

“Writing a Composition” by James Baldwin

“Children, tomorrow I shall expect all of you to write compositions,” said the teacher of Love Lane School.

“Then, on Friday those who have done the best may stand up and read their compositions to the school.”

Some of the children were pleased, and some were not.

“What shall we write about?” they asked.

“You may choose any subject that you like best,” said the teacher.

Some of them thought that “Home” was a good subject. Others liked “School.” One little boy chose “The Horse.” A little girl said she would write about “Summer.”

The next day, every pupil except one had written a composition.

“Henry Longfellow,” said the teacher, “why have you not written?”

“Because I don’t know how,” answered Henry. He was only a child.

“Well,” said the teacher, “you can write words, can you not?”

“Yes, sir,” said the boy.

“After you have written three or four words, you can put them together, can you not?”

“Yes, sir; I think so.”

“Well, then,” said the teacher, “you may take your slate and go out behind the schoolhouse for half an hour. Think of something to write about, and write the word on your slate. Then try to tell what it is, what it is like, what it is good for, and what is done with it. That is the way to write a composition.”

Henry took his slate and went out. Just behind the schoolhouse was Mr. Finney’s barn. Quiet close to the barn

was a garden. And in the garden,
Henry saw a turnip.

“Well, I know what that is,” he said
to himself; and he wrote the word
turnip on his slate. Then he tried to
tell what it was like, what it was good
for, and what was done with it.