

A Teacher's Legacy

This collection of poems is by John P. Curtin, an inspiring teacher, writer, and teacher educator who worked for the Center for Urban Education to support teaching progress.

They include poems he wrote to meet a challenge: poetry that clarifies ideas of science, government, history.

John Curtin was a master of meeting challenges: as a teacher; as a teaching coach; as a writer. He met the challenge of becoming a quadriplegic due to a tragic accident:

- He continued to teach—online at Depaul University.
- He wrote these remarkable poems.
- He organized the Center for Urban Education online curriculum resources.

His legacy is a vital part of everyone he worked with and taught.

We hope you will integrate these brilliant poems to brighten your curriculum in science, social science, and literature.

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A Sound Vocabulary Lesson

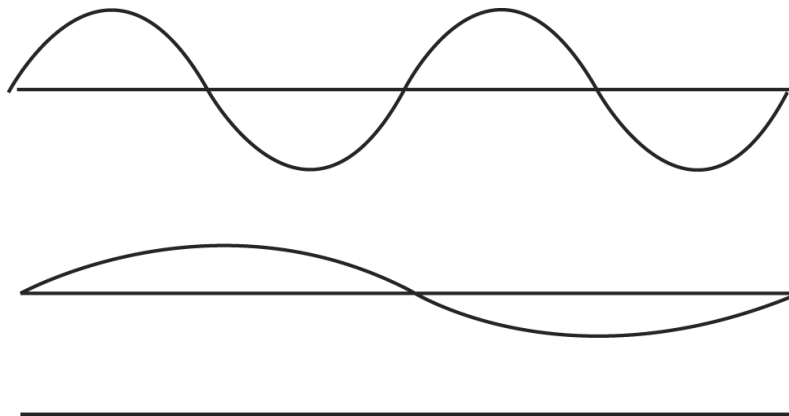
By John P. Curtin

Shhh... did you hear the teacher?
Neither did I.

But if those sound waves
(Asking us to be quiet... the ones we didn't hear)
Had reached our eardrums,
Oral would have become aural.

Not sure what I mean?

Too late now...
... here's the pop quiz.



Light: An Autobiography

By John P. Curtin

I began as a spark
And spent my childhood as a bonfire.
Yes, I was quite the luminary
Back when work and play were done outside.

Eventually people moved inside.
And besides they wanted me to be portable,
So I spent my teenage years as a torch.
But, like most teenagers, I was awkward and sometimes difficult to handle.
Sure, I was bright; but they claimed I was dangerous.

Over the years, I grew to be much more refined.
As a lantern, I was partly responsible for some of the most important books ever written.
(Needless to say, you never could have read them without me.)
I was even present at the birth of this country.
(One, if by land; two, if by sea.)

These days, I'm everywhere. And I have all kinds of names.
I'm incandescent. I'm halogen. Sometimes I'm refracted.

Mostly, though, I'm indispensable.



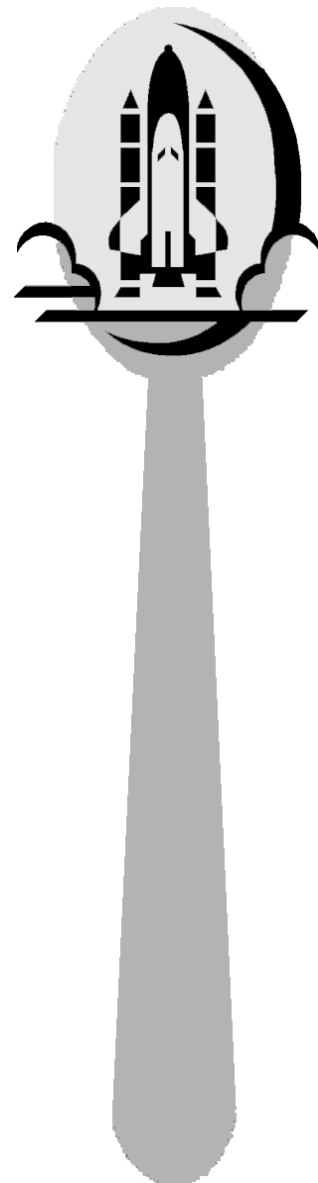
Technology Haiku

By John P. Curtin

Knowledge and tools:
Chariot into auto;
Stick into shovel.

It is as simple
As a spoon or as complex
As the space shuttle.

Once it was the wheel.
Now it is the microchip.
What will it be next?



A Lonely Planet Ponders

by John P. Curtin

I'm unleashed but feel a pull; I'm in orbit.
Gravity, my greatest attraction,
Has never let me down.

I am one of several, maybe many;
I'm not sure, I seldom see the rest.
I know, though, that there are more like me.
A network, a galaxy;
A universe at work.

