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Mr. Death

Bringing Allegory Back to Life

by Meredith Sue Willis

MOST OF MY FAVORITE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS are actually sequences of lessons: turning memories into fiction; dialogues into dramas; dramas into fiction; life stories into parables. Each student does not always write a striking piece for each lesson, but I like the longer view and complex synergy of linked lessons. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, a few students find their way into writing projects of their own.

One-shot, never-fail lessons certainly exist, but they are most often centered on poems as models rather than fiction. I have one particular prose passage, however, that works like a poem with its powerful language and form. The paragraph in question is from Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

> So Janie began to think of Death. Death, that strange being with the huge square toes who lived way in the West. The great one who lived in the straight house like a platform without sides to it, and without a roof. What need has Death for a cover, and what winds can blow against him? He stands in his high house that overlooks the world. Stands watchful and motionless all day with his sword drawn back, waiting for the messenger to bid him come. Been standing there before there was a where or a when or a then. She was liable to find a feather from his wings lying in her yard any day now. She was sad and afraid too.[1]

My lesson plan goes like this:

1. "Hey, kids, let's read this paragraph together."
2. "Okay, now write one of your own."

When a workshop is really cooking, that's all it takes. In short-term workshops, it's often tempting for visiting writing teachers to impress school administrators with lively discussions, clever activities, and writing games, but in the end, isn't engaging the children deeply in writing what we

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really want? Our suggestions and starters are, above all, ways to help the children get into the mode and mood of writing. We may be able to open some doors that might have remained shut, and we can certainly introduce literature that they would not have encountered on their own. But the best writing happens when there is least for nonparticipants to see: the kids are scribbling away; the classroom teacher is writing; the visiting writer is squatting beside a student who finished early and needs a reader.

There doesn't have to be much more to the Mr. Death lesson. To ensure that no one has the excuse of Nothing to Write About, I usually begin by having the class brainstorm a list of abstract nouns on the board. These are often emotions, but not always: hate, love, happiness, anger, depression, and jealousy work well, but so do patriotism, hope, and commitment. Also, while the students don't have to imitate the rhythms and grammatical constructions of the model piece, they should be encouraged to try. On the other hand, they may want to go off on a tangent, using this lesson as a jumping-off point for something different.

Tenth grader Nancy Finkel wrote:

> Dread is a thick, black man who drifts around stealthily in the air, close to the ground like fog. He wears a long cape that flutters in the wind, which he produces. Sometimes this sound can be heard when he infests one's heart, a faint flutter that so stirs up a person that they die. His sound echoes across cities like a disease shuddered from one body to the next. He is a man to watch out for. He may affect anyone with unreasonable fears and anxieties. He lives everywhere, in the corner.

The exercise works at least as well for younger students. I remember once some years ago presenting this lesson to a class of fourth graders in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn. I knew the kids fairly well—we had been meeting once a week for a couple of months—and I did more or less what I described above. "Try this," I said, and the kids began to write. The classroom teacher looked startled—I think she had been daydreaming and had missed the admittedly short lesson. "I'm afraid they didn't get it," she whispered. "Don't you think it's too hard for them? Don't they need some prewriting activities?"

Luckily the class was already writing, so I could say, "Well, since they've started, let's wait and see whether or not they got it."

And they did. (I wouldn't be relating this incident here if they hadn't.) The pieces weren't particularly long, but the majority of them imitated the paragraph extremely well. In the three examples here, two follow the Hurston passage closely, and one goes off in its own quirky way:

> **Depression**
>
> Depression is a big dark being that has huge feet and giant dirty fingernails, and is weak and sick with yellow teeth and wicked uncombed hair and its head has a hairy green mustache. He looks a lot like Einstein.
>
> *—Hampton Finer*

> **Love**
>
> Love is the Big Heart with red hair and red skin. He always takes target practice in his big red palace, to shoot broken hearts. His face glows and he has a black robe and fire and lightning comes out.
>
> *—James Carroll*

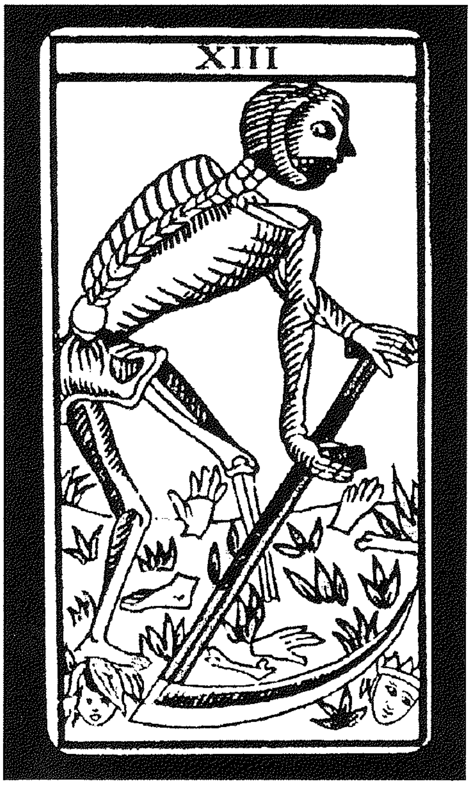
> **Happiness**
>
> Happiness is sitting on a back of a giant dog when it runs to its master. And when he licks him, you accidentally slide off. Then you hurry to get back on by climbing on his tail as if it was a rope. Then suddenly the dog starts to run to the kitchen because it's time for his lunch. And he drags you along. Then after he finishes eating, he has to get a drink and he flicks his tail and you fall into the hole of water and start laughing.
>
> *—Angel Estrada*

