

Sonnet Writing in the Fifth Grade

by Jane Avrich

LAST YEAR I TAUGHT A 5TH GRADER NAMED Rachael whose confidence waxed and waned. Usually she'd slam her books down on a front row desk, ready to leap to the fore of class discussion. "Oh, oh! Please, me!" she'd pipe, waving her arm wildly, upper body lurching over her desk. But when Rachael was unsure of the material, she retreated. If I called on her, she shrank back in her seat, large-eyed and timid, her answer barely audible. That spring, Rachael wrote a sonnet about shyness:

The waves build up and up until they're gone
Gone up upon the shore hiding in the sand
Retreating to the sea as other waves have done
Then, gathering their courage, surge to land.
The aspen tree so bold and bright stands tall
It battles against all kinds of weather
But when the wind blows its hardest it calls
To mind the quivering of a lovely feather.
The morning glory, the gold and the bold,
Opens its petals to the morning like lions
But when the afternoon does come it folds
Into a timid little mouse who's crying.
As I retreat from my boldness I'm shy
But I know my courage will come by and by.

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Rachael wrote this sonnet in my Language Structures class last year at Saint Ann's School. The sonnet writing project was highly successful; each student in the class of fifteen was able to produce a fresh, artful sonnet that spoke in that child's individual voice. The success was partially due to the exceptional nature of Saint Ann's itself. A private school in Brooklyn, Saint Ann's is progressive in both curriculum and philosophy. By removing the pressure of grades, the school fosters a mood of curiosity and openness to new projects; the aim is to encourage individual growth and interaction instead of competition. My 5th graders were a particularly supportive group, listening to and commenting warmly on one another's poems as I read the daily sheaf of homework aloud.

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In addition, the school makes a point of introducing creative writing as early as the second or third grade and continuing its practice throughout the high school years. Lower school students are encouraged to write stories and poems without worrying too much about errors in grammar and spelling, so as to make writing as spontaneous and anxiety-free a process as possible. By the time I receive my students in the 5th grade, the students think of writing as fun. “Language Structures,” a course taught side by side with English, presents our language as a versatile tool. As well as writing poetry, my 5th graders learn to trace etymological roots, read and write newspaper articles, use the resources of a library, and write research papers.

Finally, many of the children at Saint Ann’s are gratifying to teach. Bright, curious, many of them very talented, they feed on intellectual stimulation. Small classes of thirteen to eighteen students allow lessons to take place on an intimate level, with the teacher aware of each member’s individual needs.

At the same time, it is important to note that many students at Saint Ann’s, while motivated, do not possess exceptional abilities. The 5th grade humanities courses are divided into four levels; last year mine was third from the top, one of the weaker groups. Many of the children were not strong readers and few were strong writers. Some had problems with spelling and information retention, while others had learned English as their second language and were still shaky on usage and rules. Moreover, few students had formally studied poetry. And although most of them had done plenty of free-form writing of stories and poems, a formal structure such as the sonnet was something new.

But the fact is that younger children in general, regardless of their education and background, have a strong instinct for poetry. Nine- and ten-year-olds are highly attuned to rhythm and sound. Words, not yet worn-out and drained of life, are for them still imprinted with images. Much of what my own 5th graders were able to do, others of their age could do too.

During the poetry unit that my class did that spring, I grew more and more impressed with their enthusiasm both for reading and for writing different kinds of poems. Children are remarkably clever imitators, able to read and appreciate a variety of forms and then to make those forms their own. The sonnet was a fitting final project because it wrapped up many new skills, such as the uses of meter, rhyme, and imagery, into a neat and compact package. The sonnet is also an exercise in clarity; its tight, logical form disciplines students to focus on one idea, develop it in twelve lines, then bring it to a conclusion in the couplet.

I approached this writing assignment in cautious steps. The 5th graders started by looking at poetic images, so often the building blocks of a poem. The students read haikus and drew pictures of what the three-line poems let them see—a blossom, a loon, a reflection of the moon on water. Then, in seventeen syllables of their own, they tried to capture an image in a few swift strokes, leaving a lingering feeling of its “after-presence” or connotation. Their haikus were simple, frank observations of insects, sunbeams, passing clouds, or snow freshly fallen on a meadow in Prospect Park.

They went on to read Imagist poems such as William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheel Barrow” and Wallace Stevens’s impressionistic “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” I introduced the terms *simile* and *metaphor*, which they tried thinking of as points of intersection between two images, like the joining place of two links on a chain. Ezra Pound’s “In A Station of the Metro” served as a good example:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet black bough.

After turning the poem over in their minds, the students began to nod in appreciation and murmur, “Oh, I get it,” as they realized how the splotches of a hubbub of faces could look for a moment like wet blossoms clustered on a branch.

As we played with figurative language, we made the distinction between poems about *abstract* ideas—love, peace, or fear—and *concrete* ones—sensual impressions like the sound of glass breaking or the image of two plums in the icebox. We explored how abstract ideas could be represented by concrete images and thus rendered more familiar, more personal. Such is the effect in Emily Dickinson’s poem #254:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—
And sore must be the storm—
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm—

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land—
And on the strangest Sea—
Yet never, in Extremity,
It asked a crumb—of Me.

The 5th graders warmed to this emotive poem, which is written so simply, and whose single image suggests so much about the woman who wrote it. Unlike the Imagist fragments that describe impressions coolly and deftly, Dickinson feelingly extends her metaphor, drawing numerous parallels between the nature of hope and the behavior of a bird (or the “thing with feathers” that she playfully declines to name). One girl flapped her hands and pointed out that “her words sound like this,” indeed the bird’s frenetic fluttering is much like Dickinson’s delicate bursts of verse. Like a bird, she is persistent yet fragile. For an assignment, I asked the 5th graders to describe an abstract feeling by comparing it to something concrete and to sustain the comparison for at least eight lines. The resulting batch was mostly animal poems, many of them very lively. In one poem, loneliness took the form of a baying dog; in another, playfulness was a panda.

After experimenting with figurative language, we went on to rhyme and meter. Getting the children to rhyme didn’t require much work. For exercises I gave them one, two and three-syllable words and asked them to go home and find as many words as they could that rhymed with each. They

brought back scores. After all, most of them had been rhyming since *The Cat in the Hat*. Some were already rhyming their poems voluntarily. Others were accomplished rappers; in the lunchroom they'd rap about subjects ranging from Nintendo to peanut butter cups.

