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# Educating the Imagination

## A Celebration of Kenneth Koch

*[Editor's Note: Last spring Teachers & Writers Collaborative, at its Center for Imaginative Writing, presented Educating the Imagination II: a Celebration of Kenneth Koch. After a brief reading by students in the T&W workshop program, Michael Anania introduced Koch. What follows is a transcript of Koch's more or less extemporaneous talk.]*

**KENNETH KOCH:** I'm not responsible for starting Teachers & Writers Collaborative, though it was very nice of someone to say so. There were all these wonderful people who started T&W before I taught for them and who have been keeping it going. I didn't really quite know what to talk about: I'm not used to being celebrated. However, I had an idea. My talk is mainly addressed to people who write poetry or who teach poetry (also, I hope, to others who are interested in poetry).

When I first thought of teaching poetry, which I did to adults at the New School a long time ago, I knew there was a standard kind of poetry workshop—sort of the grade-A Iowa

writing workshop—in which there are twelve students who write poetry and a teacher, and every week a student has a turn. The poet prints up some poems, and everybody reads them and comments on them. In that kind of workshop you find out how you're doing, how good you are, how publishable you are, and so on. You get the advantages of knowing other poets and getting their criticism, but that seemed to me not enough. I wanted to do something new. I tried to think of a way to bring into the classroom all of the things that I thought had made me inspired to write poems and made me write better, and I figured out a way to do this, which I got better at doing as I went on doing it.

For example, I asked myself, "What makes a better writer?" Obviously, one thing is reading other poets and being influenced by them, so one of the first assignments I had my adult poets do was to read William Carlos Williams. This was

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The poet **KENNETH KOCH**, one of the first poets-in-the-schools, is the author of *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*, *Sleeping on the Wing*, *Rose*, *Where Did You Get That Red?* and other books on teaching poetry. His most recent book is *Hotel Lambosa* (Coffee House Press). He is Professor of English at Columbia University.

particularly relevant at the time, though I still do it at Columbia, because when I started teaching at the New School, in the early sixties or maybe the fifties even, there were still a number of students whose idea of poetry was something like “O wingéd being soaring through the azure,” and Williams can show you quickly the pleasure of saying “Bird there in the blue,” or something like that. In other words, the word *woman* is closer to your heart than the word *damsel*, and so on and so forth. Also, Williams writes about ordinary things that are right in front of you. He uses the language that we speak, which had helped me when I read him seriously for the first time, when I was around eighteen years old.

I lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, and my first big influence after nursery rhymes had been Shelley. My uncle Leo, who worked in the family furniture store, had me down to the store one day and took me up to a big safe that was upstairs. At this time, he confessed to me that he had written poems. I was fifteen, and he had written poems when he was nineteen. They were all sonnets, he said, and about some love that was unrequited. He wanted me to see them. He didn’t think they were very good, but he also wanted to give me a book. So he gave me his sonnets, and he also gave me a book of the *Complete Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. I remember the *Bysshe* was very important to me, as was the red cover of the book and also the wonderful picture of Shelley with wild hair and an open collar. That, for me, suddenly was poetry, and I wrote a number of poems then, which were influenced by Shelley, but they weren’t very much like Shelley. I remember the beginnings of a few. They were sonnets. One began “When young I feared two things, cancer and war.” The last line was “I never once had known they were the same.” I wrote another one, not exactly based on my experience, which began “And as a growing eaglet.” You can imagine I’d seen a lot of eaglets!

And as a growing eaglet feebly tries  
To spread his new-formed wings and soar through space  
Alas, he cannot leave his nesting place. . . .

It was a Petrarchan sonnet about being fifteen years old, and it ended with the line “Not yet a man, and still no more a child.” Well, I did get something from Shelley despite these bad poems I wrote. . . . I know I’m in a vast parenthesis. Just imagine that I’m starting over again.

I think that sometimes one of the first stages of somebody’s having a talent for poetry is the use of exaggerated, distant, remote, and fancy language like “And as a growing eaglet feebly tries / To spread his new-formed wings and soar through space.” It seems to me that’s one way to get away from the world of your parents, your brothers and sisters, the other children on the block. It’s a way of playing with poetry. You make yourself happy by saying “infinitesimal.” If you say “the infinitesimal sun,” it’s wonderful. It’s not any good, but it’s not to be disdained. To disdain it is like going around cutting down the first little green shoots in the garden: you never get any flowers.

When I was teaching at the New School, the things I wanted to bring into the classroom were: reading other poets and being influenced; trying new forms, like sestinas, say, or poems with only one word in each line; collaborating with

other poets; writing about dreams; writing stream-of-consciousness; deliberately writing things that didn’t make sense; and so on. All these things I turned into assignments, so that every week we weren’t talking about how good or bad the students were, but about good ways to write about dreams or good ways to get meaning into one word in a one-word line. It worked very well, and I’ve been doing it ever since at Columbia.

When I went into P.S. 61 to teach, I thought I’d do the same things, but I found that I couldn’t, for various reasons. I couldn’t get the children to read William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound and be influenced by them. I found that there were all kinds of things I couldn’t get the children to do.

As for trying difficult forms, this was all pulverized into one form or variations of one form: repetition. I would say, “Start every line with ‘I wish,’” “Put your favorite color in every line,” “Start the first line with ‘I used to’ and the second line with ‘But now,’” and so on. It was a children’s version of what I had done with adults.

Some people criticized my method—especially at first, though there are still critics of it—saying that, well, children are so spontaneous, they’re just naturally poets. This is sort of like saying that people are naturally good cooks. I don’t know if anybody is naturally a poet, but children are spontaneous, and they say interesting things. The critics asked, “Why are you interfering with their spontaneity by telling them what to write about?” The reason, of course, is that I may be inspired to write a poem by walking past a bakery, listening to music, falling in love, or reading a poem, but none of this happens to anyone at nine o’clock in the morning at P.S. 61. You have to make something like it happen there. Actually, if I asked you all to write a poem, probably the hardest thing for all of you would be what to write about, unless you’d been writing all day. I gave children assignments to inspire them, not to limit them. I said, “Start every line with ‘I wish,’” not “Start every line with ‘I am grateful for.’” My assignments are meant to be used, as all the teachers who have used them successfully know, just to get things started, to help children to write *poems* instead of just talking about what they feel. When you write a poem, it’s as if you are saying how you feel on a grid, and you are sort of hanging these flowers everywhere on it.

