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# The Train in the Chimney

## Teaching Poetry Writing & Art

by Barbara Flug Colin

FOUR YEARS AGO, WHEN I BEGAN AS A VOLUNTEER in the Henry Viscardi School, a state funded school for physically challenged children, I was asked to show the class what I do: write. Instead I suggested that we see what *they* could write. I now teach eleven poetry writing classes a week in second grade through high school. For the most part we use paintings, poems, and music as inspiration for our poems.

Teaching has shown me that great art makes direct contact with children and inspires them to express their own originality. There is a direct line between what Matisse calls the “childhood’s freshness” of the artist and the child’s freshness, which is still available but easily inhibited.

Here is a first draft of a poem that Faraz, a fourth grader, wrote when we were reading Whitman’s “A Farm Picture” and looking at W. S. Mount’s contemporaneous painting, “The Mill at Stony Brook”:

### The Water House

I stand and see from the bridge  
the boats and house with the brown

water mill that beautifully stands in the forest. The greenish blue water from the shallow small pond. With the path of the white snake in the sky that leaps in the clean air.

The leap Faraz took in the poem—“With the path of / the white snake in the sky that leaps in / the clean air”—was what he crossed out immediately.

I’ve learned art can bring out something intrinsically human. Miró says it’s a “collective unconscious.” And when Nicholas, a third grader, listened to my tape of loons on a Maine lake and “saw” “an interested train in the chimney,” I thought how close that is to an image from Magritte. Or when the rhymes in Blake or Dickinson inspired third graders to memorize poems (with no direction from me; I

### SPECIAL ISSUE: WRITING FROM ART

- 1 The Train in the Chimney  
by Barbara Flug Colin
- 6 The Poem in the Painting  
by Terry Hermsen
- 15 Wide World of Art  
by Glen Baxter

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hate memorizing), I thought the rhythms must touch something as deep as a heartbeat.

I've learned that children can own great art if they happen upon it on their own. After memorizing "The Tyger," Donald pointed out to the class that there is only one word different in the first and last stanza. Faraz remembered "The Tyger" a year later when we read Phyllis Wheatley's "On Imagination." He said Wheatley's "aspire" and "fire" matched Blake's.

I've learned that information may inhibit or inspire this direct access to art. We saw a Magritte retrospective through the veil of biography, but after hearing about Emily Dickinson's life we identified with her.

I've learned that certain art forms appeal to some more than to others. After listening to Mozart, Joey, a seventh grader who has neither arms nor legs, went from writing restricted, self-conscious poems to a freely associating prose poem:

#### Listening to Mozart

I feel like I am in a dream, then I realize that I am.  
Flying freely through the sky, I land so gracefully, I  
stop, and turn around. A figure is coming toward me, I  
don't know if it is harmful or friendly! It starts to talk to  
me, but I could not understand it. She asks if she could  
take me to another land and I say yes. She says two  
words to make her fly, but I didn't make them out. We  
land and I see beautiful women dancing. They ask me if  
I want to dance but I like a fool say I am handicapped,  
but they don't care! The women take me out of the chair  
and I start dancing with them. We dance faster and faster  
until I wake up.

I've learned that originality is various. When I let each child choose a postcard of a Georgia O'Keeffe flower painting, Josh, a second grader in a "slow" academic class sees "a star crashing in thunder" and hears a "hypnotic plane." A third grader sees "a secret throwing a spike . . . / a bird with glitter eyes / going to eat the flower falling from the sky. / Somebody is in heaven with no head." A fifth grader sees:

#### Georgia O'Keeffe Flower

The flower looks like a girl on the ground, lying near the pond. Hidden by leaves and flowers, she slowly looks in the water, but the reflection she sees is and isn't her own. It looks like a painting of her in a fog. Although nothing is missing, something is different and she can't understand the picture that the lake has drawn.

—Dominika, 5th grade

Dominika speaks and writes as if the words come directly from her soul. Though the act of writing is difficult for her and slows her flow, she wants to write her poems by hand (rather than work at a computer or have someone write for her). At first she crumpled the paper: "My poem is so different," she said. It always is.

I've learned that art is a means to freedom. A second

grader said, "Poetry can help me walk." Gregg (fourth grade) wrote:

#### Imagination

is underwear.  
It guards my skin.  
It protects my whole body.  
It goes with me to Connecticut,  
New Jersey, San Francisco.  
Imagination is a seal.  
It floats in the water  
to take me to Alaska  
and I can touch the iceberg.

Imagination is a dog.  
It has accidents in the house.  
It chews things a lot.  
It gets in the garbage.

Imagination is glasses.  
Important to help some people see.

Imagination is a poet.  
I enjoy poetry  
because I get to get out  
my imagination.

Because Gregg does not have the motor coordination to write or use the computer, I take dictation from him. The line breaks are mine. Recently I realized that I can ask a child to indicate when the line should be broken or go back later to make slash marks. But with Gregg, for now, I try simply to generate and catch his excitement that discussions of line breaks or editing would obliterate. The words are his. He has written other, similarly wonderful poems.

I've learned that creating a context for discovery is more effective than teaching information. To create this context I use all the lessons the children teach me.

Take, for example, our preparation and visit to the 1993 Museum of Modern Art Matisse retrospective.

Three I. E. P. (Individualized Educational Program for students whose physical disabilities have affected scholastic ability) classes prepared by writing poems while looking at paintings by Matisse. Each fifth, seventh, and ninth-tenth grader was given postcards of the Matisse paintings "Harmony in Red," "Conversation," and "Dance." We shared lots of other Matisse reproductions. We looked at John Elderfield's *Matisse* catalogue for the Museum of Modern Art's recent show and Pierre Schneider's book *Matisse*. By looking at a lot of Matisse's work, we could get some sense of his entire body of work, notice how recurring imagery, shape, composition, and color are transformed.

We begin to discover likenesses in works that have different subjects: a vase that has the same stance as a dancer; a pitcher that has the same shape in its handle as the ear in a self-portrait done in the same period. We discover that a thing and a person can *feel* the same. On facing pages in Elderfield's catalogue, we can see the similarity between two different works. We can see some drawings of "The Plumed Hat" beside the painting "The White Plumes."