Fifth grade ears were not as well tuned to meter, however. I tried bringing in examples—fluid iambs as opposed to plodding spondees, rapid anapests and waltzing dactyls—and showed them Coleridge's tour de force, "Metrical Feet":

— — — — —
 Trochee | trips from | long to | short.
 — — — — —
 From long | to long | in so- | lemn sort
 — — — — —
 Slow Spon- | dee stalks; | strong foot! | yet ill | able
 — — — — —
 Ev-er to | come up with | Dac-tyl tri- | syll-a-ble.
 — — — — —
 I-am | -bics march | from short | to long;
 — — — — —
 With a leap | and a bound | the swift An- | a-pests throng.

But when the students read a poem on their own, they had trouble distinguishing the stressed syllables from the unstressed. I encouraged them to read the poems out loud. In fact, the first poems were songs, I told them; that's where their rhythm comes from.

Then my own words gave me an idea. The next day, I came to class armed with a boom box and a Beatles tape. I pushed *play* and "Eight Days a Week" blasted out. The 5th graders mouthed the words and drummed the beat on their desks. Within moments they were keeping time in perfect trochees:

— — — — —
 Ooh, I | need your | love, babe
 — — — — —
 Guess you | know it's | true

Or iambic:

— — — — —
 I want | to hold | your hand . . .

I wrote lines of the songs on the blackboard and asked for volunteers to scan them. Most of the students were eager to come up and mark the stressed and unstressed beats. For homework they were able to write two lines of iambs and two lines of dactyls for me to read aloud. They also began to like having the odd, consonant-cluttered metrical terms in their vocabulary; daily they announced discoveries of "trochees," "spondees," and "anapests" in limericks, TV jingles, and their own names.

Now it was time to put the pieces together and look at some sonnets; in order to construct such a strict form, the students first needed to see it in action. Shakespeare seemed a reasonable place to start. His sonnet #29 proved a good ice-breaker:

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
 I all alone beweepe my outcast state
 And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
 And look upon myself and curse my fate,
 Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
 Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd,
 Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
 With what I most enjoy contented least;
 Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
 Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
 Like to the lark at break of day arising
 From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
 For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
 That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

I was surprised that the 5th graders did not seem intimidated by the antiquated language or syntax. They asked me the meaning of certain words (*scope* and *haply*) and they found it helpful to trace a few participial phrases back to their distant antecedents ("I" to "wishing," "desiring," and "despising," for example) but their basic response to the gist of the poem was immediate and strong. The students could relate to the bouts of insecurity and self-pity that Shakespeare talks about when he says "I all alone beweepe my outcast state." You feel that you're stupid and clumsy, that you look awful, while everybody else seems smart, popular, and cool. "Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I think I'll go eat worms" was one student's chanted response. The students liked the bantering self-mockery of Shakespeare's tone and felt conversant with him rather than daunted by the old-fashioned language. Even their misunderstandings brought them closer to him. In the phrase "bootless cries," for example, they pictured someone kicking out tender bare feet in frustration, only to have them slam against a wall.

Perhaps most important, the students were able to trace the shape of the poem's argument. After the buildup of complaints in the first eight lines, they recognized the "turn" in the ninth, signalled by the pivotal word *yet*. The poet stops, remembers his love, and for the remaining six lines regains his confidence. The final couplet, chiming with the sound of "brings" and "kings," gives the poem a satisfying sense of closure.

Another poem that went over well was the anti-Petrarchan blazon #130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"). The students liked the fact that the poet's love is a real woman, palpable and earthy, who "treads on the ground." At the same time, a few of the girls admitted that they wouldn't be thrilled if some guy declared that their eyes *weren't* bright, their lips *weren't* red, and that "black wires" grew out of their heads. We tried to imagine how Shakespeare's mistress might respond in her own right, pointing out her love's spindly legs or receding hairline.

The most helpful of the Shakespeare sonnets was #73:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
 Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
 As after sunset fadeth in the west,
 Which by and by black night doth take away,
 Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
 In me thou seest the glowing of such fire
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
 As the death-bed whereon it must expire
 Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.
 This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

This melancholy lyric about aging might seem beyond the experience of young students, but the 5th graders read the poem with understanding and compassion. They appreciated the sober beauty of its three images, each developed in a quatrain—the tree on the eve of winter, the vanishing twilight, and the nearly extinguished fire. Many of the children adopted this format when they came to write their own sonnets. In Rachael's poem, the alternation of shyness and boldness is at first the ebb and flow of the waves, then the aspen tree in the wind, and finally the opening and closing of the morning glory.

Rachael chose to adhere to strict Shakespearian form; the poem is based on iambic pentameter and the lines follow a traditional *abab cdcd efef gg* rhyme scheme. But no students felt bound to established patterns of rhyme and meter if such formulas constrained them, or didn't suit the themes they wanted to express. The modern sonnet is an adaptable form; the students saw how e.e. cummings tossed out old rules of end-stop and capitalization so his sonnets speak in his own voice.

And so did the 5th graders' sonnets. I was delighted to see how each reflected the writer's individual personality. There was a wide range of topics—musings on nature, statements about friendship, a description of a pet turtle, a tongue-in-cheek poem about the changing sports seasons:

As the season of spring comes in, behold,
 A starting of baseball has come to spring.
 The month of April it started, I'm told
 It goes to fall and ends with a big ping.
 In the season of fall, basketball comes.
 Shoot a sphere through a hoop, try not to miss.
 If you call a basketball player dumb,
 He will be very mad and they will hiss.
 In the season of winter football is there,
 Big people play it and make people fall.
 They tackle and block—what do people care?
 The people are strong, big, fast, fat, and tall.
 The sports never stop, go through the season.
 More guys who watch it is the reason.

—Mike Lee

Also wry and humorous—and a bit naughty—is William Avedon's whimsical riddle poem:

What Is It?

Shooting over the ice and through the rain
 The rain covers its tracks so they cannot be found.
 Could this be a horse? Or a donkey in pain?

