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Words and the World at a New York Public School

Can Writing Really Matter to Inner City Children?

by Stephen O'Connor

I wish my life will be good.

—Fourth grader at P.S. 313

IN 1988, JUST BEFORE I BEGAN TEACHING WRITING in the New York City public schools with Teachers & Writers Collaborative, I was feeling pretty confident. I had just sold my first book—a short-story collection—to a major publisher, I had a master's in English literature, and I had worked for eight years as a freelance journalist. It seemed to me that—at least when it came to teaching elementary school—I knew everything I needed to know about writing.

If you had asked me then why creative writing should matter to New York City public school students, I probably would have recited William Carlos Williams's famous poem from *Spring and All*:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

This was the text on which I planned to hang my whole curriculum, a poem that illustrates beautifully the symbiosis that is literature's gift to humanity. As I understood it, Williams is making two complementary points with this poem. First, he tells

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us simply to pay attention. Most of life consists of experiences no more grand than the sight of chickens and a wheelbarrow in the rain. To ignore such sights is not to be fully alive. But Williams also tells us to pay attention to language. Through translation into words even the most trivial experiences can gain meaning and beauty, and enrich our lives—which is to say that, under either interpretation of the poem, life itself is what depends on that wheelbarrow and those chickens.

So there it was: life going into language and language going into life; words and the world pedaling happily together on the same tandem bicycle. The value of engaging in this process—of riding along on that happy bicycle—seemed obvious to me then. One hardly had to think about it.

* * *

I might not have been quite so complacent had I known—and I can't imagine why no one had bothered to tell me—that I was about to be assigned to teach at the very worst elementary school in New York City. For several years before and after my semester there, this school's standardized test scores were lower than those of every single one of the city's more than 600 other elementary schools. In subsequent years, whenever I have mentioned to veteran teachers that I once taught at this school (which I will call "P.S. 313" here), they have shuddered and told me I was lucky to get out alive.

My first session was with a third grade class that hadn't had a regular teacher for three months. When I walked into the classroom, two boys were running across the tops of the desks. One fell, the other jumped on top of him and they began to wrestle on the floor to the cheers of their nearest classmates. The latest in this class' parade of substitute teachers stood over the boys waving a newspaper and yelling, all to no effect. On the other side of the room a different group of kids was chasing a bounding Superball, apparently unaware of their tussling classmates, while on a bookshelf against the back wall another boy, still wearing his winter coat, lay sound asleep.

Once the two boys had been separated, the substitute seemed to feel his work was done. He rocked his chair back against the wall and lifted his newspaper. I was on my own. "OK, everybody," I called out to the still frenzied room. "Let's calm down. We're gonna have fun!" Perhaps I got a sidelong glance from one or another participant in the mayhem, but otherwise I might as well have been talking to a hurricane. I ended by concentrating my efforts on three forlorn girls huddled over a single textbook beside the vacant teacher's desk. These girls did what I told them, but with none of the joy or imaginative freedom I had expected in children their age. Clearly they needed a great deal more than I could give.

I would like to say that things got better during the remainder of my semester at P.S. 313, but in many ways they only got worse. It is true that I never had another class quite as chaotic as this first one, and that many students would leap up to hug me whenever I walked into the room, and that several of them produced lines of poetry that showed real talent. But it is also true that the longer I taught at this school, the less I felt I had any right to be there.

Every day at P.S. 313 kids would tell me about seeing someone get arrested or shot. Every day I would go into classrooms in which a quarter of the students were too tired, sick, or depressed to lift their heads up from the desks, while another quarter were so unable to sit still that their—mostly white—teachers constantly yelled at them: "Do you want to be stupid your whole life! I'm ashamed of you! You don't deserve to have Mr. O'Connor!" Every day, I read writing by eight-, nine- and ten-year-olds that was full of fear and self-hatred. Here are two examples:

I wish my life will be good. I like doing good things, not bad things. I wish that it wasn't no monsters or nothing. I wish my life will be beautiful. I love being good, but I don't know why I am bad. I'm just bad because I see the things them monster be doing. I be scaring because I see what them monster be doing.

I can take an M16 and kill you. But I can't be innocent. I can go to the zoo, but I can't live with the monkeys. I can go to Africa and dance with the people, but I can't leave. I can make my teeth turn into piano keys, but I can't eat with them. I can take a .45 and shoot you, but I got to go to jail.

One day I walked into a class and found one of my favorite students lying on a rug at the back of the room. When I asked what was wrong, her teacher whispered, "Her father routinely sexually abuses her. He did it again last night, so I told her she could just rest today." In this same class there was an extremely bright and sensitive boy who had written wonderful poems about playing basketball with his brother. One day, when I asked the class to write letters explaining life to their future children, this boy wrote: "Dear Son, The only thing you got to do is find yourself a good woman and bloody her face every day, 'cause that's the only thing women understand."

Every afternoon, when my last class was over, I would burst out the front door of that school thanking God I was free. But all the way home I would be haunted by thoughts of the things I should have done but hadn't, and of the things I had done but shouldn't have. Like the other teachers, I too had given in to rage, I too had met my students' frenzy and despair with words and glances meant only to hurt.

But the main thing I thought about on those long walks home was whether there was a good reason for my being at that school in the first place.

As far as I could see, these children had no time for anything that wouldn't help them save their lives—and what was I doing? Talking to them about a red wheelbarrow. This seemed crazy to me. I should have been adopting these kids, or getting their parents new homes or new jobs. I should have been doing any of a thousand things other than asking my students to pay attention to trivial experiences, or to address odes to the sun, or imitate the merry babble of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*.

What now seemed brutally clear to me was that, for my desperately needy students, nothing at all depended on that red wheelbarrow—at least nothing that really mattered. And if Williams's poem didn't matter to these children, then maybe it didn't really matter to anyone else. Maybe this craft to which I

had dedicated my life, as teacher and writer, truly was as trivial and snobbish and self-indulgent as so many Americans dismiss it as being. I grew ashamed of my life.

2.

“What takes place” in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally nothing; “what happens” is language alone, the adventure of language, the unceasing celebration of its coming.

—Roland Barthes

For better or for worse, I kept on doing what I was paid to do: teach writing, not save lives. And, as I have said, the work was not without its rewards, for me and for my students. The following year I agreed to run the Teachers & Writers program at a combined elementary and middle school that I shall call “P.S. 227” and the “Walt Whitman Academy.” This was a vastly better school than P.S. 313. It had its share of kids living in abject misery, but none who ran across desktops or slept on bookshelves. Nor did the teachers there ever feel wholly abandoned at the front of their classrooms.

I was far happier at P.S. 227/Walt Whitman, both with my job and with the craft of writing. I was no longer quite so afraid that literature was without redeeming social value. But I did worry that many kids didn’t seem to appreciate writing in any way. One third of the students in every class would make only token stabs at fulfilling my assignments, and when it came time to prepare the year-end anthology, at least as many would neglect their best pieces in favor of their tritest or most sentimental ones—showing that they hadn’t absorbed any of the aesthetic values I had worked so hard to engrain in them. It would have been easy to dismiss these kids as mere philistines, but I couldn’t do that: first, because if my students weren’t interested in writing, then they wouldn’t want to learn, and I couldn’t do my job; and second, because the children least interested in writing tended to be the ones who most needed help—in every way.

I now understand that much of my inability to get through to these students was simply due to my lack of experience, the narrowness of my literary tastes at the time, and a degree of timidity. But to a very large extent it was also, I have come to believe, a function of the intellectual fashions that have dominated the teaching of literature and writing over the last half century.

