TEACHERS & WRITERS

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Four Women

At the Beginning of Teachers & Writers Collaborative

by Christian McEwen

WHEN GRACE PALEY WAS STILL IN SCHOOL, she cut a picture of a young woman out of the anthology of *Best Poems of 1943* and stuck it up on her wall. "I thought, 'Well, there it is, a girl and a poet, it's a possibility at least—' and I went back to not doing my homework very much." The woman in that picture was Muriel Rukeyser.

Years later, in the fall of 1967, both Grace Paley and Muriel Rukeyser came to work for the newly founded Teachers & Writers Collaborative, part of an eclectic group that included Donald Barthelme, Jonathan Kozol, Richard Lewis, and Ishmael Reed, as well as two other women writers, June Jordan (then June Meyer) and Anne Sexton.* Apart from Muriel Rukeyser, none of the four women had ever taught before. But by the time they left, their strategies and assignments, their personalities and politics, had become embedded in the very fabric of the Collaborative. Fanciful as it sounds, for me they stand like four caryatids, one at each corner of the "house" that is T&W: June Jordan, the black activist and poet; Anne Sexton, the WASP self-investigator; Muriel Rukeyser, the androgynous philosopher; and Grace Paley, "the chubby dark-haired woman who looked like a nice short teacher" (as described in one of her own stories), everybody's favorite grandmother and friend.

June Jordan

June Jordan was born in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, and as a young woman worked in film and as a freelance writer. By 1967, she was technical housing assistant in an anti-poverty program, Mobilization for Youth. T&W's first director, Herb Kohl, remembers her

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as "an incredible translator of moral values into action." She in turn remembers Kohl, for whom she had considerable respect, as "a crazy dynamo of a man. He was high and crazy, but he knew what he wanted to do." But as the lone black woman writer, she was less engaged with the other members of the Collaborative. Her heart was with black people and black poetry. "So when Herb told me he had found a woman for me to work with—a white woman from Mississippi—I was incredulous. I thought, 'You're kidding!' But that was Terri Bush, and in time I came to love her very deeply."

June Jordan and Terri Bush ran a Saturday writing workshop in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn for the best part of four years. Their "Voice of the Children" project was one of the most successful that Teachers & Writers ever sponsored. From the start, Jordan brought in books by contemporary black writers, poems by Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, and anthologies of modern African poetry. The children devoured them. Here, for example, is part of Jordan's teaching journal for October 21st, 1967:

> Around the table a fantastic thing was happening. One [child] would show another a particular poem—secretively, with extreme delight, nervously, giggling, furtive—as though they could not really believe what they were reading. . . . It got to be like the most beautiful kind of neo-Quaker meeting: there would be this extreme silence, and then somebody would just start reading a poem aloud.

Reading poems led to copying them out in longhand, and copying led to more ideas, until by the end of the session the children knew they wanted to write poems of their own. By December they wanted more books, and records too, and a record player. They wanted a place to dance and mess about and talk and browse. They wanted something simple and at the same time almost unimaginable to them, "to board a Saturday subway and get off at a place like home is supposed to be."

Their own homes were not often very home-like. From Jordan's point of view, "the proliferation of crises was staggering." Some of the kids were dyslexic. Others had parents on drugs or alcohol. Then, "so-and-so's sister's boyfriend would beat her up. Someone would get pregnant." There were problems with housing, with abandonment, with rape. And the streets of course were far from safe. As a child in Bedford Stuyvesant, Jordan had belonged to a gang called the Royal Bops. She had learned how to fight and to defend herself. "I was a girl gangster of necessity. I had a street baptism and training. It was a good thing my mother was a nurse, because she could patch me up." But as an adult, as someone who was building a life for herself outside of what was then inevitably called the ghetto, Jordan wanted to model other methods of coping. She and Terri Bush "tried very hard to put out fires." They also taught the kids to find words for what was troubling them. "Sling it on the paper!" Jordan would say. The children grew used to writing from "an urgent passionate place." It was a skill that was to prove especially useful in the coming year—"that unspeakably brutal year of 1968."

Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in early April. As soon as the children heard the news, they asked for pencils and a piece of paper. That night, while Jordan read at Washington Square Methodist Church, they all sat through the reading, working on their poems. A poem ("April 4th, 1968") by Michael Goode [see box on p. 6] was later published in the *Village Voice.*

In the cab on the way home, the children were still burning up with words. One girl asked the driver, "Can you keep the light on please? I'm writing a poem." The light stayed on, and when the cab arrived at Bedford Stuyvesant, the driver refused to charge them for the ride.