Not slipping and sliding, but merely gliding.
 Maybe it's an animal of some special kind?
 It could be a donkey whose nickname is a behind.
 It could be real, it could be a fake,
 It could be a child making mud cake.
 Maybe it's Athena, maybe it's Zeus,
 Maybe it's a runner with Nike A I R shoes,
 Maybe it's God's messenger, maybe it's his mail.
 But you know their motto, even through hail.
 It looks like a Porsche, a real cool hot rod,
 But if you ask my opinion, I think it's God!

William loved wordplay; his poem is full of witty tricks, like the derivations of Nike sneakers and the florists' logo of Hermes ("God's messenger") from Greek mythology, which we had studied earlier in the year. Aaron Neff's poem also mentions the Greeks, but is quite different in tone:

The dawn arises for a whole new day
 The day is as beautiful as I thought it.
 Dawn meets dusk and the daylight goes away
 And the sky burns then is dabbled and lit.
 Then it shows its ever-present beauty
 The night is radiant with pure white light.
 The stars and moon do their special duty
 To summon all the gods up high and bright.
 Andromeda, Perseus, Pegasus
 All tell their story with their shining light.
 Scorpio, Orion, and Artemis
 Shine down from the heavens showing their might.
 The night is mystical and magical
 Gods conversing in light and madrigal.

Impelled by the structure of the sonnet, many of the children found themselves exploring new corners of their imaginations. Some created surreal fantasy-lands:

Flowing water, purple, blue, green, and red.
 More and more green goldfish first fly around.
 Catfish, sea stars, sea slugs are at the head
 Scurry around without making a sound.
 Light dances around on the water's edge
 Sun slowly goes into the horizon
 Dances back and forth on a little ledge
 Goes down like it has some sort of poison.
 Blackness fills the sky as the sun goes down.
 Darkness fills the sky and light from the moon.
 Darkness makes people seem to have a frown
 Good news is that dawn will be coming soon.
 In the water melting into the twilight
 I'm sure this is going to be my light.

—Rebecca Milburn

Rebecca's clever rhyming of *twilight* and *my light* brings the poem to a gentle, glowing close. Other students experimented with the couplet in their own ways. One child, describing a tropical vacation resort, concludes with

In the pond there is an alligator
 There are secret passages, so see you later.

I collected all fifteen poems in a book that I called *Fifth Grade Sonnet Sequence* and distributed among the authors. Seeing the poems in print, the children were amazed at how good they were. They complimented one another wonderingly.

I was no less impressed. The sonnet form provided the children with the guidance they needed to express their thoughts clearly and sequentially while allowing them leeway to improvise, to ride the crests and dips of language to realms of their own. One such realm is described by Nao Terai, whose knowledge of English as a language second to Japanese gives her verse its own special music. Nao's was the *Fifth Grade Sonnet Sequence*'s opening poem:

The Sky

In the sky, a great big white fluffy cloud,
There are angels with hulas and wings,
Playing a golden trumpet very loud,
The other angels in beautiful voices sing.
The other angels swim in the sky beach
While the others make cloud castles.
The angels walk their dogs on leashes
Cats jump on angels—what a hassle.
People down below cannot hear the noise
So most people do not believe in this.
But when you hear it they rejoice
But when you ignore it they hiss.
Now you saw the secret of skyland.
When teachers ask you about it raise your hand.



PLUGS

The National Endowment for the Arts, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, and four other arts education organizations have produced *Three 'Rs' for the Nineties*, a collection of five brochures that tell parents how they can introduce their children to creative writing, theater, music, dance, and visual art. The set is available for 50¢ from the Consumer Information Center, Dept. 467Y, Pueblo, CO 81009. Make checks payable to the CIC.

The editors of *Off the Page* have done something that was long overdue: they have produced the first poetry magazine on videotape. The first issue includes poets reading and performing their work, as well as commentary. The poets include Richard Wilbur, Amy Clampitt, Cornelius Eady, Carolyn Forché, Richard Howard, Kenneth Koch, Molly Peacock, and Louis Simpson. Actor Tony Randall provides some renditions of Ogden Nash. The first issue is available for \$29.95 (plus \$4.50 s&h) from Primo Donna Productions, PO Box 40003, Fairfield, NJ 07004. Tel. (201) 808-8933.

Unending Dialogue by Rachel Hadas is a moving account of Hadas's experience conducting writing workshops with AIDS patients in New York City. The book includes a description of the workshops, 45 poems by workshop members, poems by Hadas that came out of the workshops, and an extended meditation on the entire experience. *Unending Dialogue* is not only for teachers working with the ill; it has much to say to all teachers of writing. \$17.95 hardcover from Faber and Faber, 50 Cross St., Winchester, MA 01890.

For the past 13 years, every T&W book and every issue of *Teachers & Writers* magazine has been overseen by our printer, Larry Zirlin at Philmark Lithographics. We are happy to announce that Zirlin's new book of poems, *Under the Tongue*, has just been published by Hanging Loose Press, 231 Wyckoff St., Brooklyn, NY 11217 (\$9 paperback, \$16 hardcover. Shipping \$1.50).

New resources for those of us afflicted with Whitmania:

- *Galway Kinnell Reads Walt Whitman* is the best reading available. The one-hour audiocassette (\$10.95 + \$1 s&h) comes from The Watershed Foundation, 6925 Willow St., NW, Suite 201, Washington, DC 20012. Tel. (800) 366-9105
- Three books from the University of Iowa Press: *Selected Letters of Walt Whitman* (\$16.95 paperback), edited by Edwin Haviland Miller, shows that although Whitman wasn't a great letter writer, he is still interesting because he is Walt Whitman; *Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": a Mosaic of Interpretations*, also edited by Miller, is a masterful collage of commentaries on Whitman's great poem (\$15.95 paperback); *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman*, edited by Robert K. Martin, presents 18 essays by contemporary critics and poets showing how Whitman influenced their own lives and work (\$26.95 hardcover). For ordering information, call The University of Iowa Press at (800) 235-2665.



Contemplation Writing

by Jeffrey Pflaum

I WANT MY 4TH–6TH GRADE STUDENTS TO BE motivated from the inside; to be able to “take something away” from my classes that they can use both academically and practically. In the past, I have generated creative thinking and writing with models from literature and from magazines, newspapers, posters, and slides. I realized that although the results proved successful, there was still too much control from the “outside” by the teacher.