Pierre Schneider's book shows how Matisse sculpted "Back" four times over a period of twenty-three years. Keith sees this as the human back changing from animal to vegetal. He says, "The shape is changing. . . . The last one is weird . . . like the spine of a tree."

As we look we say what we like and tell why. In a class vote on a preference between "Bowl of Apples on a Table" and "Apples," the fifth grade class prefers the more conventional bowl of apples. But Josh chooses "Apples" (the closer view of a much transformed bowl of apples that seems to subsume the room space) "because it's floating, and because it has a dark and a light side." Because we value the irregular, the odd, and the original, seeing it in Matisse inspires us. The poems we write, from looking at Matisse, say what we see in an increasingly original way.

In Miss Viscardi's art class we look at Matisse's cutouts, then create our own. We spend weeks cutting and composing before we find the composition we *feel* is "right" to paste down. Then we write a poem from that as if that piece of art were created by someone else.

In the process of looking at paintings, the facts of what we see yield to poetry. Grade 9–10's first attempt to say what we see in "Dance"—five naked people in a circle dance—is a class poem. I write on the blackboard their perceptions as they occur. It begins "People are dancing" and ends "A girl is reaching for another person's hand. / They're trying. / They are not connecting." A fifth grade class "Dance" poem begins "Green as grass . . ." and ends "Their arms are a circle of freedom."

It is a circular process: saying what we see, then seeing what we say. Theresa turns her "Dance" postcard sideways and sees the misshapen oval of the dancers as "a bottle." Then someone else sees "a guitar." Someone else shouts out "or a light bulb or a chicken leg or a bowling pin."

Looking at "Dance," Sabrina writes:

#### The Spirits

A tango of the mind  
surprises them. They  
have nothing to hide.  
They are mysterious  
like ghosts from another  
life. They're out for a night  
on the town. The pirates are  
waiting and stalking them  
like live prey.

—Sabrina, 9–10th grade

Sabrina's originality does not give her high marks on standardized tests. She is in a class for students whose physical disability affects scholastic ability. The discovery of her writing talent gives her coveted status among her peers and the self-confidence to head for the computer when I arrive, to ignore my class exercises and to write what is coming through her. When she finishes we find a moment alone for her to read her poem to me, not to change anything, not even the idiosyncratic beginning indent, which she likes, but to clarify misspelled words (often amazing puns or phonetic "mistakes," insights into the sense and non-sense of

language). Then she reads her poem when we all read our poems at the end of each class.

After a discussion of synesthesia with third graders, I handed out art postcards. Desiree wrote, in ten minutes:

#### "The Horse, the Rider, and the Clown" by Henri Matisse

This painting looks  
like a sculpture  
right in the middle  
of the world, to me  
it feels like a  
horse twisting in  
the wind, it smells  
like a torturing  
night mare, it  
sounds like a  
dreaming snowball  
fight, it tastes like  
snowflakes  
bursting in the cold  
winter,  
snowy, sunny, daylight,  
flowing in the  
wind.

Matisse says his process is toward a "form filtered to its essentials." In class we discover it through solving what we call "Matisse Mysteries." Looking at "Dance," we can see that it is "filtered" from "Harmony in Red" where a black-roofed tiny pink edifice out the window anticipates the black-haired pink "Dance" bodies painted the next year. We can see that "Harmony in Red" is "filtered" from "Breton Serving Girl" and "The Dinner Table." We can see what is alike in all three: a servant tends a table. And what is different: among other things, only in the final version is a scene outside visible. We can see that six circling naked





dancers deep in the background of “Le Bonheur de Vivre” become five in the foreground in “Dance.”

We discover this same process in two drafts of a William Carlos Williams poem, “The Locust Tree in Flower.” I pose the questions: “In the second version, how many words did Williams leave out? How many people did Matisse leave out?” The answers begin a class poem the students dictate to me at the chalkboard. “What else did he leave out?”

#### Leaving Out

William Carlos Williams left out 21 words  
in the final version of “The Locust Tree in Flower.”  
Matisse left out 11 people from “Le Bonheur de Vivre”  
to paint “Dance.”  
He also left out trees, goats, the horizon, figures.  
He changed the sky color.  
He left out yellow that they’re standing in.  
And pink, orange and red.  
He left out whiter bodies.  
The dark blue becomes light blue sky in “Dance.”

—5th grade class poem

Discovering this process in Matisse and Williams helps us in our process. For two years Louis wrote mostly humorous, verbose poems. After these editing discoveries Louis writes:

#### “The Waiting is Killing Me!!!!!!”

She is a housewife.  
She is waiting  
for her husband.  
She begins to walk.  
She can’t find him.  
She kneels down.  
She begins to cry.

—Louis, grade 5 (after “The Yellow Hat” by Matisse)

To solve “Matisse Mysteries,” we vie to find Matisse hidden in his painting, or to find past paintings hidden in later ones, or try any exercise to make us look more closely. Familiarity helps us to see that Josh is right: the more imaginative bowl of apples with a dark and a light side is visually closer to us. And it is closer to how our imagination is when it is freed of convention.

We have learned to respect our originality: that we see the same thing differently. In “Chinese Fish” Josh sees “the x’s are laughing at the blue sky / . . . Red lips are big, are laughing at a joke they heard.”

Sabrina writes:

The colors are all there. No meaning, no life. Why do we call colors colors? The baby in her mother’s wound cries out for air, I don’t know why she cries she just cries. The clouds are shaped like x’s. The mind wanders as it tries to ask why.

—Sabrina, 9th–10th grade (“Chinese Fish”)

Kristin writes:

#### Combination

I see pink and purple  
clouds. They are standing in  
a line.

Have you ever seen a white  
leaf? I can! See it in my  
imagination.  
A green box with a white  
frog and yellow grass can be  
strange, but when you think  
about it, it can be beautiful.  
I’ve never seen an orange  
smile with yellowish orange  
leaves around it. It can be  
odd and realistic at the same  
time.

—Kristin, 7th grade (“Chinese Fish”)

I’ve taught Kristin for three years. She usually breaks any rule I make. My students all know they are authorized to do so.