At times, the children gave voice to a sense of panic that many black adults also shared. June Jordan remembers one student, Wayne, a streetwise adolescent all hung about with silver chains. When Dr. King was killed, Wayne kept fooling with his chains as if they were a rosary. Finally he looked up at Jordan. "Do you think they're going to kill *all of us*?" he asked.

Even without the edginess added by the assassination, such terrors appeared again and again in the children's poems, from Vanessa Howard's "I am frightened that/the flame of hate/will burn me," to Linda Curry's "My Enemy":

> My Enemy is the world
> The world hates me it is trying
> to get rid of me Somebody
> up there don't like me.

But it is important to say that the children wrote other kinds of poems too. Freedom to write meant freedom to dream, to enjoy, to celebrate, as well as freedom to rage and mourn. When Deborah Burkett started a poem, "I would like to go/where the golden apples grow" [see box], she was learning from Robert Louis Stevenson as all young poets learn from their predecessors. But the "rainbow clear in the sky" and the "red flamingos" were entirely her own.

As the first year came to an end, and then the second, The Voice of the Children began to attract increasing external support. Teachers & Writers stood back, and Jordan and Bush continued to work together on an independent basis. They raised the money for the children to go to summer camp in Toronto, Ohio. They bought a van, and organized trips to the Frick Museum, to the Brooklyn Museum, and out into the country. By 1970, when Holt, Rinehart and Winston brought out the young poets' first

anthology, also called *The Voice of the Children*, the children had appeared on radio and television, and their work had been published in *McCall's, UHURU,* and the *New York Times*, as well as in a number of anthologies. The Voice of the Children had truly been heard (and validated) by the adult world.

Anne Sexton

Apart from the fact that June Jordan and Anne Sexton were both poets working for the Collaborative, they could hardly have been more unlike. Sexton grew up in Massachusetts in a conventional middle-class family. She married young, and began to write poems as the result of a nervous breakdown. Despite her successes, she continued to think of herself primarily as a "patient," whose identity was in many ways predicated upon her sadness and madness. At the same time, she had a fierce hunger to reach beyond what she knew. "I need to learn," she wrote. "I am a stubborn person."

Perhaps because Herb Kohl seemed so entirely "other" to her, so deeply committed to education and social action, Sexton was drawn to him. She called him her brother, and signed her letters to him, "Sister Anne." In the fall of 1966, she and Kohl both broke their hip (the same hip!) within two days of each other. "You sound more philosophical than I," Sexton lamented. "Send me some truth!!!!" Kohl did his best. He was genuinely fond of her, but it was clear from the beginning that he didn't have a lot of time to spare.

"Not only was I outside her pain, but I was obsessed with politics. I was obsessed with writing. I had thirty, forty, fifty children—my students—[to take care of] and I really didn't have time for Anne Sexton." Nonetheless, he sees now that "the way in which I didn't have time for her seemed to be valuable for her." She would call on the phone and it would be, "Herb, I'm in despair." He knew that she was desperate, and that such desperation could be dangerous. "But everyone I knew was in despair. I was functioning in poor communities where people were in despair because they were freezing at night, and people were hungry, so despair wasn't a big deal to me." For once the shrill voices of Anne Sexton's self-obsession ("My loss is greater than yours!/My pain is more valuable!") did not command total attention.

With Muriel Rukeyser too, whom she also met through the Collaborative, Sexton was forced to question some of the assumptions of her own anxious, pampered world. Rukeyser was no stranger to depression herself ("I have terrible periods. Depression is a mild name for it."), but unlike Sexton, who was always fidgeting with thoughts of suicide, Rukeyser never seriously considered it as an option. Rukeyser was the woman who had written in "Suicide Blues" of her severed head swimming around a ship, "Three times around and it wouldn't go down," the one who insisted, in the voice of the potted plant on her windowsill:

> Flower flower flower flower
> Today for the sake of all the dead
> Burst into flower.

For Anne Sexton, Rukeyser's level of involvement, her compassion, her generosity were all something of a threat. At the same time, Sexton yearned to emulate her. "I don't want to be a 'safe poet' or a 'safe person,'" she wrote in her journal. "I don't want to be dead."

In the fall of 1967, Anne Sexton and her friend Bob Clawson started teaching at Wayland [Massachusetts] High School in "WASP North America." They were to work with twenty children for an hour a day, five days a week. Sexton, of course, was full of foreboding. "They will be people. I am afraid of people. Will I ever learn their names?"