“Contemplation Writing” is a program I’ve developed in creative writing, thinking, self-understanding, and communication. In the program, I left the motivation up to the students; that is, I let it come from their inside world and not mine. By learning how to “contemplate their inner experience”—to look carefully at the pictures, feelings, and thoughts of their own minds—they were the ones responsible for the motivation, reason, and purpose for self-expression.

I used two basic methods to instruct the class about inner experience and how to write about it:

(1) The “counting technique” introduced students to the idea of “inner experience.” We used the counting technique for the first two weeks of the school year.

(2) Following this, the “music technique” took the children further into their inner experience. The music technique began the third week and continued for the rest of the year.

The idea for the counting technique came from a student in my 6th grade class. It was used by his brother’s teacher in junior high as a way to relax the children and improve their concentration. However, the teacher did not ask the children to write about their inner experience.

The Counting Technique

The counting technique started with these instructions: “I want all of you to close your eyes and silently count backwards—by ones—from fifty to one. Take your time and don’t rush. When you finish counting, open your eyes and write what just happened inside yourself. There are no right or wrong answers in the assignment.” My instructions about what to write were vague because I wanted the children to discover and describe their experience without my help. I didn’t want to plant anything in their heads about what they were *supposed* to experience.

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In addition, to enhance the atmosphere, I turned off the lights and drew the shades. I relaxed the class by telling them that I would prevent anyone from disturbing their concentration while counting. If they asked about the length of the writing, I said, “Just write whatever you can remember.” The length, I’ve found, varies from one line to two sides of a loose-leaf page. The average length is a paragraph of seven to ten sentences.

Before trying the counting technique in class, I practiced it myself. This way, I had an idea of where the children were coming from in their own written responses.

We counted and wrote twice a week for two weeks. Each lesson took about 20 minutes. In the second week, a 20-minute discussion period followed the counting-and-writing session. During this additional segment, I asked questions about the written responses and sometimes illustrated common experiences on the board. Before these discussion periods in lessons three and four, I made mental notes of what questions to ask. The discussion questions aimed at:

(1) making sure everyone understood the pieces that were read aloud. The lead question usually required the children to think about what had happened in another student’s contemplation experience.

(2) having the pupils express orally the experiences they forgot and therefore didn’t write down. If you practice the technique yourself, you’ll realize how difficult it is to remember everything that occurs while counting back. Listening to their classmates’ accounts often caused students to recall mind-pictures they had forgotten. A typical question to elicit such responses was: “Did anyone else have a similar experience while counting?”

(3) developing the students’ awareness of their inside worlds. Each work read and discussed provided more knowledge about what makes up inner experience.

During discussion periods, we went over as many writings as we could. We didn’t discuss them all; some I simply read aloud. My reading the work with a dramatic voice heightened the students’ interest. The identity of the writer remained anonymous so as not to intrude upon the flow of discussion. Expect some hesitancy from your students in their early discussions: they probably haven’t talked about inner experiences in front of a large group. Their participation will increase as more writings are read aloud and the children relax.

Here are some contemplation writings done by 5th grade students after the counting experience. After each one are questions I asked about the work, as well as descriptions of drawings I did at the board to clarify the experiences.

I saw myself running next to the numbers. I went up and down hills.
Then I stopped at number one and I fell into space.

—*Yolanda De Jesus*

Review the experience: What happened as this person counted back? Describe what you saw or pictured. What name would you give to this type of experience? (Answer: fantasy.) Did anyone else imagine a fantasy or story?

I pictured when I had a little dog. It was so cute that I gave it milk and my doll clothes. He wanted a girl for a friend so I found one for him. My mother made me give up the dog because a man wanted him. I gave the dog to the man. I loved my dog.

—*Diana Estrella*

Use the same questions from the first work to discuss this piece. Illustrate the memory on the board with a rough sketch. Draw a profile of the person's face. One real, outer eye looks outward, while an inner or mind's eye looks inward at an imaginary television screen inside the head. The screen shows the numbers being counted, but then being intercepted by the different mind-pictures from the memory. (I used the diagram to illustrate how any visual inner experience—such as fantasies, dreams, daydreams, and present-moment events—could interfere with counting.)

I felt my body relax and I didn't want to open my eyes. I wanted to be relaxed forever, but my neck started to hurt and my body felt heavier and heavier.

—*Wilson Betancourt*

Discussion questions remain the same as those for previous pieces. I called this experience a "physical or bodily reaction." It was a "side effect" to inner experience. At times, the children also experience headaches, pounding hearts, and dizziness.

I saw a light flash at me. I saw a frog jumping around. I watched balloons flying. The door was opening inside my mind. I imagined fish jumping up and down. The wall was falling inside my mind. The floor moved around. I saw a boat crash into another boat. The boat was melting. My body was falling. I saw myself.

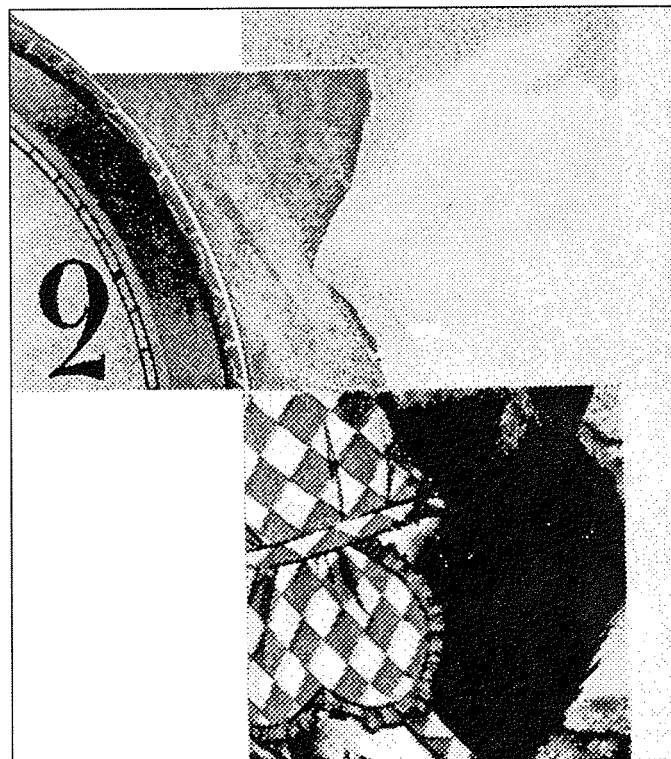
—*Miguel Diaz*

Can you describe this student's experience? Illustrate the piece by roughly sketching the various mind-pictures on the television screen in the person's head. Show the inner eye looking at the different images. I called this a "movie" experience (stream-of-pictures) because many images were seen—one after the other in rapid succession—by the mind's eye. For the final question, I asked the class: "Did anyone else have a movie experience while counting backwards?"

