

## TYPES OF POEMS TO HELP TEENS TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR OWN ADOPTION STORIES

1) **LIST POEMS**: Also called a “catalog poem,” this form has been around for a long time. (The *Bible*’s Book of Genesis, for example, can be considered a list poem that traces the lineage of Adam and Eve’s children.) List poems, which basically itemize things or events, can be made of lines of any length, rhymed or unrhymed. Lists can provide a powerful structure for an idea to develop and build.

### **Adopt a Useless Blob (Signs I’ve Spotted)**

Adopt a Pet  
Adopt a Highway  
Adopt a Dragon  
Adopt a Dolphin  
Adopt a Stream  
Adopt a Demon  
Adopt a Bat  
Adopt a Beach  
Adopt a Bird  
Adopt a Minefield  
Adopt a Manatee  
Adopt a Platoon  
Adopt a Ghost  
Adopt a Rainforest  
Adopt an Insect  
Adopt a Turkey  
Adopt a Bunny  
Adopt a Useless Blob

...no wonder Mom doesn’t want to say  
I’m adopted!

—from *The Secret of Me*

### **What I Want**

I want my own room  
I want to hit a baseball like a boy does  
I want just one cute boy named Peter to notice  
I want math to become extinct  
I want Gram to quit drinking  
I want girl hips (down from 12 to size 6)  
I want straight hair  
I want to play the guitar  
I want a midnight curfew  
I want to know how to French kiss

I want to drive a car, any car  
I want to own that car  
I want to know someone who looks like me  
I want Dad's heart to be strong again  
I want a sound system in my room and endless music  
I want to be sixteen  
I want a house with its own library  
I want a million-dollar gift certificate to the mall  
I want Peter to ask for my phone number  
I want my own phone  
I want to be pretty  
I want to see my name on the cover of a book  
I want to know who my other parents are  
I want to drive and keep driving  
until I find them.

—from *The Secret of Me*

### **Black Mood**

Black heart black cloud black  
light black mark black swan  
black book black coffee black  
eye black rot black horse  
Black Sea black box black  
ice black pepper black crayon  
black lipstick black rock black  
out black leather black tea  
black tie black face black  
rose black magic black panther  
black power black boots black  
gold black Irish black hole  
black diamond black belt black  
bear black flag black Mass  
black lung black market black  
powder black sheep black widow  
Black Hills Black Sea black  
& blue, black & white, black & tan,  
black on black, jet black, bone black,  
black-eyed Susan black-eyed pea,  
in the black, pitch black, back in black,  
black humor, onyx, midnight, bruise,  
domino, raven, funeral stiff—  
tire marks skidding off a road, ending  
at the cliff

—from *The Girl in the Mirror*

2) **EXTENDED METAPHOR**: When unlike ideas/images, or unlikely resemblances are yoked together, they are referred to as similes or metaphors. Similes are easy to spot because they use the words “like” or “as” to introduce them. “You are like the sun!” is a simile; “You are the sun!” is a metaphor, and perhaps more powerful. Extended metaphors take this idea to the extreme—often the title is the only thing that reveals what the metaphor is referring to, or its real subject. The main idea is that the poem comes at “real” subject sideways, by comparing it with something else (“it feels like this...”).

### **The Broken Place**

If you’ve been wondering where I’ve been,  
I can’t tell you. All I’ll say is you can’t  
follow me there. It’s the kind of dark

that’s never seen light; it’s the kind of dark  
you’re born into, the kind that drags you  
back into it again and again like a monster

that sees you walking by its cave and snatches  
your arm and pulls you in. You know it’s  
going to happen, but you walk by that cave

anyway, and before you know it you’re feeling  
your way along some tunnel, and you keep  
falling down and your whole body feels

like it’s made of broken glass. Do you know  
a place like that? When you get tired you sit  
on the floor with your back against the wall.

*Welcome back, welcome home*, hisses  
the monster. Sometimes you stroke its slimy  
spine so maybe it’ll be nice to you; maybe it

will keep its mouth shut; maybe it’ll let you  
out soon. Who *is* the monster, you ask? Let’s say  
it’s one of the few creatures on earth who knows

my secret. (*Oh, that’s not true! spits the monster  
from the cave. Everyone knows you’re damaged  
goods. Everyone knows you were a mistake before*

*you were born.*) Can’t that Monster ever shut up?  
Hey, you didn’t hear that, did you? Well,  
don’t believe a word that monster says.

—from *The Secret of Me*

## The Hamster in My Family

Adoption's no longer the proverbial elephant in the room, which everyone pretends isn't there. We've come that far. Still, my search is like a hamster in a cage no one cares for but me. Brown and beige and kind of sad, it runs endlessly on its little wheel. Once in a while, Mom or Bob pad by and whisper, "Good hamster!" Kate, at least, stops to ask, "How's hamster feel today?" Maybe it's my fate, but I'm the only one who feeds it, makes sure it has water, reaches in through the steel bars to pet its head. Everyone seems content with this but me. They want hamster to stay where it is, not let it out. They want our lives to remain the same. What will they do when I open that cage, when I give that hamster—when I can give my first mother—a name?

