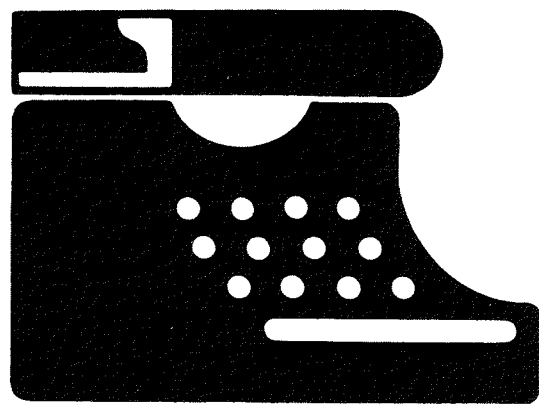


Teachers & Writers



Bi-Monthly • September-October 1990

Vol. 22, No. 1

BLAZING PENCILS

Writing Fiction in Junior High School

by Meredith Sue Willis

I REMEMBER THE FIRST THING I EVER wrote. I made it up, but it seemed totally real to me. Actually, there wasn't much writing in it because it was a comic book. I could write only two words, *hi* and *hay*, but I meant *hey* the way you say *hey* to your friend instead of *hay* for horses. My comic book was very exciting to me. The characters were fighting and riding horses and falling off a very dangerous cliff.

I showed it to my father, who was probably busy doing something else, and he said, "That's nice, but why do the people say 'Hay' and 'Hi'?" I realized that he *didn't even know about the cliff*. He wasn't getting any of the story, any of the excitement that was in my mind. For the first time I understood that when you are writing, you have to find words to let the reader know what is in your mind.

One of the best ways to do this is through sense details. The reason the senses work so well in writing is that most of us can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. Even people lacking one or two senses have the other ones.

MEREDITH SUE WILLIS's article is adapted from her *Blazing Pencils: A Guide to Writing Fiction & Essays*, a book she wrote for junior high school students and which T&W has just published. Her *Personal Fiction Writing* is also available from T&W.

If I tell you I saw a beautiful car, for example, you might or might not believe me. If we are best friends and we have talked for hours about cars, you might go along with my opinion. But if I am a stranger—if I am older than you, or from a different part of the country—how can I make you know what I mean by beautiful? I do it with sense details. I tell you the car is bright lipstick red with metallic flakes in it, and it has chrome wheels and a tiny black racing stripe, and when you sit in it, the smell of leather fills your nose, and you hear the powerful roar of the engine.

You may or may not agree with me that it is a beautiful car, but at least we know what we're talking about. I have begun to put what I experienced into words that mean something to you.

- Close your eyes and slowly, in your imagination, recreate a place you have been. Imagine yourself there. Start with sounds. Is it noisy there? Is there music? Are people talking? Do you hear birds? Is there a sound of water? In your imagination, take

IN THIS ISSUE

1 Blazing Pencils
by Meredith Sue Willis

7 I'll Carry You Away to Sing
with the Train, Maria
by Kenneth Koch

a deep breath and breathe in the air of the place. What odors does it have? Can you smell something cooking? Is there something to taste? In your imagination, feel the air of the place. Is there a breeze? Is it hot or cold? Touch some things with your fingers: are there soft things, hard, feathery? Finally, in your imagination, look around the place. Use your senses to explore the place as long as you want.

- In your idea journal, or on a piece of paper, write as much as you can of what you experienced with your eyes closed. Try to get all five senses in, but don't worry if there's no sense of taste. Tell it however you'd like ("In my place. . ." or "I looked around me. . ." or "First I heard the sound of. . ." or whatever). Make it as long or short as you'd like, and get in as many different sense impressions as you can.

Example

The dunes were covered by a quilt of brilliant white snow that had fallen the night before. Sticking up from beneath it were a few clumps of tall, thin grass. They trembled violently in the wind, but remained standing because of the bolstering snow. The snow crunched under my feet as I walked down the dune, and a few flakes clung tenaciously to my socks. . . the sea lashed at the beach like a hungry lion. Foam-capped, greenish-grey waves threw themselves at the shore and then trailed slowly back to the sea.

I stopped and faced the ocean. Eagerly, I breathed in the sharp, salty odor of the ocean. As a wave crashed against the sand with a sound of muffled thunder, a spray of seawater hit my face and covered my lips with bitter-tasting salt.

A lone sea gull was soaring gracefully in the soft blue sky, his high-pitched flute-like calls piercing the air.

I turned back to the dunes and again climbed to the top of them. Once there, I took a final glimpse at the scene, and then ran back to the welcoming lights of the house.

—Carissa Bielamowicz, 8th grade



(The hand symbol means you should set this aside and write.)

- Do a couple of these places, perhaps one ordinary place, one special place, or one you really hate. Each time, though, start by closing your eyes and imagining yourself in the place.
- Write a sense description of a place where you used to live, or of the first time you visited a new place.

Example

I opened the door to our family's old apartment. I looked around. It was empty, nothing but the air, no toys on the floor, no furniture or boxes, no nothing. I went to my old room. I looked around my room. There were no posters of TV stars or piles of stuffed animals. There were just two little cactus plants I'd left for the new people who were going to move into the apartment. I listened real hard. Besides the traffic and the honking and yelling people, all was quiet. My mom wasn't complaining about anything because there wasn't anything to complain about, no toys on the floor or dishes to be done. I couldn't go to sleep because there was no furniture or beds. There were only blank white walls. I felt very, very bad. I was moving from the city I loved so much.

—Amy Reiter, 6th grade

- Try taking your idea journal or a little notepad to a real place—a park bench, a lounge chair in your back yard, a table in a restaurant, or on a bus or train. This time, instead of closing your eyes and imagining, observe what is actually around you, using each of your senses in turn.



