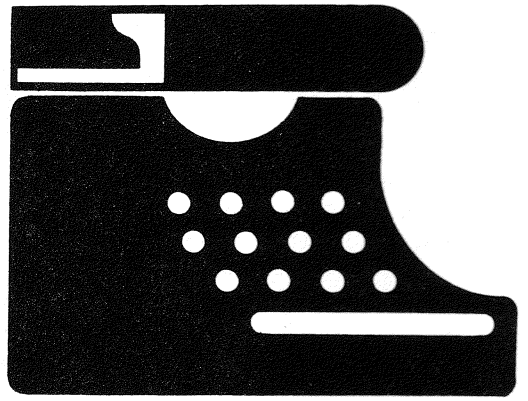


Teachers & Writers



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Poets-in-the-Schools in Bush Alaska

by Karen R. Randlev

IT'S SIX DAYS BEFORE Thanksgiving, and as I'm teaching I look anxiously out the classroom window at the fog rolling in from the Bering Sea. Weather is the prime factor in this village of 200—Scammon Bay—along the seacoast in the Yukon delta area of western Alaska. How to explain the complete isolation and helplessness I feel. I've been here

KAREN RANDLEV's poetry has appeared in *The Full Cry*, *Celebration*, *Jeopardy*, *Permafrost*, *Northwest Arts*, and *Harpoon*.

a week as a poet-in-the-schools; this is the third village on my swing-through sponsored by the local arts council and the Lower Yukon School District. It sounds so normal on paper, but when you're flying in a Twin Otter through fog and ice along with sacks of mail, cartons of groceries and beer, and a few Eskimos on their way back home, you know that being a poet in bush Alaska is like being a poet nowhere else in the United States.

My first stop, Emmonak—an old Yupik Eskimo word meaning "black fish"—is a small village of 500 on the banks of a river on the edge of the tundra. In the summer the village swells with the advent of fishermen

and fish processors, but now there is little activity save that of linemen stringing lines for the first telephones here. The village boasts a sweat house for the men and a sauna. The school has a small swimming pool (to be used in case of fire) and showers. Mail comes in every few days by bush plane, and there is cable television via satellite from California and Seattle, delayed two to three weeks, complete with commercials. Snow machines have replaced dogsleds, and kids go to Fairbanks to the University of Alaska. But this is still a village. Raw, frozen fish is a delicacy. Women wear kaspags (dress-length garments lined with fur) and carry
Continued on page 10.

AS YOU CAN SEE, *Teachers & Writers Magazine* has a new look. In a continuing effort to make our magazine more useful to you, we are initiating a format change with this issue. The new format will aim at presenting more useful material in a more accessible way.

We are cutting down the number of pages but increasing the number of issues. The magazine will be published every other month during the school year. With more frequent publication we hope to achieve a greater sense of continuity and to establish a dialogue between the Collaborative and the readers of the magazine. Let us hear from you.

We hope these changes will save you both time and effort and provide you with a more effective teaching aid.

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BOOKS

Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process

By Peter Elbow. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981. 384 pages. \$6.95.

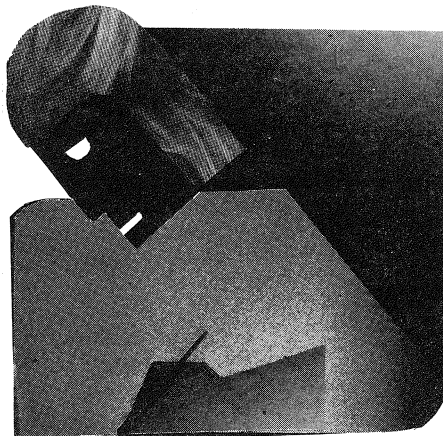
Review by Meredith Sue Willis

WRITING WITH POWER IS A book which makes me mentally shout Bravo! again and again. Page after page, chapter after chapter, Peter Elbow gives direct and down-to-earth advice for beginning writers. If you want to master the writing process, he says, above all write. Fill pages with "raw" writing, the kind of writing that frees you up, overcomes the horror of vacuum, covers the empty page, and gets rid of the critic you are probably carrying around on your back. He minimizes the distinction between expository writing and so-called "creative" writing, concentrating not on categories, but on process. He insists that the process of writing is the same, or close enough, in all types of writing—interoffice memoranda and prose poems. The essential act is of dredging oneself and coming up with powerful mental pictures, a flow of words, a shape. The intensity, the eagerness, the skill with which one goes at this process will vary from person to person and from task to task, but the process is the same.

