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Poemakers

by Dave Morice

WRITING *THE ADVENTURES OF DR. ALPHABET* (T&W, 1995) gave me the opportunity to organize the poetry activities I had used in schools, senior centers, and art festivals. Many of the activities had focused on writing that didn't involve the use of ordinary sheets of paper. In some cases, the writing surface was quite unusual—a lampshade, a chair, a hunk of foam rubber, or a parking lot. After the book came out, I began to think about new possibilities for using plain white paper.

At first I tried designing fill-in-the-blank poems that used mostly blanks and few words. I arranged the blanks in standard geometric patterns (squares, triangles, etc.) and then added the words. However, the patterns looked more interesting without the words. This initial attempt led to what I call “poemakers.”

Poemakers are sheets of white paper with special drawings pre-printed on them. As part of their designs, the drawings have blank lines where the words are to go. Both the

drawings and their blank lines are springboards for writing. (See pp. 4–7 for examples.)

The Young Writers' Festival

A few weeks after devising the first poemakers, I took part in the Young Writers' Festival in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, conducting four poetry workshops for students from first grade through twelfth. I brought along photocopies of 30 different poemaker designs.

I wondered whether it would be difficult to explain the writing activity, since there were so many different poemaker designs for the students to choose from. But as I talked, everything seemed to fall into place.

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After a brief general discussion of poetry, I said, "Usually people write across the page from left to right, and down, from top to bottom. In school, you usually use lined paper for writing. Today I have brought some special paper with lines on it, but not the usual kind of lines. For example, this one has a drawing of a girl's face, but it also has blank lines you can write on. This next one has a bunch of lines, but as they go down the page they get closer and closer together. This one looks like a car. There are thirty different ones, and you can choose whichever one you want. And what you write depends on the drawing. You can write a rhymed or unrhymed poem. If you run out of room on the drawing, just continue on the white space around it. Any questions?"

One student asked, "If we finish one, can we do another one?"

"Sure," I said.

"Can we keep them when we're done?"

"Yes, but I'd like to make a copy for myself, if you don't mind."

I gave stacks of poemakers to the students, who handed them around, each choosing one for himself or herself.

"Are we supposed to write on all the lines?"

"You can write on as many or as few as you want."

And they wrote and wrote. Afterwards, they held up their poemakers and read them aloud. Later, when I looked at my copies of their work, I realized several things:

1) Some poemakers suggest a wide range of topics and approaches, while others have a narrow range. The "Girl's Face" poemaker inspired poems about friends, girlfriends, siblings, women's rights, love, the future, and other things; the "Clock" poemaker elicited poems only about time.

2) Most poemakers result in unrhymed poetry, perhaps because the blank lines don't follow the usual lined pattern of notebook paper. The freer lines of poemakers do not suggest traditional poetic fixed forms or devices such as rhyme and meter.

3) Some poemakers are especially popular, others less so. Many students chose the "Receding Lines" drawing because, as one of them noted, they liked the challenge of writing in smaller and smaller letters. Only one student chose the "Building" drawing, in which the windows of a building provide space for writing.

4) The freedom to choose a poemaker generates immediate excitement among the students and allows them to pick images that appeal to their sensibilities. Also, the students are curious to see which blank poemakers their classmates are choosing.

5) The writing on the finished poemakers frequently adds an intriguing visual element to the whole. For example, "Boy's Face" and "Girl's Face" change dramatically when words are added.

Poemakers by College Students

To see how adults would react to this activity, I took the poemakers to the children's literature class that I taught at the University of Iowa. The undergraduates tackled the assignment with as much enthusiasm as the younger students. Some asked for copies of the blank poemakers for use with their own future students.

