

Poem III:  
*Marked*

Exercise III.1:

Wonderful poems and prose poems can be written about what our parents, teachers, and other authority figures tell us not to do and to do. (Remember the famous line, “Do as I say, not as I do”?) “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid, is one of my favorite examples: it’s one long paragraph of all the instructions a mother gives a girl in order to ensure that she will grow up decent and good. Cecilia Rodríguez Milanes wrote her own takeoff, based on the Kincaid piece, “Muchacha,” from the point of view of a Latina mother. Another favorite is the opening paragraph of Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir, *The Woman Warrior*: “You must not tell anyone,” my mother said, “what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born.”

What we are told not to do or to say is often a closed door that writers must open in order to get past the censors that keep us from telling our stories.

“Marked,” by Carmen Tafolla is a poem in which the mother tells the daughter both what not to do and what to do. It accomplishes so much in its 22 short lines. I admire its wonderful economy. Note for instance, how it’s only via the “refrain” of *m’ija* (my daughter) that we know that it is a mother speaking. Her big picture advice (“Make your mark proud/ and open,/ brave...”) is grounded in specific details that bring it home (“like a piece of turquoise/ marked”). Through simple but vivid details the mother covers a lot of ground: outlining the diversity of ways in which the daughter can make her mark in the world: from writing (with ink) to fertility from growing berries or babies, to activism, spilling her blood when necessary.

By making her marks on paper, the poet-daughter has ensured that her mother’s voice will not be lost, erased. In other words, the mother’s advice has been followed.

Students can brainstorm, as a group or individually, on all the do’s and don’t’s they’ve been given. These prescriptions and proscriptions should be as detailed and specific as possible. Think of something your mother or father, your teachers, an older brother or sister or friend has told you not to do, or to do. Think of specific ways in which you might follow this advice, or not. Begin by writing down the advice itself in the voice of the person who gave it to you. See where it takes you, where you might end up.

Sharing this exercise aloud with a class can be hilarious!

— Exercise provided by Julia Alvarez, bestselling novelist, author  
of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*