Elbow also, in various ways, advises the separation of raw writing and re-writing. He gives the always-practical suggestion simply to lay aside the work and come back to it fresh and critical, able to cull out the "good bits" and rigorously, ruthlessly get rid of the deadwood. Again, bravo! Another point he makes repeatedly in many contexts is that all writers, but especially beginning writers, need a hearer, someone to receive their written communication. Some of the best chapters in the book center on this:

MEREDITH SUE WILLIS is a fiction writer. Her novels include *A Space Apart* (Scribner, 1979) and *Higher Ground* (Scribner), which will be out in October.

how to get an audience, and how to use it to improve your writing. He describes the kind of group that gets together simply to share work, and he speaks of another step, which is to ask a friend to read a piece of work only to check for gross grammatical errors. Then there is a wonderfully useful response in which the reader tells you his or her experience of the work: "I felt sort of put off at the beginning, but then you seemed to get excited and so did I." Another level of this has the reader describing the experience of reading in metaphor: "For a long time, it was like I was slogging through mud, and then you seemed to get going and all of a sudden we were



just running along freely." These chapters, in a section called "Feedback," are ones I wish fervently I had read before I went into my writing workshops when I was studying for my Masters. The variety of possible reader responses, the very fact that it is possible to analyze what you want from a reader and get it, seems to me wonderfully liberating. Elbow even gives practical ways of using even what unsympathetic readers have to say. His essential contribution here is to get you as a writer out of the frame of mind in which your reader is some kind of oracle who will tell you if you are going to win the Nobel Prize for literature, or end up as a waitress at Schrafft's. There are lists of questions you can use to get the information you need to help you at a given stage in a given piece of writing.

This whole middle section of the book on audience and feedback is to my taste solid, useful, and thoroughly admirable. I am less enchanted with Elbow's detailed systems for getting words on paper and then revising. Perhaps it is only that I have my own methods and thus am impatient with those of others. I am certainly not in any disagreement with Elbow in theory or even practice—these methods seem like good ideas. But much of this part of the book is hard for me to read. It seems most useful, as a reference, a smorgasbord of writing methods I might come back to if I had a student to whom they seemed appropriate. He has, for example, the "direct writing" method in which the writer is working against a clock. The writer divides whatever time is available in half, uses the first half for free writing without worry about organization or precision, and the second half for worrying about just those two things. Another of Elbow's methods is called "The Dangerous Method" because you try and get it right the first time. He spends a good deal of time on the "Loop Method" which is a system for voyaging out into the sea of the material and ideas and then coming back, the voyage home, making precise and clear what was half-felt, loosely thought. There is much more like this, all of it concerned with getting control of what needs to be done for the given writing task. Paradoxically, what often needs to be done is a letting go, a loosening up, a free associating. It is also liberating to realize that every piece of writing does not have to be revised and polished for posterity.

It should be obvious by this time that I respect Peter Elbow and his approach to teaching writing; I have a strong suspicion that he is a fine teacher, flexible and resourceful and willing to expose himself. At the same time, I am now and again, here and there, irritated by his writing style. Long, knotty passages apparently represent his thinking out loud, so to speak. He is willing for the reader to witness *his* writing process. This tech-

nique, in the classroom, is called modelling; the teacher shows what she means by doing it right there in front of the students, verbally or on the blackboard. In a book, however, it seems to me to come perilously close to sloppy writing.

The question becomes, then, for whom is this book useful—or better, how can one use this book? There are parts of it, those feedback chapters particularly, that I think everyone involved in the teaching of writing

would do well to read. The book as a whole seems to be aimed at beginning writers, but I think a beginning writer should get into a class with Peter Elbow or some other good teacher and read great literature instead of books on writing. Teachers, on the other hand, perhaps all teachers, could profitably go through this book and glean its ideas, use its methods, be enriched, and perhaps even be inspired to restructure a curriculum.

Writing with Power seems to me,

finally, to be a gregarious book that I feel comfortable in recommending for its many excellent parts and for its powerfully correct attitudes. It is a book, however, that demands an active reader; it bounces off in so many directions and shows so much of its inner process, that the reader must make choices, select the parts that are most useful. It is a book that asks to be flipped through, talked over, and returned to. It is a volume to annotate and dog-ear.

On Being a Teacher. By Jonathan Kozol. New York: Continuum, 1981. 177 pages. \$12.95.

Review by Bill Zavatsky

“PUBLIC SCHOOLS DID NOT exist forever,” Jonathan Kozol reminds us in this, his sixth book, “...and, for just this reason, they can be rebuilt or reconceived, dismantled or replaced...by plain men and women, too.” *On Being a Teacher* continues the attack on the public school system which Kozol began nearly fifteen years ago in *Death at an Early Age*. This book is full of strong and important ideas, from how to win back the courage to speak in the first person (the “I” so many teachers want crossed out of compositions) to ways of knocking heads with the school board for the purpose of winning political and educational ground.

Much of what Kozol says, I agree with. But reading him one sometimes gets the impression that he sees nothing but political indoctrination taking place in the schools. (A good deal of his subject in this book is what he calls “the propaganda sold to children in the textbooks which we are assigned to teach.”) He makes no bones about preaching to the converted, trying to push already-liberal teachers a little further than they seem willing to go. But the biggest problem with his book, for me, is that Kozol

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presents courageous and important suggestions in a vacuum. Though we know otherwise, his book sounds as if he has only been an anthropologist of the classroom, making only occasional forays into its day-to-day world. Were he to flesh out his program, dramatize it, fill it with examples we could grasp, we might see more clearly how it could spring from the daily give-and-take of school life. His discussions almost always take place in the abstract, in the world of ideology, and thus the atmosphere of the book seems deprived of oxygen. Unfortunately, when Kozol mounts his soapbox he begins to drift into the stratosphere. His genuine concern for oppressed people and abused children begins to dissolve in the rarefied air of his rhetoric.