As for the assignments that I dreamed up, I hadn’t intended them to be just formulas. My ideas came from my particular experience as to what inspired me, and I don’t think there would be much more agreement on what you would have in a poetry writing class than there would be on what you would have in a domestic science class. In both you have to bring in things, but different things for different kinds of cooking and different kinds of poetry.

I thought that it would be worthwhile to go over in some detail the things and the poets that have influenced me, helped me to write, made me write better than I would have otherwise. I’m going to go into a little more detail than I did just now. One effect of this might be to encourage other poets who teach in schools to think about their own experiences and, thus, to find in them some ideas for teaching, and I thought maybe it would have some interest even if it did not accomplish that. This is not an organized speech: it will be anecdotal and autobiographical. Remember that the general idea is things that

excited me about writing poetry and how I learned them and who influenced me and so on. You're supposed to think the same things about yourself, you're not supposed to be interested so much in what happened to me.

The first page of my notes has on top of it in big letters THE ESCAPE. I was brought up in Cincinnati, Ohio. My parents were very nice. The first time I wrote a poem, my mother gave me a big kiss and said, "I love you." The whole idea of writing poetry had a lot to do with escaping, escaping from the bourgeois society of Cincinnati, Ohio, escaping from any society of Cincinnati, Ohio, and escaping from any society anywhere. The first thing I had to find out to be a poet at all was that there was a bigger world, a bigger world than that of my school and my parents and their friends. I had to find out that there was a world where people talked to the moon or said, "O wild west wind," that there was a past that was more exhilarating and interesting than the Egypt and Ethiopia that I studied in fourth-grade geography.

Then, I had to find out that there was a bigger language than the one that I spoke and my friends and parents spoke. Instead of "Oh, there's the most darling blouse down at Altman's. Let's go down there tomorrow," I had to find out that you could say, "O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being." I had to find out you could say, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment." In saying so, I was lifted way above all these troubles of Cincinnati, Ohio, these troubles that seemed to be suffocating me though I had a relatively happy childhood. I had to find this big language with words like "impediment" and "wild west wind" and the idea of talking to everything. Then, I had to find some bigger poetic forms than I knew about, bigger poetic forms than nursery rhymes. I had to find sonnets, odes, and things like that. That was the first stage.

No sooner had I found all of these things than I had to start getting rid of them. I was writing corny poetry like "When young I feared two things, cancer and war" or "And as a growing eaglet feebly tries." No sooner had I found these things which made me a poet—the bigger subject matter, the bigger language, the bigger forms—than I had to find which forms and diction were right for me and which big subjects were right for me to talk about. One I found was my feelings about my girlfriends. That was a good one to talk about. Another was the pleasure I got driving in a car, because I started driving a car, as all the idiotic teenagers did, at about fourteen. It was a crazy law that allowed me to drive. Driving in my car and walking my dog were good subjects for me. Talking to the west wind was not a good subject for me. I didn't know what the west wind was. I found that sonnets weren't good for me, but certain forms were. Mainly free verse was good for me with, sometimes, a little rhyme.

Once I'd found this, then I had to get rid of all of that because I was writing like Kenneth Patchen or I was writing like e.e. cummings or I was writing like Williams. I had to do something new, and that was very hard. It seems that when I went into the schools to teach children, I was skipping the first parts; that is, I was skipping the part of the bigger world, the bigger language, and the bigger forms. I was going right into the classroom with poets who might inspire the children to find

something new of their own. That's what I wanted to do. This seemed to work all right. Once I found this way of writing modern poetry, I had to get rid of that because I didn't want to sound like Eliot and Pound and Williams. Ever since then, I've had to try to write poems not like the ones I wrote before. It's an unending process, so one can have a poetry teacher forever. In this case it's largely oneself.

It's wonderful to get children to start to write because it makes them happy, as I say in *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*. It gives them self-confidence. It makes them like to read books. I had students who actually started coming to school with books! It's wonderful. I also noticed that when I stopped teaching at the school—or when Ron Padgett, who succeeded me, stopped—the children stopped writing poetry. If you want people to go on having the pleasure of writing poetry, along with the attendant dangers, the best thing you can do for them is to get them to read. If you can somehow get them to like reading poetry, then they can go on being their own poetry teachers, and if they like to write, they can go through all these phases. But if they don't read, it probably won't happen.

Among the things I needed to escape from at various times were rhyme and meter. In fact, I had to escape from not being able to rhyme, then I had to escape from rhyme. Poetry is like trying a lot of clothes you eventually have to get rid of. I had to escape from rhyme and meter, and anybody who helped me to do that I admired a lot, such as William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman. I was hungry. By the time I was seventeen or eighteen years old, I was just crazy with a thirst to find poetry that didn't rhyme and that didn't use meter. I was so grateful to anybody who didn't do it. I liked practically everybody who wrote in free verse in the Louis Untermeyer anthology.

Then, I needed people to help me get away from making sense in the usual way, because if you make sense in the usual way, it's like an asymptote, the thing in mathematics that gets close to a line but never gets all the way to it. You never escape from the rabbi and your parents and your teacher if you go on making sense in the usual way because they're all making sense in the usual way, and they're older than you are, and they can do it better. So I had to make some other kind of sense. I was very grateful to dada and surrealism and anything crazy. I remember something John Ashbery said to me at Harvard, where we were both students. We were reading each other's poems. He had just read Alfred Jarry, and he said, "Kenneth, I just read somebody named Alfred Jarry." I said, "Well?" I was waiting for the news. I was always waiting for the news. He said, "I think we should be a little crazier." I said, "Yes, yes." I wanted to do that, so I was very glad for anybody who could help me to be crazier. By the way, in a classroom with little children, a good thing I happened to say was "Be crazy, be stupid." I think there are actually people who go into a classroom and say, "Be imaginative." You know, you get gingerbread houses and fairy princesses.

