

Common Magic

by Braden Miller

Learning Goals

- interpret the title of a poem
 - closely examine a poet's use of language and poetic devices
 - analyze a poem's thesis
 - research and develop a photo or art essay
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Your best friend falls in love
and her brain turns to water.
You can watch her lips move,
making the customary sounds,
but you can see they're merely
words, flimsy as bubbles rising
from some golden sea where she
swims sleek and exotic as a mermaid.

It's always like that.
You stop for lunch in a crowded
restaurant and the waitress floats
toward you. You can tell she doesn't care
whether you have the baked or french-fried
and you wonder if your voice comes
in bubbles too.

It's not just women either. Or love
for that matter. The old man
across from you on the bus holds
a young child on his knee; he is singing
to her and his voice is a small boy
turning somersaults in the green
country of his blood.

It's only when the driver calls his stop
that he emerges into this puzzle
of brick and tiny hedges. Only then
you notice his shaking hands, his need
of the child to guide him home.

All over the city
you move in your own seasons
through the seasons of others: old women, faces

Her polit
to work
University
include th
related to

clawed by weather you can't feel
clack dry tongues at passersby
while adolescents seethe
in their glassy atmospheres of anger.

In parks, the children
are alien life-forms, rooted
in the galaxies they've grown through
to get here. Their games weave
the interface and their laughter
tickles that part of your brain where smells
are hidden and the nuzzling textures of things.

It's a wonder that anything gets done
at all: a mechanic flails
at the muffler of your car
through whatever storm he's trapped inside
and the mailman stares at numbers
from the haze of a distant summer.

Yet somehow letters arrive and buses
remember their routes. Banks balance.
Mangoes ripen on the supermarket shelves.
Everyone manages. You gulp the thin air
of this planet as if it were the only
one you knew. Even the earth you're
standing on seems solid enough.
It's always the chance word, unthinking
gesture that unlocks the face before you.
Reveals the intricate countries
deep within the eyes. The hidden
lives, like sudden miracles,
that breathe there.

(*Responding Activities p. 19*)

- 4 Poet and essayist Bronwen Wallace was born in Kingston and educated at Queen's University. Her political activism led her to work with auto workers, to co-found a women's bookstore, and to work in a battered women's shelter. She was also a creative writing teacher at Queen's University. *Marrying in the Family* (1980) was her first volume of poetry. Her other publications include the book of stories *People You'd Trust Your Life To* (1990). Wallace also wrote essays and created two films. (*Born Kingston, Ontario 1945; died 1989*)

- In stanza one, present the effect of the inexperience on the speaker's heart and head.
- In stanza two, present another effect of the second kind of inexperience. End the stanza with a statement of what you learned that ties into the metaphor.
- Present a dramatic reading of your poem.

Common Magic – Bronwen Wallace

Meaning

1. The title of this poem is an *oxymoron*. Based on your reading of the poem, explain how magic can be common. How can a contradiction like this be true?
2. Each of the first three stanzas is a character sketch of someone who is transformed by "common magic." Describe the characters and identify the common magic that transforms each of them.

Form and Style

3. What literary device is used in the lines, "All over the city / you move in your own seasons / through the seasons of others"? How does this device help the poet make suggestions about society?
4.
 - a) Why does Wallace describe the children as "alien life-forms" in stanza five? What does this metaphor imply about children? About adults? Is the metaphor appropriate? Why or why not?
 - b) Another line states that the children's games "weave the interface." Between what? What else in this stanza creates an "interface"? How?

Creative Extension

5. The poem ends with the lines:

It's always the chance word, unthinking
gesture that unlocks the face before you.
Reveals the intricate countries
deep within the eyes. The hidden
lives, like sudden miracles,
that breathe there.

These lines can be considered the poem's *thesis* or controlling idea. Paraphrase the poem's conclusion in your journal and write on the following questions. Do the examples in the poem make this conclusion logical? Why or why not? Do you agree with the poet's conclusion? Explain your views.

6. Create a photo or art essay on the theme of "common magic." Research appropriate visuals in various sources including magazines, the Internet, books, and newspapers. Make your selections carefully to express your interpretation of the theme. Your concluding visual should be a strong one summarizing your main idea. Include titles or captions as appropriate. In your journal, keep a running commentary explaining how you conduct your research and make your selections.