

2012 WINNER OF THE BECHTEL PRIZE

Now Let's Stare at the Purple

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For Robert

May 19, 2012

SHE IS SPEAKING SOFTLY, BOLDLY. AS she did when she was my fifth-grade student. But now she is a post-doc fellow. She is telling me about the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) show she saw yesterday.

The genius of Cindy Sherman is...

She is explaining why I should open to this artist, these photos: self-portraits as a grotesque, a man, a poseur ... as anybody else but herself.

Her words impart life experience different from mine.

I remember when she, a fifth-grader, explained the Charles Demuth painting, *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, to her classmates and me, on our Metropolitan Museum trip.

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She stared at the painting, moving forward and back. Then stopped. The three 5s in the painting were, she said, getting bigger because the fire engine was coming toward us.

She felt the motion her words imparted. So we saw it too, felt it: the motion. And the emotion: emergency.

She had empathized with Demuth's empathy with the William Carlos Williams poem, "The Great Figure." Words Demuth translated through his own experience. Emotion anybody among us might experience, despite our diversity.

The genius of Cindy Sherman is that she captures...

Her words emerge: fluid, immediate.

... that she captures all possibilities of being human. The human disjunction, ambiguity. The hideousness, beauty we all share.

Now she must catch a plane back to California. As she walks slowly, step by deliberate step toward the door of this crowded restaurant, leaning forward on her two canes, diners stare.

May 19, 1989

I dreamed of freedom, and now, finally, my three children

Then I am here in the Henry Viscardi School, an elementary and high school for the “severely physically disabled.” Beautiful, black-braided Bettina, stuffed in her wheelchair, understands immediately. She must help me.

in school, my husband at work, I sit in my office editing my poem—then hear my voice on the phone: “volunteer.”

Then I am here. A modern, windowed fifth-grade classroom in the Henry Viscardi School, a partially state-funded elementary and high school for the “severely physically disabled.” The legless boy, the wheelchairs. The teacher is asking me to help with math. Beautiful, black-braided Bettina stuffed in her wheelchair, understands immediately. *She* must help me.

August 1989

Today I bike from my brick house, green lawn, to school, a tan modern sprawl, a close other world. I was supposed to teach American Indian history during summer session, but I showed them Wassily Kandinsky painting postcards with his poems and played some Arnold Schoenberg music. The elementary school principal said, get a teaching grant. But I’m just here once a week, just presenting music, paintings, poems, just inventing exercises to elicit words. Not teaching.

September 1989

School started this week and now they want me in the high school too. The high school principal knows my name, kissed me hello in the library.

February 1990

Today two mute boys in a junior class chose the same Pablo Picasso painting, the most fragmented. One wrote the black and white material was a “curtain.” One wrote that it was “black and white minds.”

March 1990

Years I couldn’t read much. Now I can’t stop reading. I think it’s for them. Walt Whitman, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens ... Novels, poems, criticism,

letters, journals, biographies ... excited to learn. For them.

October 1990

Calida, a dark, paralyzed Madonna, a new student who got shot, hands me her poem as she glides past me for the door.

I am 11 years old
and sometimes I feel mad and angry
because it feels like I’m the only handicapped child
in this whole world
I sometimes go to the front of my house
and people stare at me
like no one’s ever seen a kid in a wheelchair
and that bothers me so much
that I go to my room
and I ask God why me
why am I the one to be made fun of
why am I the one to be stared at all the time
and I read the bible
and it tells me that those who are made fun of
will one day be someone very special
and will get to succeed in this world

Before I came here did I stare?

June 1991

In each class we collate this year’s poems for the end of the year anthology I type up with two fingers. But their handwriting is part of the art. A child with no arms, only fingers. A child with casts on his arms. Their writing, in their style, seems beautiful. Vance noticed the two spaces I typed between two words in his poem and didn’t like them.

September 1991

The last line of Bettina’s poem is “... what makes us so different, so the same?”

January 1992

As I’m passing through the library to get to the art

room, Bettina lifts her head from her computer. Barbara, she says. She was surprised, disappointed to see her poem with her name on the library wall. I say the librarian did that. She says no one asked me. I say I take responsibility, you're right. She says it was personal. I say it helps others express the personal. She says it's not all true. I say good poems use imagination. It was personal, she repeats. I know what you mean, I say, I never want to expose anything. I'm sorry I say. I was going to ask you to read your poem at the poetry assembly. Okay, she says, now that you asked me, but, if I knew it was gonna be public I would'na gone so deep or far.