I also needed poets who could show me how to avoid dead seriousness, high seriousness. I grew up in a time when T.S. Eliot was, as Delmore Schwartz said, the literary dictator of the West, and not only were you supposed to be serious, you were supposed to be a little depressed. You could read through

the quarterlies—the *Kenyon Review*, the *Partisan Review*, the *Sewanee Review*—all the big journals of those days, and nobody was seeing anything at the end of that tunnel. They were not even seeing the tunnel. I remember being exhilarated when I read Nietzsche. He said you should be very careful how long you look into the abyss because the abyss is also looking into you. I was very grateful to William Carlos Williams because he seemed happy so much of the time. And to the French poet Saint-John Perse, because he looked at the waves rolling in over the ocean and he saw blue enchantresses, kings, mountains, decades—it was wonderful. So many poets have the courage to look into the abyss, but Perse had the courage to look into happiness.

I also needed poetry to help me escape my natural prudery, my natural timidity about talking about sex or being crazy or out of line, because when I was seventeen and eighteen years old I was very proud, for all my avant-garditude, of being a nice upper middle-class boy in Cincinnati. What kind of poetry was that going to result in? I needed poetry to get me away from my ignorance, because although I had a pretty good education, I was very ignorant. Of course, I loved Eliot and Pound. Whether they were really smart or not I didn't know, but they certainly seemed smart. I needed to get away from what was supposedly poetic subject matter. I had a high school teacher, Katherine Lappa, to whom I dedicated *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, who really helped me to do that. I needed poetry to get me away from my usual way of talking and writing.

Shakespeare and Shelley were very helpful, Shakespeare because of the lift his iambic pentameter gives to almost anything one says:

Thou seest Ron Padgett sitting on my right.  
Behind him Anania holds his sway,  
And both with folded hands do listen now  
To what I say to you upon this night.

With Shakespeare, it is like pumping air into everything you say. It goes. It's great. That's something I never tried with children, which, if I went back into schools, I would like to try.

I remember I was very ambitious when I started teaching children. I assumed they could understand anything, so I read them the beginning of *Paradise Lost*:

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the fruit  
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast  
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe

and so forth. The children were looking at me. I asked, "What does that sound like?" Some smart child, a fifth grader in the back row, said, "It sounds like the preacher." What else do you get out of it the first time you read it, other than that it sounds like the preacher? I thought that was a good answer. In any case, Shakespeare showed me a way to float anything: "I take this piece of paper in my hand / And read it to you." That's wonderful. Shelley did too. He showed me not only how to make it float, but how to be excited about it. He taught me how to be burning, feverish, vague, hurried, in a great rush. I liked anybody who would do this for me.

Keats was another poet I loved, for his lusciousness and sensuousness. No matter what story is going on in "The Eve of

St. Agnes," it's all about the fact that there's a stained-glass window and red light is falling on Madeline's fair breast as she sits praying. That's what seems strongest. And "lucent syrops tinct with cinnamon." Even when they're escaping at the last minute, it's all about the sound of this big iron door opening. It's luscious. I liked Keats's letters too—he says that before he wrote poetry—take that, T.S. Eliot!—he cultivated a feeling of deliberate happiness. That was the state in which he could write poetry best. I don't think I was directly influenced by Keats, though he gave me an ideal of lushness and richness and of how much you can get into a poem, how much you can get in every line. It's not just "They are standing on the sidewalk looking at the dump truck." The great thing in the poetry of Frank O'Hara—particularly the early poetry—was that life is so full of a variety of exciting things, exciting people, and exciting ideas that you are just crazy if you're not responding to them. I think Keats, Frank O'Hara, and Gerard Manley Hopkins were all poets who made me feel that I could get a whole lot of stuff together whether I understood it or not and that I should put as much as possible into every line of every poem.

Whitman was an inspiration because he showed me a way to float things, the way Shakespeare did. "I take this piece of paper in my hand / And read upon it every word": that's Shakespeare. But Whitman taught me another way to float everything:

I see the piece of paper and I pick it up.  
I look at the piece of paper and I see what's written on it.  
I read the words and they're good words and I'm reading them  
to you.

It's terrific, but what am I saying? The music makes it say something. And there's always a possibility that once you get going in this motorboat, it's going to go somewhere wonderful. It's great, it gives you a style. It's another great style to give to children. Also, it really is true about Whitman what the French writer Valery Larbaud said, that the main thing that Whitman showed to twentieth-century American poets was that greatness in poetry can come not from difficulties overcome but from—and this is better in French, *facilités trouvées*—easinesses found. Whitman shows you, why not do what is easy? Why not say, "I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass" instead of saying, "Beyond the garden wall where. . . ." Just write it the way you would say it. Write about what is right in front of you, what you like. There really aren't any prizes for solving difficulties in poetry. I remember a particularly irritating review of a book of poetry, at a time when nobody would publish my work or Frank's or John's. The reviewer praised it by saying, "Mr. X admirably meets the demands of his forms." Well, isn't that amazing? I'm pretty good at walking sideways, but I don't see anything so great about it.

A poet who inspired me as much as anybody, probably more, is William Carlos Williams, whom I read hard for about three or four months, the way only a baby poet can read somebody. I was nineteen. I started when I was seventeen, but then when I got out of the army, when I was nineteen, I read Williams a lot more. I realized then that I could write about what I was really doing. All these vacant lots in Cincinnati,

these suburban houses, the gutters, the automobiles, the schoolyards were things that I could write about. I hadn't known that before. One great thing, of course, that artists do, including poets, is to open up new subject matter. There's a wonderful poem by Paul Eluard. It's called something like "Eighty-seven Words I Have Up Till Now Been Forbidden to Use." It's a poem in which he deliberately puts in eighty or a hundred words that he hasn't been able to use in poems until then. Well, I hadn't been able to use words like *dog*, *parking lot*, and *sidewalk*, and from Williams I learned that I could.