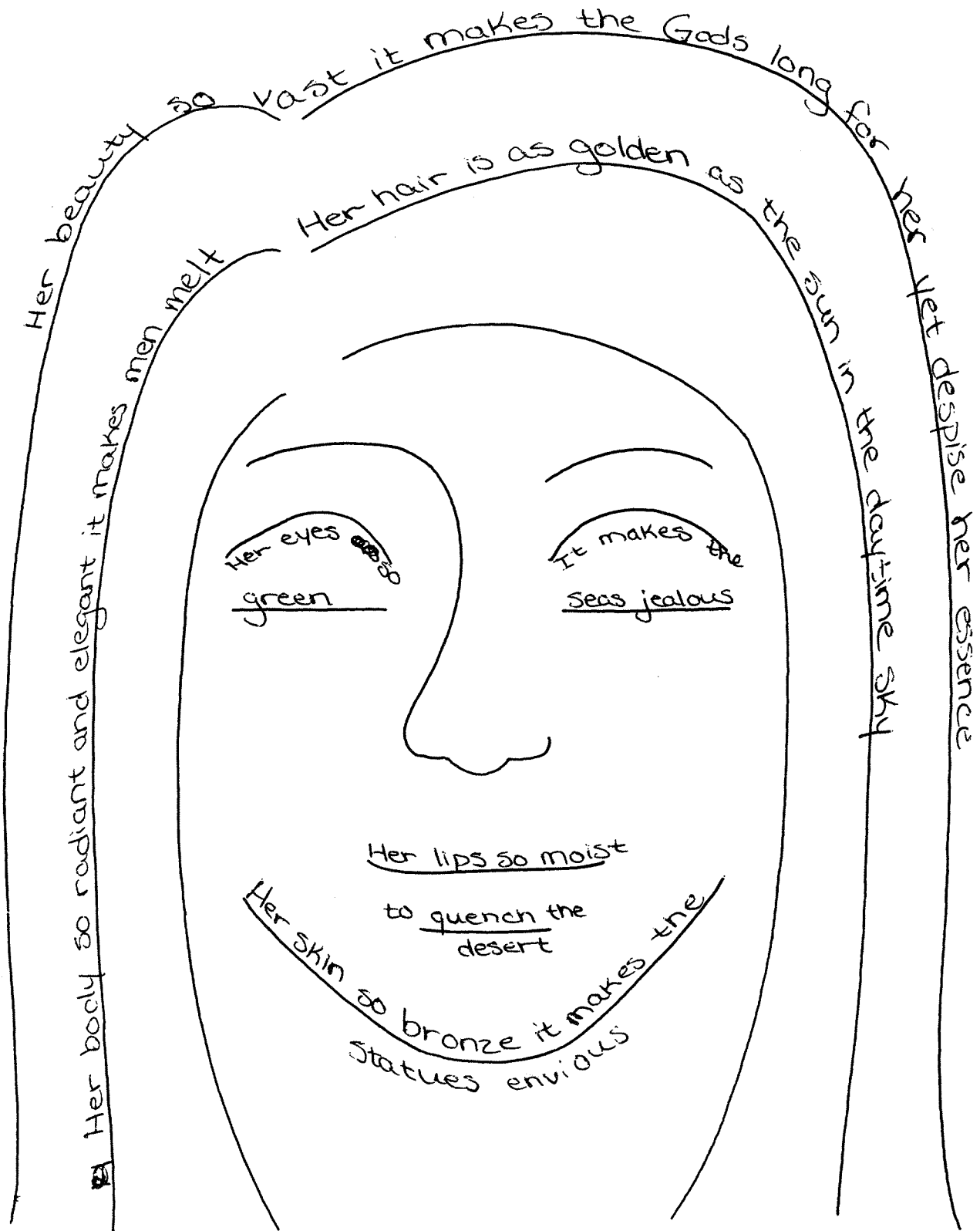
After my undergraduates had completed their poemakers, we discussed the poemaker approach as a tool for poetry writing and for teaching poetry writing. They liked the variety of images, the simplicity of the presentation, and the mixture of words and pictures.

Longfellow Poetry Day

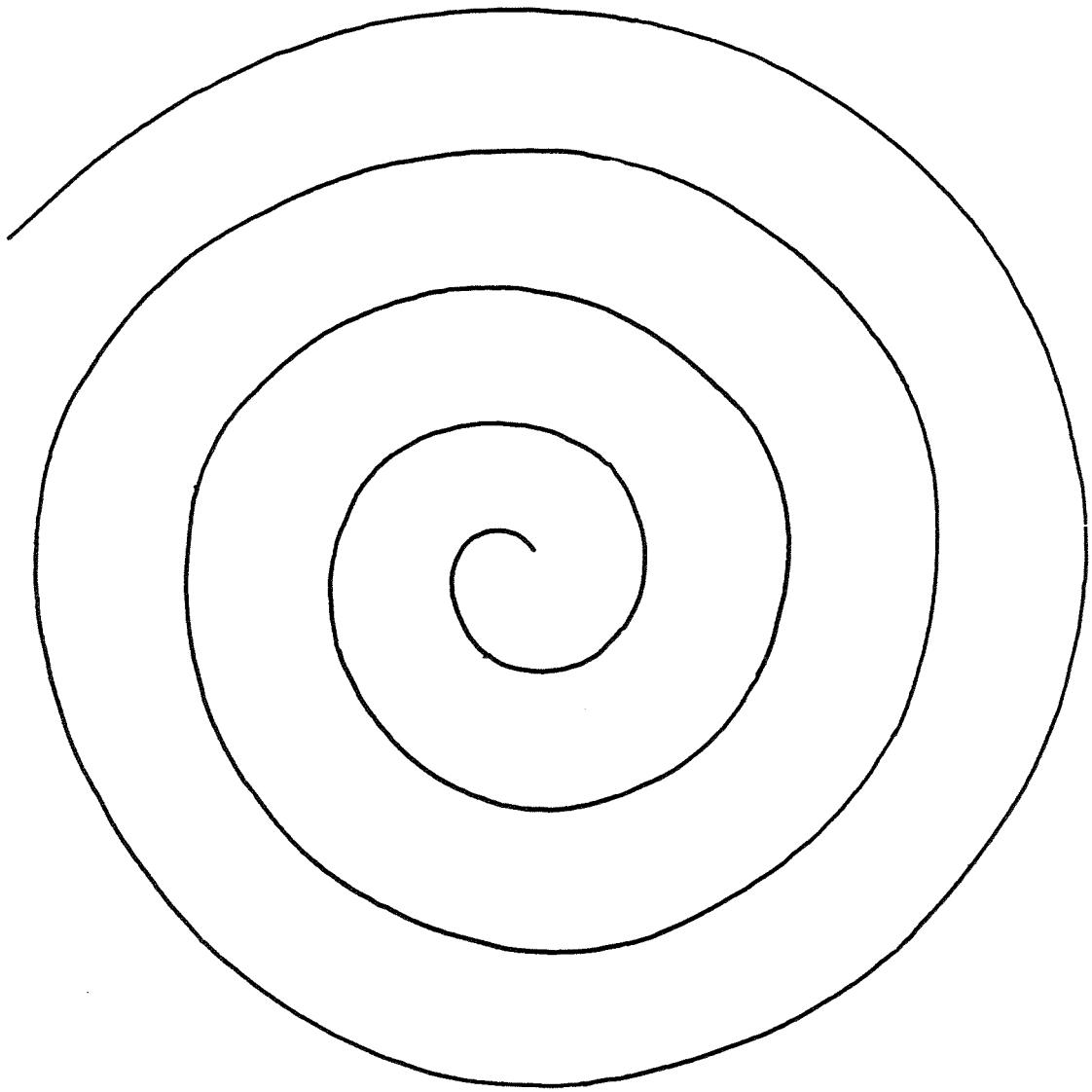
For the first Poetry Day at Longfellow Elementary School in Iowa City a few years ago, I gave the teachers packets of poemakers and explained how to use them with their students. I asked them to loan me the resulting works so that I could copy my favorites.