As I spin, solitary,
As I wend my way through space,
There's design; there's order; there is a pattern.
There are causes and their effects,
And there are reasons that
 Such should happen this way
 And this should happen in such a way.

Even unpredictability is governed by principle.

Take comfort.
Chance, too, toes a line.



Ode to the Prairie Dog

by John P. Curtin

Come to the prairie, and let's have a peek
At the tree-less squirrel with the pear-shaped physique.

He inhabits the Plains and lives underground.
The networks of tunnels he digs are called "towns."

His preferred diet is grasses and roots;
In other words, he likes tubers and shoots.

He has a defense, although he is small;
He warns friends of predators with his bark-like call.

Most folks would say, "As a pet, I would never."
You have to admit, though, he is pretty clever.



Penguin Tanka

by John P. Curtin

Feathered, they do not
Fly. Antarctic, they
Group in rookeries.

The Adelie

Territorial.
More populous than any
Continental bird.

The Emperor

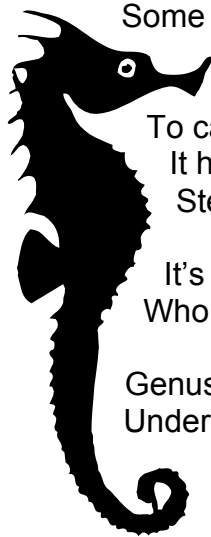
Larger than their friends
The Adelie, they eat fish
And squid. The males nest.



The Seahorse

by John P. Curtin

A horse is a horse, of course. Of course.
But a horse that can swim is a horse that's got force.



Some witches' brews might sicken you,
But *gestalt* lends a view that you shouldn't eschew:
Horse's head and aardvark's snout;
To carry their young, a kangaroo's pouch.
It has the eye of a lizard and a monkey's tail;
Stegosaurus-like, it's actually frail.

It's hard to believe in a world with such creatures –
Who can imagine such strange features?

Genus Hippocampus...
Undersea mystery or fictional history?

A City of Many Shoulders

By John P. Curtin

It's a big city.
It's a big responsibility.

The Mayor doesn't arrest bad guys,
But he makes sure that someone does.
That's what keeps the city safe.

He doesn't drive a big red truck,
Wear big rubber boots,
Or put out fires.
(At least not that kind.)
But he makes sure that the Great Chicago Fire remains historical.

The Mayor doesn't fill in potholes.
He doesn't drive a snowplow, either.
And he probably isn't the one who empties your garbage can.
But he makes sure that someone does.
And that's what keeps the city clean.

Hizzoner won't *shush* you if you're loud,
And he won't fine you for overdue books, either.
He's not the one you go to if you need a library card.
But he makes sure that our libraries do their librarying for us.
It's a big city.
It's a big responsibility.

The Chicago Fire

By John P. Curtin

On a hot, dry night in 1871,
At the end of the day, when the work had been done,
Chicago families were going to sleep,
But a spark had been set, and flames would soon
creep.

The story about Mrs. O'Leary you have heard,
Though the man who said that spoke dishonest
words.
He told of a lantern and the kick of a cow;
But the simple fact is, we just don't know how.

The city we know is of steel, brick, and glass,
But the time of that fire is well in our past.
The buildings we know will resist heat & flame;
The buildings back then weren't exactly the same.

Builders in those days chose to build with wood;
There was so much around, and they thought it was
good.
But wood doesn't stay strong like stone when it's hot,
So what seemed safe and smart really was not.

The fire, once lit, spread so quickly,
From house to house, and tree to tree.
It moved through the streets, driven by winds,
So fast that no one was sure where it would end.

The fire finally died out after two days
Thanks to light rains and a shifting breeze.
But not before it had taken its toll --
Three square miles, and so many homes.

This story, to us, is exciting, it seems,
Though to them, at the time, it brought down many
big dreams.
History is safe, with the distance of time,
But in the midst of the events, there's a lot on the
line.

El Fuego de Chicago

Translated by Arturo Romero Rendon

En una noche caliente, seca de 1871,
Al final del día, cuando el trabajo había concluido,
Las familias de Chicago iban a descansar,
Pero una chispa iniciaría las llamas que habrían de
arrasar.

La historia de la Señora O'Leary habrás oído,
Sin embargo el hombre que la contó habría mentido.
Dijo, la razón era una lámpara, una vaca y su patada;
Pero el hecho es, que con certeza, no sabemos nada.

La ciudad que conocemos es de acero, ladrillo y vidrio.
Pero el evento del incendio está en nuestro pasado
perdido,
Los edificios que conocemos resistirán el fuego y las
llamas;
Los edificios de antaño no podrían compararse jamás.

