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And Who Is "I"?

Writing to Get to the Self

by Joanne Esser

KIDS WHO ARE TEN, ELEVEN, OR TWELVE years old see themselves as very different from younger children. They are anxious to differentiate themselves from "those little kids," sensing a need to prove they have changed. At the same time, they look at teenagers with awe. They long to grow up quicker, to be as cool and independent from adults as teens seem to be. Pre-adolescents squirm in their own uncomfortable place in the world of growing up—although to a degree the same could be said for anyone at any age.

Because kids in the middle-grades are caught in the struggle to grow up fast but still have many characteristics of a young child, one of the most important themes for them to explore is that of identity, the tremendous task of self-definition. Identity involves exploring "Who am I?," questioning how their surface selves match their inside selves and wondering how others (especially their peers) see them. During this process of self-definition,

good poetry and fiction can lead middle-grades children to do writing that helps them along that slippery path.

The literature that wrestles with the issue of identity is huge. The more I looked at my collection of "favorite pieces," the more I saw the endless variety of ways to look at oneself. But I had to select just a few pieces to use in a two-week writing residency, working with a mixed group of fifth and sixth grade students. So I chose examples of poems and prose that are both good literature and useful in dealing with the question "Who am I?," examples that are fairly positive in their outlook and accessible to children who have had a wide range of experiences with writing, from almost none to a great deal.

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I began by exploring metaphor. Sometimes a thing is just too hard to write about clearly unless the writer shows how it is like other things the reader knows very well. The students and I spent one session doing both written and oral exercises, writing metaphors and similes to represent emotions: "Anger is like a volcano ready to burst with hot lava." "Happiness is the fluttering of doves inside your heart." "Loneliness is being stuck in mud up to your knees." All the students had felt these emotions, but when they found metaphors for them, the abstract feelings were easier to describe.

Next I read aloud an edited version of "The Delight Song of Tsoai-Talee" by N. Scott Momaday:

I am a feather in the bright sky.
I am the blue horse that runs in the plain.
I am the fish that rolls, shining, in the water.
I am the shadow that follows a child.
I am the evening light, the lustre of meadows.
I am an eagle playing with the wind.
I am a cluster of bright beads.
I am the farthest star.
I am the cold of the dawn.
I am the roaring of the rain.
I am the glitter on the crust of the snow.
I am the long track of the moon in a lake.
I am a flame of four colors.
I am a deer standing away in the dusk.
I am an angle of geese upon the winter sky.
I am the hunger of a young wolf.
I am the whole dream of these things...

A strong oral reading makes this poem come alive in the classroom. I read it several times through, asking students to listen for the images they liked best, the ones they remembered, the most vivid ones. Usually, they noticed the animals, the qualities of light, and the lines that use alliteration ("the roaring of the rain") and assonance ("the farthest star"). We talked about why these particular lines are pleasurable to the ear. I asked, "How can a person be like an eagle, or like a deer, or like a cluster of bright beads? How can the writer be like hunger or like glitter? How are you like any of these things?" The images in Momaday's poem gave us a way to talk about the self in concrete, sensory terms.

Before we started the writing exercise, I proposed a few guidelines. I asked students to work silently, to keep moving their hands on the page for the full length of the timed exercise, and not to censor any ideas that might pop into their heads. Then I asked them to write their own "Delight Song," using "I am" to begin each line.

The "I am's" students wrote were alive, resonant, original...after a bunch of stilted ones came out first. Like me, they had to write through the first dry thoughts to get

to the juicy ones. After doing so, they were able to articulate this breakthrough experience, and thus to use it consciously in their future writing.

I asked the students to underline a few of their favorite lines in the draft they had just written. Then I asked them each to read aloud their one or two favorite lines. We went quickly around the room, so that the lines were heard one after another without pause or comment. (It's far less intimidating to read one or two lines aloud than to read your whole first draft. It's also easier to take your turn in a quick circle of voices than to agonize about whether to volunteer or not.) The variety of short and long lines, of animal and nature images, and of everyday objects ("I am the pen in my hand waiting to write;" "I am the noise of feet stomping in the hall outside the door") often makes an interesting group poem in itself. Hearing it read by the many different voices in the room sent shivers down our backs.

Revision is easy to demonstrate, using the students' "Delight Songs" as examples. The students noted that there are too many repetitions of "I am." What if we took some out? What if we put lines that seemed to go well together (or offered nice contrasts) nearer one another, and left out the additional "I am"? "I am the solitude of a lost wolf, / the hawk soaring high above, / the mouse running to hide...."