For the most part my teaching was based on pedagogical notions that had been forged during the late 1960s and early 1970s by the pioneers at Teachers & Writers, who included Grace Paley, Donald Barthelme, and, especially, Kenneth Koch. During the 70s, Koch’s wise and accessible books about his work in the schools—*Wishes, Lies and Dreams* and *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* among them—revolutionized the way creative writing was taught, both by regular teachers and by members of the burgeoning writers-in-the-schools movement. Koch’s influence on me was particularly strong because I had studied with him when I was an undergraduate at Columbia. Indeed, it had been very much to do for other young

writers what Kenneth Koch had done for me that I had started teaching in the first place.

There has never been any standard Teachers & Writers curriculum. Indeed, the Collaborative has always emphasized the virtues of innovation and of the writer teaching out of his or her own particular vision of literature. Nevertheless, certain notions did become dominant during T&W’s early years, notions that were clearly a product of the era in which the whole writers-in-the-schools movement came into being: that period when modernism shaded into postmodernism, and the New Critics gave way to the Structuralists and Post-Structuralists. This was a time when people were fond of saying “Form *is* content,” and when the hottest literary ideas built insurmountable walls between writers (or their words) and the world. The New Critics, partly wishing to save true art from serving Sunday school teachers and fascist dictators, held that a literary work should be judged without consideration of the author’s intentions or life, or of the work’s effect upon its readers and society. The Post-Structuralists—partly because they believed that, despite the best efforts of the New Critics, art had served dictators and Sunday school teachers all too well—asserted that literary works could not convey the “truth,” or represent “reality,” that the only thing they were about was what they were: language. What was commonly interpreted as “truth” or “realism” in literature was only an elaborate lie that—in most cases, at least—supported the interests of the ruling classes.

Quite naturally the writing ideas (as well as much of the literature) that emerged under the sway of such theories tended to focus on language and poetry, and to emphasize form over content, or at least to see form as the most interesting content. Thus, students were typically asked to write list poems, acrostics, pantoums, or poems in which every line contained a different color and country. Even when writing ideas did refer to content—as when students were asked to write about wishes or dreams—the results were usually praised for the freshness of their language, or their surprises, rather than for the merit of the wishes or the psychological authenticity or evocativeness of the dreams.

Poetry’s popularity in the writers-in-the-schools movement, however, was not simply a matter of literary fashion. Despite the almost universal assumption that poetry is the most difficult and unnatural way of writing, it is, at least in its most elementary varieties, the literary form closest to the verbal constructions (the insults, jokes, anecdotes) children make every day. For example, snaps, an African American form of ritualized insult, even have the same reliance on imagery and the three-part structure with a surprise ending as Japanese haiku—although obviously the two forms aim for very different effects. Compare the following famous haiku with a familiar snap. (Snaps, an oral form, are almost never written down; I have broken this one into lines to make its structure more clear.)

In summer grass
Lie warriors’
Dreams.

—Bashō

You're so fat
you jumped up in the air
and got stuck.

To borrow the old schoolyard witticism: all kids are poets even if they don't know it. Young children may not have the intellectual sophistication to comprehend all of the intricate meditation of much adult poetry, but even before they come to school they are well trained to appreciate the punchy image and the apt metaphor. Writing assignments that play to this strength, by asking children to focus on language or formal structures, almost inevitably produce images, lines, and sometimes whole poems that are the envy of adult poets.

Below is a poem by one of my second grade students. The assignment, purely form-based, could hardly have been simpler: "Start out with one thing—anything—and tell me what is underneath it, then say what it underneath that, and so on until the poem feels finished."

Underneath a ball there are glasses that are brown and blue.
Underneath the glasses there is a gold striped earring.
Underneath the earring there is a devil eating the glasses. The
devil goes, "Hmm humm—Yummy!"
Underneath the devil there is a panther trying to eat the devil.
Underneath the panther there is a girl tiger and a boy lion.
They're kissing.
Underneath the kiss there is a red heart.
Underneath the red heart there is a baby lion and baby tiger
sleeping.
Underneath the sleep they are dreaming of love.

This poem is typical of the best writing inspired by form-based writing assignments. It is full of specific details and surprises, moving with enviable freedom between incompatible categories—from the mundane to the demonic to the cuddly kitsch—while managing to make them feel all of a piece. This poem is also intriguing—at least to adult readers—because it seems metaphorical. Its seven-year-old author, one of the more troubled children in his class, seems to be struggling with the relationship between evil and love, or between kissing and devouring, and at the same time seems torn between his desires to confront his fears and to bury them.

While the author's classmates, no doubt, were affected by the poem's odd imagery, probably none of them—even the young poet himself—could have explained what the images meant or comprehended how the poem might have a secondary content. What is more, had my assignment focused on this content, had I asked the class to write about the relationship between kissing and devouring, for example, the most likely result would have been a classwide writer's block.

I did not avoid discussing the deeper content of student work, however, merely because I wanted to foster lively writing. I was also afraid of getting into what teachers call a "situation." As I have said, this boy was quite troubled. Bringing up the metaphorical implications of his poem in front of his friends might well have embarrassed or disturbed him, and even resulted in some kind of misbehavior. But just as significant is the fact that I too might have been embarrassed or disturbed by the results of a thematic dissection of his poem.

I have often been upset by what I have discovered in class about students' lives. Sometimes, after reading pieces like the ones I quoted from P.S. 313, I have wanted to cry out: "You *are* good! And so is the world! It's not all monsters, and cruel, crazy men! You *can* make a good life—by working hard, by believing in yourself!" Sometimes I actually would say such things, but never without feeling like a sap, or as if I were condescending to my students by failing to respect both their strength and the magnitude of their difficulties. Who was I to tell them how to cope with drunken mothers or brutish step-fathers! What did I know about how to end the plagues of drug addiction and violence that make hells of so many children's lives? It was so much easier just to talk about form and language—to say "What a great image!" or ask "Did you notice how repeated phrases give this poem an exciting rhythm?"

By limiting discussion in this way I not only avoided facing depressing facts about my students' lives, I also preserved my authority as a teacher. This is an important point, one that goes a long way toward providing yet another reason why the academic world has been so willing to place walls between art and life. When it came to rhythm or imagery, I was the master of my subject. No one in the room knew as much as I did. But when I talked about the horrors of cities, or of my students' home lives, I was just another guy struggling with enormous problems that he didn't really understand. My authority was gone—or much of it—and it was harder to justify my standing at the front of the classroom.

This dynamic operates at all levels of education. When I was in college, for example, my Russian literature professor spent a long time telling us that Dostoevsky wrote *Notes from Underground* to refute certain utopian socialist ideas of his era. This information was interesting, and certainly enhanced our understanding of the text. But by restricting his discussion of the book in this way, my professor was also playing it safe. None of us knew remotely as much about Russian philosophy and politics as he did, so he was the clear authority. His position would not have been nearly as secure, however, had he encouraged us to discuss whether Dostoevsky's critique was *correct*, because its correctness depends, not so much on a firm body of fact that the professor knew better than we did, as on political, moral, and religious values that each person can only establish for himself or herself. And, because people tend to be quite passionate when defending their most basic—but ultimately indefensible—values, such a discussion could easily have turned into a "situation."

The problem with playing it safe in this fashion is that Dostoevsky did not write his book to be an example of nineteenth century Russian social thought (or of the short novel, or of early existentialism, or of any of the other rubrics under which the book is normally discussed). He wanted to stimulate his readers, to get them arguing (at least within their own minds) about politics, religion, human nature, and a host of other issues. And it is for just such stimulation that readers come to his books—and to all books. By not encouraging this process, by not connecting books to students' dearest concerns and most personal experiences, professors may be preserving

classroom order, but they are also neglecting the most fundamental needs of readers and writers—needs that are literature’s whole reason for existence.