I felt angry, mean, terrible, mad, and worst of all, I was really happy.

—*Evelyn Alvarez*

How many of you experienced different feelings while counting back? Can you name—or describe—some feelings you had? Why did you feel this way? Was anyone confused?



Collage by George Schneeman

Why? Did anyone skip numbers while counting back? Why do you think this happened? (Answer: interference by mind-pictures, feelings, and thoughts.)

All I see is black.

—*Edwin Achévalo*

Variations of this response were: "Nothing." "I didn't think about anything." "I didn't feel anything." Discussion questions: What is meant by this response? Did anyone else see black? Why does someone just see black? (Accept most reasonable answers. The student just didn't understand the instructions. He was scared doing something new, or got confused, and as a result, finished counting very quickly.) You can illustrate the experience with the basic diagram. On your television screen, write the number "50," and then draw a long, spiralling arrow to the number "1." Darken in the screen with harsh, diagonal lines to "block out" all experience.

These experiences changed after students practiced counting back two or three times. Also, as the students listened to and discussed the writings of others, they became more familiar with their own inner experience. They learned to relax and get into the experience of counting backwards.

After four counting sessions all the children saw inside themselves. Funny things started happening—all sorts of images and short side journeys occurred in between the numbers:

I felt like a wasted candle that turned off and fell.

—*Evelyn Alvarez*

I saw waves going backwards. I saw a man eating spaghetti and meatballs upside-down. I saw myself taking a bath upside-down. I felt relaxed. I felt good.

—Dennis Delgado

I felt like a turtle going very slow. Every number I said was like the step the turtle took. It looked like I would never reach number one.

—Yolanda De Jesus

I felt as if all my feelings came out of me. My heart felt tired. When I was getting up to six, it was hard for me. I couldn't pass number six. It was like a nightmare. Everything was dark. My head felt like it passed an earthquake. I mean I have a headache.

—Betty Alvia

I felt like I was getting smaller and smaller. My hands were flapping up and down. I saw myself flying in the air and the birds were calling me.

—Wilson Betancourt

My mind pictured the numbers. I was counting and thinking about the numbers. I got some feelings I never felt before.

—Maritza Alvarez

While counting back, I thought about the time my cousins, my brother, and I were playing in the hall. My grandmother came out with a broom and we all got away except my cousin Diana. My grandmother started to hit her and everyone laughed. All this happened a long time ago, but I just remembered it now. It was like doing it all over again.

—Sandra Estrella

I felt like it was personal. I saw a picture of a man on a horse. It was the dream I had last night. I felt sleepy, too.

—Crissy Toro

I saw the numbers that I was counting and felt like I was in space. I started shaking. I felt like I was floating around without a rocket. I felt a little scared.

—Carlos Rivera

The Music Technique

At the end of the two week period, I switched to the “music technique.” Instead of counting, music now triggered the mind-pictures, feelings, and thoughts. The transition from one method to another did not cause any problems for the children. In fact, they preferred listening to their favorite songs, as opposed to counting, because music made it easier to experience their inner worlds.

I conducted this new contemplation period two or three times a week, usually skipping a day between each. The listening, contemplation, and writing took about thirty minutes. The ultimate aim—beyond the music, relaxing, contemplating, and writing—was to expand the students’ self-awareness.

I introduced the new technique by saying, “Today we’re going to try something different. Instead of counting backwards, we’re going to use music to find out what’s happening inside of you. For the next ten to fifteen minutes I will play music. Relax, put your heads down on the desk (if you like),

maybe close your eyes, and listen to the music. Study your inside world while listening. When the music stops, you will have two minutes of silence to review whatever went on inside. Next, I want you to write whatever you remember about it. Your writing can be about your mind-pictures, memories, fantasies, dreams, present-moment events, feelings, thoughts, or ideas.” The length can be various, depending on the stamina of the students.

There were special rules for the music contemplation period: “No talking or singing while the music plays. Don’t tap or drum to the beat of the music. Try not to make eye contact with your friends, because it will distract you from yourself.”

The counting technique is an *introduction* to inner experience. The first two weeks of the music technique move the kids further along in the act of contemplation. They’re still learning how to look inside themselves. You can’t assume they understand the process of contemplation from counting alone.

It took about four to six practice periods (two weeks) for the children to understand the aims, procedures, and rules of the contemplation period. I reiterated the major purpose of the assignment: “What did you experience inside? What did you imagine or picture inside your mind?”

I used a cassette player to play tapes prerecorded by the children. When handing out the blank tapes to volunteers, I said: “Pretend you’re a disc jockey. Put together a concert for us. Choose songs you know everyone will like. Arrange a good mix on your tape. Vary the music: use slow and fast, vocals and instrumentals. Remember, the tapes are for our contemplations. We want the music to be a relaxing and enjoyable background for our experiencing.” The students selected mostly popular music. Among the types of music I picked were rhythm and blues, rap, soul, Latin, jazz, folk, rock and roll, classical, Native American flute, and African music. The children (a talented 6th grade class) liked the music and wrote some of their most powerful works during these periods. Once again, I recommend that the teacher practice the music technique before using it with the class.

Listening to music enabled the students to get into themselves. They felt relaxed while looking at their inside worlds. Music led them to the idea that you could enjoy yourself in thought, and that you could confront yourself, or your life, in a calm and peaceful way. Generally, music gave a positive lift to contemplation.