There are two secret sensual pleasures in Williams. One: it's a lot of fun to write in short lines. It's like flamenco dancing. You don't have a long line that you have to fill up. You say, "I pick up / the piece of paper." Another secret pleasure I got from Williams was the pleasure of interrupting yourself, of hesitating in odd places, which you don't get to do at home or with your friends. They'd think you're stammering or you've gone crazy: "I have eaten / the plums / that were in / the icebox / and which / you were probably / saving / for breakfast." You can even say, "for break / fast" or "a red wheel / barrow." It's nice, it's a lot of fun. It gives one all kinds of new music. Williams, who seemed to be apt to destroy the music of poetry, created a new kind.

Wallace Stevens, I found him very inspiring. I was envious. I couldn't understand how he did certain things. If you're a poet, you'll know what I mean. At the end of "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock," there are these lines: "Only, here and there, an old sailor, / Drunk and asleep in his boots," then these two amazing lines, "Catches tigers / In red weather." I couldn't, for the life of me, think of two short lines that had such strong stresses, "Catches tigers / In red weather." Of course they have internal rhyme. Oh, how older people used to torment me talking about internal rhyme! "Stevens has internal rhyme." Internal rhyme you just get naturally. If you give up the rhyme at the end of the line, you find it turning up inside the lines. In any case, "red weather" was obviously an example of internal rhyme, and after a while you figure out the left hand / right hand sort of poetry, the difference between accent and stress, whichever you choose. While one hand is going da-dum da-dum da-dum da-dum, the other is saying, "Put out the light and then put out the light." Some poetry, Stevens's in this case, is completely stressed; that is, there is no meter. It's just the natural stress that you put on words, but I hadn't understood that yet. I had been going through Clement Wood's rhyming dictionary. The last forty pages are devoted to poetic forms, and I had been going through them writing ballades, ballades royales, and things like that. If you write in meter, you don't ever get anything like "catches tigers / In red weather." That's one thing I admired.

I also admired the way he could be so flat and so elegant at the same time:

A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one.

How does he do that? I'd say:

My dog and I  
Are one.  
My dog and I and the chimney  
Are one.

No, it didn't work, but I figured out how to do this. People who don't write poetry might not know how many months one could spend trying to write something like "A man and a woman and a blackbird are one" and have it sound like poetry. Anyway, that was very interesting. Things like:

I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.

That's very hard to do.

Also, I loved the way he told stories sometimes, elegant, gorgeous stories that to me didn't make any sense, as in his "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks," a great poem, which so far as I know doesn't make sense in any ordinary way:

In the moonlight  
I met Berserk,  
In the moonlight  
On the bushy plain.  
Oh, sharp he was  
As the sleepless!

And, "Why are you red  
In this milky blue?"  
I said.  
"Why sun-colored,  
As if awake  
In the midst of sleep?"

Berserk answers, and the poem ends,

I knew from this  
That the blue ground  
Was full of blocks  
And blocking steel.  
I knew the dread  
Of the bushy plain,  
And the beauty  
Of the moonlight  
Falling there,  
Falling  
As sleep falls  
In the innocent air.

"I knew from this / That the blue ground / Was full of blocks / And blocking steel" is wonderful because it sounds as though it means something, but I don't know what it means. It means what it is. I tell my students in college, "If you don't know what this means, just respond to it as if it were a story: once there was a blue ground, and it was full of blocks. Then you'll understand it. There was a blue ground, and it was full of blocks." I like that kind of narrative. Stevens, in a poem like that and in a number of others, it seems to me, is creating modern fairy tales, legends in the same way that, in painting, Paul Klee did, Miro did, and Max Ernst did. I was endlessly inspired by that little Max Ernst of the two children frightened by a nightingale. I found no way to figure it out. I love certain Picasso works for the same reason, that they seem to be telling

a very moving, very important story, but you don't know what the story is supposed to be. At last, you just get the story. That was another thing that I learned a lot from.

I liked almost all dada and surrealist art at first and a lot of Picasso. I liked Matisse because of the sensuousness of it, and I was inspired by a remark that Matisse made. I thought maybe I wrote poems that way. He said, "The way I make paintings is I have a white canvas and I put a splash of pink on it, and then, with every succeeding stroke, I try to keep the canvas as beautiful as it was with just that one stroke of pink." That's asking a lot of a poem, but we might as well try it. All of these things, I think, can be brought into the classroom; that is, they would be things that I would try, but everybody has his own experiences.

I was also inspired by tapestries, frescoes, and predellas, anything that tells a story that you can't quite figure out. I guess if I were a devout Christian, I could have figured out the tapestries and the frescoes a little better than I was able to, but I would see in one tapestry somebody tearing off his clothes and in another somebody holding up a sheep. I really liked this because of the beauty of the detail and because it was telling a story, but I didn't know the story.

I liked other poets for other reasons. I loved Max Jacob because he was able to be sensuous and mysterious at the same time he was funny. When I first read Frank O'Hara's poetry, I was moved by the fact that he used a lot of exclamation marks. This seems a small thing, but I hadn't had any exclamation marks in my poetry before. Kate Farrell and I taught old people in a nursing home—we wrote about it in a book called *I Never Told Anybody*—and the second or third time, Kate and I had the old people write using comparisons. We realized that in the first few poems people had written, there hadn't been a single comparison. This was the life of rather unsophisticated people, who had been almost totally deprived of poetry. In any case, in my poetry, when I was about twenty years old, there hadn't been any exclamations or invocations like "O this! O that!"