I now realize that I was guilty of just this sort of neglect in my own teaching. Young children, perhaps, are not ready to explore the more ominous subtexts of their work, but seventh and eighth graders definitely are. They are standing on the verge of one of the most exciting and dangerous times of their lives, a time when they might make big mistakes from which they will never recover. They are desperate to know how to be good and strong and loved and independent. They are desperate to understand the world, and especially those parts of it that most frighten them. Writing that does not address these urgent needs, writing that seems to be only verbal pyrotechnics, or that is evaluated only by abstractions such as “freshness” or “originality,” rather than by how well it fosters understanding of things that matter—such writing can easily seem beside the point to many students. And it is hard for them to imagine why they—or anyone—should bother with it.

3.

What I'm about to write is true. It happened June 4, 1990. It was about 11:00 P.M. and me and my father was coming from parking the car. My father was singing to me and as we went in the building I asked him for fifty dollars. He asked me for what and then I told for some sneakers so he gave it to me, I was real happy but as we went up the stairs I saw someone come in the building, I was still happy so I just looked at him right away because I was counting the money and then it happened, a gunshot ran off and I just ducked, my mother came out, she was screaming to come in, I ran in the house, my mother asked me where's my father, I was saying I don't know, I don't know, then that's when I realized that my father has gotten shot, I went crazy, I was going wild, my brother got my father's gun from the house looking for someone that killed my father, I couldn't believe it until like a month later, I don't know where the world is going to but if it keeps on like this, the world is going to end.

—A Walt Whitman Academy Student

It took a long time for me to understand that there was anything wrong with the way I was teaching, partly because the form-based assignments that dominated my curriculum had undeniable strengths (my students produced many wonderful poems) and partly because I was just a novice, afraid to depart from the way I myself had been taught. Thus my first response to my doubt that I was giving my students what they really needed was to try to find a way of convincing myself—and them—that I was giving them what they needed most.

One day, as I contemplated my curriculum, I was struck by a surprising coherence among what I had always thought of as largely independent aesthetic principles. All of the assignments I gave my students encouraged them to be playful and to experiment. I was also constantly telling them to avoid clichés and stereotypes, to pay attention to their own feelings and experiences, to use specific details, and to write from specific points of view. In each of these ways, I realized, what I was really doing was encouraging my students to explore and celebrate

their individuality. I was telling them that what mattered most about them was how they differed from one another. By writing down their own specific observations, experiences, and fantasies, they were expressing their own unique visions of the world, and thus, helping readers to see the world in a new way, which is one of literature’s most vital functions.

Since I knew that many of my students didn’t think they had much cause to celebrate themselves or their differences, I believed—and still do—that they had a lot to gain from such aesthetic principles, as well as from the literature that inspired them. The problem was that no matter how many times I said “See, nobody else but you could have written this,” or “Don’t tell your readers what they already know; tell them what only you know,” no matter how vehemently I disparaged clichés and praised experimentation and precise, honest observation, I don’t think that a single one of my students took my proselytizing to heart. To them it was just more irrelevant teacher stuff, more of that naive enthusiasm for which poets have so often been mocked in popular culture. And I never saw the slightest sign that all of my chatter about “difference” and “individuality” made those kids who already had a taste for poetry like it any better, or that it made those who couldn’t care less about writing any more interested.

Then one Sunday morning, after I had been working at P.S 227/Walt Whitman for about three years, I came upon a review of a book about the 1986 murder of Yusuf Hawkins in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. According to the review, the series of events that led to Hawkins’s death began with an exchange of threats. When Gina Feliciano invited her Bensonhurst neighbor, sixteen-year-old Keith Mondello, to her seventeenth birthday party, he told her that if any of her “nigger” and “spic” friends came to the party, there would be “trouble.” Feliciano countered that he’d better watch out because her friends would “get” him. Hawkins, who was African American and also sixteen, didn’t know Feliciano. He came to Bensonhurst on the night of her party to look at a used car, and had the bad luck to run smack into the crowd of knife- and bat-wielding young men that Mondello had gathered in front of Feliciano’s building. Realizing that Hawkins was not attending the party, Mondello was about to let him go when another neighborhood teenager, Joey Fama, dressed all in white and carrying a silver gun, plunged through the crowd and shot Hawkins in the head just as he was taking a bite from a Mars bar.

As soon as I saw the review, I thought that the story, which contained violence, racism, and a touch of sex, would fascinate my middle school students. Then, all at once it occurred to me (the moment has a mystical radiance in my memory) that I could have my students spend several weeks exploring the tragic incidents at Bensonhurst by writing monologues and dialogues as they might have been spoken by all the people involved.

This assignment diverged from the curriculum I had mostly been relying on by focusing on content rather than form or language. I would, indeed, be asking my students to write in specific forms (monologues, dialogues) but only as a means toward the more central goals of exploring and re-creating real events and lives. This assignment also ran a much higher than

normal risk of creating a “situation.” Since I am white and almost all of my students were either black or Latino, I worried that they might be uneasy or dismissive when I began to talk about racial hatred and violence, and that they would be too angry at the white mob to write in the voices of any of its members. And finally, this assignment differed from any I had used previously by emphasizing that aspect of writing that Roland Barthes and many other postmodernists considered most illusory: its capacity to convey “reality.”

In the past I had begun fiction classes by writing FICTION = LIES on the blackboard—partly to make the distinction between fiction and nonfiction, but mostly so that my terribly self-conscious adolescent students could feel free, under the pretense that they were lying, to write honestly about those things that mattered most to them, including their own experiences. On the first day of the Bensonhurst assignment, however, I added a third element to the equation: FICTION = LIES = TRUTH. I told my students that they were going to use their imaginations to discover the truth about Yusuf Hawkins’s murder. Of course they could not write the literal truth of what happened at Bensonhurst—they didn’t know it. But if they imagined the various characters and situations thoroughly enough, and if they wrote realistically enough, their work would contain a different sort of truth: they would show how such tragic events actually can come to pass, and enable readers to experience many of the emotions people caught up in such situations actually do feel.

I gave the class a sheet outlining who had done what in Bensonhurst, and told the students to choose one person and write in that person’s voice, telling his or her own version of the events. Here, with their original grammar and spelling intact, are two examples: the first in Yusuf Hawkins’s voice; and the second in Joey Fama’s:

I was mad happy when I got my license yesterday. I was even happier when my cousin showed me the newspaper ad. Money that car looked mad dope, and it was just \$3,000 bucks too. I’d been saving up for three months, as soon as I got some of my friends went to get the car, it was somewhere out in Bensonhurst, I’ve never been out that way but my moms told me how to find my way around. I was out lookin’ for the place in the ad for an hour or two, it was getting dark out, when we saw guys up ahead they had bats and shit. When I saw that they was headin’ our way I was about to be outta out in a second they was around us, they started talkin’ shit like “What you niggers doin’ here” and shit like that. I held out the ad one of them said somethin’ about us not bein’ somebody or somethin’ like that, when one of the punks in the bunch stepped up like he was gonna hit me or somethin’, I was about to pop that motherfucker in the head, when someone with a shiny .38 said somethin’ about not hittin’ me and then blew me inna head, I felt somethin’ movin’ in my head then I tasted some chocolate in my mouth.

My name is “Joey Fama” I’m real CLEAN GUY! I can’t STAND Dirt! I was hit by some dirty car when I was 3 and got brain damage. I always wash my hands and where white clothes. I don’t like anything that has anything to do with dirt! I hate the smell, the color, the feeling and even the look of dirt! I killed this guy named “Yusuf.” I had a right to kill Yusuf! He’s ugly, a

baby and worst of all he’s BLACK! Anyway, what’s the use of him being alive? He’s a baby! He’s walking in the street with two ugly niggers, looking for some address! Hey, he’s better off in Heaven! In Heaven he does not have to worry about anything or get killed ever again! Anyway, there is always a time to dye. But now Yusuf does not have to wait that long.