Why does this lesson take so little explanation? What we were doing, after all, was what language arts handbooks call personification. But, even with a name that sounds fancy, the process itself—giving personalities to abstract ideas—is a natural and commonplace activity to children. I know I used to personify everything from God (an elderly gentleman with a bucket painting sunsets to entertain my recently deceased dog) to the number nine (dark and dangerous, possibly a Scorpio). Emotions, of course, come with familiar images based on our bodies' experience: the flush of anger, the slump of disappointment. To see Anger as a snarling red face or to imagine Hope as a singing bird are things students have probably been doing all their lives, consciously or not. I like to bring up personification as a concept after the writing. Students are more interested in the terminology—or in reading an Emily Dickinson poem[2]—after they have actually personified.

Recently, I used this lesson with a group of eighth graders in Newark, New Jersey. The students had been writing about real people (narratives of how they changed). I had emphasized concrete details (what else?), and so does this lesson. Also, to encourage them to try out Hurston's prose rhythms, I elicited some definitions of plagiarism (Stop, thief!) and imitation (the sincerest form of flattery). I also talked a little bit about Hurston herself and the Harlem Renaissance. Since the students were mostly thirteen-year-olds, Anger, Love, and Hate headed the list of words to write about.

Some of the students followed Hurston pretty closely:

> **Mr. Love**
>
> So Kaleem begins to think about Love. Love, that beautiful being with huge white wings who lives in the clouds. The great one who lives in a fluffy cloud house with hearts as windows. What couple can resist falling in love without him? He stands in his high cloud which can overlook every couple. Stands watchful and patiently all day with his arrow on his back, waiting for a small couple to walk by. So he can hit them with his love arrow. He is liable to find two or three couples a day standing in that one spot. He is a happy and joyful man.
>
> *—Ali Billings*



Anger

There he stood with his black hooded robe, beaded belt, and brown sandals on his feet. He stands there with his face steamy red. It looks like the inside of a volcano. He stands with his fists in balls, straight arms that go down to his knees. Anger stands all alone. No one near him. Anger is very mad, so mad he is speechless. His temper is about to erupt, but it doesn't come out. It just stays inside because it is Anger. This is Anger, all he does is stand around and be angry. The expression on his face is unhappy. The color of his face is fiery red. He is always steamed, never happy. Anger is his own self.

—Allison Alexander

Other students, with no prompting from me, took to the poetic quality of the paragraph and wrote theirs as poems:

Hate

Look at Hate's mischievous way
it lets nobody talk and nobody play
You can see Hate on all their face
as it moves here to there and place to place.
It goes around the world and then back
making people say I hate this I hate that.
Nobody can escape the evil chill
because hate is bad, it attacks with a will.
Hate grips you and doesn't let go.
Until Hate sees that sudden glow.
The glow makes Hate lose its hold.
Now the glow is bright and very bold.
Hate can back down because it's stunned,
Now you and the glow will become one.
The glow comes close, it's white as a dove
And that glow is called Love.

—Quadir Muhammad

Hate

Hate is a fierce thing with
horns that lurks someplace
in everyone.
A demon with a black heart
that doesn't care for anyone
Not even himself.

He is watching and waiting
for someone or thing to prey on
He is eager to kill
And he won't stop hunting
Until the break of dawn

He is colorblind
and speaks nothing but
profanity
He is controllable but
Sometimes can't be stopped

Some people let him sprout
but I know through me
Mr. Hate can't shout.

—Nichole Martinez

This brings me back to my original point, that the compact and lyrical work best in the single lesson. I also see that I have cheated a little—this lesson actually *is* part of a series. I often use it as a break in a sequence of fiction writing lessons on building and exploring character. Such a series tends to elicit fragments and studies from student writers. They often begin with a nonfiction person or real-life situation. Switching to a single concentrated image—the face of Hate, the wings and sneakers of Love—is a fruitful change of pace. It is fanciful, yet concrete. It also offers the immense satisfaction of completion, of a whole experience—a great benefit to students of all ages and economic strata. Here it stands, the completed thing—feathered, grimacing, gesticulating. And I made it.

Notes

1. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 1965), p. 129.

2. I'm thinking, especially, of:

> "Hope" is the thing with feathers—
> That perches in the soul—
> And sings the tune without the words—
> And never stops—at all—
>
> And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—
> And sore must be the storm—
> That could abash the little Bird
> That kept so many warm—
>
> I've heard it in the chillest land—
> And on the strangest Sea—
> Yet, never, in Extremity,
> It asked a crumb—of me.

The Lost Sense

A Favorite Writing Assignment

by Margot Fortunato Galt

ZEST, SHAPE, AND SURPRISE—A GOOD WRITING exercise revs me up, even if I taught it the week before. It surprises new things out of me and my students. "The Lost Sense"—a writing assignment based on Federico García Lorca's poem "The Little Mute Boy"—works like that. Each time I teach it, I feel called to attention by Lorca's poem. I invent strategies on the spot to loosen the bounds of the normal and expected. I want students to experiment with new combinations and see the world afresh.