Another inspiring thing about Frank's work I got from his poem called "Today." In it he mentions aspirin tablets, jujubes, and sequins, all tiny things with perfect shapes. My poetry got filled with tiny things like yo-yos and marbles. Before that, I had just been writing about big things. I remember, I graduated from Harvard before John and Frank did. I had known John when I was there. I hadn't known Frank. John sent me some of Frank's poems and he said, "I think there's another contender here." I read Frank's poems, which were all about jujubes and marbles, yo-yos and televisions, and I wrote back and said, "I don't think he's as good as we are." I took these poems to Europe with me. I had a Fulbright grant that year, and I read them on the train to Vienna. Then I suddenly got illuminated. Frank dedicated his book to me, "To Kenneth and the Vienna illumination."

It's been said that I have helped to make poetry easier to understand. I don't know. Apollinaire said about his friends the cubist painters that they were tearing down the world so it could be put together properly. It seemed to me that what I was doing and what my friends were doing in poetry was to get rid of the old, fat referential difficulty in order to break everything down into splashes, dots, and cubes and put it back together

with some new splendid difficulty. I don't think I was making poetry easy and accessible when I wrote:

And, dame! kong swimming with my bets,  
Aladdin, business, out Channukah of May bust  
Sit rumors of aethereal business coo-hill-green  
Diamonds, moderns modesty. "There sit  
The true of two hens of out-we-do maiden  
Monastery belongs to (as! of!) can tip up off cities  
Ware fizzle dazzle clothes belong. . . .

I don't think I was making it more difficult, either, though maybe difficult in a new way, asking readers to respond to it as if it were *not* difficult, just to read it there as it was—"Diamonds, moderns modesty. 'There sit. . .'" Kate Farrell wrote, in one of the books we did together, that the right things to ask about a piece of expository prose are: Is it clear? What does it say? Is it right? These are usually not the important things to ask about a poem. What you ask about a poem is: Is it exciting? moving? beautiful? (maybe you can ask if it's true after that). And does it move me? And—perhaps especially if you're writing the poem—is it new?



The Orion Society has produced an *Annotated Bibliography of Children's Books with Nature Themes*, which contains 88 entries on stories and picture books for young readers. The books described are not fact books about particular places, animals, or environmental issues, nor are they how-to books on gardening, star-gazing, or recycling. Rather, they are stories, folk tales, and poems that reflect the reciprocal relationship between the realm of the child and the natural world. To order the 36-page booklet, send \$5 to The Orion Society, 136 East 64th St., New York, NY 10021. For more information, call (212) 758-6475.

# Follow the Dots

by Madeline Tiger

I'M ALWAYS LOOKING FOR NEW WAYS TO HELP young students learn to shape their poems—to arrange lines and breaks, repetitions and inversions, and to invent their own patterns. I've found that most traditional forms are too imposing, often forcing students to use contorted syntax and stiff diction. But recently, working with Paul Larsen's seventh grade class at Terrill Middle School in Scotch Plains, N.J., I happened on a way to help students explore the shaping of poems without the constriction of rigid forms or the intimidating demand that they create their own open forms. The method may be the reverse of the natural method that free verse follows, because in my experiment, instead of language dictating form, odd shapes determine the arrangement of words, encouraging a vibrant interaction between the abstract visual form and the words coming together inside it.

October 25th

## Lesson 1: Images

I often start with image-making exercises, asking students to name things they see in the classroom, in the playground, in the corners of their bedrooms. Then I ask them to look deeper: what can you "find" in the thing you see? in shadows? in a design you draw? in a Chinese character? in a line or a dot?

For my first session with Paul's class I brought in some small pieces of red paper, about 4" by 4", which I had scooped up from the local Budget Print Center. Red is stimulating. And I felt that the small format might be good for the exercise I had in mind. Besides, little squares are fun to handle and surprising for kids—even "jaded" seventh graders—who haven't experimented much with the *craft* of writing. The small squares also let kids know that I'm not going to ask for extensive writing, a good ploy for the initial lesson.

I handed out the squares and asked each student to make a dot anywhere on the paper, stare at it, and then write what it could be. Paul was intrigued by my methods and suggestions. He agreed with my hunch that the red squares might be good "ground" for dots and small images. His interest gave the class a jump-start. The students were focused. Images came. The

students saw the dots variously as *Earth, eye, bug, ball, universe, Adam, an ant on a red square of a red and white checkered picnic blanket, etc.*

Then I gave each one a couple of things from my yard—aster, mum, dry rose, stem, thorn, zinnia, acorn, pine cone. I asked the students to write down the names of the objects I gave them, but to also list anything else they saw, such as my moccasins, the clock, the phone, etc. Some noticed milkweed floating around the room from a class I'd taught earlier in the day. I wanted them to focus first on the naming—"nouniness" and objective clarity—and then to write what they "saw" in each object, what they imagined each thing could be. More images came, in small script, onto the red squares. Some writers arranged these objective images and metaphors in tentative groups. I encouraged this arranging, their putting the tiny word groups together in larger sets or merging them into narrative bits, but I let them know that I also approved when they left some separate, stark.

They worked painstakingly; even so, their writing looked lively, popping up at many angles all over the red squares. So far, the exercise—red squares, dots, nouns, images—was fostering both focus and invention.

There were lists:

**acorn & asters:** a volcano on top of a mountain  
fireworks, willow trees

—Patty Burke

There were similes and metaphors:

**Pinecone** sounds like a sizzling  
turkey dinner on  
Thanksgiving

**Acorn** Me at  
Church

—Alex Scott

Some lists began to cohere into scenarios:

the moon climbing \_\_\_\_\_ aster  
on a vine

group of ghosts in \_\_\_\_\_ milkweed  
tutus dancing

sweeping the

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floor

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drop rain

—Dallas Hardy

In Italy during a spring  
 night while men are playing  
 pine cones and the festivities  
 are playful

—Marc Ricca

Others into narratives:

a bug met a couple  
 of birds sitting at a  
 wooden table outside when  
 they left the table they  
 climbed up a beanstalk where  
 they found purple bananas

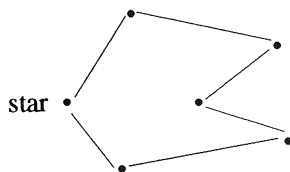
—Samantha Tenebaum

While the students were working, I asked them to read their images out loud so I could encourage them to use prepositions and conjunctions to link the images; I called these “connecting words” and gave examples from their papers.