Herb Kohl must have shared that trepidation, albeit from a distance. But in the end, Sexton's anxieties and self-doubt turned out to be useful for the students. Kohl says, "The kids could see her struggling with herself. It's like she was ripping off her skin in public." So what if she were Anne Sexton, a published author and a Pulitzer prize winner? They treated her as one of themselves. "I can't believe you wrote those poems," student Steve Rizzo wrote to her. "You seem like us, ordinary. . . . If you could write, then we could write—anyone can write." Although there were certainly bad days, when Sexton felt she had nothing in her head, "nothing but a pounding heart and no curriculum," the teaching did come to give her joy. She read her own poems to the class, and gave unlikely assignments such as, "Pretend you are witnessing the crucifixion and write about it." She brought in a piece by Grace Paley, "The Sad Story of Six Boys About to be Drafted in Brooklyn," a Beatles song, and T.S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi," all of which excited prolonged discussion. (Having read the poem three times, the kids finally asked,"Who are the Magi?") She also kept her teaching journal with some diligence, and wrote several new poems, including "The Papa and Mama Dance." The students didn't always understand her poems ("The Papa and Mama Dance" was in fact about incest), but nonetheless Sexton was triumphant. "I'm beginning to know them and they me. It's a small miracle in my life."

Another "small miracle" took place the following year, when Steve Rizzo borrowed Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, and set three of the poems to music. Out of this came a chamber rock group: "Anne Sexton and Her Kind," which was to survive till 1971.

The class itself came to an end in the early summer of 1968. It had been, on the whole, a very valuable experience,

even if some of the students would have appreciated a wider emotional range. As one put it bluntly in his class evaluation: "I would also enjoy having Miss Sexton read a poem with a happy ending, without death, incest, or related subjects." Sexton found this very funny. "None of my poems are happy—hardly any of them are." As Kohl says wryly, "Ambitions, hopes, and dreams were not her strong point." For that kind of help he turned to Muriel Rukeyser and Grace Paley.

Muriel Rukeyser

Muriel Rukeyser had been born and grew up in New York City. As a young woman, she had been dazzlingly successful, publishing her first book in the Yale Younger Poets series at the age of twenty-one. Her friend Jane Cooper remembers what an inspiration she was. "Just the idea of a young woman out in the world writing poems and making a living was amazing to me, because all the poets were men. She published five books before she was thirty. She was a *meteor*."

The importance of having a "meteor" on one's horizon was something that Rukeyser herself recognized. "Who was your first living poet?" she used to ask her students at Sarah Lawrence. It would have pleased her to learn what her example meant to Grace Paley and Jane Cooper, especially since all three later became close friends. They used to read their work to each other over the telephone. Jane Cooper explains, "All of us who grew up before xeroxing are very good hearers!"

Rukeyser's most enduring relationships were with women, but she was never a separatist ("Whoever despises the penis despises the cunt/Whoever despises the cunt despises the life of the child"), and she and Kohl soon became good friends. By then, her early fame had fallen away, and she had lived through some difficult years, raising her son alone and out of wedlock, surviving the McCarthy era (as a communist sympathizer, if not a communist party member), and in July of 1964 enduring her first stroke. She had had to learn to speak again, and when Kohl met her in the spring of 1966, she had still not entirely recovered. "Her face was becoming unparalyzed. Some of her muscles sagged, and some didn't. She spoke slowly with a very deep voice." He found her extremely impressive, a "formidable person, an elemental force. She really believed that she could save the world."

That same strength and confidence operated in her teaching. Rukeyser was convinced, as she said in her poem "Rune," that "the word in the child needs me." At the same time it didn't matter where or how she started teaching, since for her, "One's education has no edges, has no end, is not separated out and cannot be separated out in any way, and is full of strength because one refuses to have it separated out." Here, for example, is one of the exercises she used at the Community Resource Center in East Harlem. It is called "A Piece of Paper."

"I took a sheet of good typing paper and showed it to [the students]. 'Here it is,' I said, 'with whatever properties and possibilities it has.' I took the paper and in one gesture crumpled it small and threw it down in the middle of the table. They sat around looking at it in silence. 'Here it is now,' I said, 'with whatever possibilities and properties it has. Do something with it.'"

