

📅 40th Anniversary

# The Unbroken Circle

MARK STATMAN

I STARTED WORKING WITH TEACHERS & WRITERS IN SEPTEMBER OF 1985. I had been living for the previous two and a half years in the Virginia Piedmont and had been exchanging notes with Ron Padgett about a novel I was working on. At one point I let him know my wife Katherine and I were planning on moving back to New York, that I was going to need to make some money, and did he think the Collaborative was the place for me?

Ron wrote back that he didn't think there would be any residencies available but he sent along the application form anyway. I remember finding one of the questions amusing, asking one to talk about the influence of Kenneth Koch on one's teaching. I wrote that I had nothing to say on that but a lot to say about Kenneth from the viewpoint of a student, how I was a graduate of the writing-in-the-schools generation that he had helped create.

A few weeks later, and a few weeks before our move back, I received a letter from T&W Director Nancy Larson Shapiro inviting me in for an interview, that there might be some work.

And work there was. I was a busy T&W artist—in one ten-year stretch, I estimate I worked between eighty and 120 days a year in the schools, in locations as varied as Long Island, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, Manhattan, Westchester, Connecticut, and New Jersey. Wherever they sent me, whenever I had the time, I went. I loved the work, the exhilaration, the joy of walking into a school as “Mark the Poet,” the joy and exhilaration of reading and hearing all the poetry that emerged.

Sometimes, though, I think that what mattered most to me wasn't the work, the delight and challenge of it, but the fact that from the first day I walked into the T&W office at 5 Union Square West, getting off at the fifth floor, I found I was coming into a community of artist/teachers who loved the work as much as I did, who were passionate and opinionated, sometimes a little crazy, but always wanting to talk: this is what I did today, a sheaf of papers, look at what the kids wrote.

I'll play a game here—based on Joe Brainard's poem, “I Remember”—an exercise I used many times with my students:

I remember an artist meeting when Ron Padgett read from his teaching diaries and thinking how I needed to start keeping a diary, I wanted to write a book (and eventually did, *Listener in the Snow*).

I said how I liked to think how what we did was subversive, poets-in-the-schools, and Kurt turned to me and said, laughing, but pointedly, that no we weren't the subversives, the subversives were the ones who thought poetry didn't belong.

I remember an artist meeting when Bernadette Mayer and I were presenting on collaborative teaching and Bernadette turned and punched me (hard) in front of everyone because how could I say what I had just said (and can I even now remember what that was?).


I remember one night after a reading at the St. Marks Poetry Project going out with some people and Larry Fagin telling me in that deep voice of his that because he was a Buddhist if I shot him he wouldn't feel it, thinking how crazy he was and then only a few weeks later at the Hunter College Elementary School where we were both teaching he gave me one of the best pieces of advice about teaching I've ever received: if it isn't working, don't do it.

I remember walking down an East Harlem street with Kurt Lamkin, and I said how I liked to think that what we did was subversive, poets-in-the-schools, and Kurt turned to me and said, laughing, but pointedly, that no we weren't the subversives, the subversives were the ones who thought poetry didn't belong.

I remember former T&W Director Nancy Shapiro's desk, piled so high with papers you didn't even know if she was there, but if she was, then teaching and politics were the conversation.

I remember the time poet and former T&W Publications Director Chris Edgar asked, after reading a wonderful poem by fifth-grader Junior Griffiths, if that wasn't the perfect name for the next Mets shortstop.

I remember so many names and conversations, stories and faces: poet and photographer Wayne Providence (rest in peace), poet and painter Julie Patton, poets Christian McEwen (my sister in poetry) and Harry Greenberg, playwright Daniel Judah Sklar, novelists Matt Sharpe, Sam Swope, Stephen O'Connor.

When I arrived as a rookie in 1984 there were Alan Ziegler, Meredith Sue Willis, Ron—people who seemed giants, who just knew what to do when for me at the time it all seemed fumble and tumble and teaching on the go. Twenty-one years later, in September 2006, Program Director Jeffrey Rosales asked me to speak at the opening artist meeting in the then newly opened current space. He introduced me as one of the giants. No longer an active teaching artist, I felt humbled. I thought about how the straight line (of time) and the wonderful circle (of T&W) continue on unbroken. 

*Mark Statman's writing has appeared in numerous publications, including Tin House, Subtropics, Hanging Loose, The Hat, upstreet, Bayou, and conduit, with work forthcoming in Florida Quarterly and APR. His translation with Pablo Medina of Federico Garcia Lorca's Poet in New York was published by Grove in January 2008. He is the author of Listener in the Snow, and, with Christian McEwen, edited The Alphabet of the Trees: A Guide to Nature Writing. A recipient of awards from the NEA and the National Writers Project, Statman is an Associate Professor of writing at Eugene Lang College of The New School.*

*The idea of teaching writing seems very peculiar to some people. They're under the impression that you can teach math—the same people!—whereas writing is language, something you've been doing all your life. . . .*

*So the idea of teaching writing: what did it mean, finally? For some people it meant that as a teacher you had to make great writers: either a student becomes a great writer, or what's the point in teaching writing?*

*Whereas the person who believes that you can teach math never thinks about whether or not the idea is to make a great mathematician. Nor does the history teacher believe that it is essential, in order to be an honorable teacher of history, to produce a great or famous historian. In a way, they are right about what they are doing: they want to produce women and men who love history, or math, or chemistry, and would understand what they (the teachers) are doing, and love and maybe understand the world a little better.*

*Our idea was that children—by writing, by putting down words, by reading, by beginning to love literature, by the inventiveness of listening to one another—could begin to understand the world better and begin to make a better world for themselves. That always seemed to me such a natural idea that I've never understood why it took so much aggressiveness and so much time to get it started!*

**— Grace Paley, speaking at T&W's annual Educating the Imagination Forum, Spring 1995**

