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JOHN OLIVER SIMON & MICHAEL P. RAY

poetry inside out

Harnessing the Transformative Power of Translation

In 2000, Olivia E. Sears (founder of the Center for Art in Translation) met with bilingual teacher Michael P. Ray to discuss how CAT might be able to affirm and nurture the incredible language resources of bilingual children. At the end of a two-hour conversation, the Poetry Inside Out program was born. John Oliver Simon came on board in 2001, adding his expertise in teaching imaginative writing and Latin American literature.

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The use of translation to teach poetic craft is an old (and open) secret. Across the centuries great poets from Petrarch and Dryden to H.D. and Octavio Paz have wrestled poems from one language into another, absorbing the rhythms, styles, and themes of poets far removed from their own languages and, frequently, their own times. In a way, translation demands the deepest possible immersion in a work of literature. To produce a successful translation, poets must achieve a strong understanding of the meaning, music, and form of the original poem. But the rewards of such a process can be soul-shifting. John Felstiner, author of *Translating Neruda: The Way to Machu Picchu*, once said that translation allows the translator to walk to the edge of a work and gaze into the abyss.

Poetry Inside Out (PIO) is the first in-school imaginative writing program to harness the transformative power of translation. PIO works primarily with Spanish bilingual students, a group that consistently misses the mark on standardized tests, targets their strength—their budding multilingualism, which some school systems would identify as a roadblock—and shows them how to become literate in the fullest sense of the word.

A typical PIO residency begins with the instructor distributing a group of great poems by Pablo Neruda (Chile, 1904–1973), Dulce María Loynaz (Cuba, 1902–1997), Gabriela Mistral (Chile, 1889–1957), or Federico García Lorca (Spain, 1898–1936). As the students leaf through their handouts, the teacher begins to recite some of his favorites in Spanish, making casual interpretive comments

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about what the poems mean to him. "I like the last stanza of this poem from Neruda's *Book of Questions*: 'Dónde dejó la luna/ su saco nocturno de harina?' because of the way the moon and the flour are both white, but I'm not sure I get it. Maybe you can help me out. Is Neruda telling us that the moon's white light is the sprinkling of flour from a sack she (the moon) takes out at night?"

Over the course of the residency, students are asked to illustrate, memorize, and recite their favorite poems using a formal introduction. At the same time, they begin to translate the works they have encountered and to compose their own poetry based on their immersion in these models. To guide them, the instructor will encourage them to consider the two cardinal questions of the translator: "Does it mean the same thing?" and "Does it sound good?" The rest of the process is a result of discussion and trial-and-error.

Across a long-term residency of 15 to 25 sessions, the separate practices of translation and original composition inform and reinforce one another in the literary culture of each classroom. The residency culminates in an assignment that requires students to translate each other's work from Spanish to English and vice versa. As students read their translations aloud, pooling knowledge of English with their peers, look up key words in a dictionary, and engage in discussion that is, quite often, competitive, a complex learning dance ensues between adult and child language, dictionary and memory, first language and second language, and Latin American and North American cultures.

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Now let's eavesdrop on a series of PIO sessions. In the dialogue below, Michael P. Ray conducts a translation conference with a fifth grader. Reminiscent of the writer's workshop chats popularized by Lucy Calkins and Donald Graves, such student conferences help students build a bridge between their fluent playground speech and the sophisticated writing involved in the translation process.

Michael: So how did you translate these tricky lines by Efraín Huerta : "Me dio el amor en la frente/ con un pedazo de plata."
Verónica (reading from her paper): Love it gave me in the front…
Michael: Hmm. I think you've got most of it, but somehow it sounds a little funny in English. Here, how would you translate this sentence: "La puerta me dio en la cara"?
Verónica: The door hit me in the face.
Michael: Yeah, nice job. You could also say, "The door struck me in the face," and there are some other ways to say it, too. How would you translate this: "La puerta me dio en la frente."
Verónica: The door hit me in the front.
Michael (touching his forehead): No, it's not the front, it's this.
Verónica: Head….?

Michael: Close! This is called *the forehead*.
Verónica: Oh yeah.
Michael: So how would you say, "La puerta me dio en la frente"?
Verónica: The door hit me in the head...in the forehead.
Mike: Yes! Now let's go back to the poem. Notice that it's not the door hitting you in the forehead, it's love. It says, "El amor me dio en la frente."
Verónica: Love hit me in the front...I mean "in the forehead"...Love hit me in the forehead/ with a piece of silver!