The paintings become as familiar as a memorized poem. We discover deeper things, become more curious, look harder, say more, bringing into consciousness a language for something else that has much to do with our selves. Sabrina, like Matisse, identifies with the woman and the fish in “Woman Before an Aquarium.”

#### The Mystery of a Goldfish

As she stares at the bowl wondering what are they thinking. Wanting to be like them but why? What makes them so different? Why didn’t god make us the same? Don’t you sometimes wonder? About life? And why we sometimes get so sad at the world?

—Sabrina, 9th–10th grade (“Woman before an Aquarium”)

When we get to the museum we find the treasure.

### In the Museum of Modern Art

Being in the museum is like finding a treasure.  
In the museum Madame Matisse is hiding behind a mask.  
The "Conversation" was bigger.  
You could see how he painted over the skirt,  
it came out near her feet but he painted over it.  
In the museum "Dance" was huge with beautiful colors:  
lighter peach than in the postcard;  
more vivid orange than in the book.  
In the museum you could see the woman who was sitting  
in "The Painter's Family" was crying.  
She is his wife.  
In the museum, "The Moroccans" was unique with green  
fruits and then a glass in the middle.  
That was strange.  
Why didn't he paint more than one nude man?

—9th–10th grade class poem

"I like poetry because when you write a poem it's like a whole different world. . . . I don't have to be afraid to speak," says Marie. Marie is afraid to speak in class but at the Matisse exhibit she summons me to "The Young Sailor" and then to the "Portrait of Pierre Matisse" to show me how alike they are. Then to the "Portrait of Mme. Matisse." "Her lips are smiling but her eyes are sad," she says.

Desiree, who is pushing Marie's wheelchair, drags me over to "French Window at Collioure" to tell me she loves this the best. It is the most abstract painting in the room.

Then Desiree takes me to "The Yellow Curtain" (ca. 1915) and says, "It looks like his cutouts." Of course she's right, though she hasn't been taught, hasn't calculated that the cutouts came much later, the late 1940s. But she is familiar with the cutouts, can sense the similarity, in her simple spontaneous apprehension of something very complex.

As we look at "Tea in a Garden" two men pass and say they see "pebbles" on the path. The fifth grade class sees these forms as "shadows." Someone says: "The shadows look like the two people are hurting each other's feelings." Dominika sees shadows too.

### Tea in the Garden

That poor dog  
he is really too nice. He  
is just a happy dog.  
He shouldn't be with those  
gruff, stern women. At first  
glance you think he is really  
a mad dog, but you only assume that,  
only because the women  
look so angry. The women are  
having tea even though they're  
not eating. In the  
dark path there are light  
shadows and in the light path  
there are dark shadows. I feel  
like I knew the women once  
and no one could ever know  
them.

—Dominika, 7th grade

the window rail in "Conversation" "looks like a word, NOX or NON." In "Women and Monkeys" and "The Thousand and One Nights" Josh sees "Chinese and Hebrew letters."

Marie senses the equivalencies between nature and human nature.

### Sheaf

. . . These things are leafs.  
The leafs of  
life. The first leafs ever born.

—Marie, 5th grade

Looking at the paintings in the museum, Dominika reflects Matisse's words, though she has not read them.

Dominika: "Charcoal. . . . It's almost nicer if you can use your imagination for the colors."

Matisse: "A charcoalist makes his presence known even in a charcoal drawing."

Dominika (looking at a painting of Nice): "It's really a great picture. You know he's worked out all the details . . . before and all he does there is . . . lines."

Matisse: "Sift . . . details . . . selecting . . . the line that expresses most and gives life. . . ."

Matisse: "Colors win you over more and more. A certain blue enters your soul. A certain red has an effect on your blood pressure. A certain color tones you up. It's a concentration of timbres. . . ."

Dominika: "The colors look so awesome on one another. . . . The colors fit together like they were meant to be that way. . . . I've never seen colors so bright. . . . You could stare at it for hours. It's like, 'Wow—that's a great orange. Now let's stare at the purple.' You know (laughs) his colors are so bright you can stare at them for hours. It's amazing. I'm going to sleep here tonight. I'll wake up in the morning and I'll see the whole exhibit again. (Laughs.) And I'm going to spend 30 minutes at each painting. Or rather 30 minutes at each color. 'Gee that was a great pink!'"



Ray-Ray has not been told that Matisse says he wants to ". . . translate the totality of things with a sign." But he says

# THE POEM IN THE PAINTING

by Terry Hermsen

USING ART TO INSPIRE STUDENTS TO WRITE CAN be a blessing or a curse. On the one hand, the students can gain a certain focus from the art, along with some immediate visual references for their ideas. On the other hand, they can veer toward writing shapeless, rambling stories that fail to create pictures in the reader's mind because they assume that the reader can already see what they themselves are looking at. The challenge for the teacher is to find lessons that keep the writing sharp through the use of precise details that clarify what the writer (and thus the reader) sees. I do not know one "right" way to achieve this, but the lessons below have worked for me, and I hope they will stimulate you to create some approaches of your own.

It's helpful to have some large reproductions of a few paintings, for use in helping the entire class practice "looking closely," and a variety of smaller reproductions of photographs and paintings, ancient and modern, for each student to use in his or her writing. Museum shops are good for the former, and the art sections of used book stores can supply large numbers of the latter.

## LESSON ONE: DOODLE POEMS

Why not begin with the students' own artwork? I often put on some music and give them time to doodle before writing. As a self-confessed Telephone Doodler, I suggest four rules for "the true and arcane art of doodling": 1) don't try to make your doodle look *like* anything; 2) use simple shapes and lines; 3) apply continuous and inventive repetition to these beginnings, enjoying a particular line or shape until you feel like varying it; and 4) let the feeling of the music guide you.

It is sometimes helpful to model this process on the board. I often hand out photocopies of Paul Klee's imaginative drawings, which go beyond doodle but contain a similar playfulness (see example below). I give students ten or so minutes to complete their sketches. Doodling encourages students to follow—and to value—their spontaneity.