If my students had been confused about what sort of truth I was after when they first started writing, they weren’t once they heard these two pieces and some of the others. While I make no grand claims regarding the literary merits of these monologues, the students were struck immediately by how vividly the first conveyed Hawkins’s youthful enthusiasm and then his growing wariness as he approached the moment of his death; and by the way the second conveyed Joey Fama’s nastiness and perverse, childlike reasoning. Hearing these two pieces one after the other, the students became aware of a different sort of truth—the moral truth of how evil it was that so happy and ordinary a young man as Hawkins should be destroyed by Fama’s sick irrationality.

I discovered another advantage of having made truth the ultimate goal of these fictions when I wrote comments on students’ papers. Instead of saying, “Avoid clichés!” or “Use details!” as I always had in the past, I could now say, “This doesn’t feel real. I don’t think you’ve looked carefully enough at this. Give me more information! I want to know the truth!” Not only did students understand these comments much more clearly, but looking for the truth and getting it down on paper made them feel important—far more so than when I had only praised them for their individuality. They no longer saw themselves as merely fulfilling a school assignment. Instead, they felt they were producing a work of art that had the power to change minds, and perhaps, in a small way, the world. To encourage this feeling, I told the students I would edit the best of the pieces into a play that some of them could perform in front of a citywide audience at Teachers & Writers Collaborative’s twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, which was coming up that spring.

Thrilled by what they had already done, and by what might yet happen, my students wrote with more concentration than I had ever seen before, and with an enthusiasm that hardly diminished during the whole six weeks it took to write enough monologues and dialogues to cover all the major events of Bensonhurst.

It was hard going at times. I found myself in plenty of “situations.” I got into long arguments about who was to blame for Hawkins’s death. To my astonishment, the vast majority of students believed that the main responsibility lay, not with Keith Mondello or Joey Fama, but with Gina Feliciano. As these students saw it, Mondello’s hostility toward blacks and Latinos was perfectly justified in this racially tense city, as was his gathering of a gang for protection. Joey Fama may have been hotheaded or cold-blooded, but the students saw nothing unnatural about a confrontation ending with a shooting, and didn’t hold him responsible. Some blamed Gina Feliciano simply for having invited Keith Mondello to her party. Some blamed her for issuing the first explicit threat when she told him that her friends would “get” him. Either way, hers was the action they saw as making Hawkins’s death inevitable. And

nothing I could say about the boys' independence of will or their excessive brutality, or about the sexism of always blaming the woman, could budge the class from this conviction.

We also talked endlessly about why New York was so violent (a vocal faction blamed it on Adam and Eve) and about what could be done to end the violence. We talked about drugs and guns, class and race, and even about the merits of turning the other cheek. ("That's wack!" was the dominant response.) After one class, during which I had confessed that I did not own a gun, a boy took me aside and, shaking his head, told me in so many words that I was a nice man but very stupid, and that he would be happy to get me a .45. Another time, at the end of a piece one girl wrote about a violent gang, she added a note intended, if not specifically for me, at least for pathetic innocents like me: "[T]hat's how life really is, because I know people that are like that so watch your back I tell you from experience."

In the end, my students came to know me better and to trust me. And with increasing frequency they began to write or tell me about their own experiences of violence. They told me about friends and relatives whom they had seen shot down. They told me about mothers who had committed suicide, sisters who had been killed by their husbands, brothers who had been killed by gangs. One time I asked a class how many of them knew someone who had been shot—they all raised their hands. I also heard many stories of abusive parents, of fathers who had gone to jail and of mothers who were drug addicts. I don't know if any students were helped by the generic wisdom I uttered after hearing such stories, but I do know that simply talking about these things created a bond between us that had never been there before.

The hardest "situations" to deal with were those caused by the intrusion of the outside world into the classroom. Some of these intrusions were impersonal: a crucial rehearsal just before the performance of the Bensonhurst play was canceled on that odd day after the L.A. riots in 1992, when the whole of New York City was gripped by the utterly erroneous conviction that it too had broken out in looting and mayhem. But more often the intrusions were decidedly personal: the only white girl in the eighth grade was beaten viciously by two of her classmates and one of the actors missed a month of school because her mother had to go into an alcohol rehab clinic. Another girl missed several rehearsals when she ran away from a battered women's shelter; she had been put there after her mother had beaten her so badly that for months afterward she vomited pus and suffered head and liver pains.

There were many, many days when I thought the play simply wouldn't happen, because the students were too wild, too troubled, or were missing too many rehearsals, or because they were so convinced that they weren't good enough to succeed as actors, or, worst of all, because they thought they didn't even deserve to succeed. But in the end, although we lost a performer or two along the way, the play did go on, and when it was over eight young actors blinked in astonished pride at the long applause that rose from their audience.

Although for a long while afterward I went around feeling as if I were living out the end of a Hollywood teacher movie, the main lesson I learned from the Bensonhurst play was how

those movies lie when they imply that one teacher, one good learning experience, or anything short of a prodigious national effort can even begin to diminish the interlocking crises in city schools and their neighborhoods. But it is true, nonetheless, that after that performance the grades and the social status of the eight student actors went up substantially, and that the whole school was excited both about working on a new play, and about writing in general. I, also, never had another moment of doubt about the merit of the craft I both practiced and tried to teach to my students.

4.

*Sur la côte du Texas
Entre Mobile et Galveston il y a
Un grand jardin tout plein de roses
Il contient aussi une villa
Qui est une grande rose*

*(On the coast of Texas
Between Mobile and Galveston there is
A big garden filled with roses
It also contains a villa
That is a big rose)*

—From "Annie" by Guillaume Apollinaire

For a while my new faith in the validity of writing was actually a form of bad faith. I became a zealot for realism, although, through it all, I retained a decided respect for "unrealists" like Kafka, whose visions of modern life seem all too accurate. Affected partly by my students' enthusiasm for the play but more by the intimate knowledge I had gained of their personal struggles, I became convinced that the only art that matters is that which helps us understand ourselves and our world more completely, and that the highest art is that which heightens our awareness of the world's evil and inspires us to combat it. Writing that is only "about" its existence as language, or that strives only to be new or surprising or beautiful, seemed as trivial a literary endeavor as the most unabashed romance novel.

The height of this bad faith came one night when I was watching some dances by Merce Cunningham. The first thing I noticed was that everyone in the theater was white and—to judge from their clothes and accents—upper middle to just plain upper class. When the performance began, the dancers moved in odd, random-seeming ways to equally random-seeming sounds broadcast from speakers all over the theater. It was possible to impose a narrative on what I saw and heard—that is, to give it content. The longer I watched, however, the more I began to feel that such imposed narratives were just that: impositions. It seemed to me that Cunningham was interested in nothing more than the celebration of form, and that his dances provided no redeeming insights into life.

I fulminated silently as I watched, telling myself that this work was just for people so well padded by luxury that all they needed from art was confirmation of their social superiority. But, even as I became more and more convinced of my own moral superiority, I began to feel that something was going

awry. The quirky unpredictability of the dances was working a sort of spell on me—and the longer I submitted to it, the happier I became. By the time I walked out onto the street, I felt refreshed, stimulated, and richly alive. I didn't know what to make of my peculiar ambivalence to the dances, and for a long time I didn't make anything of it at all. Once again, it took my students to finally make me face my hypocrisy.

After the Bensonhurst play, I decided to go back to teaching poetry. For my first assignment, I read my students a section from Whitman's "Song of Myself" that makes nineteenth-century New York seem as busy and full of contrasts as the city is today. I asked my students to think of the many contrasting scenes they had witnessed on the streets—the beautiful and the hideous, the pathetic and the funny—and then to catalogue them as Whitman had. To my utter astonishment, there was almost no contrast in the catalogues my students produced. Their view of New York was unrelentingly grim, a long parade of filth, corruption, and fear. (As one student put it: "The streets are just a whole bunch of garbage.") Reading these pieces aloud in class was, to say the least, a downer. Nobody talked, nobody wanted to work on them any more. And it became obvious to me that the time had come for a change. We all needed relief.

