

Poem #1 - 'Beneath the Surface'

Assignment: write a poem that explores the differences between the way that people see you on the outside and the person you are on the inside.

Purpose: one of the major themes in *Bronx Masquerade* is about how people learn to get beyond stereotypes and discover what other people are really like beneath the surface.

The Process:

- Step One: participate in class discussion about stereotypes and who you are on the inside vs. who you are on the outside
- Step Two: read sample poems
- Step Three: complete writing frame
- Step Four: write and submit first draft

You might want to write about...

- Stereotypes that other people have about you (your race, gender, social group, etc...)
- A time in your life when someone mistreated you because of a stereotype
- Things about you that other people don't know but would help them to understand who you really are
- A time in your life when you learned something important about yourself
- A way in which you are different on the inside than you appear on the outside

Grading Criteria:

1. Your poem must be at least 20 lines long
2. The poem should be about the difference between who are on the outside and who you are on the inside

Beneath the Surface

By Mike Drescher

On the outside it's difficult to place me;
I've been mistaken for so many things:
White, Latino, Italian, Arabian, Native American:
Various labels applied and misapplied,
Imposed by strangers who can't see
The real me – my true identity.

On the surface, I'm a red herring,
An ethnic blank slate,
Donning different disguises for every occasion,
Like a spy from Mission Impossible,
Camouflaged by my ambiguous appearance.

But on the inside, I'm Japanese-American.
The ashes of my memory drift like smoke
Across the Pacific, to Nagasaki,
Where I see my great-great grandfather
Boarding a ship bound for a new world
On the other side of the ocean.

The ashes swirl in tiny eddies of air,
Floating along a dock in Vancouver
Where my ancestor jumps ship,
And sets off to build a new life for himself,
The first of his kind in that unfamiliar land.
The ashes follow him through the years,
Sliding past the family grocery store,
His imported wife, and the mountain
That will eventually bear his name.

The smoke from these ashes continue to glide into the past
Settling briefly on a page from my grandfather's photo album,
Of him and his brothers, Japanese-looking children
With names like Jack and Paul,
Kneeling beneath an orange tree,
Joining tanned arms in the Southern California sun.

With a sudden frightened leap,
The cloud of ash is carried back across the Pacific,
Following my grandfather off to war,
To an island in the Philippines where he storms a beach,
Plowing through neck-high water
Towards an enemy who looks just like him.

Suddenly, the smoke shifts, billowing back to California,
Where the rest of my grandfather's family is
Herded into the stables at Santa Anita racetrack
Before being deposited in Manzanar,
Where four years of dust forces its way
Into their nostrils, eyes, and mouths,
Whipped in from the desert,
Through the barbed-wire fences,
Past the guard towers with their
Spotlights and machine guns.

On the surface, none of this shows.
No scar lingers.
But underneath, understand that I was born from parents
Who defied their parents and the risk
Of producing yellow-spotted babies
To have me.

Understand that the smoke from these ashes
Follows me as well,
That it is my inheritance,
Tracing my footsteps through my life,
Mingling with those of my ancestors.

Plan your first draft in the spaces below

Title: _____

By _____

On the outside I am....

But on the inside I am....

On the surface I seem...

But beneath it all, I am actually....

‘Beneath the Surface’ – Writing Frame

Step One: complete the chart below

On the outside: write down some words and phrases that describe how you appear on the outside

On the inside: write down some words and phrases that describe how you are on the inside