One student tore the paper in half. One set it on fire. "All right," Rukeyser told him. "That's a perfectly good response. It says it loud and clear. . . . We're heading toward words. What happens when we get to words?" And the student took another piece of paper and wrote in huge staggering letters, "help, HELP, H E L P." A third student cut out a string of paper dolls and printed across their bodies, "People Need People."

For Rukeyser, none of these responses was "wrong." Each one drew words and possibilities out into the open: private, unexpected, sad, often "forbidden." One of her most famous exercises was to provide her students with the beginning, "I could not tell—" and see what then emerged. One of her students wrote about two children kissing in a dark corner, one white, one black. "I don't think the two of them pay any attention to each other in public," he added coolly. But that of course was part of the point. "Pay attention to what they tell you to forget," Rukeyser wrote in one of her poems. "Pay attention to what they tell you to forget./ Pay attention to what they tell you to forget."

Rukeyser has a poem called "A Simple Experiment" in which she writes of a magnet "shocked back" into "simple iron." It is possible, she says, to remagnetize that iron, to "stroke it and stroke it," until the molecules regain their "tending grace."

"Tending grace" is a good phrase for what she herself wanted to give, both as a teacher and a friend. Grace Paley says Rukeyser talked in harmonics. "It was like Sibelius, or the sea speaking. And people would try to extract grammatical sentences out of these waves of music that came towards them." Kohl describes her as "oceanic, dipped into the sources of language." It was as if she believed that words alone had power to heal. In the late sixties, during the riots in Harlem, Rukeyser wanted to go up to 125th Street and read her poems out loud in the street. Kohl persuaded her against it: "But every once in a while I have this dream of the whole world in riotous flames, and Muriel sitting, reading poetry with it all going on around her, and slowly the whole thing recedes. The words come out, the *presence* just comes out, with that conviction, and the flames draw back."

Grace Paley

Grace Paley was born in the South Bronx, the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants. She published her first book of short stories in 1959, but she didn't know many other writers, didn't especially want to know them. There were far too many other things to think about. "First my father was sick that Friday, then the children were born, then I had those Tuesday-night meetings, then the war began." The words belong to a woman in one of her short stories, but they could easily be Paley's own. "I was so deeply involved in so many things," she says. "All of which really absorbed me totally."

If Rukeyser was the wise woman of the Collaborative, "the largest mind," the one who had gone to death's door and come back to speak of what she found there, Grace Paley was the reliable friend and comrade, the one who had been with T&W from the beginning. Jane Cooper remembers her from the time when T&W was still being talked and argued into existence, at the Sarah Lawrence Conference in February 1966. "Grace was my hero in that whole complicated session-after-session congress, when everybody was screeching at each other. Every time she would get up she would say something quite short and sensible, and it would be like,'I think we should start in our own neighborhoods. My school is next to my apartment building. That's where I've been working.'"

Four months later, at the Huntting Conference, Paley helped draft the "Huntting Statement," which afterwards became a kind of manifesto for the Collaborative. This criticized the "milky texts and toneless curriculum" used in so many schools, and called for new principles, such as no grading, less emphasis on "correct" usage, and freedom for the kids "to invent the language by which they manage the world." The statement also argued that writing should not be estranged from the other arts, and that acting, drawing, and dancing could all be used to tell a story, and indeed, should be.

Once the funding came through, Paley worked for T&W in a number of New York City public schools. But she didn't do it very often. Resist was founded in 1967, the same year as T&W, and Paley was a committed anti-war activist. Besides, her children were in their teens, and needed tending, and she had just started teaching two days a week at Sarah Lawrence.

Teaching college was new for her then, and she remembers trying to figure out "how to make smart kids dumb." It wasn't easy, but in time she was able to come up with her own methods and assignments: reading poems aloud around the table, because there were "tunes still missing" in the students' heads, teaching them to write "what they didn't know about what they knew." "Tell a story in the voice of someone with whom you are in conflict," she wrote in "Some Notes on Teaching." "Ask the oldest person you know to tell you a story told them by the oldest person they remember. And no personal journals, please, for about a year. Why? Boring to me. When you find only yourself interesting, you're boring."

When the papers came back to her, Paley's criticism was never framed in terms of "right or wrong," but rather, "true or false," a matter of moral accuracy, not logic or aesthetics. In "Some Notes on Teaching," she provided a list of the "lies" that had to be removed, among them, "the lie of injustice to characters, the lie of unnecessary adjectives, and the lie of the brilliant sentence you love the most." Then, lest her students get downhearted at the enormity of the task, she brought in her own first drafts to cheer them up. It was important to remember that everybody's work is clumsy and inaccurate at the beginning.