I also wish that he would spend a little more time proving some of his accusations, the way Frances Fitzgerald did in her admirably researched indictment of school history texts, *America Revisited*. “Ironically,” Kozol writes, “with Thoreau, just as with Dr. King, the school boards have excluded from the acceptable life story virtually every item which compels them to include him in their textbooks in the first place.” It’s difficult for me to believe that not *one* school textbook carries the information that Thoreau was jailed because he refused to pay taxes that would support the war in Mexico.

The three-and-a-half pages Kozol spends outlining the story of how a teacher and her students in an all-black school join together to “beat the system” could have been a book by itself rather than a sketch. Again, it is

the “minute particulars” that are sorely lacking in Kozol’s approach. When he does give us a little (for example, his two or three pages on the sale of armaments to South Africa by the U.S.) it goes a long way. He ought to have kept his own marvelous book about the literacy campaign in Cuba in mind; it is a book filled with inspiring stories and eye-opening facts.

Perhaps a little more autobiography would weight Kozol to earth. Because he doesn’t tell us much about himself (beyond his moral and political concerns—which I don’t mean to slight in this criticism), there is a certain conviction lacking in his words, a nebulous quality that even surrounded his presentation of himself in *Death at an Early Age*. Kozol ought to take a leaf from Herbert Kohl’s books in this respect. Kohl is never afraid to show us his failures, never shirks from drawing a portrait of himself that’s less than sympathetic, and as a result we feel him as a man, not just as a political intelligence floating above the earth somewhere, orating. And because we feel him as a man with his feet on the ground, his ideas have that much greater impact. Kozol seems to be hoarding his autobiography for the right moment. But I am as interested in where and how he won his political convictions as I am in hearing those convictions—the two seem to me inseparable. Even in *Death at an Early Age* there was something unreal about this young teacher who could suddenly leap up from a dinner party discussion of hypocrisy and go get himself arrested at a civil rights sit-in at Boston City Hall. That kind of courage isn’t born overnight.

IDEA EXCHANGE

Some Short Translations

—Five Often-heard Statements about Writing and What They Mean

by Barbara Danish

WHY DO PEOPLE WRITE?

(1) One answer is that *writing is an exploration of one's world and oneself*; in other words, What do I see and what do I think about what I see? (I use the phrase "to see" in the writing sense: to experience, as observer and/or participant.) As a reader and writer I am very interested in this. But if I say to students, "Write your thoughts," I will likely get something like, "I think about what I am going to do after school and what I am going to do this weekend." It is even possible that, faced with such a huge field from which to draw a few sentences—one's thoughts—the writer will go blank and complain, "I don't think. I have no thoughts." Professional writers spend page after page and hour after hour wandering through just such fields, finally narrowing or focusing on their subject—what they want to concentrate on. That is a big part of the writing process. In order to help students shortcut this process, I bring in a frame (a lesson) that works much like the frame of a camera. Imagine you are at a window. What do you see, hear, etc? What does this make you think, wish, wonder, imagine? The window is a place people are used to looking from, and reflecting from. It is a place from which they can see specific things that will trigger specific thoughts. These thoughts may be related or unrelated to what they have seen. It doesn't matter. The writers may actually have

BARBARA DANISH is the author of a children's book, *The Dragon and the Doctor* (Feminist Press, 1971) and *Writing as a Second Language: A Workbook for Writing and Teaching Writing* (Teachers & Writers, 1981).

seen what they describe, or they may see it in their minds as they write. This, too, is of no consequence. The window is a focusing device, a way to find something to write about.

(2) *You have to be honest when you write*. What does that mean? Never to lie when you write? No, it has more to do with letting what is in your mind come onto the paper without interference from the censor (whether that censor is yourself or another authority) who reprimands, "You think *that*?! I wouldn't put that on paper if I were you." "That's a disgusting thing to say." When we talked about anger, for example, writers had a chance to say not only what they did when they were angry, but what they *felt like* doing. It can be dangerous to reveal yourself, and I try to make the writing time as free from criticism of values and experiences as possible so students will feel safe in being honest.

(3) *Show, don't tell* is a favorite expression among writers for a very good reason. It is probably the most basic element of good writing. This is what it means: instead of generalizing, telling us that you are happy, you give us the particulars—your gestures, facial expression, speech: are you practically dancing? Do you keep breaking into a grin? Tell us these details, and we will see for ourselves that you are happy. (You might even make *us* feel happy.) These details we collect with our eyes, ears, nose, mouth, skin, and intuition help us give our writing the same richness these details give to our life. To the grey world of generalizations—"I see flowers"—we add color: the black furry antenna of the tulip. Sometimes as we write we actually become aware of things we hadn't been conscious of. Writing about being in bed in the dark, I realize there is a whole world of sound there, from the sound inside my body and under

the bed to the sounds on the street and the noise of a jet speeding away with just a whisper of sound left.

One frame I give students to help them collect these particulars, or details, is to put them in a place: at the window, in bed, in the bathtub, or a place they go when they want to be alone. For again, if I said, "Describe your house," the field of possible details would be so large that they would probably write, "There are three bedrooms, a living room and kitchen in my house." We focus by using this frame and by talking and letting our friends' details help spark our own.