- Write descriptions of five different places on five different days. Use any of the ideas above (closing your eyes, going to a real place, one you like, one you hate, etc.). Try places like a restaurant, a student hang-out, a church, a synagogue, a museum, a park, the beach, the town garbage dump, your favorite movie theater, your friend's room, the school gymnasium or playing field, a sports arena, etc. The place doesn't matter—what matters is using your senses to write about it.



You can make your place description longer by writing it as a *portrait*. You do this by adding more about it, information as well as sense impressions. I often do this kind of writing in a letter to a friend—especially if I have just visited a new place and want my friend to have some idea of what it was like. There is a whole type of article that does this in travel magazines and travel sections of newspapers. Explorers and other travelers sometimes write whole books to describe their experience of places.

Here is a place description from a book that started out as letters from a man in prison to his lawyer. The writer is trying to give a person who has never been in jail an idea of what it is like:

Usually, by the time I finish my calisthenics, the trustee (we call him tier tender, or keyman) comes by

and fills my little bucket with hot water. We don't have hot running water ourselves. Each cell has a small sink with a cold-water tap, a bed, a locker, a shelf or two along the wall, and a commode. The trustee has a big bucket, with a long spout like the ones people use to water their flowers, only without the sprinkler. He pokes the spout through the bars and pours you about a gallon of hot water. My cell door doesn't have bars on it; it is a solid slab of steel with fifty-eight holes in it about the size of a half dollar, and a slot in the center, at eye level, about an inch wide and five inches long. The trustee sticks the spout through one of the little holes and pours my hot water, and in the evenings the guard slides my mail in to me through the slot. Through the same slot the convicts pass newspapers, books, candy, and cigarettes to one another.

—Eldridge Cleaver

- Try writing a portrait of a place.



PLACES FOR FICTION

Places are not only subjects for profiles, they are also essential building blocks of fiction writing. I've already asked you to close your eyes and pretend to be in a real place using each of your five senses. You can also use your senses to imagine a place you've never been, or you can start with a real place and change it. This is one of the best ways I know to get an idea for a story.

Several of my stories and one of my novels started with places. My novel *Higher Ground* began after I took a walk in the country with my mother and aunt. They were talking as fast as their mouths would work: they used to walk here, meet their friends here, go swimming in this old creek.

"Who lived in that house?" I asked, pointing at an empty shack up on the hill. They didn't know, and while they talked, I wandered up to the house.

It was not one of your haunted mansions; it had never been much more than a shack. The porch was broken down, and I stepped over missing boards to look in the windows. There was a horribly stained sink with all the plumbing exposed, and some kind of animal had made a nest in the corner. I heard a door swinging and creaking somewhere.

I started wondering to myself: who had lived here? What would it be like to live in a place like this with no neighbors and a long walk to the main road? It reminded me of a brother and sister from out in the country that I went to high school with.

As I walked back down the hill, I started playing "What If?" and I imagined that the brother and

sister I used to know had lived in this house. What if, instead of only knowing them a little, I had gotten to know them well? What if I had once been with them in that very shack of a house? What would we have said, what would have happened? I observed the old house; I remembered; I made some things up. That is how I got the idea for my novel:

Ahead of me was a weather-gray house with a porch. On one side, like crosses with their tops knocked off, were two clothesline poles. Only the roof of the barn was visible as the hill started down again.

Dogs barked, and a person came out on the porch and stood in the shadows. . . .

Seven Steps to a Finished Story: Step One

Get yourself in a good imagining mood. Choose a comfortable spot: your favorite chair, park bench, or the back seat of the family car on a long trip (I used to make up a lot of stories there). Close your eyes, and imagine you're in a place. This can either be a real place or a made-up one, or a place that is partly real and partly made up.

Just as you used all your senses to explore a real place, now use all your senses to imagine this made-up place. People talking? Birds? Music? Sound of water? Breathe in the air of the place. Cooking odors? Salt air? Garbage? Is there a breeze? Is it hot, cold? Hard and smooth? Rocks? Grass? If grass, short or tall? In your imagination use all your senses to explore the place. If your mind drifts, that is perfectly fine. When you have used all of your senses a couple of times, write down as much as you can about this place. Don't worry about order or spelling, just get down a lot of sense impressions of your place.



Example

I was on the top of a hill. It was a wide open field, with trees on both sides of me. The wind was blowing, and you could hear it whistling as it made its way through the trees. The grass was short from where it had just been mowed, and you could see the cows on the other side of the hill. . . .

—Angela Goff, 9th grade

PLACES SET A MOOD

When you start with a place like this, part of what you are doing is setting the mood for your story.

Examples

As the waves swept the shore, I could hear beautiful sea gulls and their peaceful screams. The crisp salt water air surrounded my body. And the sand felt like I was standing in cocoa. And the sun seemed as if it were lying on the surface of the sea, like a big red cherry. . . .

—*Christopher Shrader, 9th grade*

A planet. . . like a ball of blood. There is death in the air, children and parents slaughtered by some force. The river once clear as the air is now red as a bloody rose. . . .

—*Jason Collins, 9th grade*

The first author sets a calm and pleasant mood. The second author, on the other hand, isn't fooling around: violence and horror are the order of the day.

As you are reading or watching TV, you may not even be aware of how the setting gets you in the mood for what's to come. It's obvious, of course, when scary music in a movie tells you something frightening is about to happen. For example, did you ever see the movie *Jaws*, in which a giant shark kills a lot of people? Every time the shark is about to attack, there is this loud panting-pounding music, while the camera follows the innocent swimmer. Even television commercials do this to you: they show a lovely beach (no shark) with beautiful, tanned young people playing volleyball, getting pleasantly warm, and then refreshing themselves with Colossal Cola, or Pink-Sugar Flavored Fruitless Juice, or whatever. Using a place, they get you in a mood, then try to sell their product.

- Write a description of a place that sets a mood.

Example

The smell of fresh roses fills the room. I feel the warmth of a crackling orange fire. I feel elegant in my long lavender lacy dress, yet loneliness and emptiness consume me. I feel like Cinderella alone at a ball, with the soft mellow sounds of classical music. The room is silent except for the music. I can hear my soft breaths of air in my ears. It is too quiet to seem like reality. Too sad to seem like fantasy.