Meanwhile, back at the Collaborative, Herb Kohl was writing grant proposals and teaching his seminars and doing his best to keep T&W afloat. He didn't call Grace Paley often, because he knew how busy she was. But when he needed support she was the one he turned to. She always had a story to tell him, most often something that would make him laugh. "And if you knew Grace, you'd know that the story was for you, and that it was appropriate, just listen it out." Paley was a realist; she never pretended that things weren't sometimes very difficult. But at the same time, "Life itself was more magical than the sadness of life. That was the spirit she infused for me, certainly. Being sad is no excuse!"

Grace Paley lives in Vermont now. June Jordan (and Herb Kohl) are out in California. Anne Sexton and Muriel Rukeyser are dead. But in the sprawling house that is the Collaborative, there is no question that their influence endures. Poets, fiction writers, activists, and teachers: in the differences between them lies their collective strength.

NOTE

This piece could not have been written without the kindness of the following people: Terri Bush, Barbara Christian, Jane Cooper, Florence Howe, June Jordan, Herb Kohl, Judy Kohl, Diane Middlebrook, Grace Paley, Robert Silvers, Tinka Topping, and Zelda Wirtschafter. Thank you very much. I have also drawn much useful information from *Journal of a Living Experiment*, edited, with commentary, by Phillip Lopate (Teachers & Writers, 1979), and from *Anne Sexton: A Biography* by Diane Middlebrook (Houghton Mifflin, 1991). Muriel Rukeyser's words on education are taken from "The Education

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* The complete list of writers who went into the schools in the fall of 1967 includes Elaine Avedon, Donald Barthelme, Jonathan Baumbach, Robert Clawson, Robert Cumming, David Henderson, Florence Howe, June Jordan, Herb Kohl, Jonathan Kozol, Richard Lewis, Mark Mirsky, Grace Paley, Ishmael Reed, Muriel Rukeyser, Anne Sexton, Peter Sourian, and Jay Wright.

of a Poet" in *The Writer on Her Work*, edited with an introduction by Janet Sternburg (Norton, 1980). Grace Paley's "Notes on Teaching" are to be found in *The Point: Where Teaching and Writing Intersect*, edited by Nancy Larson Shapiro and Ron Padgett (Teachers & Writers, 1983). The "description" of Grace Paley is taken from "Ruthie and Edie" in *Later the Same Day* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985), and later from "Wants" in *Little Disturbances of Man* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1974). See also *Naming Our Destiny: New and Selected Poems* by June Jordan (Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989); *The Voice of the Children*, writing collected by June Jordan and Terri Bush (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970); the *Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (McGraw-Hill, 1978), *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton* (Houghton Mifflin, 1988), and *Teaching the Unteachable* by Herbert R. Kohl (A New York Review Book, 1967).

Four Pieces from *The Voice of the Children* (1970)

Ghetto

Nine out of ten times when a person hears the word *ghetto* they think of Black people first of all. They think just about every Black child comes from a ghetto with lots of brothers and sisters.

Ghetto has become a definition meaning Black, garbage, slum areas. To me the word *ghetto* is just as bad as cursing. . . .

—Vanessa Howard, age 13

Travel

I would like to go
Where the golden apples grow

Where the sunshine reaches out
Touching children miles about

Where the rainbow is clear in the sky
And passersby stop as they pass by

Where the red flamingos fly
Diving for fish before their eyes

And when all these places I shall see
I will return back home to thee.

The end.

—Deborah Burkett

Untitled

April 4, 1968
war war
why do god's children fight among each other
a great man once lived
a Negro man
his name was Rev. Martin Luther King
....
it's funny it's so you can't even
walk out in the street anymore
some maniac might shoot you
in cold blood.

what kind of a world is this?

I don't know.

—Michael Goode, age 12

Monument in Black (excerpt)

Put my Black father on the penny
put his smile at me on the silver dime
put my mother on the dollar
for they've suffered for more than
three eternities of time
and all money couldn't repay

—Vanessa Howard

Coyote Made Me Do It

Teenage Writers in a Juvenile Hall

by Susan Wooldridge

A LARGE ROSEBUSH WAS BLOOMING NEAR the locked entrance to the Butte County Juvenile Hall, a plain building surrounded by brown, open hills on the northern edge of Oroville, California, almost within earshot of the County Superior Court.