(4) Writers talk about *using their voice* and say that you can't be a good writer without a voice, but what does this mean? We all talk to ourselves, and we all talk to other people. One reason that the naturalness and unself-consciousness of speech doesn't carry over into writing is that non-writers have been taught that they are supposed to sound a certain way when they write—authoritative, perhaps ("Don't use the word *I*") or formal ("Don't use slang or contractions"). Just think of all the voices I could have used in writing this essay. I might have said, "One must always bear in mind that to imitate the verbal pattern of another source will result in hindering one's attempt to identify one's own thoughts," instead of, "If you try to write like somebody else you'll have a hard time figuring out what you mean." Or, "What exuberance writing creates as we energetically pursue the most intimate part of ourselves," instead of, "Writing is exciting because we get a chance to see what we think."

Of course, different styles appeal to different people, and sometimes one voice is more appropriate than another. However, at the very base of

our writing instructions should be the encouragement to be aware of and develop our own personal voice, to say something the way we would naturally say it.

One way I help people use their own voices in writing is to have them write *to* someone. This “addressing” in writing helps beginning writers get used to using and trusting their own voice.

(5) When writers express the feelings “It seemed like I was really talking to someone” or “It felt like I was really there,” they can mean they have *connected* with themselves. Whether or not the writing itself has been successful, the writers have had the incredible experience that writing—creating—affords: to be so taken in, so intrigued, so invested in, so curious, so excited by, so concentrated

on, so moved by writing that they are connected, and as a result the writers often feel strong, love writing, love themselves, and care about what they have looked at so closely. (I have used a variety of expressions to describe this experience in the hopes that at least one of them has a meaning to you and makes clear this most difficult idea.) ●

Details: Basic Components of Poetry

by Robert Hershon

STUDENTS HAVE TO LEARN that their own lives are worth writing about, that what they see and hear and smell and touch and taste are important, that a small town in the suburbs and the people who live in it are unique and infinite in their variations. Then they have to learn to write about their worlds with precision and selectivity, to know what to report (and all writing is reporting) and what to omit. After that comes a big jump that many never take: learning that the bare facts can represent feeling far more powerfully than a handful of adjectives can.

Particularly at the start of a program, I ask students to write about concrete things or about very specific events. In one exercise, I wanted them to write about things they could see and hear from their desks right at that moment. Joe Cipolla wrote about “A yellow wall/ On it a crack that runs from top to bottom/ a clock that clicks off each second/ a PA speaker that bleeps at odd times.” Would anyone need to be told that that wall is not in someone’s home or in a fancy restaurant? Is there any doubt about how the writer feels about being in that room right then?

I frequently ask students to write about place. In one assignment, I asked them to write about a specific

place in Lynbrook at a specific hour on a specific day. As a result, I know quite a bit about what a 1981 adolescent’s room looks like on a Sunday afternoon after he’s spent the previous evening skating in Grant Park and drinking beer in the Burger King parking lot. When a number of these poems are read together (and reading the student poems aloud and discussing them in detail is essential) the kids are amazed at the detailed portrait of their lives that emerges. There are many poems that can be used to set up this exercise—dozens by William Carlos Williams alone—but I often use one of my own:

LIKE SEAWATER

1.

in my neighborhood
during the worst of the heat
midnight looks like noon
whole families sit outside
in the dark
the men drinking beer
playing dominoes
the women talking on
the cracked steps
the babies playing
on the wet steamy sidewalks
fifty dollar cars roar
through the streets
through the jets
from the open hydrants
the gutters run as clean
as mountain streams
when it gets light
the men remain
talking quietly together
the taste of beer
in the morning
like seawater

2.

when my refrigerator was broken
i stopped at the corner store

on my way home from work
and bought two bottles of millers
knowing i could drink the first
before the second grew warm
the grocer without asking
put the bottles
in two separate brown bags
assuming i had a friend
waiting outside on the steps
why else would a sensible man
buy only two bottles of beer

City and suburban students, incidentally, see the neighborhood in the poem very differently.

Besides poems of place, I might ask them to reconstruct a familiar act in detail, such as getting up in the morning: there’s a good Ted Berrigan poem that begins “I wake up back aching from soft bed...” Or I might ask them to try to get a fresh perspective on a common object. In “Fork,” Charles Simic sees “...a bird’s foot/ worn around a cannibal’s neck.”

In contrast to the comparative safety of all this realism, I like to lead an occasional raid into the murkier regions of the brain, where memories and dreams and fears and fierce loves live. Countless examples are available. In fact, as I look through my notes, I’m struck by how many ideas I’ve adapted or stolen whole from other poets—Dick Lourie, Ron Overton, Donna Brook, Neil Baldwin, Barbara Danish, Emmett Jarrett, and many others. I recommend such theft heartily. Most recently, I worked with Bill Zavatsky and happily stole as many of his ideas as possible—for instance, using John Logan’s “The Picnic” as a model to help students write about first love.

Ah, first love. I might as well end this right here. ●

ROBERT HERSHON’s books of poetry include *A Blue Shovel* (Hanging Loose Press) and the *The Public Hug: New and Selected Poems* (Louisiana State University Press).