—*Claire Rottin, 6th grade*



- Read over the places you've described, pick one that interests you, and write again, this time adding more made-up details. Even if the description is of an empty lot that you pass every day, make up a couple of things about it. Put in a made-up tree or an abandoned flying saucer.



I am in the middle of writing a science fiction/fantasy novel, and one of the things about fantasy, of course, is that you have to invent almost everything. You can't just think back to the house you used to live in. I have to decide how many suns my world has (two) and what color they are (one is bluish and the other pink). This makes me start wondering what color that makes the sky. And how often do the suns rise and set? That is just the beginning. I have to decide on the weather (they have terrible freezing hailstorms) and plants and animals (or is it some other kind of life or no life at all?). Every time I work on this story, I add more details:

There was a curve with an opening between rocks on one side, and a view between them. Espere stepped out, found herself on a flat boulder that overlooked the sea. She had never seen the sea, but there was no mistaking the vast thickness of mist over a flat surface that went farther than the desert. Her father had told her that you never see the surface of the sea, only the rolling blue fog that clings to it like a garment and makes all hidden, all treacherous.

- Even if you don't particularly like science fiction, try writing a paragraph describing a world that is entirely different from ours. Is it cold or hot? Are there deserts? Ocean? What lives there? Does it swim, creep, fly, bounce—or slime?

Example

A horrid land covered with dark, thick fog. The mutants who live there are sickly grey with no eyes. They have to use their other four senses. Huge trees surround the place, the fog lives in their leaves, allowing no light to penetrate. Shrieks and screams fill the air.

—*Jonathan Southern, 9th grade*



- Describe a place that would be a good setting for a mystery story.
- Write one for an adventure story or a love story.
- Try one that makes fun of the standard types of stories (mystery, science fiction, etc.).

Example

It was on the moons of Triton when I met her eyes of the purest green: all 10 of them. Green as

the grass which grew under her toenail. . . . I loved her, so I sent her a dozen packages of toilet paper. . . .

—Mike Crayton, 9th grade

OTHER THINGS TO DO

- Imagine and write about a place that is the ultimate wish fulfillment of a person of your age group. What is a day in that place like? Is the person who lives there happy? If not, is the person able to go back to the real world? What happens?
- Describe a place that is bad, ugly, or disgusting. After you have described it, tell a story about what happens there.
- Do the same thing with a place that is good, beautiful, and wonderful. Compare the two pieces. Is one more interesting than the other? A lot of writers find ugliness easier to describe than beauty. Is this true for you?
- Describe a place, then exchange your description with a friend who then tells what happens there. Meanwhile, you finish the one your friend started.
- Do a pass-around piece. A group of people sit in a circle. Each person has a piece of paper and writes for one minute about how a certain place *looks*. Then everyone passes to the right and reads what was written by the previous person and then writes what that place *sounds* like. Pass again, read again, adding how the place *feels*, then pass, read, and add *smells*, and finally *tastes*. Read the finished pieces aloud.
- Do the same writing game, but this time the only rule is that one description will be ugly (and everyone who adds to it has to add ugliness); one will be frightening; one beautiful; one exciting, etc. You can use whatever moods you want.



- Make a collection of magazine and newspaper pictures of places that look intriguing. Put them aside and use them if you are ever short of writing ideas.
- Read aloud and record one of the place descriptions. Pretend that you are walking through it, perhaps adding sound effects: “It was a truly magnificent waterfall. . . [turn on the water faucet]. . . Yes, listen to it splash!”
- A few days later, listen to your recording and see if you want to make any changes in the original

piece. Perhaps some of the sound effects you recorded will give you an idea for sound details to add.

LOOKING AGAIN: ADDING METAPHORS

- Take one of your story settings, and add at least one metaphor (a metaphor is a description of one thing as if it were another thing— “the sky was a bar of dark chocolate”) or simile (the same thing using “like” or “as” — “the lights in the pool were like eyes”). You are probably already using metaphors and similes in your writing—I would be surprised if you weren’t, because we use them every day in ordinary talk. Just a few paragraphs back, Mike Crayton wrote that a girl’s eyes were “green as the grass which grew under her toenail.” Carissa Bielamowicz’s description of the ocean said that it lashed at the beach like a hungry lion.

Even if you already have metaphors in your story setting, add a few as a kind of enrichment, and as a way of making what you want to say even more precise. Instead of saying “It was a large room,” say “The room was as large as a supermarket” or “The enormous drum of a room echoed as I walked through it.” The thing that keeps people reading—and the thing that entertains the writer best too—is the part that really makes things alive: not “The room smells bad” but “The place smelled like rotten meat.” Not “They called each other names,” but “Joey called Eddie a pea brain,” or even better, “‘Eddie my man,’ sneered Joey, ‘you have always been a pea brain.’”

California

Splash. The crystal clear teal-blue water of the pool shines right into my face like a light halo. The pool is warm and lighted. It stands out like electric eyes next to the dark chocolate black sky. I like it because I feel free.

—Lena Shamoun, 6th grade



- Go through one of your pieces and make a list of metaphors and similes. Can you think of some that are more interesting? Avoid saying that something is as red as a rose or as white as snow. Do you know how often those similes get used? Too often. Can you come up with something else red that is more interesting? As red as Fiesta Crimson nail polish? White like a fresh opened container of plain yoghurt? Replace the old metaphors and similes in your description with new ones.

Making a place alive and vivid with words is one way to get a story started, but it will really begin to *move* when the people come in. That’s what the next part is about.

PEOPLE IN THE PLACE

Pretend you are sitting in a theater looking at an almost empty stage. Or, pretend you are watching a movie with a long shot of the desert and mountains. Or you are in a church with sweet scented flowers and wedding music coming from the organ. You have looked around, listened, taken a deep breath, and then, suddenly, it happens. At the church, the flower girl leads in the wedding procession. In the movie theater, the screen shows a motorcycle and zooms in on the rider in his black leather jumpsuit. At the theater, a woman wearing a leotard and a mask runs on stage gasping.