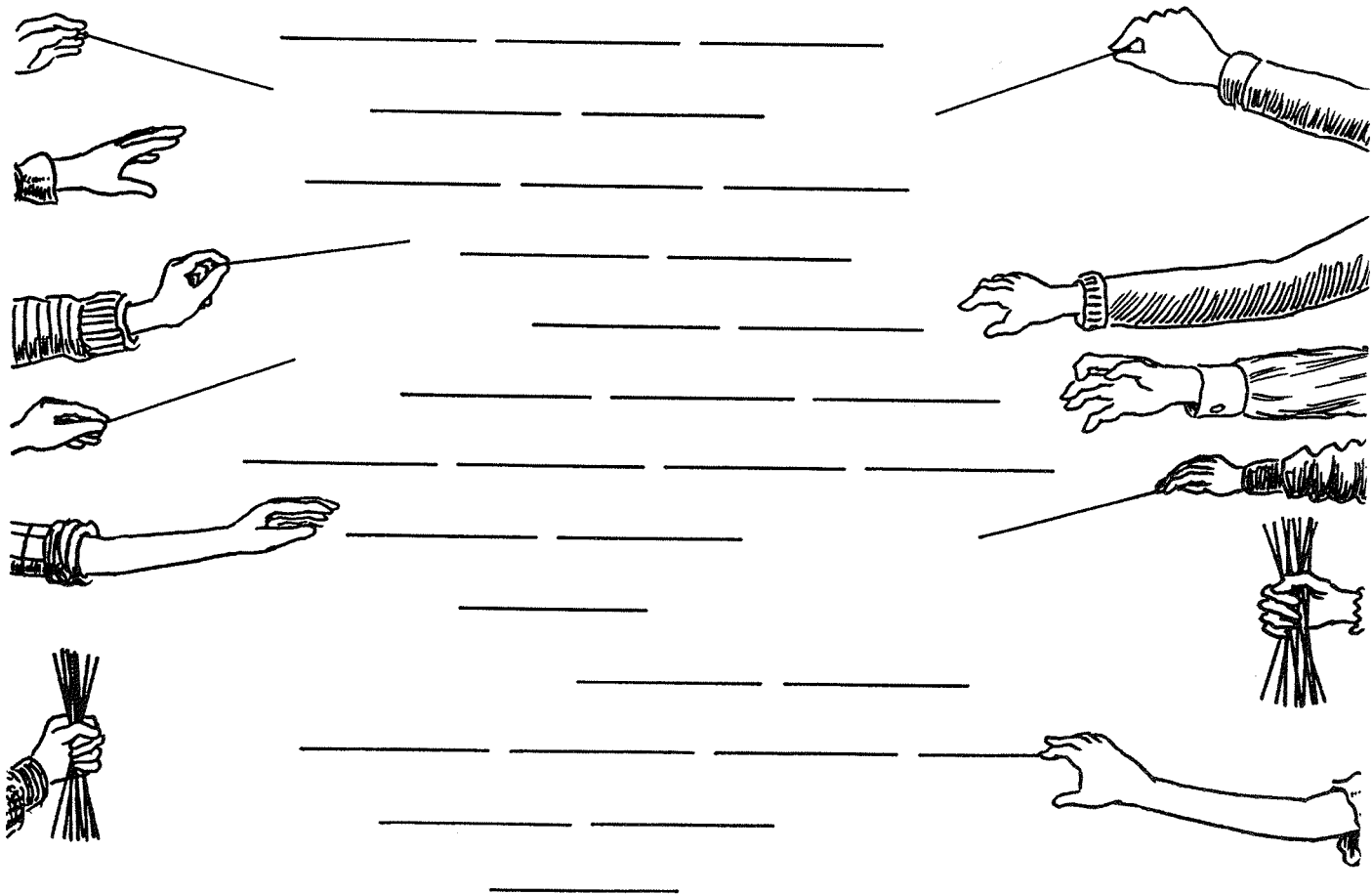
I also asked the teachers to encourage their students to design their own poemakers. This gave everyone a chance to see the method from start to finish. A number of students (and teachers) took up the challenge, with very creative results, and later I included some of these student-designed poemakers in a selection I distributed to another class.