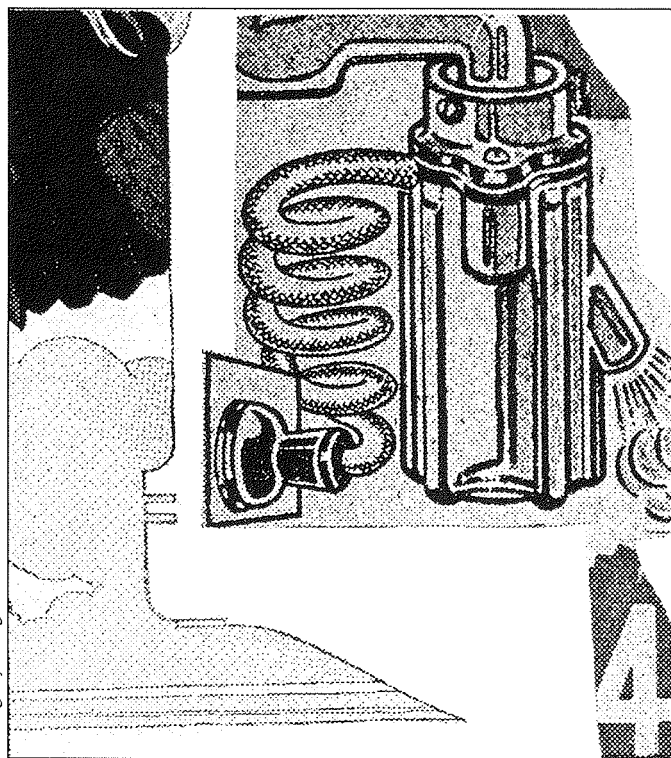
The children liked the music technique more than the counting technique because it “soothed” them into their inner experiences—which were not always pleasant.

After the students had become accustomed to the procedures of the music technique, I added one or two discussion periods, each about twenty minutes long, to the three regular contemplation periods. These question-and-answer periods immediately followed the writing. The combined lessons ran for approximately forty-five minutes. The discussion format was similar to that of the counting approach: I read aloud 5–10 of the students’ responses and asked the class a basic set of questions about them. The basic discussion questions that can be used for most contemplations are:

- (1) What mind-pictures did you see as I read the contemplation aloud?
- (2) What feelings did you get from the mind-pictures or the contemplation?
- (3) What thoughts came into mind after you heard the contemplation?
- (4) What is the writer trying to communicate? (What is the main idea of the contemplation?)

At times these basic questions led me into more and more specific and creative questioning as the contemplation writing was analyzed. It is important to note that the first question I asked encourages the children to visualize another student's contemplation in their minds. In so doing, the children saw a wider range of inner experiences than they themselves were capable of having while listening to music.

A vocabulary lesson evolved in the discussion periods, during which I defined, clarified, and expanded on the meanings of key words that became a foundation for future lessons: thought, thinking, experience, idea, feeling, emotion, meditation, contemplate, concentrate, centering, focusing,



reflection, insight, hate, love, jealousy, envy, pride, ambition, competition, imagine, image, mind-picture, reality, fantasy, daydream, sensitivity, insensitive, self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-understanding, self-image, communicate, relationship, inside world, outside world.

Below are some results of the program. The contemplations come first, followed by the discussion questions, and, in certain examples, descriptions of illustrations. These pieces came from a 5th grade class that was one to three years behind academically. The length requirement was one to ten sentences. Music for these particular contemplations came from

“Top Twenty” songs familiar to the students. The pieces are from 1981, when my program first started. The work was collaboratively revised by the students and me.

I imagined being a window and the children threw rocks at me. One day they put rubber windows on me, and when the children threw rocks, they bounced back and hit them. Then they stopped bothering me.

—Edwin Acevado

I asked the basic discussion questions: Mind pictures? Feelings? Thoughts? Main idea? Extension: What do you like about the way the experience is communicated?

The sky is beautiful night or day. At night I see the stars shine and the moon glow. In the day I see the sun shining brightly and the clouds floating in the sky. The sky is always beautiful—even when it rains or snows.

—Robert Robles

Close your eyes and picture the sky at night. Describe it. Do the same thing for daytime skies. Describe a sunset and the feelings that you might get at this time. Repeat for sunrise. What thoughts come into your mind as you imagine these pictures?

I don't want to do contemplation. I want to play seven-up. Oh boy! Oh boy! Oh boy! I have to do contemplation. Put your head on the desk and dream. Oh boy! Oh boy! Oh boy! I want to play seven-up.

—Manuel Gonzalez

What feelings are expressed? What's the problem? Is the problem or conflict solved? (Define *conflict*.) Extension: Did you ever find yourself caught between wanting to play and having to do work? How did you feel? How did you solve the conflict? Illustrate the contemplation by drawing a boy sitting on top of a fence and looking to both sides—not knowing which to jump to, the contemplation or seven-up side. Thoughts are drawn in little circles (“bubbles”) coming from his head indicating the internal conflict. Ask the class: “How will the boy feel if he stays on the fence without jumping to one of the sides?” Also, “How can he solve the conflict?” (Answer: Make a decision, that is, accept the reality of work.)

This afternoon I was playing jump rope and I always made out. I said to myself, “I am a loser. I try and try but I always lose.”

—Monserrate Pacheco

Mind-pictures? What feelings are expressed by the rope jumper? What does the person think about herself at the end? Can she change her feelings? How can “I am a loser” be changed to something more positive? Is the person hopeless? In my diagram, I showed the inner eye looking at the television image of the person jumping rope. The picture was surrounded with negative feelings and the words “I am a loser.” I drew a second illustration of the girl trying to jump rope in the future. Ask the class: “What will happen now? Describe the inside and outside worlds.” I sketched some thought bubbles in to show the continuing conflict—with or without resolution.

I thought I was a lion. Every time somebody passed through the jungle, I would growl at them and they would get scared. Once a little boy came by and I scratched his face. He got very frightened and started to cry.

—*Marisol Santos*

I used the four basic discussion questions, as well as: “Who do you think the lion is growling at or angry with? The other people or itself? Explain your answer.”

I felt like a rabbit as I walked through the woods. I saw wild animals in the forest. One day I was alone and I spotted a wild animal. I hopped into my hole and never came out.

—*Cynthia Santiago*

What feeling keeps the rabbit in the hole? What does the writing express about fear and living one’s life? Do you think the rabbit could have stayed in the hole forever? Why or why not? What feeling(s) might drive the rabbit out of the hole? Extension: How can fear have a strong effect on reading? test-taking? sports? friendships? learning something new? If you are scared of something, is there anything you can do to change your feeling? For this writing, I drew the rabbit stuck in a hole with the word *fear* printed on its body. Also written out on it were the other feelings coming into play (such as confusion, hunger, anger). In a thought bubble, the conflict of facing the fear and leaving, versus avoiding the fear and remaining, was written in. I also diagrammed the problem of fear in sports, reading, test-taking, etc.

