



Photograph by Mauro Rodrigues



Writing through Trauma

Introduction

SUSAN KARWOSKA

The news from Newtown, Connecticut, on December 14 was the stuff of nightmares: Twenty first-graders and six teachers gunned down in an elementary school. We know—or should know by now—that this kind of senseless violence can happen anywhere, but it still shocks. We send writers into schools to teach the art and craft of making meaning in poems, stories, essays, and plays. It is a mission undergirded by hope, and it is the opposite of what happened at Sandy Hook Elementary School that grim day.

And not just at Sandy Hook. Sean Thomas Dougherty, a teacher and poet we contacted for this issue, described the routine violence he's witnessed in his students' lives: "For years," he writes, "I taught poetry in the Paterson, New Jersey, school district. Nearly every school I visited would hear 'my brother was shot last week' or 'this poem is for my sister who was shot outside our house.' Teaching in Detroit, I asked a class how many knew someone who was killed. Four out of fourteen students raised their hands. The streets are full of flowers and shrines." These acts of violence rarely make the evening news, nor do the countless other traumas our students face from illness, poverty, displacement, war, and natural disasters.

What can we, as teaching artists, offer in the face of tragedy? Can writing provide any solace? And how do we respond to the demands placed on us by such occurrences?

Susan Karwoska is the editor of Teachers & Writers Magazine. She was recently awarded a New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) fellowship and a residency at the Ucross Foundation for her novel-in-progress.

In an article about teaching after 9/11, Robert E. Probst writes "Stories will save us, if anything will."¹ Telling our stories, he says, allows us to make sense of the senseless. We can't control what happens to us, but we can show our students that by putting it into words, we get to say what it means.

We also get to add our voices to those advocating for change. As G. Lynn Nelson wrote in an article responding to the Columbine shootings, "Language is both the source of much violence in our society—and its potential cure."²

In the following pages, teaching artists across the country describe their experiences working with children and adults who have lived through trauma: students who have lost a loved one to violence, refugees who have fled war, children in a hospice and in a pediatric cancer ward, US veterans back from war, teenage girls in a writing workshop in Haiti after the earthquake, and fourth-graders in Texas reaching out to their fellow students in Newtown, among others. Their stories are an education in, as one writer here puts it, "how to be fierce, how to hold on to happiness in a broken world." 🍷

For more information on Writing through Trauma visit us online at www.twc.com/magazine.

1 from "Difficult Days and Difficult Texts" by Robert E. Probst (*Voices from the Middle*, Vol. 9, No. 2, December 2001)

2 from "Warriors with Words: Toward a Post-Columbine Writing Curriculum" by G. Lynn Nelson (*English Journal*; May 2000)