If your students' images seem lifeless and you want to stir up the class a bit, one good approach is to separate the long lines into two parts. Then put the first part of one line with the second part of a very different line, giving the reader a startling surprise. For example, these lines:

I am the hawk soaring above / looking for prey
I am a letter / waiting to be opened
I am the leader of the pack / being blamed
I am a purple feather falling / not knowing where I'll land

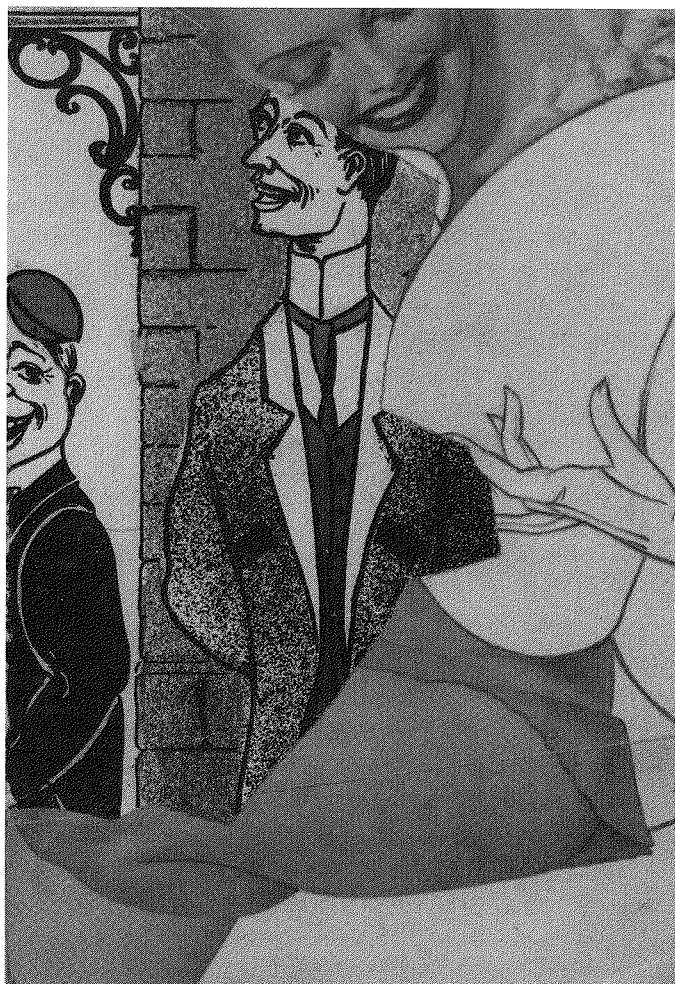
can be recombined into:

I am a purple feather falling, looking for prey.
I am a letter being blamed.
I am a hawk soaring above, waiting to be opened
I am the leader of the pack, not knowing where I'll land.

With some groups of students, I have done the recombining on the chalkboard, the whole group calling out suggestions for interesting new combinations. Some of these new juxtapositions will work well; others won't work at all. But the procedure opens our minds to new possibilities and fresh insights that we didn't see the first time through. After the recombinations, I ask students to read aloud one of their favorite new lines. We also look at the complexities these new lines offer. For example, describing the self as both "feather" and "looking for

prey” at the same time leads to a fresh look at the paradoxes within us: how can one person be both those things? Looking at the apparent contradictions can provoke rich discussion.

We are told who we are supposed to be by so many outside voices, the voices of television shows, magazine articles, advertising, popular music, friends, parents, and teachers. The media scream at us about how important it is to wear the right clothes, to use the right products, to own the right toys. Images of flawless bodies surround us, dictating the standards. Though we don’t see many people in real life who look as perfect as the fashion models, we swallow these images anyway, ingesting their claims and expectations.



Collage by George Schneeman

Middle-grades children are ready to examine these images critically, to look at them more closely and question their messages. During the fifth–sixth grade residency, we launched into a full study of media messages. With

my guidance and the help of a visiting visual artist, students cut out and analyzed magazine advertisements aimed at young people, made prose poems by blending advertising slogans into a fast-paced barrage of demands to “buy,” and made collages of words and pictures from magazines. The collages exaggerated cultural images to make them humorous and absurd, by putting oversized lips on a model’s face, a cigarette into the mouth of an innocent animal, or a gun into the hands of a baby. By juxtaposing such unexpected images, the students used surprise to draw the viewer’s attention to the extremes of the messages around us. These activities highlighted the difficulty of defining the self in the face of the barrage of definitions “out there.”