You know that it has really begun now—the church service, the movie, the play—because the people have entered. Everything we write or watch or experience takes on life from the people in it. Even in an animal story, you get involved because the animals have personalities, just like people.

Every time I work on my science fiction novel, no matter how much time I spend on the details of the alien world where it is taking place, the story always gets more interesting to me when a character comes in. I use all the same techniques for writing about people that I use for describing places—how they look, sound, smell, feel—but more seems to happen when I describe the people:

Big Cook was the tallest woman in the city. She would have towered well over seven feet, had her ankles been stronger, had she not stooped. She held herself up with two canes like columns. Her voice was deep and hoarse, and she smelled of cooking oil and strange spices, because she knew all there was to know about food preparation—and poisons. Big Cook lived in perpetual pain from her overloaded joints, with no family, famous in the city and generally feared, in spite of her physical disability.

Plot begins to happen when people come in: Big Cook knows a lot about poisons. Hmmm. . . .

Seven Steps to a Finished Story: Step Two

Read over one of the place descriptions you wrote, the one that holds your interest best. (It might be an attractive place or an ugly one.) Close your eyes, put yourself back in that place. Just be there for a little while and then, *have someone come into the scene*. If possible, just let this happen on its own, so you are almost observing it rather than making it up. It may take a while: be patient. Someone will come.

When a person finally enters your scene, examine him or her using your senses the way you did before. What style of clothing? How is his hair cut? Does he wear aftershave, or smoke? Make her

speaking, and listen for an accent: can you tell if she comes from the city or country? Does she speak quickly? Does she use many words or few? What is she talking about? How would her hair or skin feel if you touched it?

The writing assignment, of course, is to use sense details to describe the person who comes into your place. The description doesn't have to be long, and if something begins to happen—if the character begins to talk or even if someone else comes into the scene—write on! *The idea is to get a story started, not just to follow instructions.* ●

PLUGS



T&W has just published Meredith Sue Willis's *Blazing Pencils: A Guide to Writing Fiction & Essays*. The more than 150 writing ideas in this friendly book help junior high school students every step of the way as they write complete stories and essays. Each step includes advice for revising. *Blazing Pencils* has an eye-popping four-color cover and comes with a 48-page writing notebook. \$9.95, free shipping and handling. ●

Dr. Jeanette Veatch is one of those veteran teachers who was using a whole language approach long before it was called whole language. Since 1986 she has been producing a continuing series of videotapes called *Showing Teachers How*. Each of these 18 tapes presents unrehearsed demonstrations of how to teach specific aspects of whole language. The series is filled with good techniques and ideas that come only from a thoughtful and rich teaching career, but what makes these tapes particularly likeable is Dr. Veatch herself. She is a kindly taskmaster who takes delight in helping children learn to read and write in the best way possible, and in showing us how she does it. The camera work and editing are rudimentary, but they are a natural complement to Dr. Veatch's unscripted, downhome manner. Frankly, these tapes are a welcome relief from the slick, over-produced ones from large commercial publishers. Each tape runs 45 minutes. For more information, write to Jan V Productions, P.O. Box 40176, Mesa, AZ 85274-0176 (tel. 602/890-0840). ●

I'll Carry You Off to Sing with the Train, Maria

Teaching Poetry to Children in Other Countries

by Kenneth Koch

AFTER MY EXPERIENCE OF TEACHING children to write poetry here in the United States, I did the same kind of teaching in other countries and in other languages—in Haiti, France, Italy, and China. I did the foreign teaching, I think, mostly out of curiosity: to see if the teaching would work, and to see what kinds of poems the children would write. I didn't think that the ease, excitement, and spontaneity, the quick and poetic responsiveness of my students at P.S. 61 in New York were exclusively American phenomena. I wasn't sure, though, that the kind of teaching I had done at P.S. 61 could inspire children to write poetry in other countries, with other languages, and with their own highly developed literary and artistic traditions. I found that it could. Taught in much the same way as the children in New York, my students in Port-au-Prince, Paris, Rome, Shanghai, and Beijing responded enthusiastically, understood poems, and wrote well themselves.

The differences in how these different children wrote were less obvious than the similarities. The French children were a little more sophisticated, ironic, and literary—but not much more—than the others; the Italian children somewhat more open, unembarrassed by strong feelings. The Haitian students, once they got going, were vivacious, playful, and a little wild. My American students were perhaps the best at being “crazy,” at following fantastic ideas out to the end. The Chinese children had a way of their own of mixing the fantastic with the plain and practical: cars on a road looked like a dragon; wishing to go to the moon (a characteristic wish of my American students) became a wish for the moon to come to one's house.

Such differences as there were in part depended on the particular children of a country I happened to be able to teach: for example, the École Alsa-

cienne students in Paris were literarily sophisticated in a way that the children at the Genzano school outside Rome were not, quite apart from their being French or Italian. My relative knowledge or ignorance of the children's language was also a factor. My French is pretty good, my Italian is shaky, and, knowing no Chinese, I taught with an interpreter there. Each diminution of my knowledge of the language brought with it a lessening of nuance and perhaps even of imaginativeness in what I was able to help inspire the children to write. Another factor was the length of time I taught: in France, as in Italy, for about two months; in Haiti for only a week; in China for two weeks. In France and Italy, I had time to try out an idea in one class, then use it more effectively in another. Or what children wrote in one class could give me an idea for another poem, another lesson, to give to another class. In Haiti and in China, whatever results I got I had to get quickly; there wasn't much time to try things out. Despite these differences, the remarkable similarity is that all these children liked writing poetry and wrote it well. The ease, excitement, spontaneity, and responsiveness I had been immersed in at P.S. 61 were all around me, also, in the classrooms of Beijing, Paris, Rome, Port-au-Prince, and Shanghai.

