

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 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

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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.