

Playing On and Off the Page

Teaching Students to Write Without Fear

KAREN BENKE

ZOE ARRIVES EVERY OTHER TUESDAY. We began writing together when she was nine and had an anxiety of talking in front of others. Her parents took her out of public school and never looked back. I'm the creative writing component to a home school curriculum that includes Reading, Math, Science, 4-H and... Trapeze Arts. (Is it too late to be home-schooled?) Today Zoe's eyes match the sky. She's carrying a large cardboard box. At my door, she slips off her shoes, crosses the room, and places the box in front of me. She grins and lifts the lid. Inside, peeping up, are three baby chicks.

"They hatched," she exclaims. This is how I'm introduced to Pip, Blue Moon, and Head-Wig.

I've never met or held a live chicken before so Zoe teaches me. She's patient with my beginner's hands. Leaning down, she places Blue Moon in my care. A tiny heart beats against my palms. "They can be feisty," she warns, asking the sisters to settle down so we can write.

"I know, we'll write haiku. One for each of them," she says.

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This is how it goes with Zoe. She takes the lead. I hold the space of the room. She inspires herself with leaps and turns of poem-making. I watch and listen. In addition to her long-lined prose poems—one that spanned the length of my table—she's writing a never-ending story about an island of dogs ruled by a Standard Poodle named Annie. Today she's intrigued with the brevity of haiku's short line, long line, short line order that paints pictures inside her mind:

Three blue chickens

On Karen's dining table—
Cat Clive, waiting.

Blue Moon almost escapes
The box lid's folded down—
Inside, small chirps.

Pip is pecking Headwig:
Wake up, sister Chicken!
The day has begun.

I remind Zoe what my teacher, Jane Hirshfield, used to say—how it's easier to set about writing a dozen rather than just one. To write one is just too hard. So we laugh and write one for Clive, one for Annie, and a few for Zoe's brother who isn't sure he likes poetry.

As Zoe packs up to leave, I ask if she'll dedicate her book to the Silky Sisters. "Oh, I don't know," she

giggles. “—maybe.” Then the front door closes and I return to the cat, whispering my praise that he didn’t eat any of the little girl’s chickens.

On Wednesday, Sam arrives. We wrote together a couple of years ago during a workshop in fifth grade. Today’s our first one-on-one. His mom made the appointment after he confided that, “I write all the time, in my head; I just can’t get what’s in there on the page.”

Sam and I catch up, talk middle school; all the homework, his interests (friends, rap music, travel). Between his imagination and the page, his words hover. I remember him from fifth grade—back row, wide smile—how his jumbled-up images found soft places to land. He wasn’t afraid to set himself free within the container of a poem. Today, when the conversation turns to the subject of essays, he groans. I recognize his frustration. The five paragraphs. The structure. The comparison contrast. His mind doesn’t work this way. He’s desperate. He wonders how to write for someone who holds the power of a grade his head. I suggest we play with bubbles.

We take out a page covered with large, medium, small circles. Sam’s been assigned that ubiquitous essay: what he did for summer vacation. He groans. (I groan.) “What about writing what you didn’t do, but imagined yourself doing, super-hero like?” I ask. He laughs, “Yeah, sure, that’d be fun... but she’d grade me down.”

We sit above the bubbles. Sam finds a pen he likes the grip of. I tell him he’s the King of the Page. He can write in fragments, in broken bits of thought. He gets to answer only the questions he feels like answering. He can tell me to get lost off if he wants. His answers can be long, short, thick and chewy. He’s searching for the spark. The question that might ignite something hidden, something to entice him to want to write outside a bubble and keep writing out to the horizon. He’s not sure. But he’s willing to give it a try. We forget about correct spelling and commas. We send away the punctuation police. Sam lingers in *France* where he went to watch Lance ride his

last Tour; he licks his lips dashing out words: *s’mores*, *campfire*; *tent*; *Dad*. The bubbles fill fast. But he wants to write a poem, not an essay. I remind him that essays like *See’s* chocolates can have soft centers, too. “Yeah, but getting lost in a poem’s more fun.”

Among the Fog

SAM

There could be a black current of fish,
A fifth-grader,
A man sitting on a chair,
Good news; bad news
Or a snake coiling into a ball
Lost like me among the fog.

On Thursday, Alex arrives. Alex is ten and knows the names for hundreds of birds. He likes pantoums and structure, adjusts his glasses often, and offers me a play by play on his last little league game.

We spill a bag of word tickets on the table where two days ago Zoe’s chicks sat. Hundreds of words taped to orange Admit One tickets tumble out. The kind of tickets Alex thinks I’ve saved from going to the movies. “But wait,” he says, “how could someone see so many movies?” I shrug and keep him guessing. On the roof beneath us, a few crows arrive. I expect them now. The birds know Alex is here. He’s one of them. We play with word tickets; show each other our favorites. His include: *double-header*; *suicide squeeze*; *home-run-bitter*. We talk without looking at each other. Alex can be shy. He taps his pencil in a rhythmic beat on the table to relax. He wants to make sure he’s doing this poem thing right. He finds a ticket that says: “To Watch in Secret” and uses it for a title. His poem will be about a Canadian Warbler. It will be about Alex wishing he could know what it *feels* like to *be* a Canadian Warbler. Alex can be hard on himself. Often he erases what he has just written. Today he opens his notebook and shares three sentences: “Erasing is an element of fear. Not erasing, an element of fearlessness. Today I will not erase.” I tell him he’s brave.

I tell them. “Even if you only write *one* question that wows you today, you can feel lucky.” This takes the pressure off. Some students are already on their fifth question; others look around the room and slowly begin. “It’s the last day of school,” Mrs. A. reminds them. “No one has to turn anything in. Go for it.”

Pretty soon they’re all writing, having slipped into that silent scribbled spell where images and magic form. Pablo Neruda in the room, helping us move farther into the dreaming-doodling sides of ourselves. We’re getting comfortable with the power of not knowing, before resurfacing to read our poems:

KATRINA

If my life travels too fast,
will it get a speeding ticket too?

SAMUEL

What puts people in a twilight mood—
Is it the humble past or the dark future?

KENDALL

Do scrambled-up memories fall into extinct
volcanoes?
Do brave men cry?

LINCOLN

Why do mocking birds mock? Is it because they
have no true self?
Do they need guidance in a sea of doubt?

MADDIE

Is the stone of my expanding life ever going to
grow hard?
Are the woods of my childhood a sacred memory?

More students want to read than there’s time for. The bell rings. The hour’s up. It’s on to P.E. We file out together, past the empty box of doughnuts and end-of-year projects, into the June sunlight. Walking among them, I listen to these almost seventh graders talk about how much they *love* their question poems—which is why we bother to pay attention to ourselves and our expanding winged lives in the first place. 🙄