The idea of writing poetry in school, expressing feelings and sensations, and having fun doing it is at least a familiar and respectable one in America, even if it is not often put into effect. Not so in the other countries I taught in, and this unfamiliarity was an obstacle of sorts. The problems it caused were not with the children but with teachers, who were skeptical of what I could accomplish, and of administrators who didn't want to let me try. As soon as I did manage to get into a school, the children were won over; and, in every case, teachers and administrators were themselves won over by what the children wrote. Teachers at the École Bilingue were very skeptical: *Cela ne marchera jamais*. Two of them ended up teaching poetry classes themselves. This was characteristic of what happened. In China and in Italy, teachers I worked with taught poetry while I was there and afterwards. They all did it well, strange as it was in the schools where they taught. I wasn't surprised that the teaching worked, but I was surprised by how

KENNETH KOCH's article is excerpted from the newly revised edition of his *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* (Vintage). He is Professor of English at Columbia University.

well it worked. Despite apparent difficulties, poetry seemed to reach the children, to move their imaginations, as directly as bright colors or a spring breeze.

I sometimes began with easy *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* kinds of lessons, such as a Wish Poem or a Lie Poem, but mostly I used lessons like those in *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?:* I read aloud and talked about a great poem, then asked children to write poems of their own in some way like it. Most often, I used as models poems in the children's own language: poems by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Breton, for example, in France; by Dante and Petrarch in Italy; by Li Bai (Li Po) in China. As at P.S. 61, I paid no attention to whether or not the poems I used were considered suitable for children of this or that age. If something strong and simple in the poem appealed to me, I assumed I could teach it. Here is a brief account of what happened in each country.

My overseas teaching began in 1975 in Haiti, where, at the invitation of the American ambassador, I taught poetry-writing for one week at the Lycée Toussaint-L'Ouverture in Port-au-Prince. Though my stay there was short, the vigor, energy, and talent with which the Haitian students responded was impressive. Also impressive was the swiftness with which this lively response came, after a beginning that seemed full of problems. In the first place, not only was I teaching (for the first time) in a language not my own, but also it was not really the language of the students. At home and on the street they spoke Creole; French was a language they learned at school. Thus, when I asked if I could teach ten-year-old students, the minister of education said, "No, they wouldn't be able to write well enough." I was given, instead, students aged fourteen to sixteen. These older children had had time to learn more French. Furthermore, no one had written poems in school. The French system of education was, if anything, even stricter in Port-au-Prince than it was in France. You were in school to learn and to do this and this and this—not that. In the halls of the *lycée* a man walked back and forth holding a whip. An education official told me, "Oh he never uses it"—but all the same. My Haitian students, at the start, were fearful, puzzled, and hesitant to speak. By the second or third class, though, poetry found them and they found poetry, and difficulties disappeared. By the fifth and last class I had been given an assistant who had the children writing poetry in Creole; they recited, and some even sang, these poems in front of the class. Among the poems I taught were Blake's "Tyger" and Rimbaud's "Vowels." Here is a Blake-inspired poem, with what seem to me some characteristic Haitian surprises, such as the calm mélange of the domestic and the

magical and the inclusion of one line in Creole (I've translated the French lines but left the Creole line in the original):

Little cat what's going on that you're drinking the
dog's milk
My eyes why aren't you looking at me
My hands why don't you have twenty-five fingers
Quardrumane why are you so good-looking
Monsieur Mouloungue pou ka ça ou vole conca
tout—e tan oua-p vole poul moun-yo
Tomtom why do you like to beat like that "I am
poor I need help"

These are some lines from a lesson on Rimbaud:

B is black because I am in love with a black girl
named Babeth and every time I write the letter B
I see it black . . .
A is white because it looks like a house not painted
yet . . .

I taught in France after Haiti, during the winter and spring of 1975-76. I had classes in two prestigious private schools in Paris—the École Bilingue and the École Alsacienne—and in two public schools in the primarily working-class Paris suburb of Petit Clamart. My eighth-grade students at the École Bilingue had sophisticated responses to Rimbaud's "Vowels":

I green like the stems of pale flowers
O yellow like a lemon on a plate
U white like the *Pastilles Vichy* in the subway . . .
E blue as the city on a starry night . . .
The number One is white like an old teapot
Two is violet like a very big drawing
Three is black like the moon hidden by the sun
Four is brown like blond hair . . .

To my sixth-grade students at the École du pavé blanc in Petit Clamart I taught Baudelaire's "L'Invitation au Voyage," an invitation to the poet's beloved to travel with him to a country that is as beautiful, warm, and sensuous as she is—"My child, my sister / Think of how sweet it will be / To go out there and live together / In the country that is like you . . . / There, everything is beauty / Luxury, calm, and voluptuousness . . ." My younger French students had shown an interest in such voyages in writing Wish Poems—

I'd like to live on the sun with Nathalie . . .

I'd like to live in the comic-strip world . . .

The example of Baudelaire inspired strange, dreamy, sensuous, detailed versions of such wishes:

Mother I want you to come with me to that country
where all is so mysterious and so magnificent

And there are those exotic fruits that grow on the hill, hiding the setting sun that is red as a ruby reflecting in the big wall mirror that you put up to keep death from coming to take us away. . .

You'll have flowers in your hair, dresses with long trains, long as the wind that blows from the north
You'll see volcanoes talking to you about their mysterious adventure. . .

I taught an "I Never Told Anybody" lesson (a poem of secrets) to the sixth-grade students at the École Bilingue and to the seventh-grade students at the École du pavé blanc. The idea is to put in each line something you've done or thought or felt but never said. I used two different poems in teaching it—Rimbaud's "Dawn" (about a magical morning walk) at the École Bilingue and Mallarmé's "Apparition" (about a mysterious nighttime dream-like vision) at the École du pavé blanc. "Dawn" inspired confessions of feelings about nature; "Apparition," of feelings about the night and dreams—

I never told anyone that I discovered the language of my fishes
I never told anyone that a flower gave me one of its petals. . .