The next task was to replace media labels (“cool,” “flawless,” “blind consumer”) with labels we make for ourselves. To begin, I read aloud some excerpts from fiction about names. *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros contains short, eloquent vignettes from the childhood of a Latina girl in the process of coming to understand her own identity and deciding where she wants to belong. The chapter “My Name” ends with:

I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees.
Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes.
Something like Zeze the X will do.

Here and elsewhere in the book, Cisneros describes scenes from the girl’s neighborhood that affect her perceptions of the world, her concept of herself in relation to others, and her vision of what she can become, as the girl looks with clarity and empathy at her neighbors, relatives, and the sometimes rough characters who surround her.

I also read excerpts from Michael Dorris’s *Morning Girl*, a story told from the point of view of a twelve-year-old Taino girl and her brother. The two live on a Bahamian island in 1492, just before oddly dressed strangers arrive. The first chapter talks about how Morning Girl and her brother Star Boy got their names. Another book by Dorris, *Sees Behind Trees*, describes how the title character is given his grown-up name because of a special talent he has, one that becomes important to his people.

After hearing and discussing these excerpts, I had the students write pieces, either poetry or prose, about their own names. I posed a few questions as springboards: How did you get your name? Who gave it to you? Have you ever been called a name you didn’t like? How did that feel? If you could choose a new name for yourself that reveals the real you, what would it be? At the end of the session, some students read their pieces aloud. Others gave them to me to read. If a piece contained too much

truth for the student to share with a public audience, I emphasized that that was okay.

Students have an innate understanding that there is a difference between what people see of you on the outside and what you really are like on the inside. Middle-grades children feel the increasing tension between these two aspects of the self as their social awareness grows. A discussion of this discrepancy arose naturally, especially after our deconstruction of advertising. The kids talked about how they are judged, chosen for teams, selected as a friend, and categorized as smart, stupid, cool, or geeky—from what is seen on the outside only. When we brainstormed phrases describing someone who is “cool,” everyone could name the outward signs: the certain ways of walking, dressing, talking, acting, and looking that define cool. But all the students protested that there is a whole lot more complicated stuff on the inside that others know only slightly.

This discussion led to writing poetry. I structured the assignment carefully so it was not too abstract. Kids in

this age group tend to write big sweeping generalizations until they are encouraged to go deeper and find precise images. I told them to begin the first stanza with “Outside me...” and to make a list of a color, a sound, and an object that hint at what their out-in-the-world self is like. We did a few examples together on the board to get started:

Outside me is black,
black t-shirt, black baggy pants, black hair.
Outside me is loud
laughing and joking.
Outside me is like heavy metal
music blasted in your ears.

Then students thought hard about what is “Inside me.” What colors, sounds, and objects give us clues about their inner selves?

Inside me is red
like the color of blood,
hot and flowing through me.
Inside me is a whispery sound
like the secrets you tell your best friend.
Inside me is a giant rose
waiting to bloom.

This assignment is another way to elicit the type of metaphoric thinking that leads to surprising insights, like the “Delight Song” exercise did. This one focused more on the contrast (or similarity, for some students) between the inside and outside self. It also offered a less rigid form than the “I am” lines. As they revised the poems, many students discarded the idea of using exactly one color, one sound, and one object, while keeping the idea of two contrasting stanzas.

I also wanted to give students an experience with Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” which has a beautiful musicality, long lines, and a degree of mystery. With some apprehension (Will this be too out-of-reach for these children? Is it too abstract, or too “adult”?), I edited the following excerpts for my fifth and sixth graders:

From Song of Myself

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume, you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
I loaf and invite my soul,
I lean and loaf at my ease, observing a spear of summer
grass.

The smoke of my own breath,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart,
The sniff of the green leaves and the dry leaves, and of the
shore and the dark-colored damp sea-rocks,



Collage by George Schneeman

The sound of the words of my voice, words loosed on the
wind,
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple
boughs wag,
The delight alone or in the rush of streets, or along the
fields and hillsides,
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me
rising from bed and meeting the sun.
Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the
origin of all poems.
You shall possess the good of the sun and the earth.
You shall no longer take things at second and third hand,
nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the
ghosts in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things
from me,
You shall listen to all things and filter them through
yourself.

I read these lines aloud. Then I reread them, asking students to listen for striking images, because whatever images they remember from simply hearing the lines read aloud are likely to be the strongest ones for them personally. Students chose “the smoke of my own breath,” “the beating of my heart.” They also liked the nature images (“the green leaves and the dry leaves,” “damp searocks”), the image of “rising from bed and meeting the sun” and the statement “You shall not look through my eyes either.” We discussed what Whitman might be talking about in the poem. I was surprised that many of the students understood his call for being awake in the world, for taking in and filtering for oneself the beauty around us, for noticing and celebrating one’s creaturehood.