I also hope that they will stumble around, briefly deprived of a sense they take for granted. I'd like them to glimpse how they might cope, recognize a longing to recover their lost sense, and learn to appreciate how their other senses adapt. Although I do speak about "handicaps" when I teach this exercise, my emphasis is more on compensation than on deficiency. When someone loses a sense, I say, the other four senses become more acute. Sound develops color; you can smell the color of lead.

Step One: Synesthesia: Substituting Senses

First comes a conversation about compensation. We talk about the sensitive hearing of people who are blind, or the way sign language draws with dancing hands.

As the students identify them, I list the five senses on the board: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch.

Next, we play with synesthesia, the mixing of senses. For example, I might ask the class to suggest a color which I write on the board: brown. Next I ask them to tell me what instrument plays that color. Hands go up, and I take suggestions: drum, saxophone, trombone, bass fiddle, viola.

Then I ask each student to write a color on a sheet of paper and couple it with a texture. Since the words for textures don't come as readily as those for color, we brainstorm a list of textures, which I write on the board: pebbly, sandy, scratchy, silky, smooth, cool, icy, prickly, rough, slippery, slimy, sticky, velvety, and so on.

Students read aloud their combinations of colors and textures when I call on them.

Step Two: Surreal Sense

Usually I present this exercise to a class that has already written poetry for at least several days. We've discussed free verse, seen how repetition gives a song-like quality to a poem, and considered the virtues of compression and surprise. They know that poetry comes from real life but transforms experience by, among other things, comparisons.

Now I explain that the poem I'm about to read by the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca departs from real life in radical ways. It enters a surreal realm: *surreal* means above the real, beyond the real.

I mention Salvador Dali. "He painted pictures of clocks dripping over walls to suggest how slow time feels when you're bored. Lorca's poem has some very odd ideas, but on inspection, you'll see that they work just like Dali's limp clocks."

Before I read the poem, I also discuss what a translation means and tell them that W. S. Merwin translated this Lorca poem from the Spanish.

The poem has parentheses, too, I tell the students, and ask them when you're supposed to use parentheses. "To set something off that's private," they'll say. "Or to add a thought that isn't in the main line of thinking." Acknowledging the correctness of these answers, I suggest that Lorca uses parentheses in radical ways, to capture another version of reality and enter it into the story of the poem. I promise to cup my hands to show when the parentheses come.

Here is the poem:

The Little Mute Boy

The little mute boy was looking for his voice.
(The king of the crickets had it.)
In a drop of water
the little boy was looking for his voice.

I do not want it for speaking with:
I will make a ring of it
so that he may wear my silence
on his little finger.

In a drop of water
the little boy was looking for his voice.
(The captive voice, far away,
put on a cricket's clothes.)

There's a lot going on in this little poem. The surreal elements occur in the imaginative leaps and the metaphor for loss that Lorca creates. For example, on first glance it's odd

MARGOT FORTUNATO GALT's *The Story in History: Writing Your Way into the American Experience* was published by T&W. Her essay is from *Old Faithful: 18 Writers Present Their Favorite Writing Assignments*, new from T&W.

to think of looking for a voice in a drop of water. Why would a lost voice gravitate toward water? Before answering this, we discuss what *mute* means and what things in the poem have voices, though not in the usual sense.

Water has a voice, a drop of water has a voice. We brainstorm different voices of water: raindrops, a dripping tap, waves lapping or crashing, a brook gurgling, water splashing around a car, the clunk or tinkle of an ice cube in a glass, the hiss of steam. So it's not so odd, after consideration, that the little boy looks for his voice in a drop of water. Water has so many voices, his might have gotten mixed in by mistake.

Crickets also have voices. Most city children don't know that you rarely see crickets, but you hear them. A cricket trapped in a room can sound like a conductor tuning up an invisible orchestra. So, it's not so surprising that the king of the crickets might steal the little boy's voice. (Speaking of the cricket king, Lorca created a fairy-tale aura, similar to that of some of the biomorphic creatures that artists such as Joan Miró and Paul Klee created. Students might enjoy giving names to some of the creatures in works by these artists.)

I ask the children to imagine reasons why the cricket king would steal a human voice. (This empathy gets them ready to imagine what it would be like themselves to live without one of their senses.) Maybe he's tired of his own chirp; maybe his own child was born mute and he couldn't find a cricket to give up a voice; maybe the king is making a collection of beautiful voices from all over the world, and the boy's caught his ear. At the end of the poem, when the captive voice puts on the cricket's clothes, what motive for the theft becomes more likely?

The second stanza in the poem is even more odd than the others. Here somebody speaks of making a ring out of the voice so that "he may wear my silence on his little finger." This shift in voice and point of view may slip right by some students, and it's up to the teacher to decide whether to stop and discuss it or not. It is probably the boy who is speaking to the thief, but it is also possible that it is the thief who is speaking. I like the ambiguity here because it draws us into a deeper understanding of how we label a handicap a deficiency rather than recognizing its status as a beautiful, rare exception.