I've never said that I talked to the wind. . .
And I've never said I have a talking flower. . .
I've never said that I was the ocean
I've never said that I have a secret in the ocean.
(*École Bilingue*)

I never told anyone that I believed that in the evening a horseman dressed all in black put up the night
I never told anyone I believed that in the morning a horseman dressed all in white put up the day. . .
I never told anyone I dreamed that an angel came to rock me to sleep. . .
(*École du pavé blanc*)

I used Rimbaud's "Cities" ("...Houses of crystal and wood that move on invisible rails and pulleys. . .The hunting of bells cries out in the gorges. . .") to inspire poems about an Ideal City. The children wrote: "...I live in a city where everything is yellow in the morning / Orange at noon, and red in the evening. / There are no cars in that city. / Everybody walks around in a bathing suit"; "...my house [is] filled with wild animals and trees." I used André Breton's poem "The Egret" as

a model for an "If only" poem. Breton's poem is full of wishes for the impossible—it begins "If only the sun were shining tonight." My students, like Breton, put an impossible wish in every line—

If only the radiators were as cold as a photograph
If only I wrote as well as a lamp that lights up a red leaf like saliva

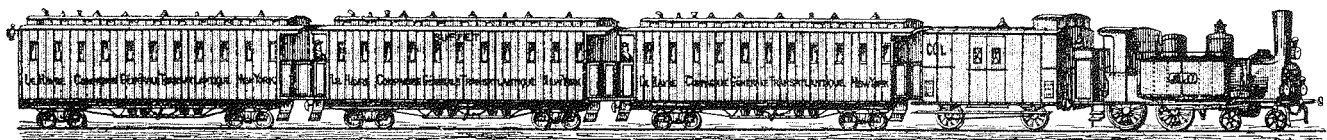
Another poem by Breton, "Free Union," has some fantastic praise of a woman in every line ("My wife with shoulders of champagne / . . .With fingers of new-cut hay. . ."). I asked my seventh-grade students to praise someone or something that way:

My dog of snow, of fire and of air,
My dog of foam, of sparks and of rock,
My dog of diamond, my dog of ruby,
My dog green with hope and pink with affection

One remarkable poem was about a door:

My door of glass which is made of sand and of dust
My door of vegetable glass which is transparent. . .
My brilliant door of glass where the moon and the stars are reflected
My door of glass which encloses the wall of the past
My door of glass which saw the world born. . .
My door of glass which will see the world die
My door of glass which was dead before it was born.

Encouraged by what happened in France, I managed to find a way, two years later, to teach in Italy. I taught in three schools on the outskirts of Rome for several months. In France I had used 19th- and 20th-century poems, those being the ones I knew best; in Italy, for similar reasons, I used mostly Renaissance and earlier poems (Petrarch, Dante, Cecchi, Cavalcanti) but not entirely (also Leopardi and Marinetti). I used Petrarch's sestina "To Every Animal That Lives on Earth" to inspire sestinas. Dante's "Guido vorrei" (which begins "Guido, I wish that you and Lapo and I / Were carried off by magic / And put in a boat, which, every time there was wind, / Would sail on the ocean exactly where we wanted. . .") seemed a wonderful poem to teach to ten-year-old Italian children. Though it has mysteries for scholars, its main



idea is engagingly simple: “Friend, I wish we had a magic vehicle that would take us anywhere we wanted and where we could do as we wish.” I asked the children to use names in their poems, as Dante uses the names of his friends Guido and Lapo, in making their wishful invitations. Some of these had the sweetness and restraint of the original—

Cynthia, Luigi, Rosalba
I would like you to come with me
To travel around the earth on a white and blue ship

Others had mostly its intensity:

I'd like to take you on a train, Maria
I'd like to take you to Rome on a train, Maria
I'd like to sleep on the train, Maria
I'd like to take you with the train to Venice, Maria
I'll carry you off to sing with the train, Maria
I'll give you a kiss on the train, Maria
I'd like to shoot you with a pistol on the train,
Maria
I'll kill you on the train, Maria
I'll marry you on the train, Maria

I taught a poem by the twelfth-century poet, Cecco Cecchi, an extremely aggressive sonnet in which most of the lines begin “Se fossi” (If I were)—“If I were fire, I'd burn up the world / If I were the wind, I'd blow it away. . .” My Genzano students were happy to join in the destruction:

If I were a window I'd throw my teachers out of me
If I were a crane, I'd demolish the school
If I were a panther, I'd bite President Leone. . .

I taught Cavalcanti's poem “Perch'i' no spero,” which begins “Because I do not hope ever to return / Little song of mine, to Tuscany / Go you, lightly and softly / Straight to my lady. . .” Once it is there, Cavalcanti wants his poem to talk to his lady about him. I asked my students to write a poem addressed to their poem itself, asking it to do something for them, anything at all. The results were, sometimes, like Cavalcanti's poem, full of strong feeling:

Oh my poem
Go and speak of me
To my ancestors and to everyone I know
Speak of my kind teacher
Good like a father
Oh my beautiful poem say to all
That the world is more beautiful, if the
People are kind
Go, I pray you
I, it is obvious, can't visit the world
Go, you are my only hope.

There was something in Leopardi's poetry I thought I could teach to children, but it took me a while to find it. There seemed to be no helpfully imitable form in poems like “La Luna” and “L'Infinito” but there was the strong presence of a feeling I thought the children would respond to: loneliness, solitude. For the Leopardi class, I read “La Luna” and “L'Infinito” aloud, explained what was difficult in them, and talked about their atmosphere of loneliness. I asked for poems about times of being or feeling alone. For form I suggested beginning every line with the word *alone* (*solo* or *sola*).