We looked at the images Whitman chose to celebrate himself. What do they show us about his attitude toward the world? What images would you choose if you were to celebrate yourself? The students received Whitman’s poem with joy. They smiled as I read it a second or third time. They easily quoted lines they liked. By this time, the atmosphere of the writing workshop felt very safe.

Then I set the students loose to write a “Song of Myself” of their own. I asked them to consider: What do you see out of your eyes? What do you love? What places do you go where you feel your best? Pretend you are in one of your favorite places and write long lines about what is happening for you as you sit there. Feel free to give the reader a command, as Whitman does (“Stop this day and night with me”).

Kids closed their eyes in concentration as they listened or as they thought of images they wanted to write. They visibly struggled to write lines that had the sound and feel of Whitman’s celebration, but there was satisfaction in the struggle.

The search for identity, or a clear sense of self, goes on for years. Middle-grades children have just entered the borders of this vast country, one in which most writers wander their whole lives. When young students hear and read good writing, though, they can get a glimpse of the paths others before them have laid out. They can choose a path, veering off on their own when they feel safe enough, awake to both the bright and the dark scenery along the way.



PLUGS

Ursula K. Le Guin Book on Story Writing

Ursula K. Le Guin, the best-selling author of more than 40 books of fiction, poetry, essays, and children’s books, has now written *Steering the Craft: Exercises and Discussions on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew*. Based on a writing workshop Le Guin conducted, this delightful book presents the basic elements of narrative, along with examples and exercises for individual writers or writers working in groups. The 176-page volume is available in paperback (\$14.95) and hardcover (\$22.95). Published by The Eighth Mountain Press, 624 SE 29th Avenue, Portland, OR 97214, tel. (503) 233-3936. Add \$2.50 for shipping of single copy.

Poetry about Movies

Lights, Camera, Poetry! is an interesting anthology with a wide range of American poems about movies. A number of the poems could be used as models for writing (others have content that make them questionable for use with young students). Edited by Jason Shinder and published by Harcourt Brace & Co., the 190-page paperback sells for \$14.

Sonnets and Bowdrills

by Jane Elkington Wohl

*Give me two sticks and some string and I can
make fire. Watch the spark flicker, burst into flame*

THE FIVE OF US BEGIN AN EXERCISE ON sonnets. Jessica, sixteen, will be a junior in high school; a former teen model, she now wears no make-up. Marla, at fifteen, has repeated eighth grade and prefaces each poem with “I hate this” or “This poem sucks,” yet she continues to work hard. Ben, my fourteen-year-old son who, when I tell him he writes well, says, “Well, Mom, I’ve been breathing it for fourteen years.” Katie is a sixteen-year-old who took herself out of school because she thought she could do it better on her own. She has written a lot of good poetry and read more poetry than most of the adult writers I know. We sit in a small circle in the back room of the lodge at the Sheridan Young Writers Camp in Story, Wyoming, on the sixth and next-to-last day of the 1997 session. Jessica has requested a class on sonnets, and the others have joined in because they think it sounds cool.

For many writers, the sonnet is intimidating. The limit of fourteen lines feels constricting, and the form is reminiscent of the Shakespeare we had to read in high school, or lines quoted from an unidentified authority. “When to the sessions of sweet silent thought...,” my mother used to say when her five children got too noisy. It was years before I knew the whole sonnet.

I have thought ahead about how to do this assignment, thought about what I want these young writers to gain and what they might find difficult about the sonnet form. After we settle in on the floor, I ask what they know about sonnets. Jessica remembers that they have fourteen lines. Katie knows they rhyme, but she is not sure in what order. Marla thinks she might have read one once. I begin by talking a little about what a sonnet does, how it looks on the page, and the great variety of sonnets we could choose from. But I stop there.

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“Let’s write,” I tell them, “write down something in seven lines. They don’t have to be sentences—just create seven lines.”

We all do this, and then I say, “Number these lines 1–7. Think of a spider on a mirror, or look at this,” and I put my hands together fingertip to fingertip, one hand below the other so that one hand reflects the other. The kids look a little mystified except my son, who has done this with me before.

“OK, now look at your seven lines and number the next seven lines 7–1, and write exactly what appears in the previous numbered lines in these slots. Line seven repeats itself in the middle of the poem and the first line of the poem becomes the last line.”

The girls continue to look at me like I am nuts. “It won’t work,” they say. I know it will. I have done this exercise many times before, and it always works and no one ever believes it will. Here, for example, is Marla’s sonnet.