—from *When You Never Said Goodbye*

### But Now

I used to be a daffodil,  
but now I am a brown, dry leaf.

I used to be all of the king's horses,  
but now I'm the egg, cracked open.

I used to be a mountain lake,  
but now I'm a worm.

I used to be Brigid—Irish goddess of poetry—  
but now I'm a pencil snapped in two.

I used to be a blue bird,  
but now I'm a buzzard.

I used to be afraid of monsters,  
but now I am the hole the monster lives in.

I used to be a foundling,  
but now I'm part-orphan, wandering, lost.

I used to be a colorful painting, a seascape—  
but now I'm a tube of paint, all dried up.

I used to be a dictionary, full of words—

but now I'm a mute.

I used to be a girl worth knowing.  
If you see that girl, tell me where she went.

—from *The Girl in the Mirror*

**Self-Portrait** (both an extended metaphor & portrait poem)

I am summer,  
late August heat.

I am daughter  
four times over.

I'm a shadow  
in the corner of the photograph.

I'm the girl on her knees  
in the stained-glass window.

I have spoken with the ghost  
of the girl I might have been.

(She will never grow up. She'll never speak.  
She wants always to be held.)

I am a song, a ballad, my lyrics lost—  
only the fiddle knows my tune.

I'm the baby in the basket  
feeling blue on a doorstep.

(If you hear me cry,  
I want only to be rocked.)

I'm the foundling in the fairy tale  
carried away by a crow.

(The crow named me, only to find  
I owned that name already.)

I arrived in the winter,  
a snake sloughing her skin.

I'm not shy. I keep the last evening star  
locked in my heart.

(My locked heart, where

I also keep the broken things.)

Before I was lost I was found.  
There's no shaking me now.

I was a tree, but now I'm paper—  
my ink flows like sap.

Someday my poems will blossom,  
and you'll see yourself in their bright mirrors.

—from *The Girl in the Mirror*

3) **PORTRAIT POEMS**: A kind of extended metaphor, but focused on the physical and emotional attributes of either the “speaker” (the actual “I” or a made-up “I”) or someone the speaker feels strongly about (positively or negatively). Portraits may be of fictional characters! Poems should compare at least three body parts as well as the heart/mind/soul/personality with something else.

### **Self-Portrait**

My face is a sky full  
of freckles. My eyes are brown  
earth, ringed by blue  
water. My legs are parallel

roads heading off into  
the distance. My feet,  
two fish; toes and fingers  
root vegetables God pulled

from a garden. Dad says  
my arms are “statuesque,”  
my hair one long tangle  
of well-done curly fries.

A tiny hill rises  
like a surprise from  
the upper ridge of my  
right ear. A pinky-shaped

scar points toward my  
belly-button, which reminds me  
of a little dry well. My heart is  
a nest where the people

I love live. When the bad  
dreams come like wild storms  
to drench my nest with rain,

bash it with hail, smash it

against my ribs, I curl  
up in bed like an unborn  
baby. I can't sleep for fear  
somebody is going to fall.

### **Word Pictures of Kate & Bob**

Kate's hands are as soft as sifted flour.  
Bob's are tough as a football, and tan  
like one, too. Kate's eyes are the blue  
of a distant mountain, but Bob's are bright  
blue, just like Gram's pool. Kate is bread,  
soup, blueberry pie. Bob is pizza, cookies,

barbeque potato chips. When I look at Kate,  
I see a tall oak tree, deer resting  
underneath. When I look at Bob, I see a red  
convertible with its top down and a big  
furry bear behind the wheel. Sometimes  
Kate sounds like an Irish ballad—a fiddle,

a bagpipe, music so sad it doesn't need  
the words. But more she sounds like a waltz—  
an accordion and a mandolin and your foot  
tapping and she grabs you by the hand  
and swirls you into a dance and you don't ever  
want it to stop. Bob usually sounds like a rock

band, all electric guitar and pounding drums.  
Sometimes he's a corny love song, like "I Want  
You and My Hot Tamale's Too" or "Love Me  
Like a Fish and I'll Love You Like a Worm."  
"Whattaya got against worms?" says Bob,  
tickling my feet while Kate holds me down

on the living room rug till I yell "I love  
worms!" Then Kate lets go and they laugh  
real hard until I call them a couple of flying  
monkeys (like the ones in *The Wizard of Oz*)  
and disappear out the back door before  
they can say *There's no place like home*.