When they have filled a page or two with doodles, I read them two example poems. I ask the students how William Stafford's "Smoke," although not based on the Klee drawing, could be a verbal representation of it.

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—Doodle by Paul Klee

### Smoke

Smoke's way's a good way—find,  
or be rebuffed and gone:  
a day and a day, the whole world home.

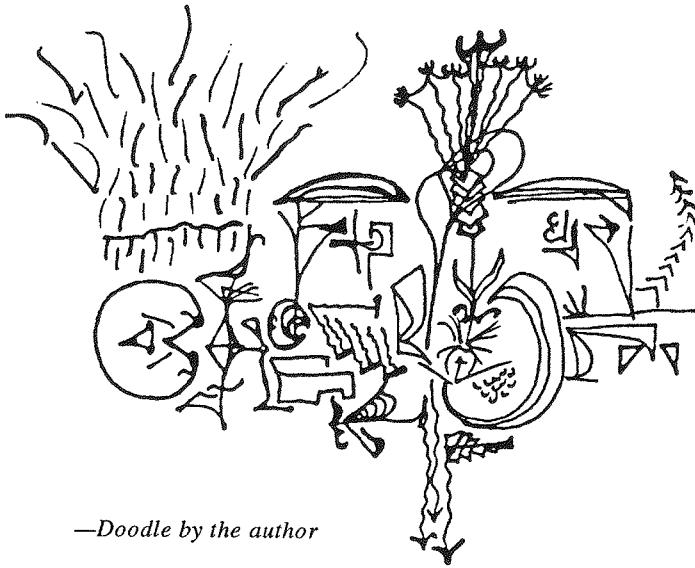
Smoke? Into the mountains I guess  
a long time ago. Once here, yes,  
everywhere. Say anything? No.

I saw Smoke, slow traveler, reluctant  
but sure. Hesitant sometimes, yes,  
because that's the way things are.

Smoke never doubts though:  
some new move will appear.  
Wherever you are, there is another door.

—William Stafford

Then I read them my poem "The Message," based on my doodle (see below), and discuss its use of metaphors derived from the drawing.



—Doodle by the author

### The Message

Kneel before the voice of wind—  
Piano song of snakes and fire

The child is at the steps,  
going down sleepy

Hang up your boat—  
it will make a better roof

Past the river of three,  
under the horn of the thorn balloons,

Through the cobble of the shell  
and the tiny eye—

There is a way home

—Terry Hermsen

Then I send the students back to their own doodles, suggesting they list down the side of a new page metaphors for what they see in their drawings and then begin a poem. I tell them that they need not use everything in their lists; rather, let the brainstorming of metaphors be a catalyst for sending them back to the drawing. The artwork itself may quietly dictate how to begin the poem.



Go up the mountain  
From here to there  
Fall down the mountain  
From when to where—

Go up the mountain  
look at the stars  
And watch the sky  
light up from glitter.

—Doodle and poem by John Collins, 4th grade



Maze through the  
shadows and no way out.  
Crossing through  
darkness never to be  
seen. Cage, cage as in  
dungeon far in a castle.  
Chinese writing,  
not understood. A  
creature biting at my  
feet. A storm and how  
to stop it from  
killing our people  
seeing the bubbles of  
success. In a trance, no way out. Freckles of  
a poor girl wishing for  
food. Not knowing where  
to run after messages  
ran out. Death in the  
darkness too hard to see.  
Wavering softly in the  
night, seeing the path and  
glory. Ha hey, ha hey,  
is that land or is that  
the thing that killed  
my brother 10 seas ago.  
Strange mountaintops  
nowhere to be found. I  
think I know what I  
see but then again I  
don't. Bugging me like a  
fly in my ear. Wind  
blowing, not sure, to be  
a turncoat or a  
stranger, believing in all  
just to  
get it your way. Eye  
of a king, no a  
sorcerer, no, a tooth! Dirt,  
only knowing the sounds  
gush and disgust.  
This is my story of  
a long time  
ago.

—Doodle and poem by Martine Grywalski, 4th grade

## LESSON TWO: GO INSIDE A STONE

### The Room

With crayons and pieces of paper,  
I entered the empty room.  
I sat on the floor and drew pictures all day.  
One day I held a picture against the bare wall:  
It was a window. Climbing through,

I stood on a sloping field  
at dusk. As I began walking, night settled.  
Far ahead in the valley, I saw the lights  
of a village and always at my back I felt  
the white room swallowing what was passed.

—Gregory Orr

Although I've found Gregory Orr's poem strangely effective with high schoolers, it is not one I use any longer with elementary school kids. I tried it with fifth graders and got dull, unperceptive story-poems that actually had little to do with what was in the painting. I was disappointed, but didn't want to throw out the concept altogether. So I hunted around for a slightly different model. I found Charles Simic's poem about entering a stone and finding an unknown world inside:

### Stone

Go inside a stone  
That would be my way.  
Let somebody else become a dove  
Or gnash with a tiger's tooth.  
I am happy to be a stone.

From the outside the stone is a riddle:  
No one knows how to answer it.  
Yet within, it must be cool and quiet  
Even though a cow steps on it full weight,  
Even though a child throws it in a river;  
The stone sinks, slow, unperturbed  
To the river bottom  
Where the fishes come to knock on it  
And listen.

I have seen sparks fly out  
When two stones are rubbed,  
So perhaps it is not dark inside after all;  
Perhaps there is a moon shining  
From somewhere, as though behind a hill—  
Just enough light to make out  
The strange writings, the star-charts  
On the inner walls.

Another useful example is Langston Hughes's poem "As I Grow Older," which is about re-entering a dream through memory. Both poems are about creating spaces within which to imagine. The problem was how to use visual art to get kids to make the same kind of space inside their poems.

Using these poems, I came up with two related approaches:

1) Write about the artwork as if it were a dream you were having. Feel your way inside the artwork and write about being there. You don't have to explain what came before in the dream—bring the scene to life and leave us inside that moment. Include details—the colors, the objects around you. Assume the reader can't see the painting. One way to begin is with the phrase, "I dreamed . . .," repeating it as needed throughout the poem (and perhaps deleting it in revision).