Poetry in the Eighth Grade

by Harry Greenberg

AT TIMES, WHEN I STAND IN front of an 8th grade class I can totally empathize with the Las Vegas entertainer playing before a restless lounge audience. Eighth graders are a tough crowd to please. I want the act of writing to be seen not as a tiresome burden, but as an enjoyable adventure—whether it represents self-discovery or strange twists of the imagination. Creating a relaxed atmosphere comes naturally to me. I use my sense of humor to kid the class. I throw out jokes all the time. Some are corny. Some are gems. The students react accordingly. This works for me because of my nature and may not work for someone else. But this is just my way of softening the atmosphere and making it more conducive for writing.

Setting up a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, however, can be as unpredictable as a volcano, and I have learned to expect the unexpected. In one class no one wanted to read any work—this coming after we had “broken the ice” just the week before with many students reading their own writing. One student, whom I tried to coax into reading by appealing to a sense of bravery, sincerely complained of a sore throat. Then one student after another begged off with a sore throat routine. I was getting annoyed and frustrated. On the spur of the moment I took a piece of paper and wrote a note, reading it aloud as I went along: “Memo to myself—GO TO A PHARMACY THIS AFTERNOON AND PICK UP ANTIBIOTICS FOR 1st PERIOD CLASS. WHAT A SICKLY BUNCH!” The line got several chuckles and a few brave souls did start reading their own work.

You now have the classroom totally relaxed—so much so it would make a

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wet noodle jealous—what do you have the class write? I “design” a writing assignment in two ways: what area of writing do I want to exercise; what motivational tool can I dream up to make it exciting? I want to touch upon description in writing, surrealism, symbolism, parody, and making it clear to my student-writers that everyone carries around a wealth of autobiographical material to draw upon for inspiration.

For the description assignment I turn to an approach that the award-winning poet May Swenson has pioneered—the sophisticated riddle poem. Ms. Swenson puts the object or situation she is writing about in the title and then is very careful not to mention it outright in the poem. She even goes as far as not to mention any key words that would help the reader make easy associations. For instance, if May Swenson wrote a poem entitled “Telephone” she would never use the word “ringing” in the poem. Too easy a giveaway! She would describe “ringing” in a fresh way—perhaps, “I cry out for attention!” Anyway, this is a marvelous way of getting students to use fresh language and abandon tired expressions. I use two motivational tools for this assignment. The first, I actually offer money to the first student who can put all the clues together and figure out a Swenson poem. It's only a dime per poem, but it does the trick. The other motivational tool is to turn the writing assignment into a type of game. When the students come up with an object or situation to write about I ask them to fold the title over so no one can see what they are working on. This will be done later, with other students trying to figure out what all the clues represent. You can actually work the class up to a fever-pitch with students shouting out “let me read next” when they have been reluctant to read anything in the past.

I teach surrealism and symbolism together, though each can certainly stand stylistically alone. Most students really understand both concepts even if they are not familiar with the terms. For surrealism I bring up that old TV favorite “The Twilight Zone”; for symbolism, the old saying “reading

between the lines.” If students come away from symbolism with the general feeling that words can have far deeper meanings than one suspected, I am quite happy. Let them go into further depth when they get to high school and *Moby Dick*. My eighth graders had a chance to try their hands at these two concepts by interpreting drawings and illustrations I brought into class. I find most of my “strange drawings” in the newspapers. The *Sunday Times* is a wonderful source. When you remove a drawing from the article it's illustrating and look at it alone, suddenly it takes on many new qualities. It is these qualities I ask the students to find. I give them specific directions. I do not want them to say, in this picture so and so is happening. I want the writing to flow and blend. I have them imagine the drawings as frozen time. What will happen next? What has led up to this point? Many students place themselves in the situations. The more inventive they are, the more interesting the writing.

I like to touch upon parody with eighth graders because it's right up their alley. They are forever cracking jokes and poking fun at things at this age. Why not channel the energy? One thing I poke fun at with them is directions—especially written directions. We are faced with these every day. Cooking instructions. Directions on putting together the barbecue grill we have dragged home from Sears. Some of the directions we come into contact with are totally unnecessary. I read the class directions you can find on a Lipton's Flo-Thru tea bag:

FOR THE PERFECT CUP OF TEA
Use one bag per cup. Pour boiling water over tea bag. Brew for 3 to 5 minutes. Serve steaming hot.

Very important instructions if you're a complete nincompoop. We discuss other useless directions, and then I have the class write their own for things that really need no explaining. I have them take on a superior attitude and tell them to overlook no detail, no matter how small. The results are hysterical in many cases, and the classes love them.

Back to Days of Childhood

by Criss E. Cannady

HAVING TAUGHT POETRY

Writing nearly every semester for three years at Eastern Arizona, a small, rural community college, and having seen many familiar faces each semester, I needed a new exercise. I wanted an exercise that would combine most of the elements which make a successful poem: a sense of place, a sense of speaker, a sense of risk, a sense of details.

In truth, it was my students who led me to this assignment.

"Tell us," they would ask, "What is a good subject for a poem?"

"How do we know if a line has anything worthwhile in it?" they would inquire at other times.

"Anything is subject for poetry. There must be something of interest in every line," I would explain.

However, my responses were neither specific nor directional enough to qualify as comprehensive answers.