Mirror Bubbles

I learned to love bubbles again Tuesday
cheeks pushing out, exhaling fast, slower.
creating fragile iridescent globes
dying on fingertips, too innocent
I’m too grown-up to catch bubbles, but I’m
still too young to give up trying
pop
pop
Still too young to give up trying
I’m too grown-up to catch bubbles, but I’m
dying on fingertips, too innocent
creating fragile iridescent globes
cheeks pushing out, exhaling fast, slower
I learned to love bubbles again Tuesday.

See? It works. There’s that fulcrum in the middle that often appears in a sonnet, between the situation and the commentary, the “hinge,” I call it, the place where the poem begins to reflect on what has gone before.

The hinge. Later in the summer I visit my son at the boys’ camp he is attending. I have spent many years at

this camp as a counselor and later as a director and then as a parent. I remember a pudgy eleven-year-old calling out to me, "Watch me split wood, watch!" His joy at learning to use an ax radiated across his face. This skill was the hinge, the change from city kid to competent tool user. Now my son comes up to me, grinning. "I started a fire with a bowdrill, Mom," he says. I know how hard this is. I have watched people start fires this way, and I know that it takes a long time. There are some skills that have far greater psychological potency than practical use. Ben will probably never have to use a bowdrill to start a fire, but the knowledge that he *can* do this is powerful. It is a skill that, once acquired, can be repeated because the practitioner has felt the way all the elements come together. Growth hinges on the knowledge that we can do things that are unusual or difficult.

After we have read the mirror sonnets to each other, the students see that the form does work, even if there are places in some of them where a word or two must be changed. There are fourteen lines, and there is a change of some kind in the middle. Often that change is unconscious and powerful, the way the line in Marla's poem reads, "I'm too grown-up to catch bubbles, but I'm / dying on fingertips." The dying of the bubbles in the first section becomes the dying of the author in the second. The mirror sonnet form demonstrates how much the position of the words can change the meaning of the work. These young writers are entranced with the magic that they have just made. It feels like magic when we write words and only afterward understand what they mean, rather than working for meaning first.

Every time I do this exercise with young writers, it works well. One summer I asked several groups of teenage writers to think about situations that were emotionally difficult, either real or imagined. Then I asked them to write seven lines about that situation. I also asked that they try not to end their sentences at the end of the line, because the enjambment always creates interesting tensions in these poems. When they had finished, I had them add the mirrored seven lines, and, if they wished, a title.

These writers confronted divorce, child abuse, and difficult relationships with parents in ways they might not have, without this prescribed form to work with:

For My Father Who Once Owned a Mountain

Dark shadows coalesced, forming in sight
to drape the mountains like a heavy cloak.
Mount Saint Helens, its side crushed by old age,
Filtered the light that leaves, holding it in greed.
It says, "Mine, mine! I have paid my dues."
But the sun steals away, unforbearing.
Shadows fill the crater and remember.
Shadows fill the crater and remember.

The sun still steals away, unforbearing.
It says, "Mine, mine! I have paid my dues."
It filters the light that leaves, holding it in greed
From Mount Saint Helens, side crushed by old age,
To drape the mountain like a heavy cloak.
Dark shadows coalesced, forming in sight.

—*Laura*

Laura's poem is full of darkness and ambiguity. Because of her title, the reader doesn't know for sure if it is the mountain or her father or some combination of both that is saying "Mine, mine!" Her father may be the demanding presence in her life, or it may be the forces of nature that are demanding; Laura uses the form to intensify that ambiguity. If I had asked her to write about her father, I am sure she would not have created a poem with as many layers, nor used the spent volcano as a metaphor. The hinge at lines seven and eight provides a repetition that is, in a way, an enactment of memory. The repetition of the first line at the end allows the reader to see that perhaps there is some understanding in this situation: her last two words become "insight."

Jamie, at Writers Camp for a fourth summer, had never written anything particularly powerful, preferring to use the time to experiment with off-color words, or to write about sports or superficial relationships with girls. I could see that the request to write about something emotionally powerful was distressing for him. He bent over his work and wrote and wrote. When I asked if he was ready to share with the group, he said no. Finally toward the end of the two-hour session, he said he would read.

Daddy

Yes, he did, I say
Are you sure, tell me everything.
I do and she cries softly
Holding me like there are
Demons caressing my hair
Ready to take me away.
Now go to sleep, it'll be okay in the morning.
In the morning it isn't okay.
Awaiting to depart with me
Demons caressing my hair
She holds me and
Cries whimperingly,
Are you sure, is that everything?
In court I say, Yes, he did.

Jamie experiments with the form in ways that add to the power of his poem. He takes the center hinge line and changes it slightly from "Now go to sleep, it'll be okay in the morning" to "In the morning it isn't okay," moving the poem quickly into the next day. In fourteen lines, Jamie has recreated a horrible childhood situation, abuse or incest, about which the child has to testify in court.