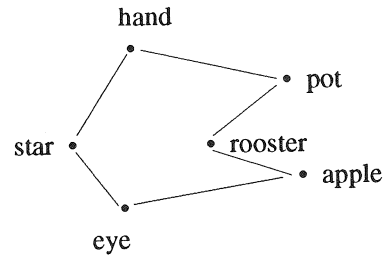
By placing images near each other, often something new is revealed—as in Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” or in some haiku. Many poems seem to be drawn together by a mysterious pull of disparate images into one cluster, taking the poem beyond the purely objective.

Discovering the charm or wit in their own arrangements, even on a small scale, startled the students. Although many kids didn’t have a strong sense of where *the poem* was in such notes and sets, we had made enough poetry-in-process for a first day.

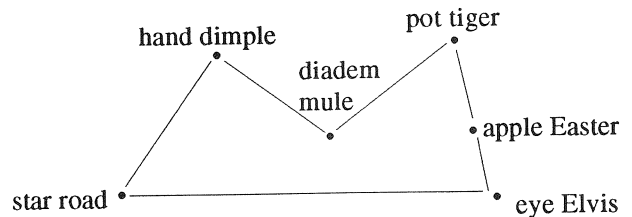
But what would the next step be? How should I follow up on the dots and images I’d started them with, and help them shape their poems? During my free period at the end of the day, I hurriedly wrote in my log, “Period 6—images from dot, aster, acorn, etc.” Then I started doodling. I started with one dot, then more dots, arranged in a random scatter. I put an image word next to the first dot.



What might the next dot be? I began to free associate, quickly placing a word next to each dot. Then I made lines to form a pattern implied by the dots:



At the end of the day, Paul and I had our first after-school conference. He was enthusiastic about the first lesson and interested in any experiment I might try. I showed him my quick sketch of the dots-to-shapes idea. He thought it would be excellent for the class because it would lead them into further work on imagery, diction, and patterning. I did another model for him: I practiced making dots quickly on an index card, then putting words next to the dots, then drawing the lines:



In this instance I was playing with pairs of words for each point on the “constellation,” linking letters in each pair, then proceeding to a new pair of words associated by sounds:

star-road    hand-dimple    diadem-mule    pot-tiger  
 apple-Easter                    eye-Elvis

This made me realize that making a word chain would help guide students away from choosing words that fit some preconceived narrative. I wanted their words to be more spontaneous, of a different diction from that of their habitual writing vocabulary. In my log I wrote: “Next lesson could be ‘Follow the Dots.’ We can use ‘Word Chains’ for collecting vocabulary pools, and combine these with an experiment in shaping, starting with one dot.”

October 27th

### Lesson 2: Follow the Dots

Paul and I started class by handing out white unlined paper. I put a dot on the board and reminded the students of how they had “seen” images in the previous lesson. Then I turned their attention to their own blank papers. At my suggestion, they made single dots and contemplated them, as in lesson 1, thinking of image words.

I wrote a word on the board, next to my first dot: *planet*. (I purposely chose an obvious example so they wouldn’t be tempted to copy it.) Then I suggested that each one write an image word next to the dot on his or her own paper. I emphasized the importance of privacy to ensure that everyone would now have a different starting point. I hoped that the work from this lesson would be varied and original, and urged them to think of unusual interpretations of their dots.



Right away I put more dots around the board, splaying them broadly, making a sample constellation. How many dots should they use? We settled on seven. The students put dots on their papers, some in close arrangements, some scattered over the whole page. I cautioned that they should leave some space between the dots, not squeeze them too close, and leave some open space in the middle.

Next, I asked the students to think of a word that begins with the last letter of that first word written next to the first dot, and to have the third word begin with the last letter of the second word, and so forth. The words elicited in the chain were to be written next to each dot. They caught onto this process so quickly that they helped me create part of the word chain I had started on the board. The students who “got it” first led the others as we worked out loud. They liked the challenge, and had begun their own chains even before I finished my sample on the board. They liked placing words all around the page.

Curiously, many did not put the words from their chains in a regular sequence; when I read their papers later I had to figure out the original order of the words. Given a non-linear approach to making a poem, the students did not write clockwise around the page, as one might expect. They allowed their chains to come “unlinked,” each word finding its place near one of the dots. Some used arcane words, some took words from their curriculum subject areas, some used dictionaries. A few wanted to use adverbs or adjectives—“O.K.,” I said, “as long as you have mostly nouns. And you can also add verbs later.” The collections came quickly.

It so happened that most kids wrote their words outside the dots; i.e., to the left of the dots on the left side of the page, to the right of the dots on the right, above the dots at the top, and below the bottom dots. But it’s a good idea to specify this procedure ahead of time, so that when the dots are connected, all the words are outside the shape. This will keep the shape clear for the writing inside, and it will also provide a visual echoing of the key words, which will be seen both inside and outside the drawn lines, thus lending another dimension to the pattern and sound of the piece.

When the required seven words had been collected on each paper, I told them to connect the dots, making a shape. I demonstrated this on the board. Then I told them to make a poem to fill the shape, using words from their word chains, adding words, repeating words or phrases, and using connecting words. I emphasized the effectiveness of repetition and the usefulness of repeating short words in the narrow sections of their designs. “Write up and down or sideways,” I told them. “Hold your paper any way you want.”

A poem-in-a-shape soon emerged on one student’s page. I read it aloud to the class. I liked its musical, clever word play and repetitions:

#### Hourglass

(word chain: *spring, goop, peace, eye, ear, rings, space, eat*)

Space goop eats up the ring’s springs so the ring can’t ring and open the eyes and ears of the poor goop eaters so they can close their eyes and ears and eat their goop in peace while the spring air in space makes goop fall from the goop eaters’ ears and eyes so they can eat without

hearing rings and springs in their ears.