One night, after class, I thought about what the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke said about poetic subjects, especially the importance of thinking back "to days of childhood that are still unexplained." Most of my students were women in their thirties and early forties, women raised in rural environments, women who knew the significance of family ties and old family tales, women who had the distance to look back at their past childhood.

The next week I thought of an assignment which I hoped would work extremely well in teaching the students the importance of place and objects in expressing emotions about a person or subject. I called it the "Detail/Family-Childhood" poem. Fortunately, it was

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successful, and often times I would refer back to this exercise when student poems were lacking in concrete details and images.

For this exercise, I combined—making alterations—two previous assignments. Earlier in the semester, I had asked my students to compose a catalogue poem (which is essentially a listing of objects) based on some remembered childhood place such as an attic, a sewing room, a barn. Later on in the semester, I required a prose poem about an intriguing person (perhaps, even one who was dead).

The final products from these two writing tasks were quite successful. The first one taught the importance of selecting the most significant objects to show a relationship between speaker and subject. The second one demonstrated that distance between writer and subject is extremely crucial in choosing the most revealing aspects about a person. However, in both exercises, the poem lacked strong emotional focus. Therefore, having learned a lesson from my students' efforts, I hoped the "Detail/Family-Childhood" poem would lead my students back to their days of childhood where they would recall a small but emotional moment involving a person or a place.

Before I gave them instructions for this poem, I xeroxed, circulated, and read Philip Levine's "Late Moon" from his book *1933* (New York: Atheneum, 1974). In this poem, the speaker recalls his mother, slowly undressing, thinking about her night at the beer garden. In class we discussed each line, the concrete nouns and active verbs which help give the reader a sense of time and place, a sense of the speaker's emotional relationship to whom he is writing about. We particularly paid attention to these lines:

My mother
home from the beer garden
stands before the open closet

her hands still burning.
She smooths the fur collar
the scarf, opens the gloves

We noticed the concrete details in

the two stanzas, the objects in the room, "the fur collar," "the scarf," "the gloves," and the gestures, "smooths," and "opens." After examining the poet's description of the room and his mother putting away her clothes, we then noticed the landscape outside the room—the one of the city, the one the woman takes with her when she goes to sleep:

The moon finally above the town.
The breathless stacks,
the coal slumps,

the quiet cars
whitened at last . . .

Again, we discussed specific images, the *interesting* adjectives, *breathless* and *quiet*, which as Galway Kinnell would say, "Make a line of prose into a line of poetry."

After looking at Levine's poem, we then turned our attention to Maxine Kumin's "My Father's Neckties." Through the image of the neckties, their colors and patterns, the poet is able to unravel her feelings about him, his death, and her own mortality, to examine the threads that lead her to this final statement about "a man who wore hard colors recklessly / and hit out in the foreign / bargain basement of his feelings."

Finally, after we finished talking about these two poems, I assigned the "Detail/Family-Childhood" poem. For the first step, I asked the students to write down ten active, interesting verbs, such as *break*, *stab*, *knock*, *strike*, etc. and to use at least five such verbs in their poems. Then, for the second step, I requested that in every line, as far as possible, they must employ at least *one* of three images: a color, or a specific location or name, or an object. After I announced these definite instructions, I told the class the poem must be about childhood: a moment regarding a parent or relative. Finally, I decreed that the poem should not be more than twenty lines long; I wanted my students to zoom in on the person by describing him or her through an event or through one or more objects.

I hoped that after my students com-



LETTERS

Dear Sirs:

I recently received materials from you and I am returning some of these materials. Please remove our name from your mailing list.

The climate in our community is such that I would hesitate to place this material in the Curriculum Library for general checkout.

Sincerely,
Curriculum Coordinator

Dear T&W,

I'd like to say that I'm a little disappointed in your articles because many of them do not deal with teaching poetry, creative writing, or the other arts to *children*; nor do many of your articles deal with *contemporary* projects pertaining to children. I hope this criticism does not appear to be too harsh. It's just that I'd rather hear about what Teachers & Writers is doing right now instead of reading a play written in 1979 or a page concerning

reflections of a teacher in 1968. I want to hear what's going on *now*.

I also have a suggestion. Is it possible for Teachers & Writers to have a sort of correspondence section with its readers? Many good ideas could be exchanged and/or articles from the magazine could receive feedback. I think the "correspondence section" is important. The magazine seems to exist in a sort of vacuum now—no comments, no suggestions.

Sincerely,
Sydelle Pearl
South Orange, New Jersey

Dear T&W,

Just wanted to tell you I'm only subscribing because people keep stealing/borrowing *T&W Magazine* from the library. You must be doing something right! (And I hope you keep at it.) Seriously—this is a great source.

Leslie Kent

Dear T&W,

For the past year, I have been increasingly bored by the publication. Many of the articles are repetitive—different teachers giving lengthy descriptions of the same teaching problems, patting themselves on the back when they reach the same solutions. I'd like to see more hard information, less anecdote, for instance, book reviews, straightforward descriptions of different kinds of assignments, news of innovative programs, teaching strategies, and even fund-raising information. I also believe the publication centers too much on the East Coast, especially New York. I realize this sounds very negative; please don't think that I'm not enjoying the magazine, or that it hasn't helped me in the past. I simply believe that you have to take some new direction.