Jamie not only made a breakthrough in his subject matter, but also he realized that he had the ability to use writing as a powerful tool. After this poem, all of his writing became deeper, and he felt freer about calling himself a writer.

During another session with young writers, we all sat in the sunshine beneath tall ponderosa pines, talking about poetic form. This particular summer the kids had invented forms of their own, and we had experimented with many different possibilities, but this afternoon I wanted them to use a form that I had given them and that would give them restrictions. I asked them to look around and write seven lines about what they saw, heard, smelled or felt, and then to add the reverse seven lines. Rachel lay on her quilt spread out on the ground and wrote:

Reflection

The comfort of a worn quilt, warmed by sunlight,
Lying across a carpet of pine needles.
Soft folds of cloth draped across bodies.
Smooth bareness of legs, naked feet stretched into the grass,
The rise and fall of inhalation and exhalation.
Fingers gently grasping at a pen urging words onto paper.
Have you ever felt this way before?
Have you ever seen this way before?
Fingers gently grasping a pen urging words onto paper,
The rise and fall of inhalation and exhalation,
Smooth bareness of legs, naked feet stretched into grass,
Soft folds of the cloth breaking up patterns
Lying across a carpet of pine needles,
The comfort of a worn quilt warmed by sunlight.

Rachel's poem captures the day in a few lines, but she also does a number of interesting things with the form. She indents some of the lines, getting away from the usual blocky look of a sonnet so that the look of the poem is softened to match the sweet, sensuous subject. At the center of the poem, Rachel makes a verb shift that makes the reader pay attention to the sensory detail in the poem in a way that we would not if she had repeated the word *felt*. The switch to *seen* causes us to see all of the repeated material from line nine to the end more acutely, paying more attention to the visual imagery than we would otherwise. Not only do we feel the breathing, but we also see the person's chest moving up and down with the air, even though Rachel never states it outright.

During the same writing session, thirteen-year-old Sam wrote:

A cloud moves across the sky
the universe swirls a planet goes
across it somewhere some quadrant
there is will be was a place
of green grass and blue water
here it is where I notice the flower on your foot

I glance at my own decorated with dirt only
I glance at my own decorated with dirt only
here it is where I notice the flower on your foot
of green grass and blue water
there is will be was a place
across it somewhere some quadrant
the universe swirls a planet goes
a cloud moves across the sky

Unlike Rachel, Sam has not stayed attached to the solid world around him. Even though he starts with conventional images of clouds, which he observes as he lies on his back in the sun, his lack of punctuation and his use of enjambments give this poem an other-worldly feel from the beginning. From the clouds he takes off into the stratosphere to imaginary places. He plays with time ("is will be was"). In the middle of the poem, he brings us back to the solid world, with the flower on someone's foot and the dirt on his own. It is easy to see this boy drifting off into interplanetary dreams, coming back to earth, being entranced by someone's bare foot decorated with a flower, noticing his own dirty feet and then drifting off into space again. For this poem, the central hinge lines are crucial because they anchor a poem that might otherwise be overly abstract.

But back to 1997. What about "real" sonnets? Jessica pulls out her copy of Shakespeare and reads a few of her favorites to us. I read Edna St. Vincent Millay, and we listen for the rhyme. "What about meter?" they ask.

"What about it?" I ask back.

"Isn't it hard?"

"Well, yes and no. Listen to ordinary speech. Is there rhythm there?" I ask.

"I can't do this," Marla says. "It's too hard. There's too much to think about at once." Jessica wants to run to her tent to get her rhyming dictionary.

"You won't need it," I tell her. I wonder if my plan for collaborative sonnets will work. It seems reasonable that something that is too hard for an individual should be easier for a group.

We all write two lines of ten syllables each. I tell them not to worry about rhythm for these first ones; it's likely to be iambic anyway. They all look up expectantly. We each pass the page to the person on our left.

"Add four new lines to the two that you have been given and be sure to pay attention to rhyme," I tell them. One of the poems begins:

Give me two sticks and some string and I can
make fire. Watch the spark flicker, burst into flame;
fire consumes nearly everything. I ran
away, fleeing the heat, waiting for pain;

a flaming forest is a lovely sight
all species race to escape the inferno.

“Now pass the pages again to the person on the left. Notice that the person before you has given you a rhyme scheme to finish.” Now we are getting into this. We are free of the obligation to control our “own” poems.