2) Stressing the magic of "Stone," leave out the idea of dreaming and just *be inside* the artwork. Evoke the amazement that we can project ourselves inside the nature of other creatures and things. Isn't this, in a way, what a portrait asks us to do? Or even a landscape? We often hear "Walk in the someone else's shoes." This is a chance to try it. So go inside a stone. Or the painting you have selected. Feel what it's like inside. Where are you? What feeling do you have?

### Poem

(Childe Hassam, *The North Gorge*)

We are always rushing—  
Rushing

I am thrown and pushed. . . . Torn from the  
others as often as I am separated myself.

The impression of the cloudless sky mingles  
with the ice blue of my home.

I am suddenly away from the deep  
and brought upon the rough, manipulative  
rocks in the shallow land.

Now I am blue.

—Emily Austin, 4th grade

### Strange House

(René Magritte, *Les Valeurs personnelles*)

The walls are windows.  
Combs stand upon my wooden  
Bed.  
The party struck my mind  
As if you struck the match on the  
Floor.  
Glasses of champagne are big as  
Me.

—Erin Ling, 5th grade

### A Dark, Cool Place

(George Bellows, *Summer Night, Riverside Drive*)

This is a dark place.

I can walk through and see  
nothing. One or two shivers and  
a quiet breeze. The water rustles  
and the trees are swirling a  
vast emptiness with sounds of  
nature. A few crickets, maybe more.  
A dog loose, and light is gone. A  
dim of a sparkle is in the background.  
A place with a cold shiver to hold  
a brightness, but yet dark. Not knowing  
what to happen. I am quiet. For time  
to come. I am still, to wait

for it to get light. I sit and am  
silent. A candle unlit to wait for  
time.

—Shawn Ehmann, 5th grade

### LESSON THREE: PORTRAITS

The world looks different when we see only one small, framed section of it—a view out a New York City window in winter, the jut of a sail seen from up in the sky, a Georgia O’Keeffe jack-in-the-pulpit enlarged to the size of a wall. Such images extend our ability to participate in the world—we come away from them more able to see—and writing poetry about art is one way to help kids discover that ability in themselves.

As a warm-up, I hold an empty frame up to a spot on a wall (preferably one with plenty of intriguing cracks and crevices). I want the students to realize how we can use metaphors not only for our feelings but also for what we see. I ask them to brainstorm some comparisons for what is inside the frame. Two highways meeting. A crack on a lens. An ocean wave. The line where the water stops in a glass. I point out how much they can invent from just one framed view when they really start to see.

Next, we read aloud poems about people, beginning with one by William Carlos Williams:

#### Proletarian Portrait

A big young bareheaded woman  
in an apron

Her hair slicked back standing  
on the street

One stockinged foot toeing  
the sidewalk

Her shoe in her hand. Looking  
intently into it

Pulling out the paper insole  
to find the nail

That has been hurting her.

We then read a portrait poem based on a metaphor, Langston Hughes’s “Troubled Woman,” and a poem of my own. Other portrait poems, such as Rilke’s “Spanish Dancer” and Chiang Ch’ieh’s “Listening to Rain,” also use visual metaphors that suggest how a painting might “talk.” In discussing these poems, I point out how certain details create the sense of a very real *someone* there, even though the reader has never seen the original person.

Then I spread some reproductions on the table—as wide a range of artists and styles as I can find, with subjects from many different cultures and walks of life, not just formal 18th-century portraits of royalty and nobility. I ask the students to choose one or two to work with, outlining the following ideas on the board:

- Write *about* the person—what he or she may be feeling at this moment, along with what the person might be doing. Or actually *be* the person.

- Include lots of *details*, such as clothing, objects on the floor or the wall, etc. Putting details in your poem will help readers imagine the portrait even if they can’t see it.

- Speculate a little. What is the person doing? What’s one thing about him or her that we *can’t* see? You might begin a line with something like, “Once I . . .” or “Once she . . .” or even “Sometimes he feels as if. . .”

- Use poem form, with line breaks and metaphors.

#### Samson

(Gerard Van Honthorst, *Samson and Delilah*)

I feel so hurt when the tricklen  
blades cut my hair                      it feels  
like I am so tired to move.

I thought she loved me, I guess I know  
what she wanted. But my hair.

Why! Will I die? Yes, I wish  
to. O            god, almighty, why  
did it have to be me? He was  
my friend. Never in my life if I  
live will I trust another woman  
or will I have another friend. Like in friend, I will end. The  
piercing of my eyes, will I ever  
see again. The blades of steel  
raking through my hair.

The candle, the candle will  
never let me see another day.

The candle burning on my  
back                      My love has tricked me by poisoning

my drink  
and making me weak so let me go and my nonforget-  
table life. Around me I see nothing,  
my eyes too weak to move.

My heart of love is in my stomach  
digesting.

—Steven Clements, 5th grade

#### Lonely

(Vincent Van Gogh, *Sien with Cigar, Sitting on the Ground*)

Sometimes I feel like a broken window,  
very little pieces falling to the ground  
one at a time. I sit here all alone in a dirty shed.

I sit by a fire in the darkness all  
alone with a cigar in my hand.

Once I used to walk to the cigar store  
but now I am all alone by a fire  
in the night.

—Melissa Jenkins, 5th grade

### LESSON FOUR: I.M.T. (INTENSIVE METAPHOR TRAINING)

Sometimes I have students who are not yet “at home in the metaphor,” as Frost puts it. Sometimes they’ve gotten the idea that you just tack on any old phrase that you’ve heard

before: “like a cloud in the sky” or “as red as a rose.” To risk inventing a metaphor is to risk saying something original, and this is not always easy. In writing about artwork, this means connecting with the painting or sculpture. To some this will come naturally; for the rest of us, it can be learned. And by learning it, we become more deeply engaged with our writing. Then it is as if we had a magic for writing about artwork or anything else.

To begin, I have the class look closely at some paintings. If you can take your students to a museum, use the museum docents, who are often adept at drawing out a class’s response to a work—guiding their eyes to certain overlooked details, or asking about emotions, moods, and the focus of the picture. Where is the “center”? What’s implied? What seems about to happen? Or what just happened? Compositionally, how is the work divided? What part takes up the most room? Where are our eyes directed? Is something in the painting the “opposite” of something else? Are there other oppositions—or pairings?

