

END NOTE

A Poetry Moment

Robert Hass Explores Poetry and Ecology with Young Students at Poets House

ROBERT HIRSCHFIELD

INSIDE THE GLASS HOUSE that is Poets House, Robert Hass was talking to children in New York about poetry and water: “Water is a good subject for poetry because water is the source of life. The former poet laureate, with a few locks of white hair falling gently over his forehead, began by surprising the children with an amazing fact. It was the kind of fact that leaves a lot of space around it because it is amazing. Enough space to fit a poem into. “Only one percent of all of our water is fresh water, and one third of that is locked up in ice. The other ninety-nine percent is ocean.” Hass told the children that one day they would be responsible for managing their water, for managing their world. He told them of the book project, *River of Words* (www.riverofwords.org), that he and his friends began fifteen years ago in Berkeley, California, where it is still located.

“What we wanted to do was to have kids in school make art and write poetry about water and nature that we would publish.”

“You mean about the water cycle?” a boy inter-

jected. “How water gets to the states?”

“Yes. Or just splashing around in it. Or standing out in the rain with your face looking up into it.”

The poet suggested that they read together a few of the poems that appeared in *River of Words*. The poem, “Fish,” was written by nine-year-old Ella Schofer-Wulf.

Swimming in the river
Curving her small shiny body
Like shimmering stars swimming back
Into the deep sea
Being the fish of joy.

“Do you like that?” Hass asked. The kids all nodded, and he repeated the line: *Being the fish of joy*, including everyone present, with each word, in the longing to be that fish.

On every pencil in Poets House is written a haiku. Each of the haikus is translated by Robert Hass. (“A Haiku is Japanese for a short poem,” he said.) There were so many he could have read that day. Like this one by Issa:

Mosquito at my ear—
does it think
I'm deaf

Robert Hirschfield is a New York-based freelance writer whose work appears in In These Times, Sojourners, The Forward, Outlook (an Indian news magazine), and The Jerusalem Report, for which he reviews books of poetry. Many of his writing hours are spent at Poets House, which he is happy to feature in this story.

Instead he read, with the children repeating after him, a haiku from *River of Words* by the sixteen-year-old poet, Oona Lyons:

I have used up all
of my river
Nothing is left but the stones.

The silence after the haiku was part of the haiku. Not just the silence of so much space around so few words, but the way the silence gently held the troubling thought of one's own river being used up, turned into dry stones.

Hass invited the children to step outside into the rock garden and watch the flow of the water between the rocks and write a poem. The rocks, he said, were brought down from Cattaraugus County in upstate New York, where New York City's water comes from.

He told the children, "You should take the time to look at rocks, because in rocks is the whole history of time."

But the poems the students read when they came back in were more about the movement of water than the mystery of rock. Tiana, a girl in her early teens, recited:

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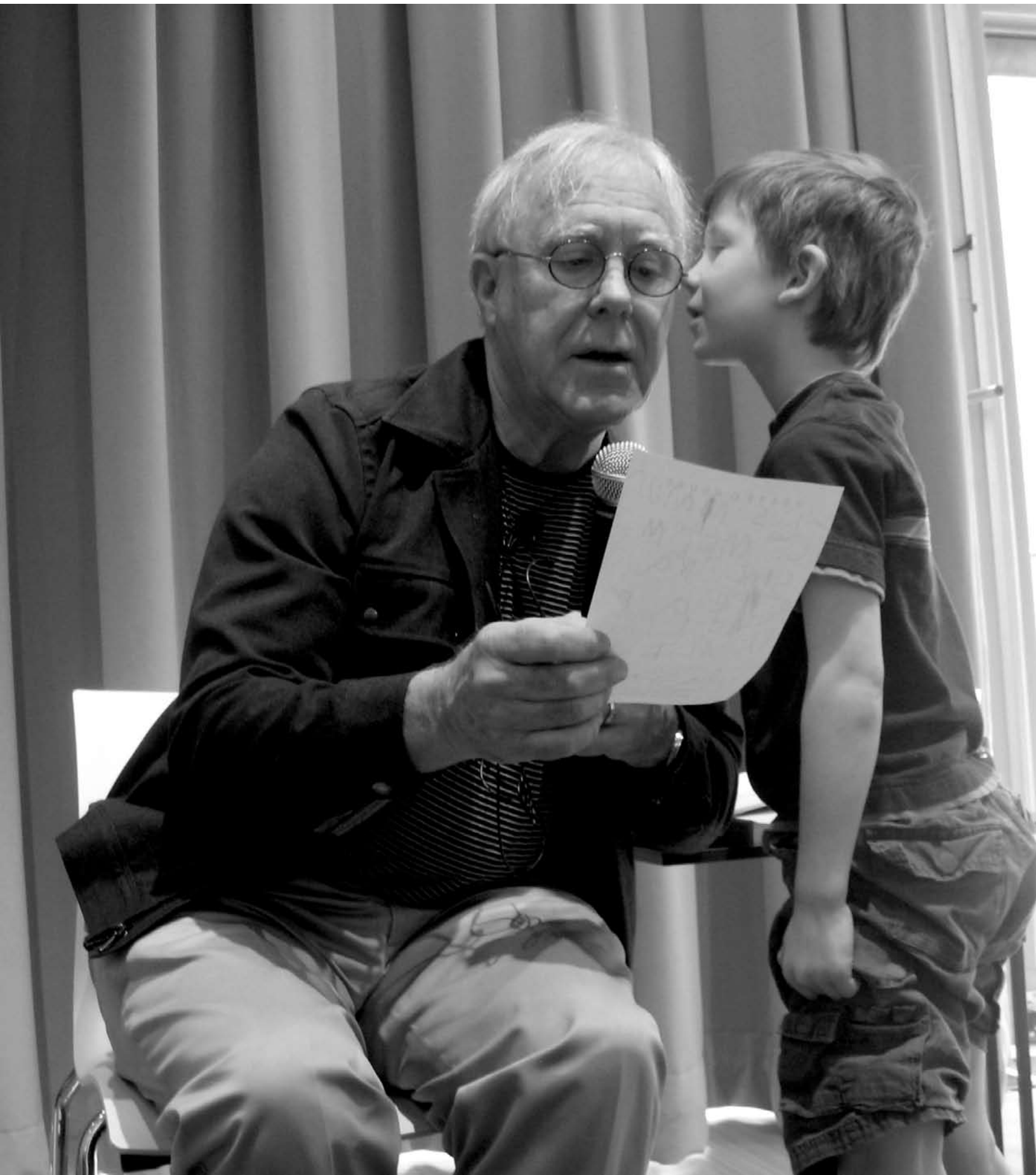
Blue blue river
Flowing down my mind.
Blue blue birdie
Going round my time.

"You know what I like about that: '*Blue blue river going down my mind*'?" Hass said. "Water is like thoughts. Water flows, and thoughts flow through you like water."

Nathaniel, who was maybe ten, wrote this:

Why does water rush?
Is it in a hurry?
The sun does not get anywhere.
Why does water rush?

The boom of laughter, with its tail of light, seemed to startle Nathaniel. How was he to know he had created a fresh poetry moment? 🤔



One of Hass' young students at Poets House gives Hass some tips about how he would like his poem to be read.
Photo by Robert Hirschfield.