

How to Find the Right Words

1. Determine the nature of words.

Begin by writing a list that excites you:
chocolate, freshly laundered bed sheets,
a harvest moon. Don't get caught up
with the hard words: love, hate, want –
You will choke, and probably
never speak again.

2. Listen for the loud drum of silence,
just below the neck.

Press two fingers into soft tissue, and
reach through the chest,
like a claw machine. Promise to keep pushing
quarters through the thin, silver slot
until the victory bell
hopefully rings.

3. Imagine a room full of balloons.

Feel the urge to dive into them,
knowing you might fall flat.
Admire how they dance in space around you
like frivolous words floating in the air,
and remember just how happy you were
when you spotted them, like stars in the daylight sky,
carrying your breath away.

4. Enter your local library, and
glide your finger along the spines.

Forget about the clock. Flip through the pages.
Draw a circle around each word
that begins with the letter Q,
and put them in your pocket.
Let all the books you haven't read yet
become like windows:
count the cars, wave to the people
waiting for the bus, and never
close the curtains.

5. Make a list of all the flowers

you see on your drive home.
Give away a new word
to each person you pass on the street.
Allow time to follow
a butterfly, a plastic bag, a single thought;

try to catch one, cup it in your hands,
let it settle,
until it's planted,
like black watermelon seeds
inside your childish belly.

6. Imagine you are not the only one,
between this paper and this pen.
There is a waking crow, a clicking beetle,
a wave deep below the surface; even a mother
in a dimly lit room, hanging on your every word.

7. Throw away the exalted dictionary.
You are the language you've been learning.
Press an eraser onto drying ink, and
watch the red disappear. Your mistakes are like sweet berries;
Open your mouth, and let the truth
finally rush in.

Great Hare

after "Game" by Hanna Hannah, displayed in the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History

Great Hare, you have released a secret
in your death. That open drawer is full
of dreams and blank hearts and
you lie beside it like a song born
in the night. Great Hare, I have to ask –
because I do not know –
what is the price of fruit
wherever you have gone? And isn't it
much sweeter in the winter
when the apples are firm and
the peaches have made their bed in glass jars?
You cannot trick me, Great Hare –
for, I love you
and your lucky mirror. I love your springtime
death like I love figs and dates and sand.
Great Hare, I must tell you:
the game has continued. Tomorrow
will be abundant with
or without your body
racked atop the earth's mantle.
You promised us a drawer
worth opening, Great Hare, and
behind you, the elephant, the cats,
even the dog, wait to welcome you.
Behind you, Great Hare,
they are dancing.

This Time

after Major Jackson

Reader, we were always meant to meet
at the beginning; never mind the lateness of the hour –
if we were mollusks on the seafloor, there would be no sky
color change to tell us: “Yes, you’re alive. You get to live
again.” There would be no request for blueberry waffles
after two cups of black coffee. Yet, we would still stir
under Scott Joplin’s syncopated ragtime ballet and
honky tonky treble lines. Reader, you would give me hips,
oiling up those creaky hinges with an Allen wrench
and elbow grease. I would have no choice but to
begin again as a sunflower or a magnolia leaf; let me not
brown before being held at least once. Let me not burn up
before shooting across the sky and being seen by at least one
hopeful child, one falling-in-love couple, one mother
doe finally tucked in beneath an oak tree.

This time, I will take my off-beat heart, my boulder drums,
my wave whistles and high-top thistles underground
to till the earth. My tiny fingers are peeling open the door
to that waiting fate, stretched out like a rug, pulled out
like a promise. I have no more secrets on my tongue,
and yet, you hear me, Reader, on the other side of the crosswalk.
Read the sign in my hands: I am screaming.