I decided to take my students as far from the streets as I possibly could, and, to that end, employed a tried-and-true assignment dating from the earliest days of the writers-in-the-schools movement. I gave my students copies of several poems by Guillaume Apollinaire in the original French and told them to "translate" the poems into English using words that looked or sounded like the French. One seventh grade girl wrote the following poem, inspired by Apollinaire's "Annie":

Sir, is your wife from Texas?
Enter my gas station.
When did you buy your roses?
I will eat a lot of vanilla.
Quiet, my roses are sleeping.

You females are ugly.
Dance with me and I will love you.
You make my roots bean up.
No, I can't take any more of you.

Come, you ugly female, I want you.
Show me your buttons and the world.
I am going to make a cake.
I'll be a good person if you come home.

I love this poem. I love its joyful inconsequentiality, spiced by odd, ominous assertions like, "Come, you ugly female, I want you," and, "I'll be a good person if you come home." But, more important, my students loved the poem too—and the many others like it they produced that day—as they had rarely loved similarly odd and playful writing before the Bensonhurst play. When I read the poems aloud, they listened carefully, they laughed, and they interrupted me with exclamations of "That was good!" and "Who did that?" It was early spring. In my memory, the classroom is filled with light and soft breezes.

That was the day I learned that, as essential as it may be to struggle against suffering and injustice with every available weapon, including art, it makes no sense to disparage writing that only makes us happy, since the propagation of happiness is, in fact, the ultimate goal of our struggle. And that was also the day I learned that art that seems only to be "about" form, that refuses to "make sense" or convey "truth," can advance our struggle, not by holding a lens up to the world, but by its example.

In my students' "translations" or Merce Cunningham's dances, we see the imagination following only its own impulses and taking pleasure simply from its own operation. In such art, utterly unconstrained by reality, fact, truth, and morality, the imagination—and the human spirit—enjoy something like perfect freedom. And that is why this art *matters*—to my students and to everybody—and why it feels so good.



PLUGS

Another account of a teacher finding ways to connect writing and reading with city students' experience is Chicago teacher Gregory Michie's *Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students*. Among the lively and unsentimental sketches of the students (and examples of their writing) are descriptions of projects such as analyzing daytime television shows, making a recording of Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, and inviting her to visit the school. The book is published by Teachers College Press (1234 Amsterdam Ave., New York, NY 10027, Tel 212-678-3929), and costs \$19.95.

Youth Speaks NY, a joint project of Youth Speaks SF and Teachers & Writers Collaborative, brings New York City teenagers together through the written and spoken word. Youth Speaks offers free, year-round after-school writing and slam poetry workshops, youth performance events, and publishing opportunities. Upcoming events include: "Bringing the Noise," a youth poetry, spoken word, and hip-hop tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King on January 23, 2001 at the American Museum of Natural History, 10:30 A.M.–3:30 P.M.; and the Youth Speaks annual Teen Poetry Slam in March 2001 (details TBA). For more information, contact Jen Weiss at (212) 691-6590, ext. 24, or jenweiss98@yahoo.com. Youth Speaks's Web site is at www.youthspeaks.org.

Nexus Poems

by Brandon Cesmat

THE POET SIMON ORTIZ AND I WERE DRIVING UP the Cuca Grande along the bottom of Palomar Mountain where a row of pomegranate bushes stands as a windbreak for an avocado grove. Simon was saying how much he liked avocados. I told him I do too, but I also like pomegranates.

“Too much work to eat,” Simon said.

As we drove on, I told him how, when I was a boy, my walk home from school took me past pomegranate bushes that no one ever picked, probably because of the work it took to peel the fruit. My mom forbade me from eating pomegranates because they stained my clothes, so I would take one before it rotted, hide in the creek, take off my shirt, peel the fruit and eat it. I liked the look of the berries catching light as much as I liked the taste. Later, I would scour the stickiness off my hands with sand. I told Simon that my afternoons with pomegranates made me appreciate Neruda’s lines, “And what did the rubies say / standing before the juice of pomegranates?”

“Good poem.” Simon nodded. “Still too much work.”

Some cases can’t be made. On Cuca Grande that day, I didn’t have the poetry to make the case for pomegranates, but because of the work I was doing at the time, I kept looking for a way to persuade with poetry.

At the time I was working as an investigator for a law firm. My job was to determine what facts could be established in cases. Whether the attorneys were writing a letter to opposing counsel or something the judge would eventually read, they wanted to know about the connection between the law and the specific facts of a case. “How strong is the nexus?” they would ask; in other words, do the facts of the case lead from a statute to a specific violation of the law?

The nexus was like the bridge that a jury would walk across. Was it strong? Wobbly? Would someone have to make a leap?

I drafted a couple of poems about what I liked about pomegranates, but it wasn’t until I threw in the word *grenadine* that I had something I wanted to show anyone.

Pomegranates

In the windbreak along the avocado grove,
pomegranates brush against the coyote’s fur,
forgotten even by him as he trots through the bushes
and puts his paws on the low limbs to reach the lobes of
golden green.

BRANDON CESMAT teaches literature, writing, and film studies at Cal State San Marco and is Area Coordinator for San Diego County for California Poets in the Schools. He performs with the group Drought Boy, and his writing appears in *Weber Studies*, *Poetry Flash*, *California Quarterly*, and *ONTHEBUS*. His Web page is www.csusm.edu/profe.

The red globes not as shiny as Christmas bulbs.
Their peels split in ecstasy to show hundreds of bloody
teeth.

Ah, they stain the Santa Ana winds.

Don’t deny the juice and leave the
pomegranates on the branches for crows,
or order a mai tai or tequila sunrise
and watch the bartender pour in grenadine ribbons.

Taste the juice as it slides from the fiery seed.
Let your mouth gape with the bloody rain from its kiss.

In this case, *grenadine* was the nexus; most people only encounter pomegranates in the form of grenadine. My poem used this connection for the same reason a legal brief introduces facts: to persuade the reader. Rather than link the reader to my memories of pomegranates, I tried to use images that a pomegranate would remember, as if to let the pomegranate make its own case to the reader.

While still working for the law firm, I started teaching as part of California Poets in the Schools (CPITS) in the Border Voices Poetry Project. The nexus poems assignment seemed to work with students when I introduced it after lessons on image, metaphor, memory, and surrealism. My plan was for students to bring together everything they had learned, in a poem that used a nexus to make an argument.

When I teach nexus poems, after reading my poem “Pomegranates,” the students and I talk about description and figurative language. With elementary school classes, I use a trick I learned from poet Jack Grapes. Grapes will say something like, “There’s a big college word for when you use one word to talk about something else. For example, when the bartender pours in the grenadine syrup we can call it ‘ribbons’ because it looks like ribbons, even though there aren’t really any ribbons in the glass. But you don’t have to know this college word.”

The students wait about three beats before someone asks, “What’s the word?”

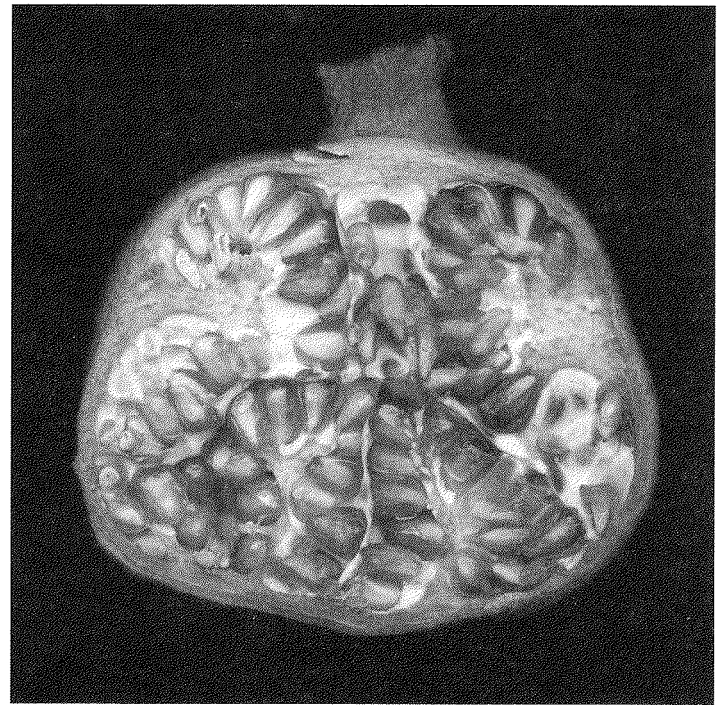
“You don’t need it yet, do you?”