Step Three: Life without a Sense

Since most of us take our senses for granted, I want students to brainstorm some personal reactions to losing one of their senses. To begin, I ask each student to decide which sense they are willing to relinquish for the duration of the poem, and to write this sense at the top of their paper. It is interesting how many of them choose taste or smell, almost as though they're unwilling even to play with the possibility of losing sight, hearing, or touch. It is worthwhile to discuss these choices with the class, and to investigate why we rely so much on sight, hearing, and touch. It helps make them more appreciative of the gifts these senses bring, and sympathetic to those who live without them.

After everyone has chosen a sense to lose, I ask them to write down what they would miss most from this sense. Many will write "the taste of pizza." Red, spicy, gooey foods appeal mightily to fourth graders.

Next, I ask them to consider how losing this sense might endanger them: unable to feel a hot stove, or to hear an oncoming train.

What would confuse you or what would you be unable to do, if you lost your sense? I ask next. Couldn't tell hot peppers from cold milk. Couldn't tell if my socks matched or if I pulled the cereal box I want from the shelf.

If you lost your sense, what would be the benefits? Wouldn't have to smell rotted garbage in summer. Or feel sweaty hands when you shake hands with one of your parents' friends. Wouldn't have to listen to your sister play the trombone.

Step Four: Creating a Net of Surprises

Robert Frost's description of free verse as playing tennis without a net set me thinking about ways to create forms that will surprise young writers to do things they wouldn't normally attempt. Or, to think of it another way, I want to rub rules against their imaginations to light a fire in the shape of a song.

For this exercise, the net I create with the class is based on guided associations. It works like this:

—Each student writes a list of words.

—The list is individual in substance yet general in categories.

—I create the categories on the spur of the moment, but I am guided by the notion of travel or a journey, and so I usually include some items of travel paraphernalia (something like a map, maybe) and some element of geography (like a continent, ocean, etc.). I also want to encourage synesthesia, and so will pair categories, saying, for example, "A Color," and next, "The Texture of That Color."

Next, I explain that I will say a category and they will write a specific item in that category.

Here are the categories I used recently with a fourth grade class:

an item of clothing
a unusual color from the sixty-four color Crayola box
a sound in nature that fits this color
a continent or country or place
a texture

And here are several lists:

a cape
burnt sienna
pigeon's cooing
Mexico
splintery

—M. F. G.

quilt
red
fire

China
soft

—A student

boots
magenta
surf crashing
bayou
fluffy

—A teacher

Step Five: Writing a Poem of Searching for a Lost Sense

Getting the class ready to write their own poems, I reread Lorca's poem aloud and mention some of the strategies he uses. I write these on the board:

—The parentheses that give away clues or the actual location of the lost sense.

—Repetition of lines that talk about searching.

—Looking in unusual places that turn out to have some connection to the sense.

—A wish to do something with the sense that might emphasize its loss or how much you miss it.

—What the lost sense does without you.

I also emphasize writing about how you would compensate without the sense:

"Tongue, now that you're swallowed
I must sniff myself through
a pizza . . .

The sky has the color of cymbals
now that blue has drowned

A rose petal against my face
smells like a tickling kiss . . . "

"Remember," I remind the students, "you're on a journey to find your lost sense. Think of various ways to travel, think of oceans, glaciers, deserts, rivers, bridges, crossroads, or small spaces like stairs, drawers, closets, pockets, toothpaste tubes, clockfaces."

Finally come the instructions about the net of words: "You must use every word on your list in the order they're written." Then I take the last part back: "But if you must move them around, you can. Don't be afraid to make all kinds of leaps in sense, and at the same time think about the way your lost sense would operate if it were really lost. Where would it go? How would it react to your calling it? How would it like to be cornered and captured? Does it miss you too? Has it changed into something else?"

Step Six: Writing and Reading

I write along with the students for about five minutes, explaining that I'll do that and then help them afterward. My last words of encouragement before I pick up the chalk for my own poem are: "You don't have to know where this poem will take you when you start. Use your first word and think of some connection between it and your search or your lost sense, then move on to other strategies we've listed."

Here's a fragment of a poem I wrote about my lost taste:

Taste has left its cape
in my closet, then
disappeared in its folds.
Pizza flops on my tongue
like a leftover tail.
Burnt sienna flavors
every meal with its
pigeon's coo.
How I miss
splintery celery
pebbly cookie.
Meanwhile, my taste,
swashbuckler of meals,
forks its way across
the border. Sends me
a postcard on a chili:
"Amigo, look for me
under the sombrero
of a nose, in a
mountain of tacos."
Rascal, I know him
watering his bushes,
a figment of teeth,
a jouster of corn.

Here are some poems by fourth grade students and one by their teacher Judith Pfeifer, from Pine Hill Elementary, Cottage Grove, Minnesota:

Sense of Sight

I can't see what I'm trying
to find. I am trying
to find my quilt.
If I find it I will
use it to keep me warm
in the winter. It's soft
as a baby's skin. If I
don't find it I will
find fire red as the sun.
I will go to China to find
a dragon that can blow
fire or it might
have my quilt. I
will listen to the
hot fire.

—Larry Hui

I have no sense of taste.
I have been looking for
it. Little Swedish spike-headed
ants have taken
my taste. It is calling
out to me, it sounds like
a dripping faucet when
it yells. It is held
captive in a brick red
blob which has a big
fat coat in it.