November 1992

In the months before three classes go to the Henri Matisse show at the MoMA, I slowly turn the catalogue pages to show, chronologically, his body of work: to solve mysteries such as *How are Matisse's three early dining room paintings alike?* Because it seems to me that you can see in the art process something human and common. You can see in these three very different paintings of the same subject—a servant leaning over a dining table—how, over twelve years, the rooms open, more and more, to outside light. How Matisse is opening.

The first dim dining room has a door opened to an interior. Light comes into the second through a curtained window. But in the third dining room, *Harmony in Red*, a sixth of the painting is a windowed wall, so you can see outside. *What seems the same inside and outside the window?* I ask the sixth-graders. I hear ... *The servant's puffy brown hair is shaped like the white blossoms on the tree outside... The brown rung on the back of the chair matches the shape of the black roof on the small pink house outside ...* The outside is through Matisse's window, as the spontaneous words in class discussions and quick poems are each student's pro-

jection. This is the excitement in the classroom: the surprise of what's inside us, said.

December 1992

Dominika, a fifth-grader whose parents left Poland to come to America for the best care for her cerebral palsy. Matisse, a French artist, from a dim industrial town, searching his whole life for the light.

Dominika (at the MoMA Matisse show): "Charcoal ... it's almost nicer if you can use your imagination for the colors."

Matisse: "A colorist makes his presence known even in a charcoal drawing."

Dominika (looking at a painting of Nice): "It's really a great picture. You know he's worked out all the details before and all he does is ... lines."

Matisse: "Sift ... details ... selecting ... the line that expresses the most and gives life."

Matisse: "Colors win you over more and more. A certain blue enters your soul. A certain red has an effect on your blood pressure. A certain color tones you up. It's a concentration of timbres ..."

Dominika: "The colors look so awesome on one another. The colors fit together like they were meant to be that way. I've never seen colors so bright. It's like, wow, that's a great orange. Now let's stare at the purple. It's amazing. I'm going to sleep here tonight. I'll wake up in the morning and I'll see the whole exhibit again. And I'm going to spend thirty minutes at each painting. Or rather thirty minutes at each color. Gee, that was a great pink."

March 1993

The blue water trades with the sky. People dance on both sides. Of the world.

*This is the excitement
in the classroom:
the surprise of what's
inside us, said.*

Shana, in a sophomore class, tests at fourth-grade level. My first year here she hid in the bathroom with her switchblade, and was expelled. Now, her spontaneous poems make her the class star.

The clouds sprinkle the sea with
illusion. As a path of gloss.

SHANA

Shana, in a sophomore class, tests at fourth-grade level. My first year here she hid in the bathroom with her switchblade, and was expelled. Now, her spontaneous poems make her the class star. But “I’m vanishing,” she says today in a poem she reads to the class, her mouth an O trying to form a word. She hands me her second poem and asks me to read. But Kacie wants to read *her* poem. And Rainbow, paralyzed in her wheelchair, bruised knees exposed below her red pleated skirt, insists on reading her René Magritte poem first, which ends, “the rose is calling for help / because it doesn’t want to grow anymore / it wants to stop growing.”

Finally reading Shana’s poem aloud, I’m stuck on a word. She leans over me to help. This sounds like a song, I say. I have songs she says, and pulls out two. I read aloud and ask her if she wants Mr. G., the English teacher who plays the guitar, to compose tunes. But she’s finished with that, grabs a Claude Monet postcard from my pile, shuffles to a computer, sits. Her hands play the keys like a pianist transported by the piece.

September 1993

In these months before the Joan Miró show, even in some classes that are not going, we look through the catalogue. It’s chronological so, again, I create mysteries such as *What changes, what stays the same?* Finally I tell them what Miró said: “A red circle, the moon, a star keep coming back.”

Before I came here I interviewed artists, to hear in their words confirmation of what I saw in their art

processes. Miró, Matisse, like the artists I interviewed, were finding a language for human experience. Louise Bourgeois told me: “It is a progression ... later on not only do I accept the self but I enjoy it.” Self-confiding, then, self-confidence. And, during our four years together here, students do seem less self-conscious, in class and in their poems. As I am, too.

In telling I begin to see the human consistency. Miró said these forms kept coming back “in spite of me.” Memory is the muse. Mnemosyne, for the ancient Greeks. Memory images, according to modern psychiatry, which certain early experience seeds. Like the images Miró said he was “recovering ...” “... One does not discover in life,” he said.