The process of arriving at a more precise and satisfying translation is not the same as insisting on the "right answer." Rather, each student is encouraged to forge a correct (or nearly correct) English usage that possesses a special relevance and the vibrancy of personal discovery.

Now let's watch how translation and creative writing begin to be integrated, as John Oliver Simon's students work on a fragment from Neruda's "Pastorale" over the course of two 90-minute sessions of "Fuego de Palabras" (an after-school PIO program in Berkeley). The students first translate in table-teams, then compare their versions line-by-line and argue to consensus over their choices.

Voy copiando montañas, ríos, nubes,
saco mi pluma del bolsillo, anoto
un pájaro que sube
o una araña en su fábrica de seda,
no se me ocurre nada más: soy aire,
aire abierto, donde circula el trigo
y me conmueve un vuelo, la insegura
dirección de una hoja, el redondo
ojo de un pez inmóvil en el lago,
las estatuas que vuelan en las nubes,
las multiplicaciones de la lluvia.

—Pablo Neruda

I go copying mountains, creeks, clouds,
I grab my pen from my pocket, I jot down
a robin soaring in the air
or a spider in its factory of silk,
nothing else occurs to me: I'm air,
open air, where the wheat surrounds me
and I am tempted to fly, the insecure
direction of a leaf, the round eye
of a motionless fish in the lake,
the statues gliding in the clouds,
the multiplications of the rain.

—Translated by 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders

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These highly-motivated and mostly high-skills young poets make a number of interesting choices, capturing the idiomatic "jot down" for *anoto*, and the vivid and specific "robin" for the generic *pájaro*, which in turn is a much more colorful and exciting word than "bird." But battle royal ensues when the girls fall in love with the idea of a "wilting leaf." "Where's the wilting?" John asks, "Show me 'wilting' in the original and we can put it in!"

"Well, we know 'wilting' isn't in the original," answers Lily, a confident fourth grader, "but we think 'wilting leaf' is prettier than just 'leaf.' It's *our* translation, isn't it?" Grudgingly, at last, the girls give up their cherished wilting before the broadside goes to press.

The students' own poems, based on "Pastorale," blossom in many divergent and deeply-felt directions. And, while the poem's opening line would have been no less infectious without the translation process, the quality of the poems reveals how strongly the children absorbed elements of style and theme that a mere reading of the poem would not have elicited. Many of the poems take a transformative leap gleaned from Neruda. East Oakland fifth grader Ana María transports her poem from the cosmos to a humble neighborhood park:

Voy copiando estrellas del cielo
el fuego del sol quemando mi ojo
Voy al parque
Yo veo un burro sentando en un banco
las multiplicaciones hacen una fila
esperando que el burro
las resuelva

—Ana María, 5th grade

I go copying stars from the sky
fire burning my eye from the sun
I go to the park
I see a donkey sitting on the bench
multiplications lining up
waiting for the donkey
to resolve them

—Translated by Talia, 5th grade

Second grader Caroline of Berkeley's Rosa Parks School goes from animals to watercolors before magically climbing up through the ocean to a land of peace. Her poem is subsequently translated by a student three years her senior at Oakland Elementary School:

I go copying swans,
dinosaurs, myself.
I take out my paintbrush
I look outside
I feel like all my dreams are going
to come true.
The ladder I climb
through the peaceful
water of the sea
island of peace
through the valleys and the meadows
God built these things of
peace.

—Caroline, 2nd grade

Voy copiando cisnes,
dinosaurios, yo místna.
Saco mi pincel
miro para afuera
siento que todos mis sueños están volviéndose verdad.
Me subo en la escalera
por el agua
tranquila del mar
isla de la paz
por los valles y las praderas
Dios hizo estas cosas de
la paz.

—Translated by Alejandro, 5th grade

Fifth grader Juan starts with "rosas," the single most over-used cliché in Spanish-language poetry, sees a girl who is "like a rose," goes blank, recognizes the illusion, implies some sort of connection between the illusory and the divine, and while snapping his fingers receives the greatest of all messages: This is a mystery that can't be understood.