The first thing I saw as I approached the building was a tall, thoughtful-looking teenage boy looking at some rose bushes with a staff member. The boy chose a giant, pearly rose. Then the three of us were buzzed in, letting the heavy entrance door clang shut behind us like a vault's. It's supposed to do that, a guard told me as I signed in.

The boy offered to carry my large basket of journals, books of poems, and kids' poems, laying his rose on top. I felt embarrassed. The subject of poetry, like that of ballet, can be awkward, especially around teenage boys. But he seemed interested and said he'd see me in class.

This visit was the first of five, in which I worked with most of the 50 young adults in the Hall's Table Mountain School, conducting poetry workshops. The kids, from twelve to nineteen years old, were in the Hall for crimes ranging from petty theft to murder. I'd had years of experience as a visiting poet in the classroom, at all grade levels, through the California Poets in the Schools program, but I was nervous about working with kids who I feared would be poor students and hostile to the idea of writing poetry.

The next day the boy's rose appeared in his poem:

> She doesn't know what the rose means.
> I wish I could tell her
> before she leaves the forest.
> She keeps the rose close to her heart,
> nearly thinking of me.

It didn't take me long to see that many of these kids were good writers with a lot to say.

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They especially liked writing about the Native American trickster and troublemaker Coyote. They wrote about Coyote as a "friend" who gets them in trouble, and about the Coyote inside themselves.

I was surprised to learn that one of the boys was named Freedom. He was a perky boy, only fourteen and sleeping in a cell. When the class and I talked about names, Freedom was one of the kids who hated his name—the irony was too great for him. We all laughed about how, with a name like that, you're likely to try to prove your parents wrong and then get yourself locked up! He asked to be called Pony Boy.

His lovely, melancholy, thirteen-year-old girlfriend was also confined in the Hall. She was a lively porcelain doll, both soft and hard at the same time, who wrote poem after poem. How she saw both herself and her world emerged in her poem about the ocean, an ocean that contains

> soft waves and a beautiful appearance,
> calm and quiet,
> but yet roars with anger,
> and has deathly sharks out to kill.

Freedom's wishes were simple and uninspired:

> I wish I had a good life.
> I wish I had a dog.
> I wish, I wish, I wish.

For him, a good life is hard to define or imagine, especially when he feels his very imagination is at risk:

> In my imagination
> I see my imagination drifting away.
> Listen, you can hear it.
> It's lonely in my mind,
> like a door opening,
> letting my imagination drift away.

The two groups I worked with each day weren't much different from any other teenagers except for their higher level of restless "boy" energy. Each class had, in fact, about eighteen boys and only two or three girls. The first day, I brought in piles of my journals, as I do in all my residencies. I've been keeping a journal since I was

fourteen. From them I read aloud bits about conflicts with my parents, difficulties in school, dramas with boyfriends, and funny things my children have said. The kids were fascinated by my little black books and their tiny scrawls, doodles, poems, notes from lost loves, and photos of me when I was their age. They gobbled up these details from my life.

"Give me one from the '60s!" several kids said. Another looked up from a page written in 1972. "Hey, do you remember finding a dead cardinal on the road when you lived in Illinois?" They loved entering a stranger's life, a safe place that was both real and free. I found myself telling them things I've never told any group of kids before. It may sound odd, but I felt safe with them. They seemed to understand boundaries, the necessity of honoring some things by not mentioning them. And they began to see that journals and poems could provide a place to collect ideas and words and to make observations and discoveries about themselves.

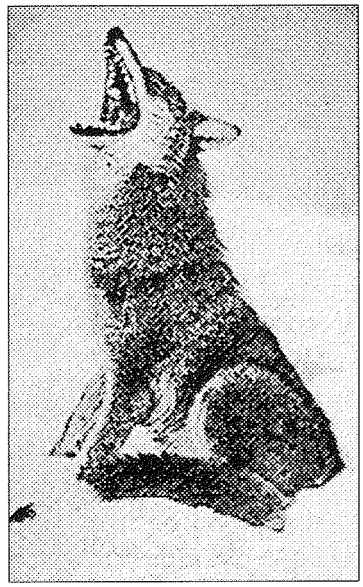
The kids became especially excited when we talked about e.e. cummings and how he broke the rules, turning words upside down and putting all his punctuation on one line. I showed them how his poems looked, and read bits and pieces aloud. We talked about how you can wildly exaggerate in poems and get away with it. We talked about the idea of opposites and how poems could contain both "lies" and the absolute truth.