Alone the bird flies in the month of September
Alone with a girl in a car in the dark
Alone in my room thinking of my little dog who
died
Alone I was studying one summer morning. . .
. . . I was alone in the country
I was alone in the mountains
I was alone in a boat
I was alone in class

I taught Marinetti's “To a Racing Car” (it begins “Vehement god of a race of steel, / Automobile drunk on space. . .”) somewhat as I had taught Breton's “Free Union,” to inspire a poem of exaggerated praise or boasting:

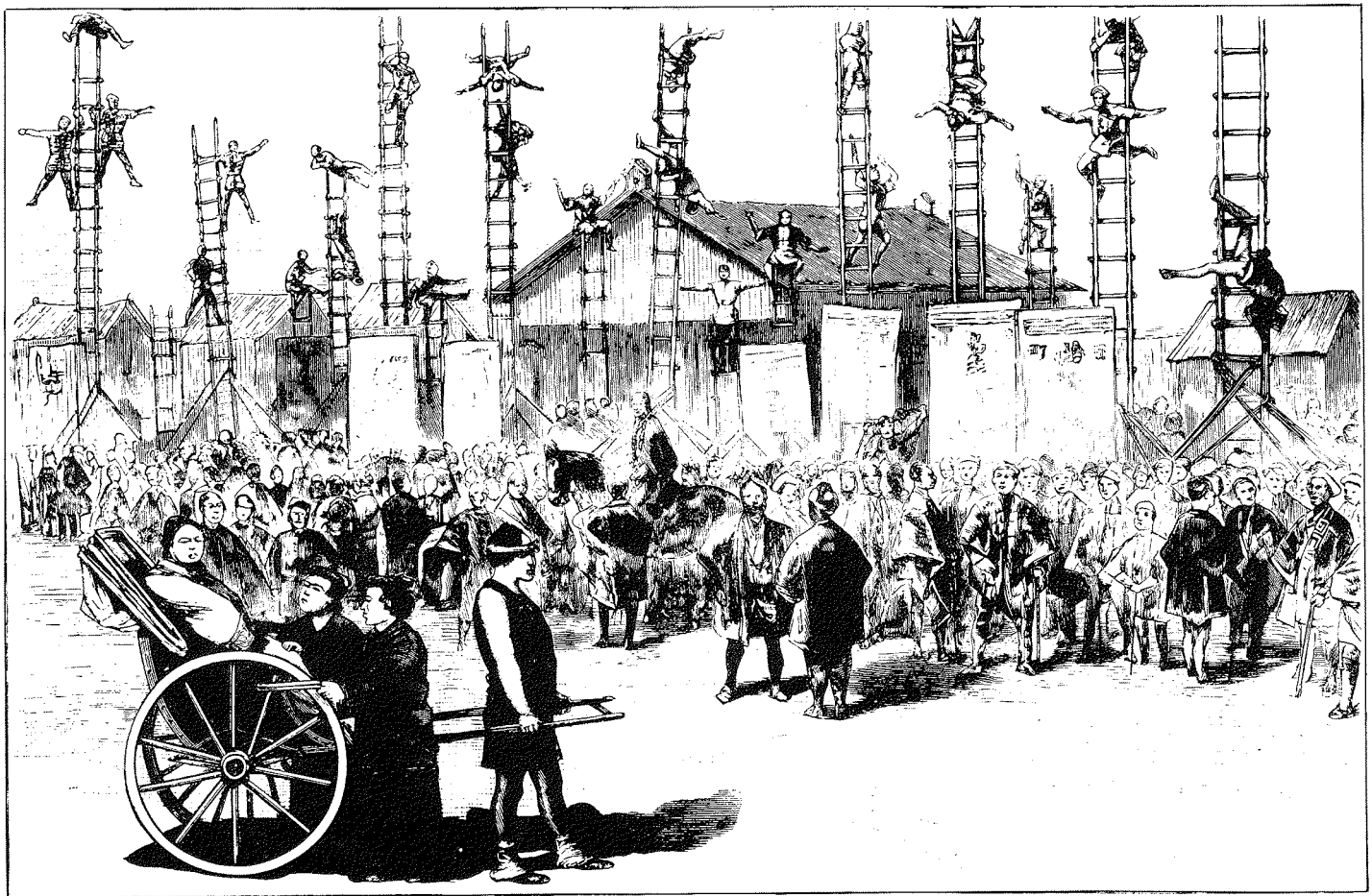
My piano, when I want it to, turns into the ocean,
the universe, the mountains. . .
My car runs not on gas but on gold
My car moves faster than light
My car cries because I go to school
My car has a blue fiancé. . .

My Italian students openly expressed their enthusiasm for their new subject—

Don't worry, Poetry,
I'll never abandon you
Even if when I grow up
I forget about you
I beg you, make me remember
Of you, the beautiful thoughts that I had
When I knew you. . .

Poetry you seem a person dressed in white in the
middle of many people dressed in blue I know
you right away. . .

Teaching in China was my most ambitious endeavor, since I didn't know the language and I had very little idea of what Chinese education, or Chinese school children, were like. (I was invited to China to read and lecture in 1984 by the Writers Union. Teaching in schools was something that was worked out after I got there.)



I taught six lessons in Beijing and four in Shanghai. In Beijing I taught with Zhu Ciliu, a professor and poet, who was perfectly bilingual. Facing the two hundred children the Chinese authorities had given me as students, I would speak for a minute or two—explaining the poetry ideas, giving suggestions—then turn to Zhu Ciliu who would translate for the children what I had said. Timidity and unsureness led me to use simple poetry ideas like *Wishes* and *I-used-to-but-now* for my first six lessons. In China I really didn't know if the teaching was going to work at all. The children, however, sitting there, being told through an interpreter to write poems, which I don't believe they had ever done in school (certainly not this way), were at first puzzled, then quickly excited. They wrote, covering their notebook pages with Chinese characters, at what seemed to me an incredible pace:

I wish I had a box in which there was everything . . .

I wish Newton had not been born yet so the law of gravity would be my discovery
I wish summer would last forever so I wouldn't have to say good-bye to my beautiful skirt with flowers on it . . .

I was very very fat, too fat to walk
Now I am very very thin, like a bamboo . . .