Los constructores de entonces escogieron construir
con madera;
Había en abundancia, y pensaron que era duradera.
Mas la madera no resiste al calor como la piedra,
Y pasó de segura e inteligente a un error cualquiera.

El incendio, una vez iniciado, se esparció velozmente,
De casa en casa, de árbol en árbol,
Atravesó las calles, ayudado por el viento que lo
fortalecía
Tan violento que nadie pesó que cesaría.

Al segundo día el fuego murió
Gracias a la ligera lluvia y la brisa que cambió.
No sin antes haber dejado --
Daños en tres millas, y hogares sin reparo

Esta historia, a nosotros nos logra emocionar
Sin embargo, a aquellas personas y sus sueños logro
devastar.
La historia se siente segura cuando es distante,
Pero al estar sucediendo, hay mucho en juego al
instante.

John Paul Curtin
(1967-2012)



He reigned like a prince from that damn chair.
Not like some tyrant issuing commands-
But a presence—one might have said royal
had not so many palace occupants ruined that once fine word--
A presence powerful and yet serene,
Churning with ideas and insights, and yet listening,
Waiting to learn from others--
Showing by example how to live not just with, but through tragedy and beyond,
Quietly demonstrating day after day, year after year
how to squeeze from a huge lemon heavier than Sisyphus' rock
the joy of living, the milk of human kindness.
“Oh please! Do watch those mixed metaphors,” the English teacher in him would have
cried,
firmly but supportively to all those west side students who learned from him
not just grammar and literature, but more about how to live and how to care about
others:

“I will always remember his jokes and pink socks . . .”

“One of the most vibrant and joyful personalities at [the school] . . . “

“I will remember his laugh, his intellect, his enthusiasm for life and those darn
sandals he wore in the middle of winter!”

“I will miss John dearly; it's as if somebody turned out the light in my favorite
room of the house, locked the door and threw away the key . . .”

“I thank God for your life and legacy of endurance and perseverance . . .”

“I started calling him JC during his first year at St. Mel because his class was like
salvation to me . . .”

“His favorite word was “clarify” in red ink! Linton how do I know you understand
this word if you don't clarify it within your sentence?” Thank you Mr. Curtin
because once you have clarity, you are free!”

“I loved your class and the . . . warmth of your personality . . . from your
whimsical socks to the infamous Birkenstocks. Your legacy lives on . . .”

Crippled? Disabled? Not John.

Quadriplegic? Well, yes. He knew a fact when he saw one.

But he also knew how to face that awful fact and to stare it down.

Differently abled? Possibly. But differently from what? From whom?

Perhaps *enabled* says it best. Enabled in his quiet, persistent and self-effacing way
to cultivate and then to show all of us what really matters,
what makes us truly human:

a sharp, inquiring mind;

a ready welcoming of the best in all of us, a gentle coaxing of us beyond our less than
best;

a love for family and friends so clear it little needed to be spoken;

a concern for the powerless, the short-changed, all the needy of the world.

But no soft, chair-bound bleeding heart he.
Only a deep indignation and withering critique awaited those
Who exploited their fellows, who failed the public trust and served themselves first.
“Don’t make me get up out of this chair,” he sometimes threatened
when we insisted it was our turn to pay the dinner tab—after I had declined his invitation
to arm wrestle for it. But joke or no—we were never really sure
that his unyielding sense of justice and fairness would not someday lift him right up from
that chair.
And yet he was comfortable with his condition, more so than some of us.
A young man dozing on a bench noted our passing on the way to dinner.
Running to catch up, he inquired of John,
“Is it possible that you cannot walk?”
With only the hint of a smile John replied, acknowledging the man’s concern,
“Yes, it is possible that I cannot walk.”
“May I pray with you?”
As John nodded the young man knelt and prayed
as the unnoting Ashland Avenue traffic whizzed on by.
And I, unsure, wondered if I, the only able-bodied white male in this small gathering
should protect John from such intrusions.
Shame on me! John needed no protection. And from what?
This obviously heart felt intercession on his behalf?
And what did my supposedly able-bodied white maleness have to do with anything in
this special moment?
Clearly I still had much to learn from John.
With his chair battery well charged, his scarf around his neck against any possible chill,
His cap and a credit card in the chair’s small pouch,
He was ready to face the world to get at that fine Italian wine and fare.
But John was also human. He surely suffered mightily.
And who knows what troubling thoughts, what might-have-been’s
hovered in the darkness when sleep would not come?
Perhaps those closest to him—family and other care givers—knew.
And while such knowledge, and their helplessness in face of it, tore at their hearts,
It also told them what a man, what a fine, courageous human being this John was.

Paul F. Camenisch

August, 2012