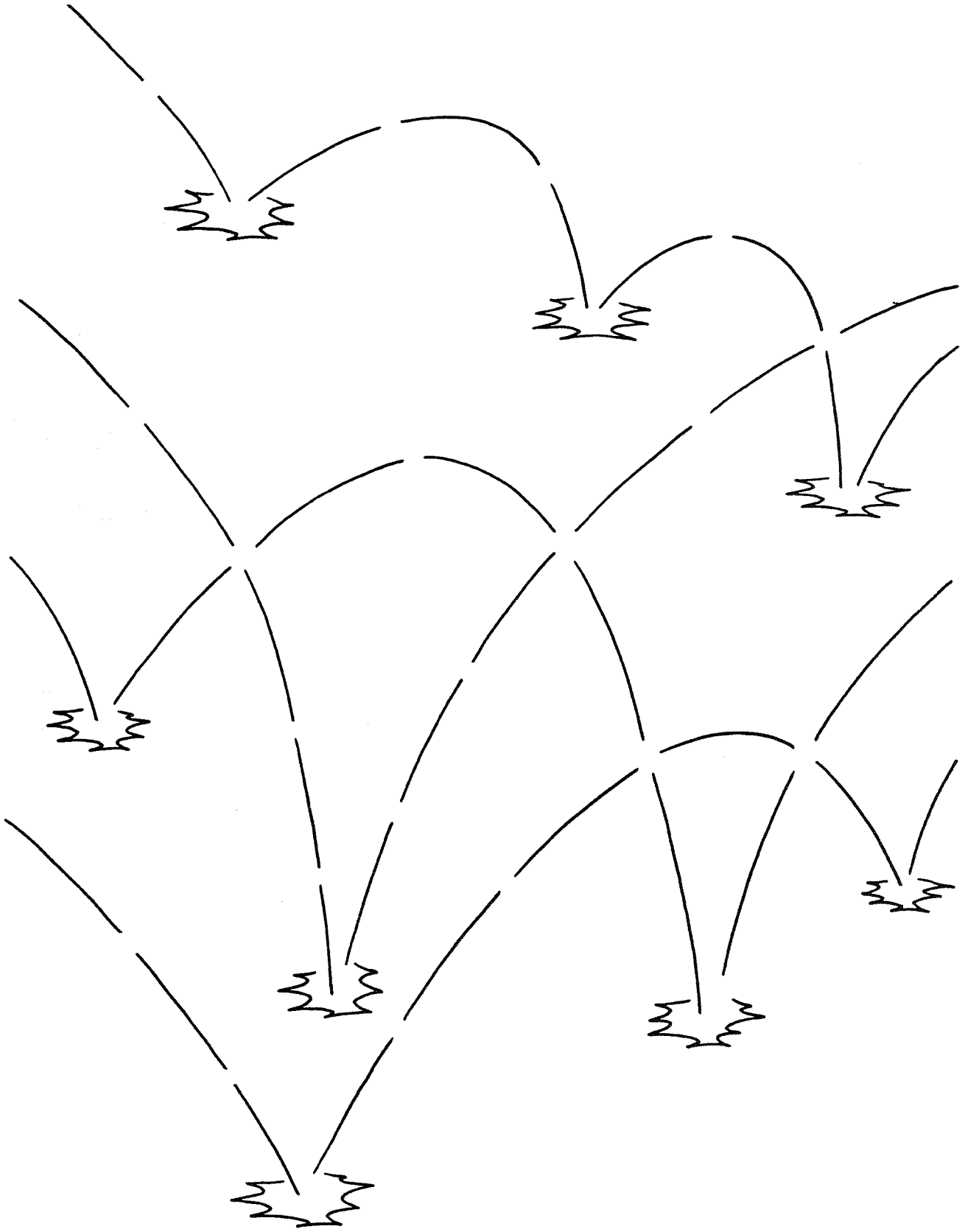
Not too long ago the school celebrated its eightieth anniversary. I was surprised to see, in the hallway exhibits for that event, dozens of poemakers from different classes, poemakers the students had developed even further by coloring them. On the next page is a finished example in black and white, followed by four life-size blank poemakers, which, if you wish, you can photocopy for your students and yourself.