“Tell us.”

“OK, it’s called ‘metaphor.’”

Usually, the teacher has already taught them the concept of metaphor, and when the students tell me so, I tell them their teacher is giving them the good stuff.

After we discuss “Pomegranates,” I tell the students that Aristotle said that making metaphors is a sign of genius: the ability to recognize the similarity between apparently dissimilar things. I tell them I want them to be geniuses; I want them to show an unappreciated thing (like a pomegranate) at its



origins or genesis, and then to show that thing where most people usually encounter it.

I tell the students, “Choose a thing that interests you, but that the rest of us might take for granted. Pay attention to it. Notice its details with your senses and write those down. Then ask what the thing might remember. Ask: Where does it come from? What does it remember about where it came from? Write that down. Try for twelve to fifteen lines.” Once they are writing, I ask the students to bring the images back to where the reader would find the thing and make metaphors along the way. I also give them one other important instruction: if the writing goes its own way, they should ignore what I’ve said.

Because I meet with students for five one-hour workshops, we don’t have a lot of time for research. We use observation and whatever memories we can recall during the workshop. Rachel Paarman, a fourth grader, wrote “Old Nail” in about twenty minutes on the fifth day of the residency. That day I had brought a bucket of junk from home. If students didn’t have something they wanted to write about, I gave them each an object from the bucket. I gave Rachel a rusty nail.

Old Nail

It feels sharp and cold in my hand.
Made in a factory where machines clash and clang.
Burned in fire,
then bellows like the wind,
like a lion’s roar, came and blew it out,
the fire like a day in Hell, burning, raving, killing.
Oh, rusty, worn nail!
You held up palaces, hotels, buildings.
Now you sit in my hand, silent, still,
quiet like Death Valley.
Oh nail, like a wise old man, then forgotten like a moment,
at last lost like a memory.

Rachel had been in my poetry workshops since she was in second grade. She came from a family of readers, and she would usually volunteer to read her work aloud after the writing session, but after the Nexus exercise, she didn’t. When I read her poem later that afternoon, I thought it was one of her best, so I made a photocopy of it and arranged a conference. At first, Rachel denied having written the poem. I pointed to her name. “But I don’t cuss,” she said. I recognized her denial from somewhere.

“I know you wouldn’t cuss,” I said. I pointed to *like* and told her she had made a simile. “What’s the weather like in Hell?”

“Hot,” Rachel said.

“Is there any place hotter?”

“No.”

“So you picked the hottest place you could think of?”

Rachel nodded, but I could see that she still was wrestling with where her writing had taken her. “It started out to be about my grampa who has an old barn with lots of rusted nails. I don’t know how I wrote that word.”

I offered to take the word out. Rachel looked only half-relieved. She asked, “Do you think it will ruin the the poem?” I told her the truth, that the poem was about more than Hell—that I really liked the way it tricked me into remembering the forgotten old man—but that the poem probably made a clearer image with the word. Rachel’s poem went on to win first prize in the Elementary-School Division at the Border Voices Poetry Fair.

With high school classes I don’t take in my junk bucket, but I still play around with the word *nexus*. I tell them it’s a big word I hauled over from Cal State San Marcos. Otherwise, I present the lesson a little differently. I read the model poem and then show it to them on an overhead transparency. We review

previous workshops about metaphor and euphony, and eventually I show them the nexus between where something originates and where people use it.

“Consider all the things around you,” I’ll say. “The bricks in the wall, the glass in the window, the chalk marks on the board. Choose something that interests you, and ask, ‘Where did this come from?’ See if you can trace it back to its origins. What are some of the plants, birds, animals, or people from the place the thing you’re writing about comes from?”

I move around the room, and if I see someone with a blank page, I ask them if they have something unappreciated—like a pomegranate—in mind. If they say no, I ask them, “If you were to write about something, what would it be?” Whatever their first impulse is, I tell them, “Go with that.”

Once they’ve established the origins, I ask the students to show the object where it is usually seen. After about sixteen or seventeen minutes, I ask them to write a couple of lines that create the nexus.

High school students vary the exercise in creative ways. Paula Encarnacao was a sophomore at Scripps Ranch High when she wrote “Samba, Samba”:

Samba, Samba

It was born in a dirty favela shack
crowded next to another,
outside a Brazilian city
on one of those hills that bears no name,
fathered by the hands of an unknown drunk
and baptized by child’s tears,
then stolen from an unsung musician and
the river of poverty took it away.

Upon your hands this song now lays
pleading to drum its unfamiliar beats,
dying to tell the sufferings of its people.
As it sits upon your unknowing hands,
don’t play its sacred rhymes once or twice,
corrupting it as if it were one of your foreign songs,
for it was made to tell the common story of a poor man’s life
through a sambista’s chanting voice.

Of course, scientists as well look for nexuses. In an English class comprised primarily of AP Science seniors at Scripps Ranch High, Alison Gabriel wrote a poem that drew on her knowledge of the process that creates diamonds:

Diamonds

It was molded in the molten mother.
It was under the world above.
It gleams shinier than light,
its walls reflecting the rainbow.
The hot, sweaty, unforgiving chamber.
Oh, the pressure of the world’s weight.

I don’t want you just to wear it.
I don’t want you just to flaunt it.
I want you to travel below
where the chamber walls steam, and the diamonds mold.
I want you to experience far from society.
I want you to nurture your sight of molten mother,
like a protégé.

I met with Paula and Alison to give them some suggestions for revision. Laura Rose Dutkiewicz’s “The Worn Sky,” however, was one of those rare poems that came out whole:

The Worn Sky

The full electric-blue moon
lights the field below.
The bowls of cotton shine
like blinding stars on the earth.
I stand amidst the radiance,
my midnight-blue jeans up-lit by the ground,
iridescence shimmers up my new skin.

The fields continue to flow and wave into mid-day
when the sun burns the cotton dusty brown.
The dirty cream strings worn from the hem of my jeans
stroke my leathery feet as
they slide along the dusty clay of the earth.
I am wearing the old and used cotton blue sky.



The Poetry Society of America announces the Louise Louis/Emily F. Bourne Student Poetry Award. A \$250 prize will be awarded for the best unpublished poem by a U.S. student in grades 9–12. For guidelines, high school students or teachers should send a self-addressed stamped envelope to Poetry Society of America Awards, 15 Gramercy Park South, New York, NY, 10003, or visit the PSA website at www.poetrysociety.org.

Writers Guild of America East’s Short-Radio Drama committee and Teachers & Writers Collaborative’s Anything Goes! radio series announce the first annual Big Apple College/School Short Radio Drama festival. Students and teachers from all colleges or schools in the U.S. are invited to submit short radio dramas of “broadcast quality” on the theme, “American as Apple Pie—Aspects of American Culture.” Those selected will be aired on WNYE-FM in Fall 2001. Entries must be on digital DAT or compact disc. For an application or more information, contact Irwin Gonshak, Chair, WGAE Short Radio Drama Committee, 555 W. 57th St., New York, NY 10019 (e-mail: igonshak@aol.com).

