

The first place poem in this age group, "Dear Minty" is a tribute to Harriet Tubman, who was born a slave in Maryland and, in 1849, escaped her owner for freedom in the North. Tubman was to become the most famous "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, which was a series of safe houses that kept escaping African Americans hidden during their journey to freedom. Often risking her life, Tubman led hundreds of family members and other slaves north to Philadelphia, and later to Canada and freedom. The poem's powerful and economical use of language, inventive metaphor, and meaningful conclusion mark this as a first place poem.

Harriet Tubman is held in high regard in this poem. 'Araminta' is Tubman's given first name; 'Minty' is her nickname. The poem's title, "Dear Minty," represents an epistolary* style that fits the poem's message and tone well. The poem's epigraph* is a line from Wallace Willis's Negro spiritual: "Swing low, sweet chariot, / Comin' for to carry me home." These lyrics confirm Tubman's efforts to free slaves and assert that "home" is freedom.

The poem's first section treats Tubman as a stealthy tracker and knowing woodsman. Her "feet move over moss / Silent and light / Like the paws of a panther." To avoid detection, she wears a "head scarf and cloak" and travels only at night, with the "North Star reflected in [her] eyes / Guiding you toward freedom." Tubman is seen as a "fearless lioness" who leads her "precious cargo" / "timid as lambs" to the safety of her "den." The speaker addresses Tubman as "Moses," a nickname Tubman earned after the Biblical prophet Moses who led his people to freedom. In all of her journeys she "never lost one."

The next section delves into more of Tubman's stealth to bring slaves to freedom. She carries "tools of [her] trade" needed to make a successful journey leading slaves at night to safe houses along the Underground Railroad. She carried such items as "a lock pick, a whistle, pistol, a book." (*As an aside, Tubman knew how to use the gun she carried.*) In the remainder of the section, the speaker pleasingly describes the animals that inhabit the woods the escapees travel through:

A nightingale trills, a fiery fox treads, silent
Fish swim in streams clear as glass
Mice and squirrels scurry
Raccoons peek from burrows
An owl perches in a hemlock
An eagle hunts from above
At home in the land of the free.

The poem shifts its language and cadence here to represent the freedom that denizens of the woods possess. Notice the precise verbs—"trills," "scurry," "peek," "perches," and "hunts"—that keep the poem in motion.

* *Epistolary*: from the Greek noun 'epistolē' meaning "message" or "letter." 'Epistolary' came to English via Greek, Anglo-French, and Latin. Epistolary poems, then, are, quite literally, poems that read as letters. As poems of direct address, they can be intimate and colloquial or formal and measured. ~Miriam-Webster and American Academy of Poets

* *Epigraph*: a quotation at the beginning of a literary work that suggests its theme. ~Miriam-Webster.

The poem's next section describes one safe house that sheltered Tubman and her "precious cargo." The Underground Railroad's safe houses were in reality institutions, churches, establishments, and privately owned homes that aided runaway slaves on the dangerous journey north. There were signs and codes used as the speaker relates: "A quilt in the window," to knock "five times," code words such as "*A friend with friends.*" These would enable Tubman's escaping slaves to gain entry to a "cellar to sleep."

At the conclusion of the poem, the speaker praises Tubman in a series of striking metaphors:

Your voice a church bell
Your eyes a beacon
Hope in every hollow your foot barely left behind
The shackles loosened by every single step
Your blazing soul too bright to be bought or sold,
Too bold to be crushed under slavery's heavy heels.

These characteristics of fearless Harriet Tubman demonstrate the respect for and honor due this heroic woman.

The speculative last section concerns the weight that slavery has left upon the United States. The speaker asks, "Will we ever escape from the shadows / Of the time in which you lived?" The speaker acknowledges the burden and consequences that the institution of slavery has left America, and "prays that someday we may all be that eagle / Free to fly, free to be."

The subject matter, adept use of metaphor, and precise language in "Dear Minty," showcase this poet's talent. Let's hope we hear more from this very accomplished writer!

Thank you for the pleasure of reading your work!

Marie Kane, Final Judge
Sarah Mook Poetry Contest, 2018