November 1993

Miró returned home to his family farm and had his first breakthrough in an original, detailed, almost surreal portrait of *The Farm* (1921-2). Shy Grace slowly writes, then crosses out her “Farm” poem, a breakthrough for her: “There are footprints / that go a short way then suddenly stop. / The tree is hundreds of peacocks floating above / the earth connected by one horse’s hoof. The house / is made of thousands of pounds of sand.”

December 1993

Before I came here, my MFA thesis: How a Giorgio De Chirico painting image is in a John Ashbery poem; a Charles Sheeler image in a William Carlos Williams poem, etc. Minds are connected despite language, times. Now I’m showing classes one mind in two languages: Miró’s prose poem for his painting “Carnival of Harlequins.” Juniors, lit by this visual and verbal free association, write feverishly: “... red leaking on all other colors ...” “... black hooked to the brown path through the city ...” “... black and the color inside light ...” Except for Jacinda, who stares at something I can’t see. I don’t walk over to help as I sometimes do. Eight minutes to go, face down she writes: “The good side

of life and the dark side / life's repetitious tragedies, crimes / and results / complex thoughts as one listens to a piece of music / one's inner struggle of doing what's right and / desiring to be the innocent one."

February 1994

I'm beginning to understand: Why art?

Miró: "To rediscover the sources of human feeling." His breakthrough, *The Farm*, a weirdly original farmhouse painted when he returned home.

What is art?

Matisse: "It is the recollection of my sensations ..."
His breakthrough, "The Joy of Life," when he returned home metaphorically. In his early Eden painting, naked people loll on yellow grass below orange, pink, and blue-green trees while six naked dancers, deeper in, circle wildly. Soon the six will reappear as five, the whole subject in *Dance*. Five dancers circling on green ground below blue sky fill the canvas. The "recollection of my sensations." Five, circling wildly, arms reaching to attach. But two can't hold on.

March 1994

I wake at four a.m. with what Jay said: Miró is "loose and free like Michael Jordan." We had compared H.M. Sorgh's *The Lute Player* (1660) with Miró's 1928 interpretation, *Dutch Interior*. Jay said Miró was "the winner." As he made an analogy between art and sports, I thought, in both we re-create ourselves by returning "home." The backcourt. Home base. First seed. Like Miró to his farm. Matisse to his Eden of free-wheeling sensation.

April 1994

Handwritten note from enormous book of grieving poems given to me by all classes:

Dear Barbara,
I am so sorry your mother died.

I remember her pushing me at the museum.
This Sunday at my little league baseball game
Our team will dedicate it to your mother.

June 1994

Mute Calev in his wheelchair—turquoise eyes, straight blond hair clipped to frame his perfect face—refuses to use the Dyna Box that will speak for him. He's eight or nine, so handsome, maybe smart, but when I try to get him to join in he won't move his hands on his tray to words between the left NO or the right YES. The class encourages him but Calev refuses. Is he listening to the *Sakura Sakura* tape I play? Others hear colors dancing, playing, praying, as his head slides off the leather head holder on his wheelchair back. So I grab my homemade color chart, loud color strips I got free from a paint store and pasted on manila paper:

Fifth-grader Blair: "I feel like a plant / without sunshine / trying to grow. I feel like a sign / They stare at me ..."

bright, soft, hard, silent colors I place on his tray—*what color do you feel?*—but his two hands stay on home base between NO and YES, then slowly slowly scan edges of peach, pink, white, black, all blues, and land on red.

November 1995

Fifth-grader Blair: "I feel like a plant / without sunshine / trying to grow. I feel like a sign / They stare at me ..."

I don't stare. Here I feel—in a different way than in my protected life—human connection.

December 1995

I don't know how I chose this school, but today, when the visiting public school teacher asked me to "teach" there too, for pay, I refused. I'm just a volunteer, but the remuneration is unquantifiable.

October 1996

At the Metropolitan Museum, we are before the huge Édouard Manet portrait of a fifer beside the Eva Gonzalès copy. How are they alike? Different? I ask.

They see different buttons, jackets, pants, shoes, face rouge, backgrounds. Natie says the Manet is bigger. Jacques says they're not the same style. But the same hat, he says. Then Farah, who told me she got shivers when she first saw these paintings, says, one copied the other. Who copied who? asks Mathilde. They look at dates, vote on which they like best, they vote on which is more modern. Tim says you could enter the Gonzalès but not the Manet space.