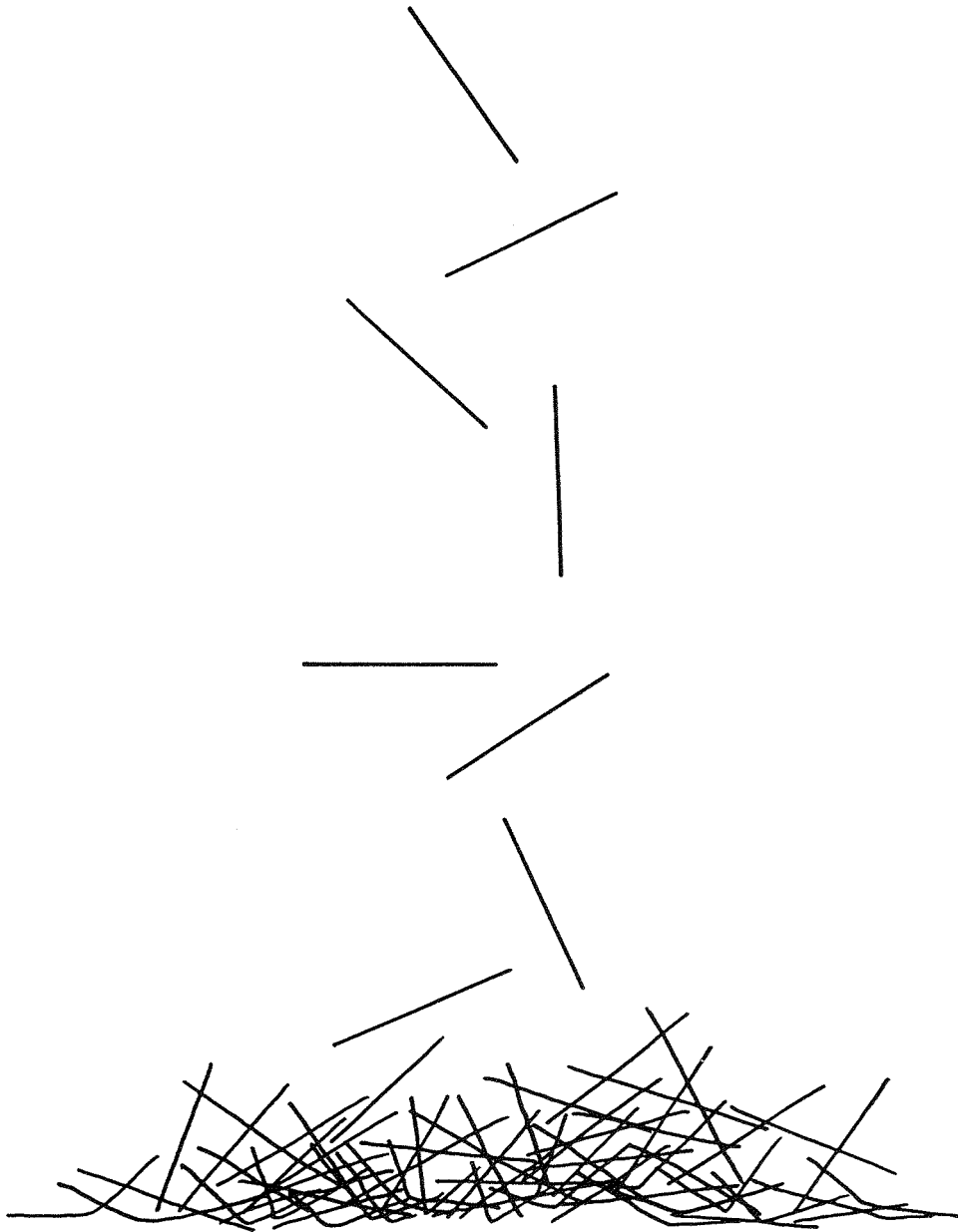
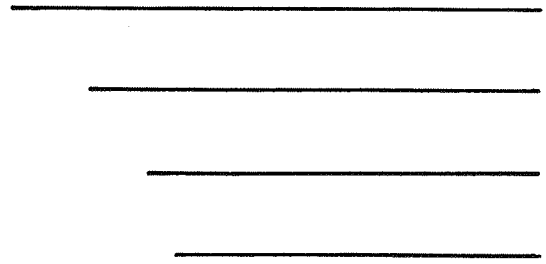
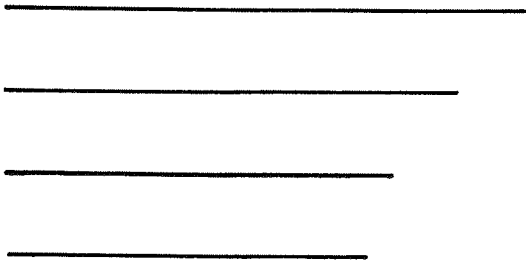


—Greg Robertson









Inside Out & Upside Down

One Way to Teach the Pleasure of Revision

by Elizabeth Raby

OVER THE YEARS I HAVE DEVISED A METHOD that enables students to enjoy the process of revision as much as I do. I used this method in a recent prose-writing residency with the thirteen fifth grade classes at the Hillside School in Bridgewater, New Jersey.

During my four days with each class, every student wrote about a chosen subject in five or six different ways. It is not necessary to arrange these exercises within a four-day time-frame: I did so because of the parameters of my residency. The exercises I describe can be used in any time-frame or circumstance to generate ideas quickly and painlessly, to get those ideas into words on the page, and to discover that there is always more to be said about a subject and that it is pleasurable to turn words and ideas inside out and upside down to find the form that suits them best.

Our subject was memory. To help the children begin to remember, in some classes I told a story or two from my own childhood. In other classes I read passages of dense description from nonfiction works such as *Home and Home Again* by George and Helen Papashvily. This entertaining book recounts the couple's visit to George's childhood home, in what was then Soviet Georgia. The book travels in time from the events of their journey back through George's early memories of his life in a village. Any memoir rich in detail will help to stimulate the processes of recollection.

I urged the students to remember something, a family story or something that they had experienced personally, some person, some tiny moment or some big event, something that happened only once or over and over, something pleasant or unpleasant, recent or in their farthest pasts. I suggested that the first thing that came to them probably contained a story that ought to be told. After a few minutes of discussion, everyone had at least a scrap of memory to work with.

