in chocolate milk  
    I have been waiting  
You have been swinging at recess  
    I have been waiting  
You have been playing baseball with friends  
    I have been waiting

I miss you

--Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved

(I'm not happy with the ending of that one. Need to take it back to the drawing board.)  
For me, the trick is to really imagine I AM that thing. I ask myself questions: What do I think? What is happening around me? What do people do to me? What are my secrets? What do I like? What do I hate? What do I wish I had or wish I could do more than anything else in the world? How do people feel about me?

Then I start writing. I pick a tone to match the voice of the object. For a poem from a school bus' point of view, I wanted to use a straightforward kind of voice, because the poem is about how "boring" buses are to kids after the kids are used to them and the excitement has worn off. But in my poem, the school bus gets a chance to talk back, to defend itself and explain the purpose of its predictability.

### Daily Chore

I roll along the mountain roads  
Hold tight to hilly ground  
My boxy body's yellow  
My massive wheels are round  
I'm boring and predictable  
But that's my sacred chore:  
To get you safely to your school  
And leave *you* to explore

--Laura Purdie Salas, *Always Got My Feet: Poems About Transportation*

The punctuation is boring, the language is very steady, and that's all because the bus is a responsible, steady, boring—but important—part of kids' lives.

In this poem, the narrator is a tornado.

### From a Tornado (That Doesn't Know Its Own Strength)

My whirling funnel's  
a windy slide!  
I'm a twirling jump rope—  
Step inside!  
I'm a monster  
roller coaster ride!  
I don't know why  
you're terrified!

--Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved

The punctuation is more emphatic here—exclamation points galore! The lines are different lengths, and though it's short, it feels a bit like that overwhelming kid who exhausts you with animated chatter in about 3 minutes flat.

I'm realizing I've shared almost all rhyming poems, because these are coming from collections I wrote that were primarily rhyming. But mask poems do not have to rhyme. Again, the only element they must have is a first-person narrator that is not you.

Here are links to just a few mask poems I love:

Elaine Magliaro has some fabulous mask poems [here](#) (<http://wildrosereader.blogspot.com/2008/03/mask-poems-reprise.html>). They're terrifically clever!

One of my favorite Billy Collins poems is [The Revenant](#) ([http://www.bestcigarette.us/2004/09/the\\_revenant.html](http://www.bestcigarette.us/2004/09/the_revenant.html)), written from the point of view of a dog that's been put to sleep. It's an adult poem, and it sounds morbid, but it's actually funny. Very funny. Hearing him read this at an event, in his dryly funny way, was a highlight of that night!

[Here's](#) (<http://ettcweb.lr.k12.nj.us/forms/mask.htm>) a lovely mask poem by Kristine O'Connell George, along with a simple template to write your own mask poem.

[A Frog in a Well Explains the World](#) (<http://www.joycesidman.com/poemofmonthnov07.html>), by Alice Schertle, is at the site of one of my favorite poets, Joyce Sidman. That one totally gets the power of the mask. The frog's specific situation/location controls the content of the poem. Fabulous!

So, now it's your turn. Pick a topic. If you can't think of one, choose one of these:

a worn-out shoe  
a backpack  
braces on someone's teeth  
a dog nobody will let back inside  
a Christmas tree on the curb

Write your mask poem—any form, rhyming or non-rhyming. Just make sure to use the word "I" and to write the poem as if you ARE the shoe, the braces, etc.

Have fun!