Next I add one more step, one that helps immensely with the students’ poetry. I tell them to begin to add “as if.” Is there anything in the artwork that connects with that phrase? Does the wallpaper seem as if it were ready to peel, or as if beyond the door an opening might slide into an entirely different room, one butted right up against the edge of the sea (even if the sea is only suggested in the painting by a sliver of blue in the top right-hand corner)? Is the plate white like a scrubbed and rounded bone, or like a piece of paper with a hole cut out for a mirror? Kids are quite capable of inventing similarly fanciful images. Some may invent images that are merely bizarre and thus lose the original focus of the artist, but more often than not students will be led by such play, as if through some back door, into other levels of the artist’s intent. Insights that might come only after years of study become available to the students through the combination of seeing and metaphor.

So I suggest that they take their time and look closely. If nothing comes immediately, that’s okay. This kind of seeing allows for patience. Sometimes I have them practice on a three-dimensional object first: a piece of knotty driftwood, a snakeskin, or an old-fashioned egg-slicer. As I hold it up for them to see, turning it over in my hand and asking them what it reminds them of, we get the juices flowing. Then we take the more sophisticated step of feeling our way to the metaphors in a two-dimensional surface. Making these connections can open up museum doors for students for years to come.

Finally, before writing, I like to read aloud some poems based on metaphor, such as “The Horse” by W.S. Merwin. You might ask your students, for instance, what Merwin might have been looking at when he got the idea for the poem:

#### **The Horse**

In a dead tree  
there is the ghost of a horse  
no horse

was ever seen near the tree  
but the tree was born  
of a mare  
it rolled with long legs  
in rustling meadows  
it pricked its ears  
it reared and tossed its head  
and suddenly stood still  
beginning to remember  
as its leaves fell.

The following three poems have a similar effect. All that’s needed are two or three poems to remind the class how a metaphor weaves its way into the heart of a poem:

#### **Moving Forward**

The deep parts of my life pour onward,  
as if the river shores were opening out.  
It seems that things are more like me now,  
that I can see farther into paintings.  
I feel closer to what language can’t reach.  
With my senses, as with birds, I climb  
into the windy heaven, out of the oak,  
and in the ponds broken off from the sky  
my feeling sinks, as if standing on fishes.

—*Rainer Maria Rilke*

(Translated by M.D. Herter Norton)

#### **One A.M.**

The kitchen patio is snowy  
moonlight. That  
snowsilence, that  
abandon to stillness.  
The sawhorse, the concrete  
washtub, snowblue. The washline  
bowed under its snowfur!  
Moon has silenced  
the crickets, the summer frogs  
hold their breath.  
Summer night, summer night, standing  
one-legged, a crane  
in the snowmarsh, staring  
at snowmoon!

—*Denise Levertov*

#### **Oceans**

I have a feeling that my boat  
has struck, down there in the depths,  
against a great thing.  
And nothing  
happens! Nothing . . . Silence . . . Waves . . .

—Nothing happens? Or has everything happened,  
and are we standing now, quietly, in the new life?

—*Juan Ramón Jiménez*

(Translated by Robert Bly)

I then turn the students loose to find their own metaphoric responses in the paintings they choose.

**Fire**

(René Magritte, *The Graduation of Fire*)

Upon the charred oak table,  
 There lies a piece of pottery  
 looking like a dead man's brain.  
 A hardboiled egg,  
 like a deformed golfball  
 with fingerprints.  
 A key to a chest of treasure,  
 like a young boy  
 leaning over to catch  
 something.  
 There are many shadows  
 wherever you look.  
 Everything you see is burning.

—Nathan Douridas, *5th grade*

**Poem**

(Georgia O'Keeffe, *Jack-in-the-Pulpit VI*)

I feel the sadness of leaving  
 and moving.  
 A candy cane being sucked  
 very hard.  
 I feel cool inside the  
 windy transportation.  
 I feel sharply in pain  
 like a fishhook.  
 A light, spiritual color.  
 The sharpness of a bear's tooth  
 that just came in.  
 The lapping of a rolling and  
 flying carpet.

—Mandy Prifogle, *5th grade*

## LESSON FIVE AND BEYOND: HEARING THE PAINTING

The following four ideas are synopses of lessons I've created based on particular poems. You might want to adjust these ideas according to your own experience and hunches.

If one theme ties these four ideas together, it may be that of "hearing" one's way into a painting. For if one of the best ways to understand a poem is to picture it, one way to know a painting is to listen for the sound it makes. In a way, these are all variations of lesson two above: ways of stepping through the wall between us and what this particular work of art might give us.

**A) In My Window**

Look at one or more of the following poems:

**5. (from "Puzzles")**

The window above my green iron bed  
 is so high I have to climb the rails  
 and sit on the window sill  
 to look out at the street.

Early mornings, or lying alone  
 in the afternoon, I listen to  
 footsteps in the street, or cars,  
 sometimes no sound at all,

only the light touching the house  
 on the other corner, the one  
 with a wooden tower, where  
 once I saw someone's face

looking out, seeing me  
 in my window well, the two of us  
 staring at each other  
 over the big empty street.

They tell me I'm too little  
 to go by myself. I'll never know  
 who that person is, what  
 we'd have said.

Across the street is another country,  
 the pavement a grey desert.

—Barbara Angell

**Between Walls**

the back wings  
 of the

hospital where  
 nothing

will grow lie  
 cinders

in which shine  
 the broken

pieces of a green  
 bottle

—William Carlos Williams

### Love Calls Us to the Things of This World (Excerpt)

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,  
 And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul  
 Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple  
 As false dawn.

Outside the open window  
 The morning air is all awash with angels.

Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,  
 Some are in smocks: but truly there they are.  
 Now they are rising together in calm swells  
 Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear  
 With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing.