—Jarret Crawford

The students noticed, but they were intent on their own work, involved in their own streams of thought. I think the physical shapes gave support, like a raft at sea, to many students who have trouble writing. Paul was getting a kick out of seeing his students working so diligently, and he reacted with excitement to the poems emerging, which encouraged everyone. Many students seemed to take pleasure in making things fit. And in discovery: the shapes seemed to have life, even before words went inside. Some students were puzzled and anxious; but that was part of the excitement in the room, the sense of adventure.

Girl: My shape doesn’t look like anything.

Me: That’s O.K.

She: Wait, it looks like a sea creature—a dolphin.

Me: Yes, it does. Great!

She: But I don’t have the word *dolphin* as one of my words here.

Me: That’s O.K., even better.

Another playful, musical piece appeared on Dallas Hardy’s paper, from the word chain *noise-echo-otters-sing-giant-treats-rain*:

Rain makes noise that echoes  
in otters that sing about giant  
chocolate treats at night

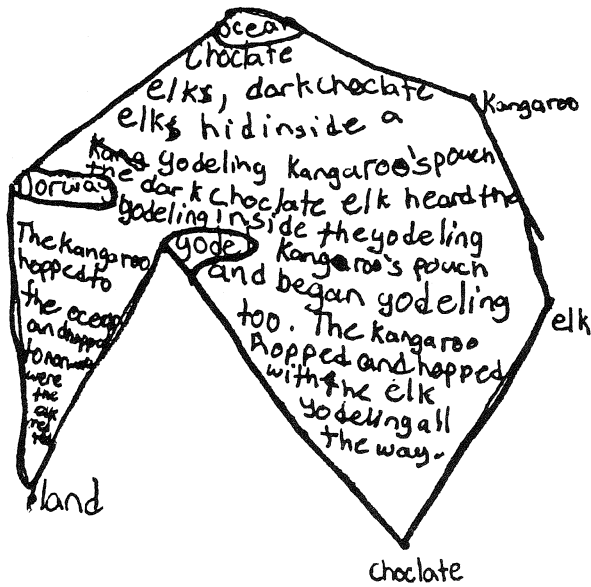
Treats sing giant songs to  
otters who echo noise of rain

Dallas didn’t fill his shape, though; he just placed the poem quite squarely in the center of a seven-sided figure that later received the title “The Broken Crown.” The piece is calm and pleasing, a fine setting for the singing otters. Another student kept his word arrangement tight, in the middle of the shape, with only a few long lines. I didn’t know why, but this one looked right to me—I knew it shouldn’t be tampered with. It seemed to possess a rigid tension, a contained violence. Another student’s words went all the way up into the tight angles of the form.

The students finished their pieces faster than I’d expected. Hands were up. A few wanted to do a second piece. I went around to confer with each one. “Go on,” I urged quietly. “Or do you want a private assignment?” I gave one student a Bly poem about a night, a lake, and a loon’s cry, and told him to draw the scene, then think about his images some more, then write his own night images. He did, then made a second follow-the-dots piece.

In most cases, energized poems were the result, demonstrating the power of transformation by rearrangement, letting go of “ordinary” sense. Some achieved a dazzle of assonances and rhythms. Several kids used novel repetitions, inversions, line variations, bits in riffs. “I don’t need to demonstrate Gertrude Stein’s work in here now,” I told Paul in my excitement. (However, a good follow-up would be to read aloud a few of her pieces after the kids have finished, to show the connection.)

# The Broken Star



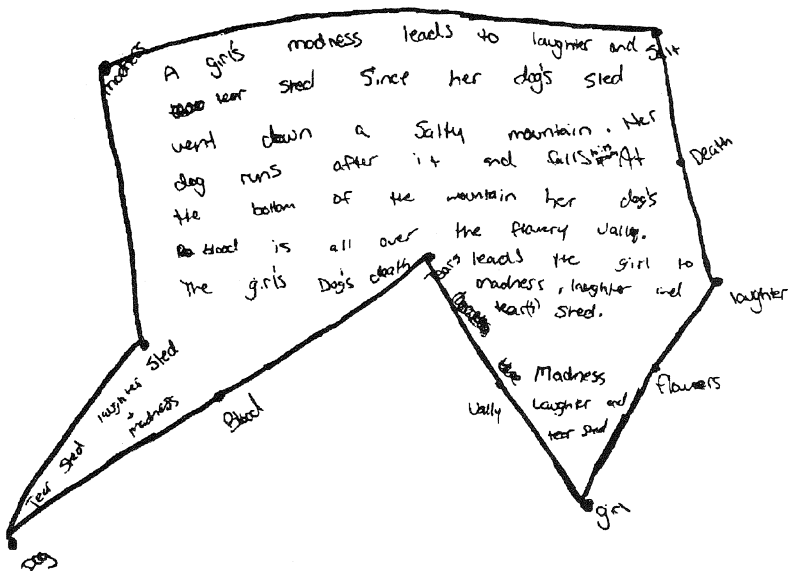
## The Broken Star

Chain: *chocolate, elk, kangaroo, ocean, Norway, yodel, land*

- **ocean**  
Chocolate  
elks, dark chocolate  
elks hid inside a  
yodeling kangaroo's pouch.  
The dark chocolate elk heard the  
yodeling inside the yodeling  
kangaroo's pouch  
and began yodeling
- **kangaroo**  
too. The kangaroo  
hopped and hopped  
with the elk  
yodeling all  
the way.
- **Chocolate**
- **Norway**  
The kangaroo  
hopped to  
the ocean  
and dropped  
to Norway  
where  
the  
elk  
rested.
- **yodel**
- **land**

—Brian Dinitzo

# TOOTH



## Tooth

Chain: *madness, salt, death, laughter, flowers, girl, valley, tears, blood, dog, sled*