— Jeff Hillyer

A parka was sitting on the table
when I went to put it on
I lost my taste.
That day everything I ate
didn't taste.
I wondered about pop, so I
bought root beer. Still
no taste, but they
gave me a green harmonica.
Did my taste go to Greenland or Texas?
Just tell me where he went!
Then five years later I ate some pizza
and finally found him.

— *Kyle Magyar*

I'm looking for my sense of hearing.
How can I find it without
being able to hear?
I already looked in Florida,
in someone else's shoes.
I followed a yellow bee flying
in the air.
I felt something as
sandy
as sandpaper.
Oh where Oh where is my
sense of hearing?
How I miss being able
to hear the bees buzzing
and the color blue
sounding like a trumpet.
I also miss talking
on the phone.

—*Conrad La Doux*

Hearing flows out of me through
the warm soles of my cowboy boots.
My own footfalls on the stairs
are strangely silent.

The magenta sunrise reflects
on the surf slamming
soundlessly against the rocks.

My parrot's fluffy feathers rise
in frustration as his whole body
strains, shrieking unheard on top
of his cage.

My coffee maker drips but only
the light tells when it is ready.
Its final "thunks" are gone.

As I leave to search for sound
at school, the door slams shut
behind me but the bang is missing.

The key turns in the ignition.
I wait trying to feel the car's vibration.
It shudders, I hope it will
move as I shift and step
on the accelerator.

Children come at me, eyes wide
and lips moving. Their crucial
messages are empty holes
in the air.

Desks scrape across the floor
unheard. Children move their
mouths at each other appearing
fascinated by facial movements.

Suddenly I hear a whisper.
The heating unit fan kicks in.
Reality returns with a rush
of classroom cacophony.
I consider the pros and cons.

—*Judith Pfeifer*

PLUGS

T&W's radio producer Irwin Gonshak has just brought out *Project Reach*, a 49-minute audiotape of 35 songs about solving problems without drugs or violence, all written by young people. *Project Reach* also includes the lyrics for the songs, as well as 11 related word puzzles by students. The $9.95 charge for *Project Reach* includes all three items, as well as shipping and handling. Order from Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306, tel. (212) 691-6590.

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Spreading the Word: Poetry and the Survival of Community in America by Ross Talarico is an exhilarating account of a grassroots writing program that the author set up in Rochester, NY, involving the entire community. Talarico interweaves that story with writing assignments, autobiographical passages, and commentary on the role of poetry in contemporary America. *Spreading the Word* is available in a 154-page paperback edition for $13.95 plus $3.50 UPS from Duke University Press, Box 90660, Durham, NC 27708, tel. (919) 688-5134.

Changing Shape & Acting Out

Writing, Storytelling, & Performance

by Sam Swope

MY BEST WRITING ASSIGNMENTS WORK MOST successfully when students know their stories are going to be acted out in front of the class. This technique was invented by Vivian Gussin Paley, a teacher with the University of Chicago Laboratory School. Paley's many inspiring books, which include *Wally's Stories* and *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, show how children use stories to help them find their footing on life's mysterious terrain, both as individuals and as a class.

Although the production value of these performances is nil, with no costumes, no props, no rehearsal, and a "stage" no fancier than a circle defined by the students, the simple fact that the children know that the stories they are writing will be acted out works as a magical carrot that has turned even the most reluctant and sullen child into a writer. In her books, Paley eloquently analyzes how this process taps into our deep human need to perform, to see our fantasies enacted—and acknowledged—by an audience of peers. Not only do young authors experience a sense of pride and power as they watch their words come to life before their eyes, but these performances also create a euphoria in the class that imbues writing with a sense of exhilaration and fun. Paley's technique has practical and tangible didactic benefits, as well. Because the actors need to understand what's going on in the story in order to act it out, young writers learn how to shape a clear plot, write vivid action, and use specific language.

I adapted Paley's technique for my creative writing residencies. These residencies were with classes from K–6 and averaged ten workshop sessions of forty-five minutes with each class. The storywriting/storyacting residency has three elements: reading and discussing; writing; and performing and critiquing. First, I read students a story that illustrates a point I want to make, and then we discuss the story and I point out what I find interesting and instructive about the writing. Next, I give the students a related assignment—which they are free to ignore if they have some other topic they want to pursue—and then they write. (While they write, I hold individual conferences with students while the teacher goes from student to student, answering questions and cheering the writers on.) Finally, amid eager chaos, the students push their desks aside and we gather in a circle to act out a few of the day's stories.

Before a story is performed, I read it out loud to the class. (I do the reading because it saves precious time.) After asking the author to clarify the story's most egregious confusions, I ask the author to choose the cast for his or her story. This empowerment is important; it shows respect to the writer and gives him or her an important sense of ownership of the work. That done, the actors take the stage and perform the action as I read the story out loud a second time. The actors are encouraged to embellish their characters and the action, but only with the understanding that they not overwhelm or alter the story. This elaboration can be immensely helpful: when particularly gifted or even just plain exuberant actors are used, the writer often gets new ideas for revision. After the performance is finished, I ask the author what he or she might change in the story, and then the group critiques the work. We discuss how the prose might have given the actors more to do, where the story seemed too vague, or where gaps in the plot caused confusion. Then it is on to the next story.