Give me two sticks and some string and I can
make fire. Watch the spark flicker, burst into flame;
fire consumes nearly everything. I ran
away, fleeing the heat, waiting for pain;
a flaming forest is a lovely sight
all species race to escape the inferno.
Blazing and burning the destruction might
tear down trees, lives that took so long to grow
but this life can begin in an instant
its embryo multiplying into

The hinge occurs at line seven with “Blazing and burning the destruction might / tear down trees,” because suddenly the poem changes from the definite to the possible, and with that change comes the possibility of rebirth and new growth. This fire has become one of regeneration rather than one of destruction. Finally, the last person gets each poem and has to finish it by adding two lines and then the couplet at the end. We all are on a roll now, and can’t wait to get the next poem passed to us. The room feels warm; the heat of concentration builds. I am sure now that this exercise works, and I know that these poems will surprise us.

We read the finished poems. They work and work well. They are definitely poems, and they are sonnets. They all have the Shakespearean rhyme scheme, and they take not too many more liberties with meter than Shakespeare did himself. “Hey, this is cool,” someone says, “I can do this.” Here is one of the poems:

Yesterday we sat among pines and thorn
writing metaphors while birds filled the woods.
Stop one brief instant while branches mourn,
hiding grief and shame among many moods,
the group of us with dirty feet, torn nails,
life placed carefully beneath the roots of a tree.
I remember Tuesday night because it hailed
although watching through the window, I failed
to go outside and gaze up with the others;
the fire kept me inside, loving the flames.
Later the warmth of soft and safe covers
blanketed me from the day’s rainy games.
The day kept me in sync with my soul
each time I write I am closer to whole.

Written by four people, this sonnet moves from outside to inside and from a group to an individual experience. The shift happens right at the middle of the poem

with “I remember Tuesday night” when the poem switches to the individual speaker’s experience.

A sonnet may not start a fire in the wilderness, but it can be a powerful hinge for a young writer. The sonnet is perhaps the most famous poetic form, and to be able to write one—to learn that this form is attainable—is a turning point. This achievement gives young writers the sense that they belong in the continuum of writers. Of course, like any other skill, writing sonnets will require practice before they can do it easily on their own.

The kids want to keep writing. Jessica lies down on the floor to write more sonnets. Katie begins to write in her notebook. Ben and Marla go off to do more collaborations, and I reread one of our new poems:

Give me two sticks and some string, I can
make fire. Watch the spark flicker, burst into flame;
fire consumes nearly everything. I ran
away fleeing the heat, awaiting the pain;
a flaming forest is a lovely sight
all species race to escape the inferno.
Blazing and burning the destruction might
tear down trees, lives that took so long to grow
but this life can begin in an instant
its embryo multiplying into
so many fragments, bits and pieces, constant
repetition, circles around, cycles begin to
form, reform. Give me two sticks and some string
and I can teach you anything.



PLUG

Very Contemporary Poetry

To get an idea of who some of today’s hot young American poets are and what they are writing, look at *An Anthology of New (American) Poets*, edited by Lisa Jarnot, Leonard Schwartz, and Chris Stroffolino and published by Talisman House, PO Box 3157, Jersey City NJ 07303-3157. The price of the 352-page paperback is \$21.95. Add \$3 for shipping.

Three Poetry Ideas

by devorah major

SOME OF MY MOST SUCCESSFUL WRITING assignments have grown out of poems I wrote. Here are three examples.

Photographic Portrait Poems

Have you ever looked at a photograph of yourself and said, "What was I thinking of?" or "Why didn't I smile?" I have a hard time relaxing and smiling in front of a camera. So does my son. I started this poem by looking at a school photograph of my son. This poem started as a description of what I saw. I kept writing, and it turned into an idea about a new photograph.

kindergarten photograph

my son, at times,
is so much like me
he does not like to smile
for strange photographers

he presses his teeth together
pulls back his lips and grimaces
the pain of the moment he has kept hiding
is printed on the school keepsake photo

"he made me smile, mama,
but i didn't have nothing to smile about."

the vein in his forehead
pulses with his grandfather's throb
his eyebrows wrinkle like mine
his cheeks are hard set trying to do right

"i didn't feel like smiling, mama, are you mad?"
"no baby, lately i don't much feel like smiling
either, especially for strangers, on demand."

his lips slide open showing polished teeth.
his arms wrap around my neck.
we laugh for ourselves.

now. snap the picture, now.

Take a photograph of yourself or someone you know and try to write about the feelings in back of the expression. What do their eyes say? How do their lips look? Is the smile real?