- **madness** A girl's madness leads to laughter and  
tear shed since her dog's sled  
went down a salty mountain. Her  
dog runs after it and falls to its death. At
- **Death**  
the bottom of the mountain her dog's  
blood is all over the flowery valley.  
The girl's dog's death leads the girl to  
madness, laughter and  
tears shed.
- **laughter**
- **tears**  
laughter & madness  
Tear Shed
- **flowers**  
Madness  
laughter and  
tear shed
- **valley**
- **blood**
- **dog**
- **girl**

—Rahna Jalashgar

Later I noticed some problems with the lesson. One or two students had abandoned their chains and supplied words that were too conventional. One student couldn't find a flow, couldn't take off playfully; he wrote a tight little set of sentences squeezed up into the first section of his design, just getting it over with as soon as possible. Such problems may occur with students less secure in verbal or imaginative play, but for most of the students—and this was a heterogeneous class—the lesson was adventurous and liberating. It freed them from stanzaic constraint and visual convention. While larger shapes elicit repetition, the smaller shapes require economy of usage—to get all the words from the chain into these jagged forms—thus necessitating focus on the chain words, which are often provocative or surprising in this new context. Best of all, the lesson encourages wit.

At the very end of the period, I read the poem “It is a pleasure . . .” from Richard Lewis’s anthology *Moment of Wonder*, and told them what a pleasure it had been to work with them today, how beautifully they’d fulfilled this experimental lesson.

November 1st

### Lesson 3: Making Up Titles

After each of my two visits, Paul had talked to the students about our work. His excitement was, of course, contagious. He had told them that we would work on titles in the next lesson.

We started class by having each student hold up his or her work to let classmates call out what the shape reminded them of. Then the student chose one of those suggestions for the title, whether or not it seemed pertinent to the content. Even better, I told them, is a title that does not “fit” the poem logically: there can be a felicitous surprise in the conjunction of a title derived from the shape and the poem that fills the shape—the visual impact and the verbal drift.

Such combinations make some students feel uneasy, but I encouraged them to try the non-logical, to see something interesting in the newness of it. I told them that a title is there to attract the reader, not to “give the meaning” of the poem, and if the title is different from the subject of the poem, it may provide a more surprising enjoyment. Poems often make “poem sense” of their own; a startling new view can come from taking chances with images. Some image combinations may make you nervous or may seem silly, but that’s O.K., that’s part of the experience.

I said, “If anyone asks you what your poem ‘means,’ just go like this,” and I put my hands on my hips, shrugged, and gave a wry “poor you” look. Then I put my hands out palms up, cocked my head, wrinkled my brow, and told them to say, “Don’t ask what this poem means. If you don’t get it, well. . . ,” and, turning the corners of my mouth down, shook my head with a “that’s the breaks” expression on my face. Middle school kids love this in-on-the-elite-secret attitude. When they catch on that they are involved in something novel, something at the cutting edge, something the “grownups” might not understand, they begin to bask. They become more willing to take risks. When they know that they might make a crazy new music that could unsettle their elders, they become more and

more willing to work hard. And when the hesitant ones see the pleasure—of laughter, of awe, of intensity—on their classmates’ faces, there are no sleepers in that room.

The graphic shapes of the kids’ poems elicited energy, suggestions, and conversation. For some poems, the students came up with several titles for each shape, then argued and pressed each other toward a choice. They were in it together, pointing at one poem-constellation after another, more and more willing to accept a title that didn’t logically “go with” the “topic” of a poem. Then they listened to each other’s poems again, even more intently. (Some had already been exchanging poems at their desks.) The positive reactions helped them to find the pleasures possible in these new associations of words.

This method may be particularly useful for adolescents because they so often think that poems should be full of Meaning and have titles that serve as abbreviated topic sentences. Don’t worry if a few students simply cannot break away from linear “sense”; for them this lesson is only partly successful. For instance, two students in this class did the steps of the lesson but filled in their forms sloppily or incompletely. Some used words indifferently, couldn’t be led into wit or verbal play. One, taking literally my suggestion to use repetition, repeated something dull, too easy, as if to be done with the lesson. However, even in these “failures,” there were some interesting repetitions or reversals of phrases, a little word play here and there, some diligent revisions, small bursts of power.

This assignment produces the opposite of “shaped” poems wherein a thing is described in words arranged to present the shape of the thing itself. How many long-stemmed flowers and big-wheeled trucks have we seen worded forth in elementary poetry lessons? In this lesson, the poem grows on its own words, into strange corners. It surprises.

Maybe this experience will help students feel more pleasure in fitting words together inventively. Maybe they will sense how many shapes a poem can take. I hope they will also eventually discover how words can lead them into finding shapes for poems, how the poem-in-the-making does its work.



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## CALL FOR ESSAYS

Teachers & Writers Collaborative is interested in considering essays for a new book, *The Teachers & Writers Guide to Frederick Douglass*, to be edited by Wesley Brown. We are looking for innovative, creative ideas for using Douglass's *Autobiography* to inspire students to write. We are particularly interested in imaginative, practical ideas that lead to writing in all forms, including poems, stories, plays, diaries, letters, essays, and, of course, autobiographies.

The primary audience for this book is English, social studies, and history teachers at the secondary level, though material for elementary and college teachers is also welcome. Most welcome are essays with ideas that could be adapted for use at all levels, as well as pieces for the general reader interested in Douglass. However, we are not interested in considering scholarly papers or purely sociological essays.

Essays might:

- Include the grade level(s) or students' ages
- Describe the teacher's preparation for the lesson
- Describe the presentation
- Show what the assignment is particularly good for
- Discuss why the assignment works well
- Discuss any pitfalls and drawbacks
- Provide student examples, when possible
- Be informal in tone.

These guidelines are not meant to be rigid. You should feel free to modify them to suit your own purposes. Deadline for submissions is **September 1, 1994**. Please include a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

For more information, please contact T&W's Ron Padgett or Chris Edgar at (212) 691-6590 or Wesley Brown at (908) 985-1014.

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