

Cynthia Grady

What's in a Name?

My initiation into poetics began one rainy November morning in second grade. The classroom smelled dank with wet coats and soggy lunch bags. We groaned and complained. In an effort to redirect our attention, the teacher had us imagine our desks surrounded by redwoods and giant mushrooms, and she began at once a routine we were used to: clapping syllables.

This exercise prompted another round of groans. Not syllables *again*. But this time was different, at least for me. Instead of spelling or vocabulary lists, we clapped out the syllables in our names, one student after another. “Cyn - thi - a.” Three syllables. Three claps. Most people in my class had fewer syllables than I did—a heady discovery.

Then we learned to hear the stressed syllable if we were lucky enough to have more than one. “**Cyn**’ - thi - a.” I clapped louder for “Cyn.”

Next, we listened to the vowel and consonant sounds each name made. Here I had a “y” in my name, making a short “i” sound. An “i” making a long “e” sound. An “a” sounding the elusive schwa. I had an “n,” that workhorse of letters, following the exotic “y.” And to top it off, a “th”

consonant blend stood smack-dab in the middle. And glory be! A “th” has *two* sounds? Yes. The “th” as in *Cynthia* (and *thistle*, my grandmother’s favorite word), or the “th” in “**them**” and “**those**.” One pulls, the other pushes.

My name. Brimming with an embarrassment of riches. Its vowels were exceptional. Its consonants played by special rules: a “c” can be hard or soft, depending. Rising out of a mechanical syllable exercise, I discovered a kind of music, a syncopation of sound.

Every day thereafter, I heard the beginnings of poetry when anybody spoke. I paid attention to sounds, to breath, to rhythm. I wondered how words were spelled when I heard them—and if their spellings held secrets that I should know. I listened for rising cadences. I listened for patterns. I played with the physicality of sound coming out of my mouth and the mouths of others.

Years later, I would at once learn and remember what poet Richard Hugo meant when he said, “All truth must conform to music.” Four decades ago in a stinky classroom, I learned to listen. To live by ear. Like so many musicians. Like so many poets.

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