Cubism in the Classroom

by Robin Messing

MANY YEARS AGO, I SAT THROUGH WEEKS OF life-changing lectures on William Carlos Williams by Allen Ginsberg. In addition to having the joy of being in Allen's presence and of being privy to his scholarly brilliance, I also had an idea. In the course of the lectures, which covered Williams's visual approach to poetry, his associations with painters, and his circle of imagist writers, I came to see how I might connect my interests in art and poetry, both in my own work and in my teaching.

My notion was to teach children to write poetry the way the cubists made art, by connecting cubist portraits with series poems. I've taught this drawing-and-writing lesson several times over the years, and here's how I do it.

I begin by passing out photocopies and art books of cubist portraits. Often, the students laugh and are bewildered, but they're also intensely interested in the color and style. I explain that after photography came along in the nineteenth century, Picasso and other cubist painters saw no need to paint in a "realistic" style anymore. The cubists wanted to show objects from many changing viewpoints at once, playing on our visual experience of how things exist in space. As I say this, I let the students see me from different perspectives—turning to the right and left, sitting and standing, walking, speaking and staying silent, gesturing and unmoving, etc. I explain that, influenced by African masks and sculpture, with their stylized, flat geometric shapes, Picasso created paintings that break up objects into simplified geometric parts and then overlap several points of view on the flat canvas. The object was to present an experience of the subject rather than any one view of it. I use examples of Picasso portraits such as *Weeping Woman* or *Three Masked Musicians* to show different perspectives. The head of the musician in the middle of the latter painting faces forward, but the legs are painted as if he is sitting sideways, for instance. I review geometric shapes, and the students and I look for them in the figures in the paintings—triangles, circles, ovals, rectangles. I make the kids feel their own faces so they can experience, in a tactile way, the shapes of their heads, noses, ears, eyes, lips, eyebrows—as ovals, triangles, curved shapes. Then, as I give them drawing paper, pencils, crayons, craypas, colored pencils, I ask the students to draw self-portraits in a cubist style, without looking in a mirror. (I remind them that the nose may appear to be a front view while the ear might be drawn as we would see it from the side.)

I tell the students that in cubist portraits, color reveals feeling rather than reality. For example, the *Weeping Woman's*

hands are green, as is part of her face; another part of her face is yellow. "What feeling might the green convey?" I ask. "Do two colors convey more than one mood?" I hint to the students that the background of their portraits may be abstract lines and colors, or representations of objects that express who they are.

Some students feel uncomfortable with drawing; for them, breaking up the image is a further complication. When students don't know where to begin, I stand in front of them and pivot in a circle to show how the view of my face keeps changing from full view to profile to rear view, and so forth. I tell them to imagine parts of all those positions laid out on a piece of paper. Another approach to help students who are stuck is to suggest that they think of the page as a surface that can be broken up into smaller rectangles, each of which can contain a different point of view. Another thing to suggest is to draw the portrait in the ordinary way, and then to erase areas, simplifying shapes, and changing their angles and positions. (I adapted much of this from an out-of-print issue of *Scholastic Art*.)

After the students finish their drawings, we begin the writing part of the project. I begin by explaining that early 20th-century poets, inspired by the cubists, invented a form, the series poem, to look at one subject from different points of view in the same work. A classic example is "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens. Other examples I use are "Solitude" by Tomas Tranströmer and "Three" by Gregory Corso. More challenging series poems are William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* and Theodore Roethke's "The Lost Son." Many writers have used this technique, and of course you can use any poet whose work appeals to you and is appropriate for your students. (I would add here that I wouldn't assign this kind of project before the students have had some experience with poetry. Students need to know about line breaks and stanzas, metaphor, simile, repetition, alliteration, etc.)

I often begin by writing Corso's "Three" on the board, since it is simple, short, and almost as stylized and flat as the cubist paintings.

Three

1

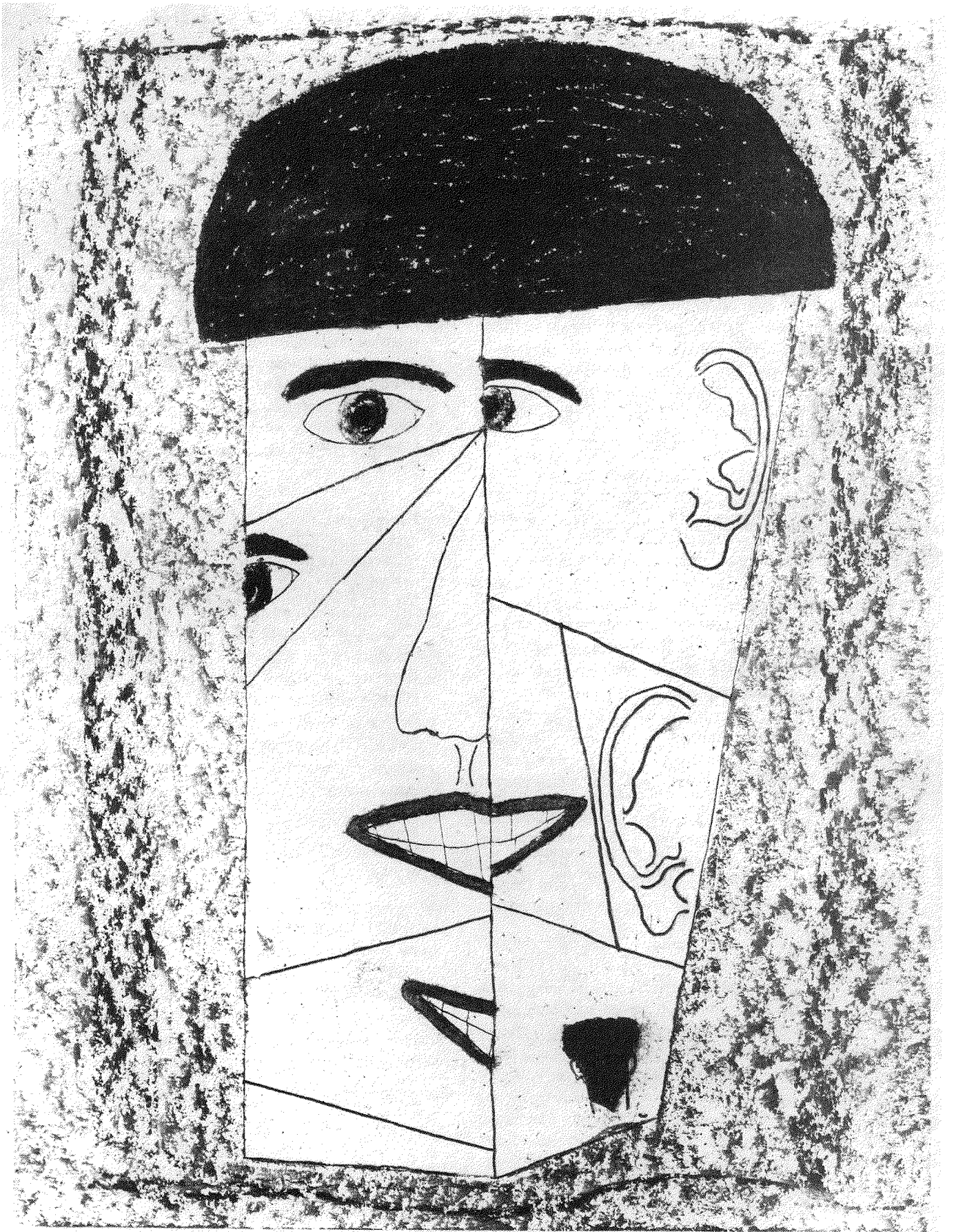
The streetsinger is sick
crouched in the doorway holding his heart

One less song in the noisy night.