Then, using a certain amount of theatrics, I explained our method for the week. Whenever we began to write, we were to write for the assigned time without stopping. Our

Since 1989, ELIZABETH RABY has taught writing in grades 1–12 in the writer-in-the-schools programs of the Pennsylvania and New Jersey state arts councils. Her poetry has appeared in two chapbooks, *Hard Scent of Peonies* and *Camphorwood*. One of her essays on teaching appeared in *Old Faithful: 18 Writers Present Their Favorite Writing Assignments* (T&W, 1995).

pencils were never to lift from the page or to stop moving. If we couldn't think of anything more, we were to write that: "I can't think of anything more. I am stuck. I don't remember...but I do remember..." We were to write whatever we needed to write to keep the pencil moving. The purpose of freewriting, of course, is to take the pressure off. Whatever appears on the page is "correct." Children don't have to worry about making mistakes or writing the "wrong" thing.

After being sure everyone had pencil and paper, and announcing that this first writing assignment would take five minutes, I called out, "Pencils at the ready, get set, write!" and they did. Three examples from Mrs. Donna Emanuelli's class follow. I have standardized the spelling, but otherwise they are exactly as the students wrote them.

Megan Staats: I remember how my grandpa would make me an airplane kit, but I could never build mine right. He would make me a new one, but I wouldn't be happy. I would go off the deck with him and I would climb my swamp maple tree. He would soon join me. But he would stay at the bottom. I would go almost to the top and there was this place where the almost thickest branches would grow together touching. They are gone now, but I would just go up and cry, think, and sometimes just go up there with my stuffed cat and play with her and a ball. I couldn't sleep, because I was afraid a storm would come, and I would tumble down. Sometimes my blanket would come up with me. All I wanted was that spot. One day it was raining, but I wasn't about to let that stop me. I would bring my blanket, cat, tossing blue ball that was marked with a sign of a heart, an umbrella, and a sign that would say that no one could come up. I loved that spot. My wagon was always there, too. I want that spot back.

Sarah Fuchs: Everything she owns has that stench of perfume. Even when she buys something new, the next day it has that sneezy smell. She loves shopping. She loves little gadgets and different accessories.

I remember the time she came to my house to babysit me for the weekend and she right away said, "Let's go to the Mall." She loves the Mall. When we went to the Mall we looked around, shopped, and did all sorts of things. When we got hungry we went to the food court on the top floor of the Mall. She ordered orange chicken. I got rice. I remember laughing when she snuck the orange chicken into the movie theater. We had so many great times together!

Zach Zeller: Last winter I made a giant snowball. I would have made a snowman, but I can't lift those huge things alone, and the only person outside at the time with me was my little pain in the !@* sister. She always copies me.

Zach stopped writing before the five minutes was up. When I urged him to keep going he told me he didn't like to write and couldn't think of more to say, but then added:

She was six at the time and had practically no personal influences. She still doesn't. She copies almost everything off me. When I finally get the chance to, ohh she's going to get it!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

When I called time, many students were eager to read their pieces aloud. We listened to all of them. Next I asked the entire class to read over what they had written, put that aside, and take up a clean sheet of paper. Then I gave them the adjective *red* and told them to describe any reds in the memory they had just written about. Almost any adjective will do. I selected different words for different classrooms, with equally useful results.

This time we had only three minutes to write.

Megan: I remember that my Poppi used to wear a red shirt when we raced. When he won, he would toss a wet red cloth on my head. I would paint my plane red to show "he won."

Sarah: My grandmother's best color is red. She looks so nice in it. She also looks good in lime green and animal prints. She always has on bright red lipstick.

Zach: Whenever I think of winter, then think of red, there are some things that come to mind. You can easily think of Santa Claus (but I forget about him since I'm Jewish). And my sled is red so sometimes I think of that. Sometimes I even start thinking that winter is over when I think of red. You can think of many things for red and winter if you put your mind to it.

Then, beginning with another sheet of clean paper, we tried a third timed experiment. ("Experiment" is a useful word to relieve writing anxiety.) The students were to write about any scents or odors associated with the memory they had selected.

Megan: I remember my grandfather (Poppi), and the scent of his cologne. He would always have it on. Whenever I made a model airplane, I could smell his "beautiful scent, Megan, beautiful scent of nature!" He also would make me have a race with his airplane. I remember the one time I won, because his crashed, but mine went over the hill. I also remember how he would make me an airplane kit, and I could never build mine right. He would then make me take it into the shed, and he came out with another one, but I still got it all wrong. I think the shed is now all filled with planes. My grandfather's scent is still there, even though he passed away. My grandfather always made me an airplane, and he would make me a new one when I messed up. I wish he was still here.

Sarah: My grandmother always smells like the feeling you get right before you sneeze. My grandmother is very classy and wears scarves, perfumes, lots and lots of jewelry. Everything she owns has that stench of perfume. She has so many different kinds of perfume but for some reason every bottle, every time she puts it on it always smells the same.

Zach: The smell of coldness, the smell of pure winter. I can somehow smell if it's going to be freezing. I can't wait until it does snow, though. Last winter I made a giant snowball. I would have made a snowman, but I can't lift those giant snowballs. I even trotted around in the snow to spell my name. The sled I have has worked before, but it usually doesn't. I prefer using my older brother's snowboard. Of course, he rarely lets me. And my oldest brother doesn't have any cool snow stuff, because he's constantly on the computer doing total nonsense. But when I'm on the computer, he always thinks what I'm doing is nonsense.