Class dynamics, class size, the age of the students, and the length of the workshop determine how I schedule class time. Sometimes each class is divided into thirds, as described above. But other times one entire class might be devoted to reading, discussion, and writing, while the next class is given over to performing and critiquing. In a short residency with a lot of students, time is maddeningly tight. Because it takes a minimum of five minutes to act out a one-page story, and because every kid has to have at least one story acted out, I often have to work at a frantic pace. This doesn't allow for leisured discussion of each kid's work, but I have found that critiques are not nearly as useful to the children—or as powerful—as simply seeing their words performed before an audience. Everyone—writers, actors, and spectators—benefits. Everyone intuits something simply by being a part of the process. Eventually, the thrills and possibilities of performance are internalized, becoming part of a child's writing process: the children learn to "see" their stories as they write in a way they did not before.

Vivian Paley comes to her classroom with advantages not available to a writer-in-residence. She is with her students all day, every day, knows them well, and is able to draw inferences and make connections between students' stories, their lives at home, and the social and academic worlds of the classroom, impossible for a writer only briefly in residence. As a visitor, the best I can hope for is to make a happy splash in a child's consciousness, giving a pointer or two but mostly letting them know that writing can be fun and richly rewarding.

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In 1994 I conducted a residency in a fourth grade class in Queens, New York. This residency was generous and unusual: thirteen hour-and-a-half sessions with the same group of twenty-nine kids, most of whom had tested below average in writing. The students and I were blessed with the enthusiastic help of a devoted and committed teacher who was nearing retirement but still very much engaged in her work. She admitted that teaching creative writing made her uncomfortable and that she didn't think she did it very well. She was of the old school, and her students' stories were throttled by restrictions: every story had an opening paragraph stating the theme, a paragraph that told the story, and a concluding paragraph. Students were not allowed to write with colorful ink. Neat penmanship was important. Spelling was stressed. Nevertheless, the children adored her, as did I, and she was not only open to my approach but threw herself into it. The school also gave the workshop an enrichment teacher, and while the students were writing and I was having individual conferences, the other two adults were available to the rest of the class.

My assignments in this workshop were often spinoffs of the theme of transformation. Most of the kids had to have the word *transformation* defined for them, but they understood the concept without much explanation. Children's literature, mythology, folklore, and popular culture are full of shape shifters and innocents magically transformed into beasts, plants, stones, statues, or constellations: Aladdin, the Frog Prince, Batman and other superheroes, King Midas, *The Ugly Duckling, Sylvester and the Magic Pebble, The Wizard of Oz, Alice in Wonderland,* and on and on. Children were also quick to note that there are myriad transformations in real life as well: from caterpillar to butterfly, from child to adult, from bad person to good, loving parent to angry, seed to tree, tree to paper, paper to art, living creature to dead, dead body to spirit. We also talked about the transformations we undergo when we play pretend—how, as one child observed, "playing pretend can feel real only it's not"—and how actors turn into characters that sometimes seem real but are not. Depending on the age and sophistication of a class, these discussions can get pretty interesting. They also provide a chance to discuss how the performance transforms the story, bringing it to life in unexpected ways and offering the writer ideas and perspectives that will be valuable for rewriting.

Early on in this residency, I read the children a story I wrote. (I use my own stories whenever possible because my personal connection to the work and the students' personal connection to me seems to make an important emotional impression on the kids.) In this story, an unhappy boy catches a fairy who, to gain her freedom, gives the boy three wishes. His first and immediate wish is to become a dinosaur. After I finished the story, I asked the kids why they thought the boy chose to become a dinosaur. We talked about how emotions influence choices, and how this boy's unhappiness led him to choose something big and strong. And that led us into a discussion of how someone's inner goodness or badness might cause him or her to be transformed into a princess, as in *Cinderella*, or into a monster, as in *Beauty and the Beast,* either of which would make a suitable alternative reading for this assignment. We also talked about how some people remind you of animals, and we played a game in which we imagined what animals famous people might have been before they became people. I then asked the children to write a story in which one character turns into something else.

One of my students in this particular residency was a bright-eyed boy named Noel. Noel was quite small for his age, and a squirmer, full of high-spirited energy. Spanish was his first language, and although he spoke English fluently, writing it was such a struggle that his teacher reported he hardly wrote at all. Here is his response to the transformation assignment:

> **My Father a Car**
>
> I turned my father in a car. My father can go on the highway. If my father crash it would hurt. And his color is red. He can pass a light. He can run fast. And my father car is big. And my father would have fun. And my father likes car. It would be fun if I was a car. And people were making fun of my father. On the way to the Empire State Building and he climbed in the Empire State Building.

When it came time to act this story out, Noel decided that he himself would play the part of the father in this one-man show. As I read his story out loud, little Noel roared around the circle with rotating arms, much as some kids imitate a train. When the story suggested a car crash, Noel threw his arms up in the air and his body onto the floor. "And my father car is big" led Noel to raise his arms and puff out his cheeks. And when I read, "My father would have fun," Noel indicated fun by smiling from ear to ear, a smile he managed to make even broader when I got to the sentence, "It would be fun if I was a car." He stood still during the sentence, "And people were making fun of my father." But at the story's end, as Noel chugged into the Empire State Building, the character of his father was clearly triumphant.