Amy Levin
Denver, Colorado

Continued from page 1.

their babies in the space between the hood and their bodies. Several old ladies make pocket money by weaving small baskets from the summer grass on the tundra—I buy two of them.

These kids have had a poet in their midst before—for one week last year. At first there is that inevitable feeling of competition—will I match his skill, will my word magic be as powerful? I find that I am teaching fourth through twelfth grade, working every period... not even a moment to catch a cup of coffee. I start first period with my standard song-and-dance routine and write William Carlos Williams's poem "so much depends" on the board. Don't fail me now, I silently beseech the ghost of Williams's voice. And so the week starts.

Happily most of these kids don't know what a poem is. They've heard no limericks, have written no haiku. They are blank pages. So there are no misconceptions to break down, no bad habits to ignore. I start out with Williams's poem because it illustrates

beautifully just what a poem can be.

"Hey kids, is there any punctuation? Are there any capital letters? Are there any rhymes? Do you see any colors? Can you understand all of the words? Can you 'see' the words?"

Then we get to the hard part... what does it all mean? Thank God for rural villages with people who raise chickens, for eggs to EAT, and chickens to FEED, and at that very moment a light rain is glazing the boardwalk from the school to the post office right outside our window.

I erase slowly all but the first line and then... hopefully... ask the kids to write, to tell me what so much depends on, what is so important for them.

*so much depends upon
a mother
when she is gone
there is no laughter in the house*

*nobody to talk to
but when she is home
there is joy
things to do
and talk about*

—Barbara Lilly Trader

*so much depends upon
hunting seals
for winter
taking the meat to eat
taking the skins
for boots*

—Anthony Hootche

*so much depends upon
the sunrising
every day
to shine on flowers, trees
to shine through the window
to warm up the ponds
to wake up the people
all over the town*

—Ted Hamilton

Poem after poem, the children are using all the things that they have closest at hand—seals, the tundra, subsistence living, isolation, the river—and using them with sensitivity and understanding. I am always in awe of those first few days. Nobody says that he doesn't understand the assignment, nobody says he doesn't know what a poem is. Even Norma, who's retarded, lets me take her dictation and beams when I read back to her what she has said. They did it again, they

really can write!

The next few days I work with them on creating whole images in each line, on making their ideas compact, on using the line to delineate a thought or a movement. I talk about their experiences and ask them about life here. Then we move to descriptions of people. I use a vivid poem by Ramona Wilson, a Colville Indian, called "Keeping Hair" which describes her old, beloved grandmother with just a few short phrases. I urge them to be elliptical and to let the space on the page be a place for the reader to enter in. Out of this I hear about the people that they love, admire, and ridicule in the village.

*Face black as mud
hands bigger than a swan's heart
his hair is as short
as porcupine quills
his clothes are black as soot
he talks as loud as a mouse
moves as fast as a flying duck
and smells
like a dead rabbit*

—Albert Westlock

MY AUNTIE

*Her face is soft and wrinkled like wool
Her eyes are brown as gravy
Her soft voice sounds like a robin
She wears home-made dresses*

—Barbara Trader

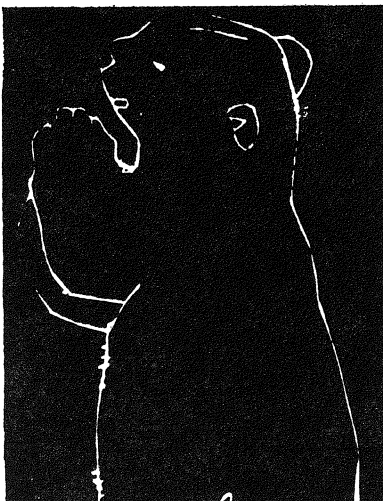
The agony of trying to teach writing in five days, the terror, the egotism, the paperwork. We wrote about wishes and dreams, about being animals. We edited by reading aloud, by seeing lines on the board. We read Galway Kinnell and May Swenson and Richard Hugo and the writing of other kids. And it was all over in Emmonak just when they were getting the hang of it and me of them. All the while it rained outside—a warm November rain. The river rose, and the planes stopped flying into the village. But Saturday morning brought a fairly clear sky and a ride on a charter to my next village, Kotlik.

As we flew to Kotlik, I stared at the river and swamp and marshy, unpeopled tundra below. We flew over a wrecked plane, and the radio crackled as we were directly above it.

So far from my home. Flying out over this flat land. If we crash? Suddenly up ahead I saw a graveyard, the funny little fences around each grave, and across the river, Kotlik. The cycle

has started again. I must try to be less impatient and relax. I realized that no one in Kotlik ever thought of their village as being remote—if you lived here, you'd be home now. Two more weeks of work, two more sets of kids, two more villages to come to know.