Rosas volando en el cielo

Voy copiando rosas volando en el cielo
Las veo con mis ojos abiertos
Vi una niña parecida a una rosa
Tenía una voz como viento calmado
No se me ocurre nada más
La niña era una ilusión
Las rosas la llevaron al cielo

Mientras yo chasqueaba mis dedos
Me dijo algo
Que no entendí

—Juan, 5th grade

Roses Flying in Heaven

I'm copying roses flying in heaven
I see them with my eyes wide open
I saw a girl that looked like a rose
She had a voice like soft wind
Nothing else occurs to me
The girl was an illusion
The roses carried her to heaven
While I snapped my fingers
She whispered something
I couldn't understand

—Translated by the author (

Third grader Angel also begins his poem with an eloquent but well-travelled cliché—“los tesoros de mi corazón” (the treasures of my heart). Watch how Angel “makes it new” as the poem's governing verb mutates from the sun and the moon to the light of death, exploring the notion that the act of copying is similar to its antonym (the act of erasure), before ending with a wild, unbalanced dance:

Las estrellas de mi corazón

Voy copiando los tesoros de mi corazón
que están atrapados en mi soledad.
Voy copiando el sol caliente y la luna
que está muy fría.
Voy copiando la luz de mi muerte.
Voy borrando las palabras que escribimos nosotros.
Voy bailando con una silla viejita que
tiene un pie.

—Angel, 3rd grade

The Stars of My Heart

I am copying the treasures of my heart
that are trapped in my solitude.
I am copying the hot sun and the moon
that is too cold.
I am copying the light of my death.
I am erasing the words that we wrote.
I am dancing with an old chair that
has one leg.

—Translated by Gabriel, 3rd grade

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In this era of non-stop testing tyranny, one of the most essential lessons that any good writing program can convey is that in poetry—and in PIO's case, translation, too—there is no one right answer but rather a multiplicity of options. We encourage divergent thinking by asking students to compare and defend their translations of the same poem. Look how a visionary fable by Jorge Luján (Argentina/Mexico, 1943–) is semantically altered by two decidedly different student interpretations.

El gallo

El gallo abre su pico y sale el sol
El sol abre su mano y nace el día
El día se asombra cuando la noche
tiende su capa y la colma de estrellas
para que coma el gallo
y vuelva transparente
al nuevo día.

—Jorge Luján

The Rooster

The rooster opens his beak and the sun comes out
The sun opens his hand and the day is born
The day is amazed when the night
unfolds his cape and fills the sky with stars
so the rooster can eat
and turn transparent
to the new day.

—Translated by Maya, 2nd grade

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The Rooster

The rooster opens his beak and out comes the sun
The sun opens his hand and the day is born
The day is astonished when the night
lays down his cape and fills it with stars
so the rooster can eat
and make the new day
transparent.

—Translated by Precious & Erica, 5th graders

Do we like the straightforward "the sun comes out" or the inverted "out comes the sun"? "Amazed" or "astonished" for *se asombra*? Does the night unfold his cape or lay it down? Is it the night that turns transparent or the new day? Which of the last extended lines has more verve? There are no right answers to these questions! But as students argue, often passionately, about such issues, they become participants in the age-old but still sprightly dialogue of the literary translation tradition.

Typically, we encourage students to pair up and translate each other's poems, thus sparking further dialogue. Frequently, a student will disagree with the way a translation of his/her poem is rendered. This is the kind of disagreement we like! It's not uncommon for students to come to the PIO instructor complaining that a certain part of a poem they're translating "doesn't make sense." "Well," we say, "ask the author what it means. You can't do that with Neruda, since he's dead, but you *can* do it with this poet." There is a good deal of cross-pollination between poet and translator—clarification of the meaning in the English translation frequently leads to an illuminating revision of the original.

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We have found that translation offers fresh approaches to the magical nature of that oft-misunderstood poetic miniature, the haiku. Mexican poet José Juan Tablada went to Japan on a diplomatic assignment in 1900, was enchanted by Japanese poetry, and consequently became the first foreigner to write a haiku in a language other than Japanese. His graceful haiku spawned a vital Spanish-language tradition in which syllables are rarely counted but the first and third lines often rhyme:

Tierno saúz
casi oro, casi ámbar,
casi luz...

—José Juan Tablada (Mexico, 1871-1945)

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Tender willow tree
almost gold, almost amber,
almost light…

—Translated by Tania, 3rd grade

Argentinian-Mexican poet Jorge Luján adds an ironic twist to his haiku:

¿Viste, pescado?
el mar sigue su danza
y tú enlatado

—Jorge Luján (1943–)

Now look, fish:
the ocean continues with its dance
and you're in a can

—Translated by Ivan, 3rd grade

A PIO haiku workshop becomes a wonderful matrix of languages as our students translate Spanish-language haiku into English as well as haiku written in English (some of which were previously translated from Japanese!) into Spanish. When it comes time to write their own haiku, we try to take the kids outdoors in order to emphasize that haiku are not merely about nature, they are in and of it. Whether they are combing through Berkeley's jungle-like school gardens or watching the palateros with tingling bells on their refrigerated carts pass by Josefina de la Cruz Park, we find that nature, even urban nature, has a better chance of finding its way to the children's senses and onto their pages outside of the schoolroom. These haiku give a sense of the vivid insouciance with which the children, informed by their immersion in the great tradition, greet the universe.

el sol nos alumbra
¿pero quién ilumina
el sol?