I felt like asleep, you know, soaking in a hot tub of bubble bath—ahhhhhh, I could fall into it right now.

—*Arthur Cintron*

Describe the images you see. What feelings do you get from them? What thoughts come into mind? What does the experience tell us about contemplation? How can it have a strong effect on our feelings? I drew this experience showing the inner eye looking at a screen with the person sitting or sleeping in a hot tub. (You can also ask the children to draw a quick pencil sketch of the writing.) I defined “peace” by putting synonyms on the board: “quiet, calm, still, tranquil, placid, untroubled, serene.” Finally, we compared the students’ visualization of peace to the statement, “I feel peaceful.”

It took time and practice for the students to master the four basic discussion questions. The mind’s eye needed training to see the mental imagery clearly and in detail. As Maritza said about counting backwards: “I got some feelings I never had before.” Throughout the course of the year we built up a vocabulary that named, defined, and described a wide spectrum of feelings and their different degrees. The “thoughts” question was difficult early on because it required the children to be exceptionally quick or spontaneous enough to catch fast-moving ideas triggered by the writing. I encouraged them to say whatever came to mind, reassuring them that there were no right or wrong answers. The students’ responses to the “main idea” question, where critical, syncretical, and creative thinking were involved, improved steadily over time.

After the students had completed a dozen writing assignments, I talked about certain contemplations that showed: 1) a lack of effort; or, 2) a misunderstanding of the contemplation process. Children who didn’t put enough energy into their work or were confused about the process wrote pieces such as the following two:

Today my mother and sister went out. I was outside with my friends.

It was raining Friday and I could not go out to play. I stayed home playing with my Atari and watching television. I played with my hamster. I waited for the rain to stop so I could play handball with my friends. But it did not stop raining. I stayed inside and listened to music and recorded some songs with my sisters.

In the first example there was no effort. I explained to the class: “The key to contemplation writing is the effort you put into the contemplation itself.” Strong contemplation efforts resulted in creative, perceptive, and poetic writing. The second example shows confusion about the contemplation process. Hearing this piece, the class saw several mind-pictures, but there were some missing pieces: What feelings are connected to the mental images? What was the writer thinking throughout the day? Was he bothered about not going outside? What was he trying to express? Generally, my discussion questions for weak pieces attempted to enrich and expand the experiences: “What is missing from this contemplation? What can be added to improve the work?” If too many contemplations fell flat, I reemphasized three major points: 1) the definition of contemplation; 2) the diagram illustrating the phrase “contemplate your experience”; and 3) the idea that the first step in writing is contemplating.

During the first six discussion periods, I also demonstrated the formation of a mind-picture, because the concept of mental imagery is crucial to contemplation writing, and to most forms of writing. I asked the children to stare at a lit candle for thirty seconds. Next, I said: “Close your eyes for ten seconds.” Then I asked, “What just happened inside your mind? How did you see the lit candle if your eyes were closed? What happened to your experience of staring at the candle?” Another mind-picture exercise was to ask them to close their eyes and describe their room, breakfast, pet, school lunch, bicycle, etc. A key question is: “How were you able to look at and describe these things if your eyes were closed and the objects were not even present?”

In the last few years I have changed the length requirement of the contemplations from “one to ten sentences” to “fifty to one hundred and twenty-five words (or more).” I wanted more intense and detailed contemplations. I wanted to prod my students to see, feel, think, and concentrate more during contemplation. As a result, the pieces written over the past three years have improved in their depth and description. Here are some recent samples by (average to above average) 4th–6th grade students. The work has been corrected for basic errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

I feel curious, just waiting for the words to come on. I like listening to music because it puts a picture inside my mind. What I see right

now is a hot, tasty pizza and I'm eating and eating. It's all finished! Now I'm going somewhere and it looks like a pool or a beach. The music is following me wherever I go. I'm jumping into the water and it is a whole new scene. The scenes keep on changing, and now, the music is gone, and I'm regular.

—Melanie Colon

I felt like I was in my bed, and all of a sudden, I fell, fell into the bed. I screamed and screamed. It was like falling into space. It was pretty, but it frightened me because I didn't know where I was. It was like a fairy tale. I skipped in a beautiful meadow and the sun was going down. As I looked at it, I felt joy coming through my eyes at that moment. The sun glared at me. It sparkled like the stars, the sky was blue like the eyes of joy, and the birds whistled at me. Then, everything changed. A huge wind came and blew and blew. I tried to grab on to a fence, but the wind was too strong for me. I flew with the wild wind and started to spin and spin. Then, I was in class. I wish I was there again.

—Rebecca Sanchez

What should I be? I don't know. Should I be like my cousin, uncle, aunt, or father? I have choices. It's just that I'll never be like my cousin. I'll never play as good as him. For example, one day we went outside, and he threw a couple of balls to me. I dropped some. I caught some. But I always dropped one when my friends came. Even Jason saw that I wouldn't dare try and catch one of his real high pop flies. It's like in class, when the teacher calls on me, I just stay in shock. I get confused and I just don't know what to do. So I get it wrong. It's not that I'm dumb. It's not that I'm absent-minded. Even when I speak it's like having a nervous breakdown. I guess it's just that I think I'm going to reply wrong or get embarrassed. Why was I born with this fear of speaking? I can't say what I really want to say. I can't be anything if I always speak with fear.

—Francisco Rosado

It was all red with only one window. It was this classroom, with a man dressed in all green, and who disappeared every time he went near the window. There was no door, no chalkboard, no nothing, just one window with a strange man. Outside the window it was all foggy with no one, no cars, no buildings, no nothing.