Fashion Statements

Like many parents, I do not always agree with many of my children's fashion choices. I wrote this one day after laughing over my daughter's oversized clothes. I realized that they provided her not only with a certain identity, but also a certain protection.

she says she wants to be a model

my daughter dresses like a guerilla
her oversized pants sag
and are tucked in at the top
of her ankle high boots
which shine black across
their thick hard rounded toes

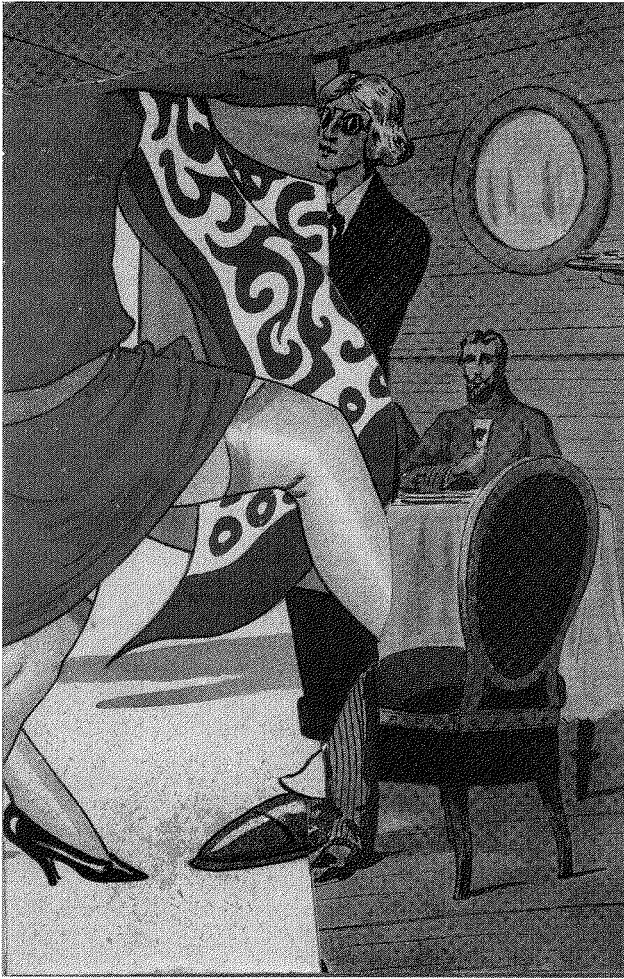
her coat from ear past hip
pads back and chest
shields heart and groin
her knit cap pulled low
tucks away her curls
hennaed and cropped short

my daughter dresses
for the war zone
in which she lives
she is willing to do battle
she intends to survive

and only a sparkling ring
planted on the edge of her nose
and a pair of painted, bright red lips
reveal that she is a woman
young and full of dreams

Look around at your friends, people you go to school with, different adults. Pick out one style of dress and try to see what it says to you about them and the way that they see the world. Use lots of details. Are the shoes always scuffed, the tie pushed uptight, the hair dyed many colors? Look at the way you present yourself to the world. Does your dress make a statement? What does it say?

DEVORAH MAJOR has taught poetry writing to students from elementary through college age for fifteen years. In 1996 her book of poems, *street smarts* (Curbstone), received the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award for Excellence. She leads the San Francisco Fine Arts Museums' Poets in the Galleries workshops.



Collage by George Schneeman

Advice Poems

Did you ever have not just a bad day or a bad hour, but one of those stretches when things keep going wrong hour after hour, day after day? Maybe breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend caused the problem. Maybe it was losing a good friend, or doing worse than you expected in school. Maybe it was all of that and being sick and having to move, too. In any case, your feelings and your world fell down. You fell down and had a hard time getting up. I wrote the following poem using the idea of falling, having something go wrong. It is one of a series of “advice” poems, in which I give advice to myself, to make myself remember to “do the right thing.”

on falling

it is okay to fall, sometimes
sometimes there's no avoiding it.
there just ain't no ground underneath you
and gravity starts pulling

so for me
when i have to fall
i try to fall
so as to hit the ground
doing a minimum of damage
to myself or the surroundings

i try to ease into the downward slide
as soon as it becomes obvious
that there is no stopping the descent.
and when i hit the ground
i just check out all my parts
and get back on up

sometimes i hardly touch down
before i bounce right back up
with some kind of dignity
and broken grace

other times
it takes a bit longer
an ankle sprain
a scabbed knee
or something worse
causes me to limp away
slow, but sure
but either way
when i got to fall
i go on and fall
because i know how to get back up

i've got lots of experience

Write your own advice poem. Mine was not really a poem about falling on the ground, even though that's all I talk about. In your poem, use an everyday act, such as baking a cake, climbing a hill, or losing a race, to talk about meeting a challenge. The resulting poem will automatically be a metaphor.