—both from *The Secret of Me*

## Tim

Tim is a golf course in spring—wide open,  
welcoming views edged by pines chiming  
with bird song. He is the song, too—a fluty  
melody backed by guitar strum sure to soothe  
the bluest part of you. True alchemist, he takes  
that blue, makes it shine like moonlight on  
the darkest night until you rise, a new sun  
inside you. Rain, not even snow can chill you  
then—though there he is, making a shelter  
of his arms just to be sure. So you move in  
closer. Wonder about the future. And suddenly  
you know as sure as you can sing your own  
heart's hymn: you'll be seen, you'll be loved,  
you'll be safe with him. All that waits beyond  
this world you've made—well, let it come.

—from *When You Never Said Goodbye*

4) **FORMAL VERSE** (sonnets, sestinas, pantoums, villanelles, haiku, etc.) Structures of form provide a “safe house” for difficult subjects.

### Birth Mother Villanelle

She must be here in New York, my first home—  
this isn't some adoptee fantasy.  
I feel it in my gut, my bones.

The only other mother I have ever known  
says she, too, thinks it a possibility:  
*she* could be here in New York, my first home—

city of concrete, of glass, of lights and stone;  
island surrounded by rivers and sea.  
I feel it in my gut, my bones.

This birth mother's inspired many a poem  
even though she's a stranger, a mystery.  
She must be here in New York, my first home

and maybe hers, too. Perhaps she never roamed,  
so didn't want me growing up in *her* city.  
I feel it in my gut, in my bones

that she'll welcome me, now that I'm grown.  
I could be as close as the sand is to sea.  
She *must* be here, in New York, our first home—  
I feel it in my gut, in my bones.

—from *When You Never Said Goodbye*

## Dad's Wake

I don't remember much of those hours  
at the funeral home: the rows of chairs,  
glimmer of candles, how all the flowers  
made me choke. Mom, Kate, Bob, and I stood there  
in front of that casket as people streamed  
by like a river. We shook their hands, said  
"Thanks" or let them do all the talking—we  
were in a trance. *In that box, Dad is dead,*  
I kept saying in my head, *so why do*  
*they call this a "wake"?* I thought such strange things  
while I hugged friends and all those people who  
knew Dad and loved him and wanted to sing  
his praises. My head ached. My hands were cold.  
Mom, dressed in black, looked thin—and so old.

[sonnet above & ghazal below from *The Girl in the Mirror*]

## Birth Mother Ghazal

Jade says until we know them, we can't judge our birthmothers.  
Who knows what happened when they were new mothers?"

If I find my birth mother, I hope we can be friends.  
I'll have to tell her: I already have a mother.

"I don't know who gets the prize for best disappearing act,"  
says Jan, "my mother or my birth mother."

"I'm glad I found them," says Cathy, "but we don't talk—  
they're both totally nuts, my birthfather *and* my birth mother."

Bank security question: "What's your mother's maiden name?"  
Which one, I wonder—my mother or my birth mother?

The Letter tells me some things, but there's so much more  
I want to know, starting way before my birth, mother.

Kate and Bob both want to have kids someday.  
Me, I'm not sure I'm cut out to be a mother.

When I was in foster care, you came to my doctor's appointments.  
In this way you were my mother before you weren't, birth mother.

There are more than 210 million orphans in the world—  
how rich I am to have two fathers, two mothers.

If I find my birthmother, I'll ask her to call me Elizabeth.  
What will I call *her*? I can't, won't call her Mother.

## RECOMMENDED BOOKS ABOUT POETRY FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

*How to Read a Poem & Fall in Love with Poetry* (Harcourt Brace, 2000), by Edward Hirsch.

*Poetry Handbook: A Dictionary of Terms* (HarperResource, 1982), by Babette Deutsch. There have been several editions of this book; it's easy to find a used one online.

*Rhyme's Reason* (Yale University Press, 1989), by John Hollander. This is a fun little book that explains different forms by writing in them...an amazing feat in itself.

*To Read a Poem* (Heinle Publishers, 1992), by Donald Hall.

*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry & Poetics* (Princeton University Press, 1993), edited by Alex Preminger and T.V. F. Brogan.

*Sleeping on the Wing: An Anthology of Modern Poetry with Essays on Reading and Writing* (Vintage, 1982), by Kenneth Koch and Kate Farrell.

*Teaching the Art of Poetry: The Moves* (Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, 2000), by David Cappella and Baron Wormser.

Also, there is the terrific Conference on Poetry & Teaching held at the Frost Place in Franconia, New Hampshire, every summer. Visit [www.frostplace.org](http://www.frostplace.org) for information.

The New England Young Writers Conference at Breadloaf is a four-day event for high school students who love to write. Visit <http://sites.middlebury.edu/neywc/>.