With my coaching, they began playing with words, collecting them on the board: lively verbs (*plunge, embarrass, magnify, tabulate, spin*) and words to describe themselves (a color, an animal, a sound, a shape, a number). These words, which I call "word pools," gave the kids a chance to redefine and explain themselves to those of us "in the outs." When the students had generated enough words, I read other young people's poems, also based on word pools. One stately black teenager gave himself the nickname "Life" after writing

> I'm a turquoise circle, rolling into nowhere,
> a drum beating in the rain and no one can hear me.
> I am the number 50,
> so far from the end and far from the beginning.
> I am what you call life,
> hard to hold.

In their poems they began to find a way to express their greatest fears, their most lonely and desperate thoughts, and a sense of who they might dream or dare to be.

The lives of many of these kids are bursting out of society's seams. And though the Hall can keep them for a time, help some of them stay off drugs, and possibly help to heal them, these kids still go back out into the same world where they've been failing, and not for lack of intelligence. In the "outs," many of them feel, as G. wrote, like "a stray dog without a home,/running from the dog



catcher." These young people—many of them abused and neglected—feel abandoned and unheard. They have broken the law, some with violence. Though I knew at least one kid had been involved in murder, I chose not to find out who had done what, so I wouldn't judge them by their police records. And after that very first session, I could see that these kids were not all that different from the kids I worked with in the local schools. I'd seen them on baseball fields and in junior high halls. They have the same needs as every other kid. These are *our* kids. One boy, nicknamed "Homesick," wrote:

> I'm a lone wolf
> crying at the moon
> 'cause the night is so lonely.
> Hoping I get through the night
> without being attacked.
> Hoping that I'm the predator not the prey.

In his world, the predator stays alive. One especially alienated kid no one thought would write defined himself as a cockroach, but when the other kids praised his poem, he began to feel that perhaps he wasn't so bad after all. Likewise, Table Mountain School is filled with students who sign their poems with nicknames such as Jude, Angel, Roly Poly, Homesick, Joe Mama, or with names from books, such as Raistlan and Dalimar, providing both an alias and an alternative identity that transcends the label of misfit, delinquent, or troublemaker.

Many children who are troubled, shut down, failing, or cut off have special gifts. Frequently they have a depth of insight that comes from grappling early with despair, failure, and futility. Though there is a larger concentration of these kids—"goof-ups and misfits"—at the Juvenile Hall, they are also the kids around the edges of most classrooms, kids who are unable or unwilling to conform.

Often they understand things that more "settled" kids don't. And for them poetry is a wonderful tool that allows them to use metaphor and imagery to explore and express that depth. These kids see where they are, and they express it with power and beauty. D., a handsome, brooding teenager, wrote:

I'm a frozen rain,
a river without motion,
a runner stopped,
a car dead,
I'm nonmoving matter.

On the final day, singer Steve Cook came and sang some of the kids' poems to music he had written for them. When he began D.'s "A Frozen Rain," D. sat up and looked around, stunned to sense the power of his own words moving out over the audience, bringing tears to the guests and earning loud applause and cheers from his peers. He asked quietly, "How could I do that?"

Writing and hearing the poems, the kids wrote later, made them feel "excited, like crying, amazed, proud, strong, happy, like vanishing, smiling as the sun does, shocked, embarrassed, wondering, laughing." One wrote that it "made my feelings pour out of me."

In fact, a surprising number of their poems were humorous or ironic:

I'm a cockroach,
hiding, escaping the fierce power of Raid,
running for cracks
'cause Black Flag is after me.

In some poems they explored the reasons for their being in the Hall:

I rebel against authority,
they lock me up and throw the key away,
they say they know just what I need,
they tell me to quit smoking weed,
now I just sit here and believe
that where I am is up to me.

In the Hall, at Table Mountain School, and through their poems, the kids begin to see that they're not simply victims, that they must take responsibility for their lives. Raistlan, struggling with his notions of good and evil, wrote:

I'm trapped in a voidous prison of my creation.
There are no walls,
yet I cannot leave.
I'm my judge, jury, executioner,
and I have sent myself to this abyss.

At the same time, it's not hard to see how much these kids need love. Fourteen-year-old C. wrote, "I see a bright orange ball on the floor,/screaming for someone's touch." Later in the same poem, he used a series of similes:

I'm like a brown pony tied up.
I'm crying like a newborn baby.
I'm as strong as a train.
I warm people's hearts like a fireplace.
I feel like an abandoned shack.
I feel like a car out of control,
running like a madman,
and sometimes I panic.
Sometimes I'm like a broken leg lying helpless.