These first lessons having gone well, I felt bold enough—with a great deal of help from Zhu Ciliu—to use some classic Chinese poems as models. Zhu Ciliu suggested this quatrain by the eighteenth-century poet Liu Zongyuan, which describes a scene partly by saying what is not there:

No birds flying over the hills
No one on the mountain trails
Only a fisherman in palm cape and straw hat
Fishing alone on a river in falling snow.

In the original, the first two lines begin with the word *MEIYO*, "there is not." The poem was read aloud and written on the blackboard. I asked the children to begin their first two or three lines with *MEIYO* and then conclude with a word like *only* to say what *was* there. Each line of Liu Zongyuan's poem has seven Chinese characters. I told the children they could if they liked make their lines of seven characters, too:

There is no green grass
There are no sweet-smelling flowers
Over the blurry barren hill
There is only flying snow

No one walking on the path
No bird flying in the trees
Only one person on a bench
Reading out loud in a foreign language

Another class was based on some lines by Li Bai about the Yellow River:

The Yellow River with its water from the sky
Flows on and on into the sea . . .
Bursting through the Kunlun Mountain in the West
The Yellow River roars across ten thousand li and
leaps over the Dragon Gate

I told the children to imagine they were looking at something that was very long and that came from far away—like a river, a mountain range, the sky—and to write a poem about where it began, where it went, and where it ended:

A gust of hard wind from the Yangtse River
Raising up flying sand blowing moving stones
Ranging as if in a land with no people
Roaring roaring until it stops at the Huang Po

Shan Yin Street comes from the sky
Deep and long it leads to the earth
The stream of cars runs without end
Like a huge dragon it rolls to a distant place.

The best poetry, it turned out, was as inspiring to children in China, Haiti, Italy, and France as it has been to my students in New York. French children were moved by Baudelaire to create landscapes that mirrored their feelings; Italian children, following Dante and Cecco, to propose ideal voyages and to create vigorous invective; Chinese ten-year-olds found mysterious solitudes in present-day Shanghai as Liu Zongyuan had found them in the eighteenth-century countryside. No matter how much I had expected, these results were surprising, suggesting, as they did, the probable universality of the power—still, sadly, by so many, unrecognized—of children's imagination and intelligence. ●

Teachers & Writers Collaborative Staff: Nancy Larson Shapiro, Director; Ron Padgett, Publications Director; Gary Lenhart and Pat Padgett, Associate Directors; Elizabeth Fox, Program Director; Chris Edgar, Publications Associate; Christian McEwen, Jan Totty, and Felice Stadler, Assistants. **Writers & Artists in the Program:** June Ballinger, Eve Becker, Jack Collom, Nelson Denis, Tony De Nonno, Jill Eisenstadt, Larry Fagin, Karen Fitzgerald, Harry Greenberg, Ian James, Nancy Kricorian, Alisa Kwitney, Kurt Lamkin, Michael Laser, William Logan, Cindy Luvaas, Theresa Mack, Jane Mankiewicz, Maria Mar, Bernadette Mayer, Christian McEwen, Susie Mee, Sheryl Ann Noethe, Stephen O'Connor, Denise Ostrow, Abiodun Oyewole, Julie Patton, Richard Perry, Orel Odinov Protopopescu, Tom Riordan, Sylvia Sandoval, Cynthia Shor, Cynthia Simmons, Adele Slaughter, Mark Statman, Jackie Sweeney, Samuel Swope, Susana Tubert, Ed Vega, Meredith Sue Willis, Dale Worsley, and Alan Ziegler. **Board of Directors:** Wesley Brown, Norm Fruchter, Colin Greer, Herbert Kohl, Phillip Lopate, Walter Dean Myers, David Rogers, Marly Rusoff, Steven Schrader, Robert Silvers, and Carmen Valle.

Copyright © 1990 by Teachers & Writers Collaborative, Inc. *Teachers & Writers* magazine is published five times per year by Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, New York, N.Y. 10003. Telephone: (212) 691-6590. Domestic subscription rates: one year, \$15; two years, \$26; three years, \$37. Foreign subscriptions: add \$2.50 per year.

The work of Teachers & Writers Collaborative is made possible in part by grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative is particularly grateful for support from the following foundations and corporations: Aaron Diamond Foundation, American Stock Exchange, Mr. Bingham's Trust for Charity, Consolidated Edison, DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, Joelson Foundation, Louis Calder Foundation, Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company, Mobil Foundation, Morgan Stanley Foundation, New York Telephone, New York Times Company Foundation, Henry Nias Foundation, Helena Rubinstein Foundation, the Scherman Foundation, and Steele-Reese Foundation.

Our program also receives funding from Districts 3, 5, and 6, PS 146 and PS 198, and the Calhoun School, Manhattan; Districts 7, 8, 10, and 11, CS 152, and Grace Dodge Vocational HS, Bronx; Districts 13, 22, 28, and PS 152 and PS 346, Brooklyn; Districts 25 and 28 and PS 30, Queens; PS 84 PA, PS 87 PA, PS 75, and PS 190 PA Manhattan; Freeport School District; Port Jefferson Elementary School; New Rochelle School District; ArtsConnection-Arts Exposure Program; the New York Foundation for the Arts Artists-in-Residence Program, administered by the Foundation on behalf of the New York State Council on the Arts and in cooperation with the New York State Education Department with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Council; Heckscher Museum; Great Kills Branch Library and Todthill-Wesley Branch Library, Staten Island; Veritas; Arts and Cultural Education Network; the DOME Project; Educational Alliance; Park Avenue School; the Wheatley School, and the Webster School.

Editor: Ron Padgett. Assistant Editor: Chris Edgar. Printer: Philmark Lithographics, New York, N.Y.

ISSN 0739-0084. This publication is available on microfilm from University Microfilms International, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative

5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003 USA

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED
RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED

NON-PROFIT ORG
U S POSTAGE
PAID
NEW YORK, N Y
Permit No 9369