Noel's classmates loved his winning performance (as did I) and when we applauded him, he beamed. After offering my congratulations, I said, "As I watched you up there, Noel, I wondered: how did your father get turned into a car in the first place? Who or what did it? And why?" Still smiling, Noel just shrugged. I then asked him, "I noticed you didn't do anything when we got to the part about the people making fun of your father, but that's not surprising because you didn't paint a picture of that moment. What were the people doing who made fun of your father? Were they saying mean things? Can you imagine what they looked like? Can you tell us what they were doing so that we could act that part out? Were they sticking out their tongues and rolling their eyes—like this?" Again Noel had no ready response, but neither was he bothered by his inability to please me with answers. He just sat there beaming, full of happy pride.

The other students were eager to answer my questions, but I felt as if they didn't really understand what my problem was with this story. It seemed their explanations and suggestions were not heartfelt but only efforts to please me. I got the impression (as I often get when discussing children's stories with children) that the kids understood Noel's story in a way I could not, that they didn't require the details, the explanations, or the structure I do in order to appreciate a story. Looking back at Noel's story from a distance, I now see that it is, in its rough-hewn way, a satisfying and complete emotional statement and perhaps that was enough for the children. Noel had turned his father into a powerful symbol—a speeding red car—and in so doing he had made his father happy; so happy that Noel, too, wanted to be a car just like his father. There is perhaps a subtext here of sadness that is reinforced by the allusion to the people who make fun of his father, but then all quickly comes right in the end as Dad triumphantly ascends another powerful symbol, the Empire State Building. The story works.

Noel improved as a writer. Eight sessions later, in response to an assignment in which he was asked first to draw a map with three very different places on it, either imaginary or real, and then have his characters travel to these places in a story, Noel wrote this:

> Once there lived a king and a queen in a castle. They went on a trip. The first place they went to [was] Puerto Rico. It was very hot and they went swimming in the high waves and they bounced up and down in the waves. Then it started to thunder. A storm was on the way. They went running out of the water from there. They got on [an] airplane and flew to Las Vegas. Then they rented a car and got lost in a dark spooky tunnel. A scary looking man with a mask who limped and walked with a stick came after them. He picked up the stick and swung it at them. They fell down and pretended to be dead and the bad man ran away. They never got anywhere else on that trip when then the bad man ran away. They got up smiled a big smile and drove home. This story had a happy ending.

Noel had acquired some sense of story line, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Using the same playfulness he exhibited earlier and a similarly triumphant finale, his writing now has concrete details, more vivid language, and a plot that is easier to act. Any actor would know what to do with this sentence: "It was very hot and they went swimming in the high waves and they bounced up and down." And Noel also knew it would be a blast to see one of his friends perform "a scary looking man with a mask who limped and walked with a stick." Performance had become part of Noel's writing process—he was now writing with acting in mind.

Noel usually wrote during the residency, but not always. Sometimes, it was a struggle to get him to settle down with pencil and paper. This was partly because of his energy level, and partly because I couldn't guarantee him that we'd have time to act out another of his stories. Inevitably, this happens: sooner or later the kids figure out they're probably only going to get one shot at having a story performed. When that moment comes, when the carrot vanishes, some kids—but only some—lose interest. I always promise them that at the end of the workshop, after everyone's had a turn and if there's time, some of the kids will get a second chance by lottery, and most of the children are satisfied with that. Of course the best course is for the teacher to make storytelling/storyacting a regular part of the classroom experience.

Michael was a sweet fat kid and always the butt of class jokes. His stories, however, were very well received by his peers, so it is not surprising that he became one of my most enthusiastic writers and showed remarkable improvement throughout the workshop. Fascinated with the theme of transformation, Michael returned to it again and again. Here is one of his later stories:

> **The Murderer That Turned into a Werewolf**
>
> Once upon a time there was a murderer. He broke into people's houses and killed them. Some got cut into pieces by an ax. He was very mean and fat with a bald head and a tattoo on his arm. His name was Sam. He would kill anybody that gets in his way. He once tricked an old lady. He knocked on the door and said he was poor and when he went in he stole the jewels. He even stole plates and other stuff.
>
> One night the moon came up and Sam felt kind of strange. His pants were ripped and his shirt came off. He also had sharp teeth and big long nails and he started to grow lots of hair. He went to the woods to howl. He started to get mad. So he started to break in people's houses again but this time only meaner and madder.
>
> When it was daytime he saw himself sleeping in the woods and he said what he was doing there in the woods alone with ripped pants and shirt. When it was night time again he went to the top of the mountains to howl. When he howled very hard, people came from lots of places to kill him. One man got him in the back with a stick and he fell down from the mountains and died.

This is a vivid story, with a strong central character who is easy to act. He named the werewolf after me because he knew it would get a laugh from his classmates, but also because he liked me and I think it made him feel good or safe to have me somehow present in his story. When performance time came, Michael cast the most popular boy in class to play the part of Sam, and cast himself in the more modest role of the man who destroys Sam in the end. While it could be said that Paley's technique, at least as I have adapted it, favors action-oriented stories over the contemplative and introspective, I would argue that Michael is working through something here, and that this story does have its introspective qualities. The character of Sam is powerful and monstrous but eventually destroyed by his enemies, perhaps in a reconfiguration of Michael's own daily torments at the hands of his classmates. By casting the class' most popular boy in that role, Michael may have been identifying with the boy, with Sam the character, and with Sam the teacher, a complicated constellation of powerful figure and victim. Within the context of the performance, Michael is safe and transformed, and he has found a way, however temporary, to bring his classmates into his world—to belong.