**BOOKS RE. ORPHANS, ADOPTEES & KIDS IN FOSTER CARE**  
(in which the fact of the child being adopted/in foster care is important to the story)

**Fiction of My Childhood**

<i>Anne of Green Gables</i>	L.M. Montgomery
<i>Heidi</i>	Johanna Spyri
<i>The Witch of Blackbird Pond</i>	Elizabeth George Speare
<i>Silas Marner</i>	George Eliot
<i>Jane Eyre</i>	Charlotte Bronte

**Fiction of Later Years (for adults)**

<i>Bleak House</i>	Charles Dickens
<i>David Copperfield</i>	Charles Dickens
<i>The Bean Trees</i>	Barbara Kingsolver
<i>Can You Wave Bye, Bye, Baby?</i>	Elyse Gasco

**Contemporary Nonfiction (for adults)**

<i>The Mistress's Daughter</i>	A.M. Homes
<i>Borrowed Finery</i>	Paula Fox
<i>The Book of Sarahs</i>	Catherine McKinley
<i>A Chance in the World</i>	Steve Pemberton
<i>Adoption Nation</i>	Adam Pertman
<i>Ithaka</i>	Sarah Saffian
<i>Philomena</i>	Martin Sixsmith
<i>Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?</i>	Jeanette Winterson

**Contemporary Picture Books**

<i>Three Names of Me</i>	Mary Cummings / Lin Wang
<i>The Story I'll Tell</i>	Nancy Tupper Ling / Jessica Lanan
<i>Our Gracie Aunt</i>	Jacqueline Woodson / Jon Muth

**Contemporary MG / YA**

<i>The Girl Who Drank the Moon</i>	Kelly Barnhill
<i>Kinda Like Brothers</i>	Co Booth
<i>Year of Mistaken Discoveries</i>	Eileen Cook
<i>When Friendship Followed Me Home</i>	Paul Griffin
<i>Heaven</i>	Angela Johnson
<i>Somebody's Daughter</i>	Marie Myung-Ok Lee
<i>The Original Ginny Moon</i>	Benjamin Ludwig
<i>Orbiting Jupiter</i>	Gary D. Schmidt
<i>Locomotion</i>	Jacqueline Woodson
<i>When the Black Girl Sings</i>	Bil Wright

**MEG KEARNEY**  
**(pronounced “Car-nee”)**

**FOR MORE INFO:** [www.megkearney.com](http://www.megkearney.com)

**CONTACT:** [meg@megkearney.com](mailto:meg@megkearney.com)

*Jacqueline Woodson* said of Meg’s most recent novel: “*Meg’s writing takes you into the heart of the story and holds you there. I loved everyone I met on these pages and felt every moment of deep love and deep loss. **When You Never Said Goodbye** is a gift to the world, a book you’ll want to read slowly, savoring both the eloquent writing and the brave and beautiful story.*”

Meg Kearney is author of three YA novels in verse told in the voice of adoptee Lizzie McLane, all of which have received rave reviews and come with teacher’s guides as well as guides to their poetic forms, all from Persea Books: *The Secret of Me* (2005); *The Girl in the Mirror* (2012); and *When You Never Said Goodbye* (March 2017).

Meg’s picture book *Trouper* (Scholastic, 2013) is illustrated by E.B. Lewis. Winner of the 2015 Kentucky Bluegrass Award and the Missouri Association of School Librarians’ Show Me Readers Award (Grades 1 – 3), *Trouper* has been selected as one of the Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People of 2014; one of the most “Diverse and Impressive Picture Books of 2013” by the International Reading Association, and one of the 2013-14 season’s best picture books by the *Christian Science Monitor*, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, and Bank Street College of Education. It is also a 2013 Association of Children’s Librarians of Northern California Distinguished Book, and a Nominee for the 2014-2015 Alabama Camellia Children’s Choice Book Award (Grades 2-3).

Meg’s most recent collection of poems for adults, *Home By Now* (Four Way Books 2009), was winner of the 2010 PEN New England LL Winship Award; it was also a finalist for the Paterson Poetry Prize and *Foreword Magazine’s* Book of the Year. Her first book, *An Unkindness of Ravens*, was published in 2001 and is still in print. Meg’s poetry has been featured on Poetry Daily, Ted Kooser’s “American Life in Poetry” series, and Garrison Keillor’s “A Writer’s Almanac,” and has been published in such publications as *Poetry*, *Agni*, and *The Kenyon Review*. Meg is Founding Director of the Solstice Low-Residency Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program at Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. For eleven years prior to joining Pine Manor, she was Associate Director of the National Book Foundation (sponsor of the National Book Awards) in New York City. She also taught poetry at the New School University.

A native New Yorker, Meg currently resides in New Hampshire with her husband and their three-legged cat, Hopkins and their four-legged cat named Magpie. Their beloved, three-legged dog friend, Trouper, died in January 2018. All are greatly anticipating the arrival of a new rescue-dog member of their family, Winston, in late April.