The atmosphere in the classroom throughout this first day was electric. The students worked with great concentration and energy. Everyone felt successful with at least one of the three efforts and many students were eager to read aloud what they had written.

For homework I asked them to think about anything with a rough texture associated with their memory and, at home, to do a three-minute freewrite on roughness (or smoothness).

Day Two

The next day Zach was absent but Megan had written:

When my grandfather would make me race, and I lost, instead of yelling and screaming, I would run my hand hard against the railing of the deck. It was so rough I couldn't get the splinters out of my hand. My grandpa would take me into the bathroom and perform "bathroom surgery!" I think I still have some splinters in my hand.

Sarah brought in a crossed-out paragraph about her grandmother's rough scalp and weekly visit to the hairdresser. Beneath this discarded material she wrote:

There is nothing rough about her. Her hands are soft like a baby's stomach.

To begin our second session, I asked the students to spread out everything they had written, to read it all over, and to mark with a star the sentence that appealed to them the most. After the students had done this, I told them to write these sentences across the top of a fresh sheet of paper. This was going to be the first line of a new piece that might or might not relate to what they had already written. Again we had five minutes of continuous writing. (Using all these fresh sheets of paper seems wasteful, I know, but I wanted each writing to appear important to the students, to have equal potential for development.)

Megan: One day it was raining.... How I wish that spot was there. I would go up there all the time. I loved that spot so much that I would go up there with a book that I always read. It was the only three-page book with no words I could read. I still have that book. The days it rained, I would bring my big, four-foot across, umbrella that my grandpa gave me and would get my wagon-o-fun and to the tree I went. I would go up there and put my umbrella wedged in between two branches and lay there with my stuff. I would read, play, toss, and just do nothing. I almost

fell asleep in the tree on a hot, muggy day. I was two years old then. I love that spot. Too bad it's not there anymore.

Sarah: She ordered orange chicken. I'm surprised that I remember what she ordered, which reminds me how I always remember the unimportant things, and the important ones I forget. Almost like the unimportant ones are pushing the important memories out. Just like how I remember there was a McDonalds at the hospital where me and my brother were born. He was born six years ago and I remember the little toy at the McDonalds.

Once again the students wrote enthusiastically and were eager to read aloud. Many of them were surprised by the number and specificity of the details that swam out to the end of their fingers and onto the page.

Day Three

The third day we began with a discussion of point of view. So far, each of us was telling a story from his or her own point of view. I asked the students once again to look over what they had written, select one piece, and imagine that inside that piece someone or something else was telling the same story from its point of view. To get them going I read them a story by a girl in the seventh grade of another school I had visited some years earlier.

It seemed like the beginning of a glorious day. My fish and dolphins were swimming among my mighty currents. The boats were sailing smoothly on my surface, and the beachgoers were swimming lazily on my tides.

The one thing I regret, though, about the magnificent start of the day, was when my uncontrollable rowdy waves sucked in an innocent swimmer then spit it back out onto the sand. They must have thought it was rather fun though because they continued this routine several times.

Then the poor thing got attacked by nasty crabs and blood flowed into my waters. I probably washed out its sense of thinking because it kept coming in over and over after nearly drowning several times.

Although I knew it got hurt, I knew it was still having fun because it was jumping over the waves and laughing again.

—Roseann Morsch

The class had fun reconstructing what they imagined to be the original version of this tale—Roseann's day at the beach, which she had enjoyed despite being battered by the waves and bitten by crabs. They enjoyed Roseann's becoming an "it" and seeing things from the point of view of the ocean. The change in point of view was clear to everyone. They were eager to begin the day's experiment.

Megan: I couldn't believe it! It was raining, but that girl just climbed up my branches and got on my close together limbs. She put her umbrella up above her and made a big shelter. I was so upset. Her grandpa was up there too! Higher than he usually went! I wonder why? Well, someday I'll get struck by lightning, and these limbs will fall off. She will be upset, though. "Little Megapuss Rex, come on inside! Lunch is ready! Chicken-Noodle soup!" Her dad was calling. Here she goes! Yey! She's gone and nothing is left here. Now I can rest while she eats.

Tug, Crunch, Step. Here she comes again. Thank goodness it stopped raining. No umbrella or "quack-quack" as she calls it.

Sarah: Here comes the metal scooper, time for another day in the mouth. I wonder what the breath smells like in this mouth. Take out! Nobody told me I'm take out. I'm moving. I can't see my owner. I want to see my owner. Take me out of this box. I'm claustrophobic. Ah, out of the box and onto the fork. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. No one told me it was going to be pitch black in here. Now I'm never going to see my owner. Sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff. Oh, the usual breath. No excitement. Well, maybe I'll have better luck tomorrow.

Zach entered this experiment with energy and imagination:

There I sat upon the grass, children picking me up, turning me into balls. Some children threw their balls of me, some rolled more of them in me to make three large balls, one upon the other. There was still more of me falling from the sky. The children tried to catch me on their tongues. I was being sledged through, even snowboarded through. Some children tried to stop the balls made of me by making small walls of me. As I fell in streets, large trucks swept me off to the side. It was a terrific time helping children have fun, but it was getting dark quickly. Some children stayed out to continue playing, others went inside their houses to drink hot cocoa. Suddenly, children were going in very quickly. I was becoming lonesome. Before I knew it, it was midnight. All the children were asleep.