Now they are flying in space, conveying  
The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving  
And staying like white water and now of a sudden  
They swoon down into so rapt a quiet  
That nobody seems to be there [ . . . ]

—Richard Wilbur

Each of these creates a scene that could have been glimpsed out a window. Incidentally, Wallace Stevens's poem "Disillusionment at 10 O'Clock" makes an interesting model because it creates a kind of scene in reverse by conjuring images of what is *not* there.

Next, find a painting based on a window scene, such as Andrew Wyeth's "Groundhog Day" or Edouard Manet's "The Balcony." Ask the students to imagine the painting as the scene outside their own windows, or a window in a room they might live in sometime in their lives. Propose a format something like this:

- Write a poem beginning with the phrase "In my window . . ." and bring the painting alive in your words. You might want to come back to that phrase as a repeating line.

- To make us feel like we're there, use lots of details and metaphors to describe the scene.

- If you get stuck, some other phrases that might trigger an idea are: "Sometimes . . .," "Above me . . .," "When . . .," and "I never. . . ."

#### In My Window

(George Bellows, *Mrs. Albert Miller*)

In my window I feel  
So shy! My shawl is  
    old and my dress is  
    shaggy!

In my window  
    I am standing  
in front of it, turning away  
in pity of the shaggy look of  
the trees!

In my window,  
    the breeze is cold  
and the trees, what a pity,  
    hanging their heads low!

—Karen Scott, *5th grade*

#### Poem

(Vincent Van Gogh, *Starry Night*)

I lean over a cliff,  
watching the town.  
Everyone is asleep, dreaming.  
Suddenly a fire flares up  
and the peaceful town  
is in commotion. People  
run off into the  
hills as if never  
coming back again. But  
I know they will.

Leaning over a cliff, I watch the  
peaceful town. Little by little the lights  
go out and stars come.  
The moon shines brightly as I  
walk back home.

I lean over the cliff watching the  
town. Everyone is asleep dreaming. The  
moon shines brightly as little droplets  
fall out of the cloudy sky. Soon the  
town will be dripping.

—Danielle Konfal, *5th grade*

#### B) *The Song of the Picture*

Artists do illustrations for stories. Composers write music to emphasize the emotion of a movie scene. So might there be a song inside a painting? The Russian composer Mussorgsky "heard" a series of symphonic pieces at an artist friend's show, which became his "Pictures at an Exhibition." (You might play one of these and ask the students to visualize the original painting.)

The assignment here is to write a poem about the "song inside the painting." Each line or so could begin with the phrase "The song of . . ." and include particular details from the picture, as in my example:

The song of the river  
brushed out from the edge of the world.  
The song of the rounded green globe of the earth.  
How the flowers rise up like hydras, yellow, bitten white. . . .

Repetition of certain key phrases can give the poem a song-like quality even without rhyme.

One variation involves taking on the persona of the composer by beginning with a phrase such as "When I make my song of . . ." and going on to include the full range of the painting in your own composition. Langston Hughes gives us a model for this type of approach in his "Daybreak in Alabama":

#### Daybreak in Alabama

When I get to be a composer  
I'm gonna write me some music about  
Daybreak in Alabama  
And I'm gonna put the purtiest songs in it  
Rising out of the ground like a swamp mist  
And falling out of heaven like soft dew.  
I'm gonna put some tall tall trees in it  
And the scent of pine needles  
And the smell of red clay after rain  
And long red necks  
And poppy colored faces  
And big brown arms  
And the field daisy eyes  
Of black and white black white black people  
And I'm gonna put white hands  
And black hands and brown and yellow hands  
And red clay earth hands in it  
Touching everybody with kind fingers  
And touching each other natural as dew

In that dawn of music when I  
Get to be a composer  
And write about daybreak  
In Alabama.

—Langston Hughes

**Fox and Eight Big Black Birds**  
(Winslow Homer, *The Fox Hunt*)

The fox      the poor fox  
A cold winter day  
The poor fox            nowhere to go  
  
Running fast from eight big black birds  
The birds are attacking  
The fox      the poor fox  
  
Eight big black birds beat him  
On a cold winter day The fox lays still  
The poor fox            nowhere to go  
No one to help him  
The poor fox lays still            On an island  
The eight big black birds            picking at him  
  
The poor fox trying to fight back  
The fox lays still  
Watching the water sway back and forth  
  
Then disappear  
The poor fox lays still.

—Melissa McManus, 5th grade

**Poem**  
(Marc Chagall, *The Wedding*)

When I make my song of night  
I look out my window and hang  
from a tree  
I see a woman and man in front  
of my house, and the moon behind them  
Then there was a guy with a violin  
in his hand  
A wedding woman with flowers in her hand  
and a guy was about to kiss her  
Then I climb back in the window  
and I say to myself, When I  
make my song of night

—Angie Cossin, 5th grade

**My Song**  
(Stuart Davis, *Landscape with Drying Sails*)

My song of  
the harbor  
in the middle  
of spring.  
  
The smell of  
fresh sea  
air from the west.  
  
The taste of  
fresh fish  
is still in

my mouth.

I start on  
my way  
to the harbor  
of my own.

—Matthew Morgan, 5th grade

### C) Oppositions

Art critic John Berger says, “Every painting begins with the word *here*.” I agree. And within that *here*, there begins a linking of oppositions. Sky and cloud. Line and circumference. Suggestion of shadow and the implied presence of its source. Art—whether music, painting, poetry, dance, or theatre—may well be about experiencing the basic oppositions of our world.

Here’s an assignment to tap into that particular energy. I have students list the various oppositions within a given work of art. For example, in a landscape by Albert Bierstadt there might be mountain and cloud, boats and island, bay and sea, the thrust of light and the shaft of a pine, all moving in opposite directions and yet strangely imitating each other.

You might, of course, prepare the students for this kind of list-making by toying around with the idea of opposition (or creative pairings, if you will) *before* you apply it to paintings. Brainstorm some forms of opposition with the class. It helps sometimes to point out that someone once said the opposite of “war” is not exactly “peace,” but “fishing.” (So what is the opposite of “brick”? “Feather”? “Air”? And what about “star”? One student suggested “fish,” because the stars are small and glitter in the sky and the fish do the same in the water.) Then see if this same kind of linking can be applied to a painting. Go through one large reproduction together and then have the students make lists based on their own chosen artworks.