This is the first year that there has been a high school in Kotlik. Last year the kids went to boarding schools all over the state from Mountain Village (about 75 miles away) to Mt. Edgecumbe (in Sitka, about 2,000 miles away). Bush Alaska is going through a painful transition in establishing local high schools after a landmark state supreme court decision, the *Hootch* decision, requiring educational opportunities in each village instead of in regional or out-of-state boarding schools. The students are used to well-equipped schools with large gyms and showers, tape decks



and generous school lunch programs, trips to large cities, and television. Kotlik has none of these. All four grades of high school meet in one large room that used to be the community hall. Chairs and tables must be unfolded each morning. There are no cooking facilities for the home economics kids. School lunches often consist of beans and rice. There are no flush toilets or showers. And many of the kids seem antagonistic toward the efforts of their teachers—a bright, vibrant couple who have come to Alaska after teaching on the Navajo reservation in Arizona. Many of the boys in the class have been functioning as men in their families for at least a year or two. By fishing and hunting they more than contribute to the well-being of their families. The girls are grown up, too. Many are close to being married or raising a family. And

all seem to miss the pace and sound and activity of a larger boarding school. I notice the quiet, too.

But the quiet in the room is no more silent than the wind whistling over the tundra. More than in any place I've ever visited, these kids are thinkers. Some of the older teachers later tell me that Kotlik kids have traditionally won awards for academic honors in competitions with other villages. I'm also working with fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders here. As the week progresses and we work with image and sound poems, they hear rhythm and see form in every wind whisper, writing about it easily.

WIND

*hits the rope tap tap
rush to the boards the sound
like someone whistling
plays with the boxes
like someone kicking over and over
thump thump
rushes through the propane tanks
making a sound of someone
whistling*

—Alex Tom

THUNDER

*Like two giants fighting in the
skies. Like two drums banging
on each other. boom-boom-boom
Like the whole sky above us is
having a wave. Like the skies
having a quake, and a volcano
erupting.*

—Buck Andrews

Before the end of my stay in Kotlik, there is a violent winter storm.

*stream
flowing down
toward the noisy ocean
stream dream beam
flowing down
the stream swiftly moving
roaring loudly
flowing down
the stream carrying wind
and sound
flowing down
continuing to flow down
toward the roaring
ocean
flowing down
happy, laughing, crying, singing
flowing down*

—Linda Okitkun

It would be a nicely comfortable generalization to make that without television and freeways and roller boogie and Big Macs, a mind could flex and function so much more easily. The question I keep asking is how long can you or should you try to keep the twentieth century out of here? Ralph Teeluk understood me when he wrote the following poem about his grandfather.

*He was old and weak
couldn't walk
or do nothing much
yet he told me a story*

*About how the Eskimos
were when he was young*

*He had so much fun
but he had to work hard
hunting for food
traveling with his dogs
to get things he wanted
traveling back again*

*He enjoyed
having them gather around
singing Eskimo songs*

*Now he's gone
nowhere to be seen*

—Ralph Teeluk

*She is so kind
like flowers starting their bloom
to meet the summer sun.
She walks so gently
like the wind blowing across
the grassy field*

*Her face is so old
that cold may sneak
through the lines of her
face. We shall meet
the life she has.*

—Sam Henry

On Friday when we hear the sound of the Otter buzzing the village, poetry is forgotten. These kids grab my bags, I zip on my snowpants and arctic parka, slip into my caribou mukluks, and pad down after them. As I hoist myself into the plane, one of my students — John Strongheart — hands me a folder of block prints the kids made to illustrate the poems they had written. The village smiles good-bye, and the plane lifts off for the forty-minute flight to Bethel. I'm going to make it home for Thanksgiving without a hitch. The forty-minute ride to Bethel where I'll pick up my 737 to Anchorage and then to Fairbanks gives me lots of time to think back over the three weeks. Only one kid in

all of the three villages couldn't figure out what to write about. Everyone else wrote and wrote and wrote as if poetry were the most natural mode for expression. Nobody said, "Aw, I can't do that" or "I don't want to do that" or "that's dumb." Within twenty-four hours of my arrival in each village, everyone in town knew who I was and stopped to chat with me on the street. When I left Scammon Bay, the whole village turned out to say good-bye. In the months since I left, I've gotten several sets of letters from the kids with thank-you notes, drawings, and more poems.

*Dear Karen,
Hi and hello. how are you.
Thanks for teaching us how to write
poems.*

*Almost everybody still writes poems
especially Gary.*

*Today we are going to watch the video
tape we made of us reading our poems. tell
your son I said hi. Sometimes we have fun
in the library reading to each other. I wish
you were here teaching us poems because I
hate doing work!*

—Jacob Johnson, Jr.

p.s. Please come back to Emmonak!!!!

Who could resist a request like that? ●

My next day starts with packing up my gear and flying off to Scammon Bay, the last village. After two weeks of tundra flatness, I feel relieved at seeing the hills where the Yukon meets the ocean. As I land on the village airstrip at Scammon, I am struck again by how different each village is. Here they have running water, I find out later. So everyone has clean clothes, shiny hair, no impetigo. The school is tiny, housed temporarily in the community hall while the new one is being built — for \$1.5 million. The houses in the village are laid out as if they were part of a model train village — in neat little rows, freshly painted, and each house having the name of the head of the household lettered on a small sign carefully nailed above the front door frame.

My students are subdued but eager. Sam Henry, Allan and Albert Hunter are in their twenties. Peter Uttereyuk has been to Missouri with the National Guard. Still, Sam can write about his grandmother without the expected self-consciousness of his suburban counterpart.

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