

Poetic Pause

PÈRE LACHAISE CEMETERY, PARIS, FRANCE, EARLY SPRING

BY RUSTIN LARSON

On the tomb
of the broom-
stick maker
rests a pink butterfly
sipping nectar
from a long
green straw.
This is under
a tree, leafless,
brown, just
steps away
from the tomb
of Oscar Wilde
which is stained
from one end
to the other
with lipstick kisses.
It is an early
April morning
and the ghosts
are calm and happy
seeking out
a trapezoid
of chilly blue
sky. Please dispose
of your Mars Bars
wrappers and leave
quietly. I have
been a friend
to the shadows.



RUSTIN LARSON is a professor of creative writing at Maharishi International University. His most recent poetry collection is *The Cottage on the Hill*.

A STORY HUNT CAN SPARK YOUR CURIOSITY

BY DANNY HEITMAN, FORUM EDITOR

One of my grade school teachers, Barbara Mann, indulged the arrival of spring each year by allowing us to go outdoors on a few afternoons and study beneath the shade of a greening tree rather than back inside at our dreary desks.

It wasn't an easy arrangement, with nearly three dozen youngsters battling the distractions of the season while Ms. Mann, standing beside the trunk of our playground oak, tried to march us through the week's spelling words or a little history of the Gettysburg Address.

Many years later, after becoming an adjunct professor of journalism, I came to understand another possible reason why Ms. Mann had allowed us to sample the great outdoors. Teachers, too, can chafe at the confinement of the classroom. Maybe she needed spring air as much as we did.

When I taught a writing class one spring to college freshmen, I assigned them to arrive for class one afternoon with comfortable walking shoes and notebooks. We, too, convened outside, taking a stroll through campus in what I called a story hunt. My basic lesson was that good writing topics usually start with a question. The important thing is to regard everything you see, even the seemingly minor stuff, with a sense of curiosity.

We'd walked only a few feet when I pointed to a rusting drop box for postal mail on the corner. Did anyone at the university still use it? Was there

still a post office on campus? If so, what drew its university patrons to use snail mail rather than the electronic kind? Maybe, in the answer, there was a story to be told. Above our heads, I pointed to a street light. Were there enough on campus to help students feel safe at night? If not, then why? How much money might it cost to provide more, and where might it come from? Another story, maybe, ripe for the telling.

After those prompts, my students began to spot their own story ideas on our walk – in old trees that might reveal an interesting history, the passing bus driver with the lively personality, or the protest sign taped to a post. Within less than an hour, we had nearly 40 ideas for stories, just by walking and looking around.

Although I work primarily as a nonfiction prose writer, novelists such as Charles Dickens and Virginia Woolf, along with poets such as Mary Oliver, found their own kinds of inspiration by taking a walk.

In engaging the outside world, a writer can practice asking questions, the seeds from which most good writing grows.



Forum editor **DANNY HEITMAN** has written about the writing craft for numerous publications, including *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and he's taught writing to university students.