(Incidentally, this was the last poem C. wrote during my residency. The last two days, he was confined because of unacceptable behavior.) J. wrote: "I wish the world around me would open up,/and feelings of happiness would flow inside of me" and "I wish the goddess of love would touch me/and lead me away from this life of misfortune." One of K.'s poems was in a similar vein: "I wish there was so much love on earth I could swim in it."

It is not surprising that the poems of young people whose lives have been lived at the extreme should be given to moments of sentimentality. What *is* surprising, at first, is that young people who can act so tough can also be willing to reveal themselves as vulnerable. What is even more surprising is that the writing itself—its imagery and syntax—is sometimes so fresh and original, as in one of Freedom's poems:

Song of the Wild Panther

I'm a wild panther
with purple eyes
running through the soft wind
with a white circle on my back,
dot of blue like water
in the middle of the curl
and the paws' sounds of drums, dudunt, dudunt,
running for twelve miles
and tired, getting home,
I'm home.

At the end of the week, it was poems such as this, as well as the bond I had formed with the kids, that made me want to return to the Hall. And I did.

Word Strings

by Ron Padgett

NOT LONG AGO A FRIEND AND I, IN THE course of joking with each other, came up with a little word game. I'm not sure of what its impact might be on the history of education, or even of whether or not anyone else would enjoy playing it, but here it is anyway.

Called Word Strings, it's a game for two people, a "sender" and a "respondent." The sender says aloud any letter of the alphabet. The respondent then says any word beginning with that letter. Example:

Sender: "E."

Respondent: "Every. . . ."

Then the sender has to think of a word that could logically follow the word *every,* and says aloud the first letter of that word. For example, after hearing "every," the sender thinks of "person" and so says aloud, "P."

Then the respondent has to think of a word beginning with *p* that could logically follow the previous word he has said ("every"); for example, "Parisian."

The sender must now think of a word that could logically follow "Every Parisian. . . ," such as "can." So the sender says aloud, "C."

The respondent thinks up a word beginning with *c* that continues "Every Parisian. . . ," such as "craves."

The game continues in this fashion until a sentence is completed. Players then write down the sentence. (A variation is to have the sender write down the respondent's answers word by word, as they occur. This slows the game down a bit, though.)

The object is to create a long, syntactically complex, and inventive sentence as quickly as possible. To do so requires the cooperation of both players.

The sender can, however, challenge the respondent by leading with either "difficult" letters or odd sequences of letters. For example, the sender can give a couple of *x*'s or *z*'s, or give five *g*'s in a row. Such challenges are fun, but in excess they force the respondent to create bizarre and contorted phrasings, which isn't the main point.

For advanced play, you might try the following:

1) Reverse strings: the sentence is created backwards.

2) Theme strings: the sentence is about a particular subject.

3) Foreign strings: the sentence is in a foreign language.

4) Uniform strings: each word in the sentence has the same number of letters.

Computer versions might be designed for one or two players. In the former instance, the computer would act as the sender, generating random letters of the alphabet, displaying them on the screen, and waiting for the respondent to enter a corresponding word. The game could include a time limit for each response, which the respondent could predetermine.

A version for two people would require two computers, each with its own monitor. In this version, both players in effect perform both the sender and respondent roles. The first person would enter a word, but the computer would send only the initial letter to the second person. The second person would use that letter to begin a word, think of a following word, and enter it. The initial letter of that following word would be sent back to the first person, as the beginning of the second word in his sentence. And so on. There would have to be a way for the first player to signal that he is at the end of his sentence, to allow the other player to end his. The idea is to have both players write sentences whose words have identical initial letters.

All these versions— handwritten and computer-written— of this game help bring out the mysterious personal chemistry between the writers that is the result of all close collaborations.

RON PADGETT is the publications director of T&W. His recent books include *Blood Work: Selected Prose* (Bamberger Books) and a translation of *The Complete Poems of Blaise Cendrars* (Univ. of California Press).

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The 1993 *Grammar Hotline Directory*, an annual publication, is available from Grammar Hotline Directory, Tidewater Community College Writing Center, 1700 College Crescent, Virginia Beach, VA 23456. The directory lists telephone numbers in the US and Canada that anyone can call with short questions about grammar, punctuation, syntax, spelling, diction, etc. The price? One self-addressed, stamped envelope (business size). For more information, call Donna Reiss, the hotline director, at (804) 427-7170.