—Juan Carlos, 5th grade

the sun shines
but who shines
on the sun?

—Translated by Alan, 4th grade

Creo que todos
están cansados
menos las hormigas

—Lily, 2nd grade

I think
that everybody is tired
except the ants!

—Translated by Clarissa, 4th grade

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In the last year, we've carried the PIO idea one step further by initiating a pilot program in Chinese. Translating into English from Chinese is more difficult than from Spanish because the languages are so different that even in the best English rendering much of the remarkable craft of the original Chinese is lost. There are no words in Chinese that sound the same as in English, they are not expressed in a phonetic alphabet, and Chinese omits such "conveniences" as pronouns, tenses, and articles. It is the context of the poem that anchors the verbs, not a word like "he" or "she." This means that the initial comprehension and the fleshing out of historical context and cultural cues are critically important in helping students create a valid translation. On the other hand, the ambiguity of Chinese leaves room for a great variety of strong English versions. Students sweat with the difficulty of the task, but they also become inspired by the freedom to elaborate their own spin.

While none of our PIO instructors are fluent in Chinese, we are able to collaborate with Chinese teachers and draw upon such rich resources as Greg Whincup's *The Heart of Chinese Poetry* (Doubleday, 1987). Whincup's compilation provides character-by-character analysis and much-needed historical background, which leave us better informed than Ezra Pound was almost a century ago when he worked on his approximate translations for *Cathay*!

Unlike our work with Spanish bilingual students, few of the two-way immersion students we are working with seem to have the confidence to compose their own poems in Chinese. It may be that this phase of the program must await an instructor fluent in Chinese whose skills can carry the children across this gap. For now, let's take a closer look at the Chinese-English translation process we've developed.

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春望

國破山河在
城春草木深
感時花濺淚
恨別鳥驚心
烽火連三月
家書抵萬金
白首搔更短
渾欲不勝簪

—Du Fu (Tang Dynasty, 757 A.D.)

Read from top to bottom and right to left, this classic poem by Du Fu is eight lines long. The first line consists of five ideographs that Whincup transcribes as:

NATION BROKEN, MOUNTAIN, RIVERS REMAIN.

Whincup renders the third line as:

FEEL TIME, FLOWERS SPRINKLE TEARS.

The PIO instructor's job is to help students fashion such starkly juxtaposed images into integral lines of English poetry. The lack of ligaments between the characters compels the students to do the work of relation. As we work with the class as a group on a single line of the transcription, we look for as many accurate and good-sounding translations as possible:

The nation is broken, but mountains and rivers remain.
The country has been broken, the rivers and mountains remain.
The nation is destroyed/ rivers and mountains still run.

In the translations below, Stephanie supplies a political context to the first half of the opening line, while Maria brings a breath of natural awareness to the second half. In the third line, Stephanie has chosen to make the flowers the weepers; Maria, with equal justification, puts the tears in the eyes of the poet. Their finished translations of this ancient text read as if they had been penned by a citizen of modern-day Iraq or Darfur.

The kingdom is broken up, only the mountains and rivers are left
untouched. Although the city is in spring with plentiful grass and woods,
the atmosphere is sad enough to make a flower cry,
and the sound of birds is frightening.
The fires of war have been raging for four months,

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letters from loved ones are now priceless
and the hair on my head grows so white and thin from scratching
that the hat pin doesn't hold.

—*Translated by Stephanie, 8th grade*

The country is broken but the mountains and rivers still run.
It is spring in the city, trees and grass grow deep;
at the sight of flowers my heart breaks,
listening to the birds sing makes me want to cry.
The war seems like it has been going on forever;
letters from home are worth gold to me,
my hair is white and falling out,
so even my hat pin won't hold.

—*Translated by Maria, 7th grade*

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"What did you learn from Poetry Inside Out?" fifth-grade teacher María Lourdes González asked her class at Downer Elementary School in San Pablo.