Then I show them a couple of poems dealing with opposites. The opening of David Wagoner’s “Death and Resurrection of the Birds” stands opposite the closing of the poem:

#### The Death and Resurrection of the Birds

Falling asleep, the birds are falling  
Down through the last light’s thatchwork farther than rain,  
Their grace notes dwindling  
Into that downy pit where the first bird  
Waits to become them in the nest of the night.

Silent and featherless,  
Now they are one dark bird in darkness.

Beginning again, the birds are breaking  
Upward, new-fledged at daybreak, their clapping wingbeats  
Striking the sides of the sun, the singing brilliant  
Dust spun loose on the wind from the end to the beginning.

As an alternative, Federico García Lorca’s short poem-exercise called “Balanza” (“The Balance,” a fragment found in his notebooks) quickly indicates how one might use opposites in every other line:

### Balanza

The night, quiet, always.  
The day goes & comes.

The night, tall & dead.  
The day with a wing.

The night over a glass  
& the day below the wind.

(Translated by Paul Blackburn)

Propose that the students do the same for the oppositions in the paintings they've chosen, imagining each "partner" of their pairs to be alive and active and capable of force: "white" may "shiver at the edge of the cloth," while "silver" is "no more than a gleaming tongue in the knife, half-hidden and haunting." Single pairs of opposites might be followed through the painting, or the students could leap from pair to pair. The idea is to discover the inherent "balances" within the artist's scheme.

### Poem

(Georgia O'Keeffe, *Jack-in-the-Pulpit VI*)

It is like a hook ready to  
strike, a blaze of light  
confronting the dark. A wave of  
gold sweeping through space.  
A golden highway leading into  
nothing. Flowing through  
blackness. As if  
a blinding light coming to  
take over the dark. Curving  
along like a sharp knife  
cutting through space  
like a knife cuts through  
bread. A half circle  
of light almost complete.  
I feel as if I am riding  
along at speeds so fast  
I become numb. Never end-  
ing, always steeper. Overflowing  
into eternity.

—Adam Roberts, *5th grade*

### Poem

(Vern J. Funk, *Covered Box 4*)

Here is a rectangle with four lips  
and four sides.  
The rectangle has lips with no  
body at all. Here is a rectangle that  
lost its rainbow in the sky.

—Sara Keels, *5th grade*

## D) The Painting as a Memory

Another way to write from art is to imagine a painting or drawing as a memory from some previous time or previous life. As an introduction to writing poems based on memories,

Theodore Roethke's "Child On Top of a Greenhouse" is particularly useful for its fine use of color and imagery, combined with playful metaphor:

### Child on Top of a Greenhouse

The wind billowing out the seat of my britches,  
My feet crackling splinters of glass and dried putty,  
The half-grown chrysanthemums staring up like accusers,  
Up through the streaked glass, flashing with sunlight,  
A few white clouds all rushing eastward,  
A line of elms plunging and tossing like horses,  
And everyone, everyone pointing up and shouting!

Rilke's "From a Childhood" is a wonderful evocation of a single moment:

### From a Childhood

The darkening was like riches in the room  
in which the boy, withdrawn and secret, sat.  
And when his mother entered as in a dream,  
a glass quivered in the silent cabinet.  
She felt how the room had given her away,  
and kissed her boy: Are you here? . . . .  
Then both gazed timidly towards the piano,  
for many an evening she would play a song  
in which the child was strangely deeply caught.  
He sat quite still. His big gaze hung  
upon her hand which, all bowed down by the ring,  
as if it were heavily in snowdrifts going,  
over the white keys went.

(Translated by M.D. Herter Norton)

After you've read aloud these poems or passed them out, help the students recognize the details and precise metaphors in them. Then suggest they think of the artwork they have chosen as an "invented memory" of their own. Each line might begin with "I remember . . ." or the whole poem could be based on a single memory, as in:

### Poem

(Winslow Homer, *Girl in the Orchard*)

In the shade of the trees  
I can remember the girl in  
the orchard. She mourns in sorrow  
in the shade of the trees.

I remember that girl for she was  
me: and the chickens feel no sympathy  
for her as she burns with grief.

In the orchard, she stands in  
the shade and cries.

—Amy King, *5th grade*

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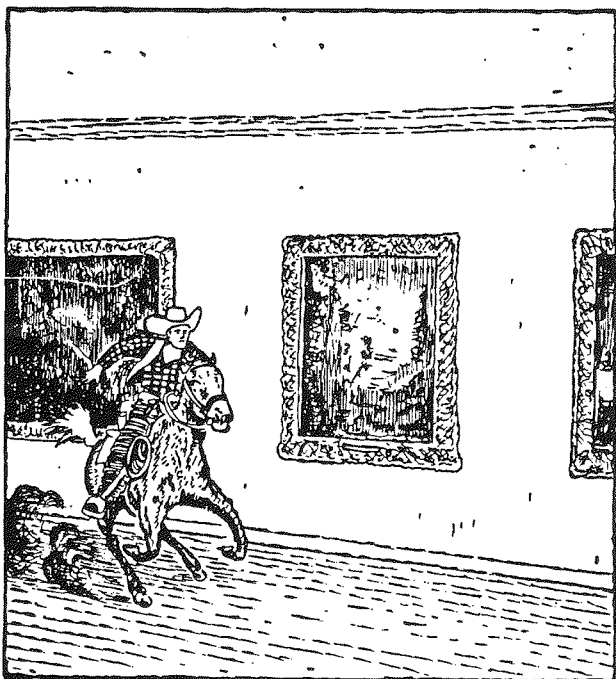
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# WIDE WORLD OF ART

by Glen Baxter



HANK'S TOUR OF THE LOUVRE  
USUALLY LASTED ALMOST  
EIGHTEEN MINUTES.



"ONE REALLY MUST PAY ATTENTION  
TO THE SHADING AT THE TIP OF  
THE HORN, CECIL" ADVISED TIM.

GLEN BAXTER is an artist and writer who lives in London. These two drawings are from his book, *Glen Baxter Returns to Normal* (Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd, 2 Soho Square, London W1V 5DE, England).