I look out at them, listen, worried we block the way to the next room because a crowd has gathered, 40 or 50 people. I hear myself, calm lecturer on a video I fast forward. Do I see Farah's thinness; Omar's new haircut, jacket, and how he's not on his walker but in a wheelchair? Is Tilly bored? Giles is deep in a corner and not talking. They are voting on who is the teacher, Diego unafraid to be the only one not voting for Manet. They vote on who is more original: Manet. Tilly says: If Manet is the teacher why is Gonzalès less original? A student is always the teacher.

March 1999

Before the Chuck Close show at MoMA, we look at his portraits. He was not born disabled but is a paraplegic, I say. Aggie asks: Not being born disabled, is he better off, or worse?

April 1999

Dominika, who mainstreamed, returns to teach with me, nervous, her first time teaching. She is present, straightforward, and they like that. In fifth grade, my first year here, her long blond hair curtained her face as she wrote her first poem slowly, then crushed it:

Georgia O'Keeffe Flower

The flower looks like a girl on the ground, lying
near the pond.

Hidden by leaves and flowers, she slowly looked in

the water, but
the reflection she sees is and isn't her own. It looks
like a
painting of her in a fog. Although nothing is missing,
something is
different and she can't understand the picture that
the lake has
drawn.

She mainstreamed for junior high where she walked with difficulty down halls, up stairs, so she wouldn't "slow" her graduation procession. Number one of two hundred, she was accepted in a great public high school so she trained her legs all summer for the stairs but always arrived late for class: demerits. She's been accepted early to Brown.

June 1999

As usual I lug in my tape recorder, painting postcards, and inter-loaned library books with big painting pictures. But today, teachers, aides, volunteers know how to use the Internet to access music by Arnold Schoenberg, Alexander

Scriabin; paintings by Wassily Kandinsky; and a painting program for students whose paralyzed hands can't paint but can push the pommel in the rhythms of the music. Looking at a Kandinsky painting, Gee writes: "... They're in a dungeon of colors ..." Listening to Schoenberg, Saul writes: "Shhhh. Listen to the silence."

June 1999

The generosity here. Students pushing wheel-chaired students through the halls. Students giving up an urgent need to yell out a poetry line or an epiphany to help a non-speaker find words.

I wouldn't be here if not for Mrs. I., the fifth-grade teacher, my first day here, who sensed my aptitude was not in math. Or the principal who asked me to stay when I recommended a better poet to replace me. The generosity. Of administrators, teachers, nurses,

Tilly says: If Manet is the teacher why is Gonzalès less original? A student is always the teacher.

aides, volunteers. Many with PhDs. Some here for twenty-five years, or more.

January 2007

Dominika and I celebrate. She passed her University of California, Berkeley PhD orals. Her long, blond hair short now, still parted in the middle. After dinner and the Edna St. Vincent Millay program at the 92nd Street Y, I drop her off on my way home. Her parents greet me in their lighted living room. She hands me a recently published anthology in which her poem appears. Her poem is naked, original, deep. Like her beginning poems. She sits beside her mother on the pink-flowered sofa to sign the anthology for me. The same determination in her fingers slowly forming the letters: "...and had you not rescued my poem so many years ago I doubt this one would have followed..."

May 19, 2011

Next week, our yearly poetry assembly in the gym. All students are invited to read their poems from his-year's anthology. Some will read for others who won't or can't. This week I ask about their writing process:

Where do your poems come from?

Janelle, 11th grade: "A season inside, I pulled it from my soul."

Zora, 6th grade: "A dream is a huge furry beast running after you. A poem is you running after a huge furry beast."

Are poems "given," like your dreams?

Zora, 6th grade: "A dream is a huge furry beast running after you. A poem is you running after a huge furry beast."

What does it feel like to write your poems?

Avery, 12th grade: "Writing poetry is different from other subjects. I'm free to fly, dangerous, high, intoxicated. I really mean that."

Isabella, 7th grade: "After writing a good poem it feels new to you, it feels part of yourself, your baby. I had my poem stuck in my head and then my head opened. My imagination flew onto the paper out of my head. Then it kept happening. It kept flowing out of my head onto the paper. It was incredible. I couldn't do it last year."

When was writing easier?

Mason, 6th grade: "I liked writing better older. I was freer when I was younger but I liked my poems better when I was older. Younger, I didn't know about the world, what lay ahead of me in the open sky." 🗨️