2

Outside the wall
the aged gardener plants his shears
A new young man
has come to snip the hedge

ROBIN MESSING is a literacy staff developer in District 15, Brooklyn, New York. She is currently working on a novel.



Death weeps because Death is human
 spending all day in a movie when a child dies.

Corso's poem creates three views of loss. Each section gives us another perspective, not unlike the different perspectives in the portraits the students have just made.

Then we read the other series poems—I hand out photocopies for students to follow along as we read (and to refer to when they begin to write). I reinforce the idea that each poem is one work on one subject, like a portrait or still life, broken up into parts and laid on the paper (the flat plane).

Finally, I have the students write self-portraits in the form of series poems. In the course of their poems, they will see many views of themselves at once, I tell them. We make a list on the board of some things they might include: what they look like, what gives them different moods, what other people say and think about them, what they do, where they live, what people are in their lives. I ask for one-line or one-stanza examples of each of these categories. I tell the students that since they'll be trying to provide different views at once, it's OK to move back and forth between first and third person. I ask them to make their poems as visual as possible—like paintings, with clear descriptions, shapes, and colors. The poems below were written by middle school students in a gifted and talented program.

Ten Ways I View Myself

I

The field large and green,
 I, a small dot,
 slowly move across it

II

A mass of children,
 I, like a droplet in a river

III

All is silent,
 nothing moves,
 except I,
 across the floor

IV

Thump! an apple falls
 Thump! another
 I climb the tree higher

V

I alone grip the bat,
 the ball soars,
 I swing as hard as I can,
 Strike 3

VI

The leaves are swaying
 The water is rippling,
 I am dancing

VII

The world is a blur,
 I run,
 landscapes fly by,
 I run faster

VIII

The willow is weeping,
 I, under it, am sad

IX

The wind swirls,
 I am caught by it and,
 am part of its dance

X

The lake of colors,
 I am a tint,
 help make it

—*Won Chai*

Myself

I

I see a girl
 she is big
 yet fragile
 a piece of paper

II

Her face is a machine
 no feeling or
 smiles
 inside
 a jungle
 tornado

III

Hair as black as ink
 shiny a waxed floor
 tangly
 a bird's nest
 her face
 white as egg yolk
 smooth as marbles

IV

Her eyebrows
 neat
 specked with a few
 unwanted hairs
 like ants at a picnic

V

Her eyes
 pupils of the cat
 colorful
 mysterious

War!
 claws scratch
 paws hit
 silence
 kittens again
 at play

VI

her lashes
 curlier than a pig's tail
 thin as a needle

VII

Her nose
 round
 the moon
 a dome

her upper lip
 two hills
 meeting the flat ground
 with a pit at the bottom

VIII

I see a quiet girl
 a different life form
 from the rest

I see
 an insecure person
 depending on someone
 like dogs and owners

IX

I see my brother
 a lion
 I
 a jaguar

X

I see
 hands pushing
 her back
 she pushes
 hands vanish
 paths form

XI

I am
 a shell
 pretty outside
 hidden inside
 friendly
 but bossy
 quiet
 yet loud
 shy
 though nosy.

—*Anna Cheung*

Q&A: Writing and Music

by Daniel Kane, with
David Hollander

For the past several years, David Hollander has led a poetry writing workshop at P.S. 107 in Flushing, Queens, in which he uses classical music to help foster creative thinking and writing. The program is a collaboration between Teachers & Writers, Carnegie Hall, and District 25.

DANIEL KANE: Why bring music into a writing classroom?

DAVID HOLLANDER: I think that anything you can do in a classroom to excite students, or to encourage them to make connections that are outside their ordinary classwork, makes the learning process more dynamic. My work at P.S. 107 basically combines poetry writing with an odd form of classical music appreciation. In effect, the students are more excited about both parts of the project (the music and the writing) than they would otherwise be about either.

DK: What kinds of links do you make?

DH: There are two basic approaches that I use. The first is simply to use music as a soundscape—I'll read them vivid poems, with bright images and lots of sense impressions, and we'll talk about setting, whether or not music can be like a place. This is the sort of question that my kids react to excitedly—one they've never considered before. We talk about whether or not certain sounds have colors or textures, and we try to make connections. Then we'll listen to a piece of music, and I'll ask them to convert the sounds to images and objects in writing, to create a place that is the equivalent of the music. My second approach is to make more direct connections, discussing elements of music such as rhythm, dynamics, repetition—and their poetic counterparts.

DK: What poems do you use when you do these kinds of exercises?

DH: I try to switch the poems I use with each residency, so that I don't get bored and the lessons don't become rote. I try to use poems that will highlight particular poetic elements. Recently, in a lesson focusing on rhythm, I used Yusef Komunyakaa's "Blue Light Lounge Sutra," which has this really amazing swing to it. The kids feel it even if they don't get all of the meaning. When we talk about setting, I'll use Wallace Stevens, or sometimes William Carlos Williams, or more contemporary

stuff by Billy Collins, like "Fishing on the Susquehanna in July." Sharon Olds has a poem, "My Father Snoring," that I've used for its sound as well as its attention to character. I'm always looking for poems that deal with music in strange ways. There's a poem by Michael Fulop, "Imaginary Piano," that I use with an exercise in which the students invent instruments that play something other than sound.

DK: OK, so let's imagine you've just read the Komunyakaa piece with your students. Where and how does the music come in?

DK: Well, in that case, we would listen to the music beforehand. With the Komunyakaa poem, we listened to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony—the "Ode to Joy" section. After listening to the music, I talked about melody and repetition, the idea that musical compositions have themes—musical lines that occur more than once, and in various guises. I played some Beethoven and asked them what kinds of repetition they noticed. Sometimes this led to humming melodies together. Other times we would talk about how certain instruments entered the composition more than once, instilling a particular feeling. (Naturally, I'll ask, "What feeling?") Then I handed out the Komunyakaa poem, and before reading it, I asked them to pay attention to the sounds that repeat, and to the rhythms that repeat. (We learned the words *staccato* and *legato* to describe poetic lines as well as musical ones.) Finally, with the music playing in the background, they wrote poems of their own in which a short two- or three-line "melody" repeats itself several times, with slight alteration.

DK: Could you say something about the traditional divisions teachers and people in general make about genres and art forms? That is, what might your experiences suggest within the context of an educational system that divides literature from music, math from art, science from gym?

DK: My experience, I think, confirms something that a close friend of mine, Michael Smith-Welch, believes about epistemology. He teaches science at Little Red School House, a private elementary school in Manhattan with a slant toward "progressive" education. In his classroom, he allows his students (fifth graders, mostly) to "play" with abstract projects, without a rigid structure or definite end product in mind. You should see the amazing stuff his kids do. They build robots, program computers to perform all kinds of cool simulations—but they don't necessarily have a definite "assignment." It's more like, "Here are these materials, here's how you put them together, now what do you want to do?" They approach learning as just a different kind of playtime, and as a result their energy is not focused elsewhere. I mention this because my own experience is that students write beautifully and with a rare energy when

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they feel as if they're playing. Combining music and poetry isn't something that they would normally consider doing. Students also wouldn't ordinarily paint a math problem, but I think they'd have a lot of fun if someone asked them to. As teachers of writing, it's our job to find a way to make the kids like the writing process, to make them feel like it's not just another school subject to be endured and then shelved. Combining curricula helps to open new lines of thought, and allows students to create without fear of screwing up, because the territory is new and unthreatening.

Violin

I was told
that a special violin

can bring happiness to a person.
If you stroke the E string it will
bring the season of Spring with
soft flowers and butterflies.
Touch the A string and
along comes Summer with
swimming pools, vacations, the beach.
Be grateful, the D string brings
Fall with colorful leaves orange,
red and brown.
The cold, deep G string brings
snow, Christmas, and gifts.
The violin gives no anger.

—Boae Lee, fifth grade

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