"We learned," they informed her (in Spanish), "to listen to thoughts with our heart, to know our feelings and dream of life, to feel the air of the eternal sky with my writing, to open the doors of my soul and dream with love, to write with the letters of life, the feelings of love and the colors of the sea, to know pain, anguish, and the feelings of the flavor of life and the sun."

To which, Mrs. González added, "I learned to know the face of my students."

These comments transcend the category of "feedback." They read like poems in their own right or a translation of Francisco Alarcón's hopeful lines—

may our mouths
speak
our true faces
and hearts.

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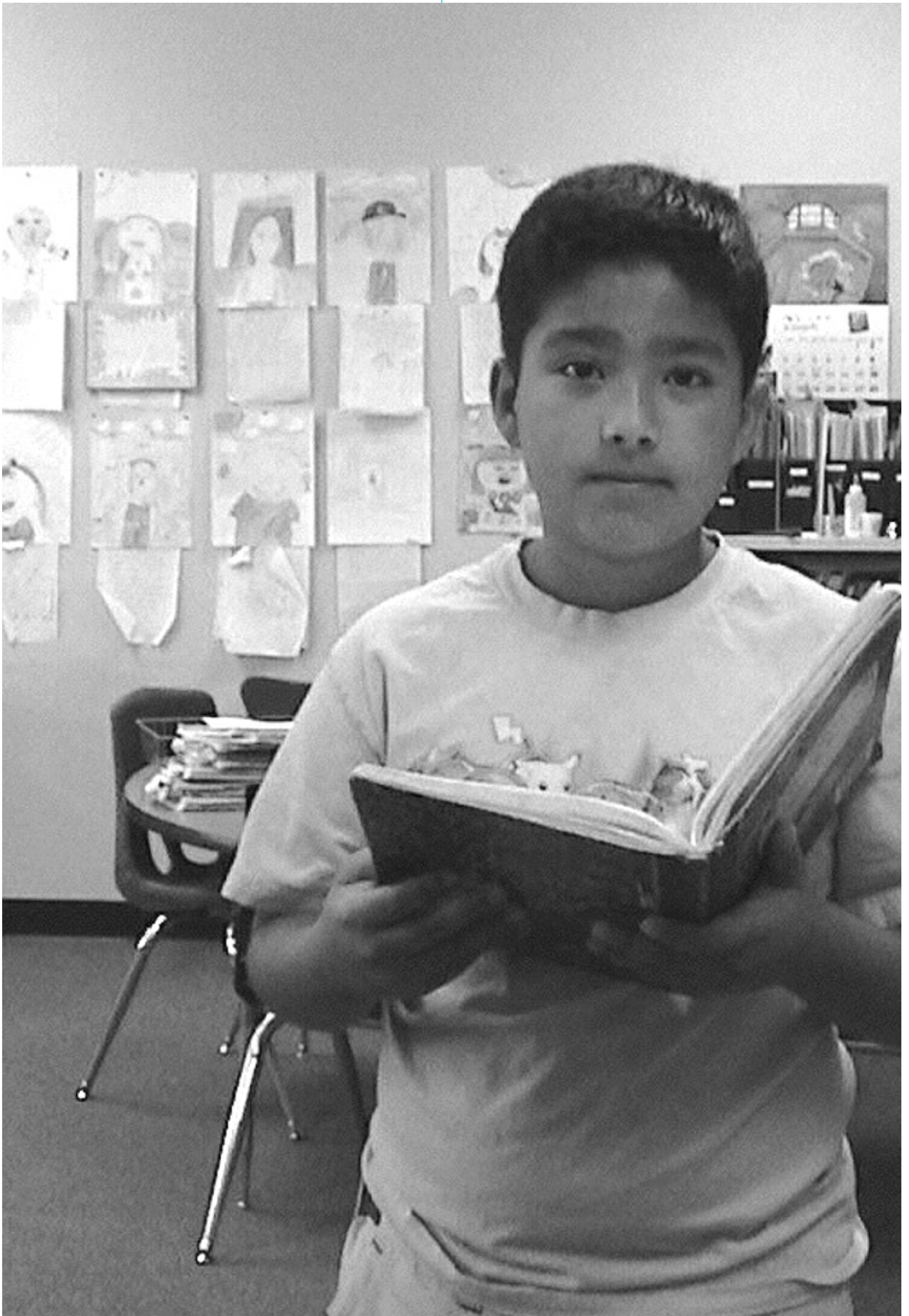

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