—Raul Fernandez

Contemplation Comprehension

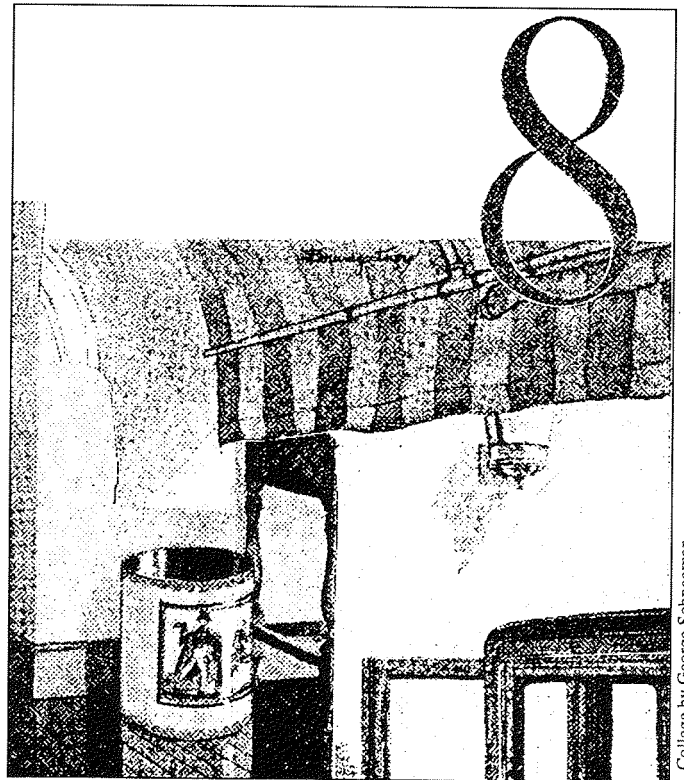
Sometime after midyear (February), when the children had contemplated approximately 30 times and had had about 15 discussion periods, I introduced "Contemplation Comprehension": "Today, instead of reading aloud your writings, I'm going to hand out a sheet with one contemplation and a set of questions about it. Read the work silently and contemplate the experience described in it. Find the mind-pictures, feelings, thoughts, and main idea (message) conveyed by the contemplation. In other words, before you actually answer the questions, you'll be 'contemplating the contemplation.' When you're finished with this, we'll go over the questions to make sure you know what they're asking. We will go over your answers tomorrow in our discussion."

My final objective was to evaluate the children's understanding and knowledge of inner experience resulting from the contemplations and our discussions. How involved were they

in writing, listening, experiencing, contemplating, and thinking throughout these periods?

I checked the papers overnight and starred the strongest responses. The following day I read the questions and asked the students whose responses were starred to read their answers. In this manner we were able to get into the contemplation in much greater depth.

The following are three sets of samples and questions used in a 4th grade class. Student responses are not included. The point here is to give you a better understanding of the questioning methodology.



Collage by George Schneeman

I was not relaxed and moved a lot. I looked at my desk and then looked at the floor. I kept looking at the floor and I got relaxed.

- (1) Describe the writer's feeling.
- (2) How did the writer change his feelings?
- (3) How was the person able to relax himself by looking at the floor? Explain what you think happened.
- (4) Name a place or thing that relaxes you the more you look at it. (Discuss both real and imaginary items.)

I imagined being a soccer pro. I was a goalie. Nobody scored on me. I was the best and then they left me on the bench for most of the game. The score was tied 6 to 6 and they put me back in as goalie. The other team scored on me and I wasn't so professional anymore.

- (1) What does the contemplation get you to think about?
- (2) If you were the goalie, what would you be thinking while you sat on the bench?
- (3) If you were the goalie, what would you be thinking two hours after the game?
- (4) Describe one mind-picture you can see clearly.

While I was listening to the music, I felt as if I wanted to cry. I don't know why. I felt as if someone from my family died. I just kept listening to the music. Then I felt as if a whole bunch of computers were surrounding me. I turned one on and they all turned on and they all showed my face. I got so scared I turned them off. I walked out terrified. But I didn't feel scared after that. I just kept listening to the music.

- (1) Describe the mind-picture that really stays in your head.
- (2) Why did the person get so terrified as the computer(s) showed her face(s)?
- (3) Why do you think the person stopped feeling scared after the experience?
- (4) What is the writer trying to express in the contemplation?

The contemplation writing program, starting in 1981 and still continuing, has been successful. Student writing improved over the school year as a result of contemplation. The children became comfortable with writing. They learned a method to discover the ingredients of their inner worlds and to deal with their lives. The weekly discussions helped give the students further insight into themselves and others. An objective behind the question-and-answer mode was also to get the children to

“imitate” the teacher’s role of interpreting experience. I wanted them to internalize the questioning technique to contemplate and understand themselves—without anybody’s assistance. Contemplation writing allowed the children to release negative feelings so that they were clear-headed for work. The writing system was not only a means for expressing one’s self, but also a way to change one’s immediate (and not so immediate) feelings and behavior. The program can be adapted to junior and senior high school students, and can be utilized with large (thirty or more) and small groups (eight to fifteen).

My goal has also been to help colleagues see the imaginative side of pedagogy. Contemplation writing could affect them, as it has students, helping them to be more spontaneous, to be discussion leaders and listeners, and to generate student-centered classwork. The teacher’s role would change from imparting knowledge to drawing it out. By demonstrating to the children their private worlds of inner experience, the assignments would become more “organic.” Expanding our capacity as communicators and artists would help bring down the walls because we would all actually stop to see each other.



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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, the Bingham Trust, Booth Ferris Foundation, Chemical Bank, Consolidated Edison, Louis Calder Foundation, Morgan Stanley Foundation, New York Rotary Foundation, New York Telephone, New York Times Company Foundation, Henry Nias Foundation, Helena Rubinstein Foundation, the Scherman Foundation, and the Steele-Reese Foundation.

Our program also receives funding from Districts 1, 3, and 5, PS 75, The Dalton School, and The District 3 Dual Language Program, Manhattan; Districts 7, 8, 11, and 12, PS 49, PS 75, PS 96, CS 152, and IS 151, Bronx; Districts 18, 22, and 23, PS 198, PS 219, PS 312, JHS 263, and Eastern District High School, Brooklyn; Districts 25, 26, and 27, PS 42, PS 62, PS 64, PS 90, PS 159, PS 165, and PS 225, Queens; The Webster School; The Park Avenue School; Nassau County BOCES; The New York School for the Deaf; ArtsConnection-Arts Exposure; The Arts & Cultural Education Network; The Bronx Museum; and The Girl Scouts of Greater New York.

Editor: Ron Padgett. Assistant editor: Christopher 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 is a member of the Library of Congress' Center for the Book.



Teachers & Writers Collaborative

5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306

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