Day Four

The fourth day began with the children once again spreading all their drafts across their desks. They were very impressed with how much they had written. This time they selected their favorite draft and set it aside. Then, with a highlighting pen in hand, they read through the rest. When they found a sentence, phrase, or idea they especially liked, they highlighted it. Now at last they were ready to begin their final experiment on yet another clean sheet of paper, for which they had to face some questions. How could they use the highlighted material from the discarded drafts in their final story? What changes needed to be made? What did they need to rearrange, to add, or to leave out? The students made their own decisions about what was important or interesting. Was all this effort useful? Was the final story a better story than if they had simply cleaned up their first version? The students thought so, and I agreed.

My Grandpa & Me

My grandpa was a great airplane builder. His name was Poppi. When he would make me race airplanes with him, I would usually lose. But, instead of yelling and screaming, I would run my hand HARD against the railing of my deck. It was so hard, I couldn't get the splinters out of my hand! Poppi would take me into the bathroom and perform "Bathroom Surgery"!

When he finished, I would get another airplane kit, but it seemed that I could never build mine right! He would make me a new one, but I wasn't happy. I would go off the deck with him and go to my swamp-maple tree. I would then start to climb up. Poppi would come, but he would stay at the bottom.

I would go to my special spot near the top. There all the thickest branches grew together. They, like Poppi, are gone now,

but I would just go up there to cry, think, and sometimes just play with my stuffed cat and a “bouncy ball.” Sometimes, I felt like I wanted to sleep, but I couldn’t. I was afraid I would tumble down. Sometimes, I would take my blanket up with me. All I want is that spot. I want my Poppi back, too.

—Megan Staats

My Grandmother

My grandmother is very special. She lives in Manhattan and is probably the most classy person in all of New York. Her best color is red. Most of her clothes are red, and her lipstick is red. Her hair is strawberry blond. There is nothing rough about her. If anything, she is soft. Her hands are like a newborn’s back.

My grandmother always smells like the scent you feel right before you sneeze. Everything she owns has that fragrance of perfume.

My grandmother loves to shop. If there is something so popular and something so hard to find, she is probably the first one to own it. She has many gadgets and lots of jewelry. Sometimes, I wonder where she keeps these things since she lives in such a small apartment.

I remember that time she came to my house to baby-sit me over the weekend. Right away she said, “Let’s go to the mall.” She loves the mall. So we called for a taxi and we went to the mall. At the mall, we looked around, shopped and did all sorts of things. When we got hungry, we went to the food court on the top floor. At the Chinese food place, she ordered orange chicken. I ordered fried rice and lo mein.

I remember laughing when she snuck her orange chicken in the movie theater. My grandmother and I share many special times together.

—Sarah Fuchs

Zach found his way into his material with the change in point of view. He made only minor changes in his final ver-

sion. Why spoil a good thing? I believe the previous three experiments helped to bring the fullness of his experiences with snow back into his mind.

Snowy Times

There I sat upon the grass, children picking me up, turning me into balls. Some children threw their balls of me, some took their balls and rolled them in me to make three large balls, one upon the other. There was still more of me falling from the sky. The children tried to catch me on their tongues. I was being sledded through, even skied and snowboarded through. Some children tried to stop the balls made of me by making small walls of me.

As I fell in streets, large trucks swept me off to the side. It was a terrific time helping children have fun, but it was getting dark quickly. Some children stayed out to continue playing, others went inside their houses to drink hot cocoa. Some couldn’t come outside because they were sick. Suddenly, children were going in very quickly. I was becoming lonesome. Before I knew it, it was midnight. All of the children were asleep.

—Zach Zeller

During my four days in each classroom, every student wrote about his or her chosen subject in five or six different ways. As they wrote, they didn’t have to worry about how the pieces would fit together; each piece stood alone. Hopefully, they learned something new about their subjects with each iteration. Only on the last day did the students select their favorite draft from those they had accumulated and consider strategies for incorporating material they liked from the other drafts. Until the final version, the students were not engaged in editing. They were re-imagining, re-visiting, and re-visioning their experiences, and they felt free and easy within that process.



BOOK REVIEW

Better Than Life

By Daniel Pennac

Translated by David Homel

Stenhouse Publishers, PO Box 360, York ME 03909

207 pp., \$15

Another book about reading? One’s first impulse is to head for the nearest exit. But this is not just another book about reading.

Better Than Life does cover the topics essential to a serious discussion of learning to read (and learning to love to read): the home environment, reading aloud, storytelling, initial instruction in school, and so on. What distinguishes Daniel Pennac’s book is its delightful narrator, who sounds

as though he is talking to you and only you, the reader, in a calm, reasonable, and sometimes whimsical tone, telling you about his reading experiences with his child and about his own reading experiences. Using very short chapters, *Better Than Life* flows along like a novel (the book’s original title in French is *Comme un roman*) narrated by a Gallic charmer, a combination of perhaps François Truffaut, Raymond Queneau, and Jacques Brel. David Homel’s translation is smooth and clean.

Teachers who are uninspired by jargon-ridden research studies can find relief and pleasure in Pennac’s thinking and dreaming about a subject that is, when written about with this much love and flair, endlessly interesting.

—Ron Padgett