

## Writing Your Childhood (Star Coulbrooke, Poet Laureate of Logan, UT)

Read May Swenson's "The Centaur":

[http://www.babsonarabians.com/Readers\\_Corner/The\\_Centaur.htm](http://www.babsonarabians.com/Readers_Corner/The_Centaur.htm)

Also see "Little Girls Farming in the Fifties" below

Think of a childhood game, activity, or work of the imagination.

Examples: Red Rover, Jacks, Post Office, jump rope, sidewalk chalk, counting, coloring, swimming, ball games, swinging, see-sawing, marching band, dancing, playing house or playing doctor, Checkers, Chess, marbles, imaginary friends, tea time, dolls, cars, soldiers, etc.

Start by describing your part in the game or activity. Give it a specific timeframe (that summer that I was ten) and place ("a willow grove down by the old canal").

As you compose your piece, you may consider copying Swenson's form and style (three-line stanzas in free verse), or you may choose to write a response to her poem (what happened in your own hobby-horse scenario, for instance). Try not to force any pattern, however. Relax and let the writing guide itself.

Toward the beginning or near the middle of the piece, begin to incorporate details of the place in which the activity occurred. Swenson uses details such as dust, grass, fence ("paling"), porch, hall, and sink. It can be helpful to stop and draw a map at this point in the poem. Imagine yourself outside the place where the thing happened. As you picture the surroundings, remember to add sensory details—smells, sounds, the emotional feel of the place.

Weather often plays a part in memory. Swenson brings the feel of summer heat into her poem with descriptions of the powdery dust on her Centaur's hoofs. Animals may enter the writing, whether fantasized or actual. If they appear, give them a place.

Let the playfulness of childhood come into the writing: how might you have become the thing you were playing, or how might the other people involved seem fantastical, for instance?

Describe your actions and justify them through the thought-process of childlike imagination. This will be tricky because you want to keep the child's sense of innocence while employing an adult's perspective, so the language must be sophisticated and simple at the same time.

Think of how Swenson uses bodily actions to help readers "feel" the scene and therefore see it more vividly. ("jouncing between my thighs," "my thighs hugging his ribs," spanked my own behind.") How did it feel to be in close contact with your own body, or with certain objects, or with others' bodies? This kind of intimate detail gives a piece of writing vivacity and intrigue.

Add dialogue if it comes naturally, if there are particular things you might have heard over and over as a child. The speaking parts must be realistic, must fit the sense of the narrative.

Above all, have fun with the writing! Revision can come later.

## Little Girls Farming In the Fifties

We sit up high on rusted seats,  
metal molded to fit a man's bottom,  
round holes for venting hot sweat  
on long turns around fields  
over hours of plowing and planting.

We don't know the real work,  
only this imaginary traveling  
on relics of a family farm, wide rake  
bearing rows of curved steel tines,  
wagon-sized drill with disks mounted  
for sowing, wooden seed boxes  
lined up, sun-dried, lids curled.

We open them as if we'll find treasure,  
something that wasn't here yesterday  
or the day before when we played,  
imagining we were Indians, pioneers,  
farmers, some discovery we overlooked  
and now see, there in the bottom corner  
among small hard grains left over  
from the last-ever planting,  
little golden seeds amidst the chaff.

---Star Coulbrooke, *Junction Magazine*