Stories that are to be acted out tend to favor action and, children being children, a lot of violence. I can't help but sigh at that, but I tell myself it's fine. At least the violence has a joyful quality to it as a super laser-guided axe chops off hundreds of heads at a single stroke, mummies do a drop kick, and monsters eat eyeballs for breakfast. You can see the kids snickering as they write, gleeful in the knowledge that they'll get to act these things out later on. (Obviously you must make it clear to the kids that when they are acting the stories out they are not allowed to actually hit or hurt another actor.) And what their stories lack in originality they make up for in clear and concrete writing. The kids learn to think specifically. What kind of a weapon is used? Where exactly does the character get shot? What expression was on her face as she died? What were his arms doing as he fell off the cliff? Surely these skills will transfer to more sedate forms of expression.

Elizabeth was Asian, and although English was not her first language, she wrote effortlessly from the first day. The way she wrote was amazing. As soon as I asked the students to start writing, Elizabeth would tear a piece of paper out of her notebook, grab her pencil, and write. Her pencil flew across the page. And all the while she had a crazed happy expression on her face and never once looked down at her paper to see what she was writing. It seemed a kind of automatic writing, as if she was riding a wave and although she had no idea where it was going to take her, she gave herself to it completely. Elizabeth was confident enough to ignore assignments that didn't inspire her, which is what she did with the transformation assignment. Later on, however, she came back to it.

The Day My Father Turned into a Monster

> Once upon a time there was a little village. There was a beautiful girl named Jenny. She was very nice to everyone in the village. She liked to help many different kinds of people. Jenny lived with her dad, Billy. Her father was very nice, too. He worked at a downtown market.
>
> Once her dad was walking through scary woods. He heard a creepy noise. It sounded like a tree was talking. It was! Billy turned around and saw the tree. The tree stuck its arm out. Billy turned around and started to run. Then the tree caught him. The tree took a bite on his neck.
>
> A little while later Billy turned into a scary monster. Billy looked so ugly. His face was full of vines. Then blood was leaking down his eyes. His nose turned black. His hair started to fall out. Then his eyebrows fell out. His nose fell off, too. His mouth started to disappear. When he tore his clothes off, they were full of 1,000 eyes. Then one day he just died.
>
> Jenny was so worried about her father because her father didn't come home. Jenny started to cry. She looked at the table. She saw a piece of paper. It said, "If you want to see your father alive meet me at a place I will contact you." So she went there.
>
> The next day the police found her dead. Nobody knows how she died. The tree got the power from an old wizard. His name was Aloka.

This story is breathless with excitement and full of sharp details. It shows an acute awareness of an audience. Elizabeth knew whom she was writing for, and she knew how to get a rise out of them. Although too shy to perform herself, she was eager to assign roles to other kids in the class. And of course when the time came for the actor playing the father to transform into a monster with blood leaking out of his eyes and his nose falling off and so on, the class was squirming with delight, and Elizabeth loved the power of that. I always admire a young writer who forgoes the happy endings so much of their literature forces on them, and the kids, too, were tickled by the death of poor little Jenny, the sweet devoted daughter who also bites the dust, arbitrarily, for no just reason, with all the gratuitousness of life.

But Elizabeth's story is also something of a mess, with motivation unclear, plot points unresolved, and details appended as they popped into her mind and not as the story required them. This is partly my fault. I was not very successful in conveying to the children the need to explain why and how their characters transform. Almost every time I asked students to tell me how their characters transformed, I was met with a blank stare or rewarded with a clunky explanation grafted awkwardly onto a story only to please me, like the ending of Elizabeth's story: "The tree got the power from an old wizard. His name was Aloka." Perhaps I am again imposing unwarranted adult rules for writing onto the children's prose. Fourth graders, after all, are magical thinkers. Life to them is often without logic; their world is always changing on them, seemingly without explanation or reason. What do they know of cause and effect?

Elizabeth's style was also influenced by her singular way of writing. She wrote and wrote and wrote, and when she was done, she was done. Try as I might, I could not get her to revise. Throughout the workshop, Elizabeth did consistent work, but she showed less marked improvement than the others. Perhaps if I had had enough time to have all the students act out both their first drafts and their revisions, Elizabeth would have wanted to rewrite her stories.

The theme of transformation is a fertile one, yielding many different assignments. Sometimes I ask my writers to concentrate on the moment of transformation, describing bit by bit a little girl's body turning into a bird, or a teacher turning into a cockroach. Another lesson asks the child to bring an object to life, giving it language and emotion, as Hans Christian Andersen does, for example, in *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* and *The Fir Tree*. Still another transformation assignment that produces some interesting writing—for students who aren't afraid of it, that is—asks the children to write about a character who comes back from the dead. Many Native American stories treat this theme, as does Dickens's *Christmas Carol*.

Transformations are something kids understand, but that is not the main reason this assignment works as well as it does. It owes its principal success to Vivian Paley. Her process takes the children's writing off the page and into the world. These stories are one way the children have of announcing themselves to the class, and their fantasies, through performance, become a shared experience that transforms story, writer, and class, creating confidence, pride, and joy.