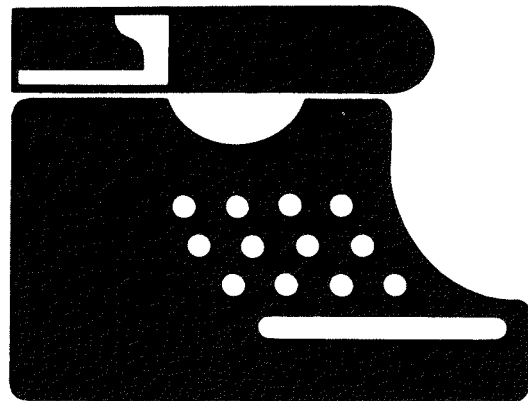


# Teachers & Writers



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## What I See in Children's Writing

by Jack Collom

*Jack Collom spent twelve days in January and February, 1982, as poet-in-residence at St. Jude Catholic School, in northern Manhattan, under the aegis of Poets in the Schools. He conducted poetry workshops with eight classes of 5th-8th graders six times each. Most of the kids were of Hispanic background. He has chosen the poetry they wrote as examples of what he finds remarkable about children's poetry.*

I HAVE NEVER WORKED A DAY IN A SCHOOL without getting excited about some of the things the kids wrote. Generally speaking, though, their poetry shows little sustained versification skill, precision of thought, conscious subtlety or breadth of metaphorical reference. Lacking these possibilities for involvement (or distraction), the mind turns to and focuses on the tiny "moves" from word to word, musical, imagistic, ideational. The effect is a back-to-basics concentration that seems refreshingly simple and aesthetically solid.

Children tend to write works that contain wonderful flashes of poetry. They show little appetite for revision and their writings are often lifelessly conventional or generalized. But they, being youthful, are "naturals". The descriptive word most often applied to children's art is "fresh". What does this mean? I think it chiefly means that, in lacking a sophisticated adult context of moral or other philosophical acceptability into which impressions must fit, the child is likely to get simple, direct, sensory takes on phenomena, and

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find words to match. The verbal juxtapositions may thereby be full of surprises. However significant the elaborate adult skills are in poetry, and this is not to deny that significance, the spirit, the vivifying spark, remains surprise, which is proof of accuracy to the moment, of originality.

The first day's writing in my workshops is usually in the form of "I Remember" poems. Each "line" of the poem begins with the words "I remember". The students are encouraged to write in the terms of ordinary talk and relate personal memories, using details. The matter of details needs a lot of pushing, since kids, though having the fresh eye, are beginning to order their world, often lack faith in the personal fact and will produce unedifying essences like "I remember going to the movies with my friend" (end of memory). Lively examples are best for urging detail.

I remember when I was in 3rd grade and my best friend liked the same guy until we found out he was making love letters to Nancy Grand. I remember when my best friend and I gave the biggest Halloween party ever and he left Nancy so he could get some soda. My friend was dressed as a man so she asked Nancy for a dance. Nancy was so romanced dancing she did not know she was on the edge of the swimming pool. As she fell she cried out, saying, "Oh you rude gentle man!"  
—Eyerilis Fernandez, 5th grade

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In “making” love letters, the oddity forces a fresh look at the word and at what is done to produce a love letter. “Making” love letters seems a solid venture than “sending” or even “writing” them, thus a greater challenge to the frustrated girl duo. The speed and economy of statement make the introduction of the third girl, Nancy, coming right after the second girl, a socko expansion. “Biggest... ever” by its exaggeration casts the event into the archetype-familiarity of myth or fairy-tale. “Romanced dancing” is both odd and concise and adds the musical focus of rhyme. “As she fell” skips over the push, but we know it more quickly than if we had been told. There is a formal, poker-faced tone (effective by contrast with the content), as in “As she fell she cried out, saying, ‘Oh you rude gentle man!’” charms by its oddness, intensifies the slight fairy-tale flavor, illuminates the paradox in the “man’s” both dancing and dousing. (Throughout this article, I recommend reading the piece a second time after reading the comments.)

I remember going to the store with my uncle and I got shot.  
I remember going to school and they mugged me.  
I remember going to the movies and a monster tried to eat me.  
I remember going home and my mother was not there.  
I remember going to my friend’s house and he would not let me play.  
I remember going to the park with my friends and one of them hit me in the head with a ball.  
I remember making new friends and one of them hit me with a spitball.  
I remember watching TV and it broke on me because I kicked it.

—Danny Santiago, 5th grade

Memory coughs up, typically, catastrophe, more easily believable and interesting, even to oneself, than blessedness, less vulnerable to have expressed. There’s a shift of reality level from “shot” and “mugged” to the monster line, and that shift retroactively changes the light in which we take the first two lines, introduces playfulness. Also, the abruptness, lack of transitional devices, lets the change simply be there, in a quasi-physical way. Adults often lose poetry via attempts at palatability of shift. The understatement, then, of “mother was not home,” the lack of ornament, shows that mere absence can be as disastrous as violent attacks are. Then the piece goes off into a humorous accumulation of futility, with a mea culpa bow at the end. A shapely, funny (but not whimsical) confession.

I remember when there was a fire in my building. I went to school. Everyone asked me what happened. I was so happy.  
—Gilma Alvarez, 5th grade

An adult would not, generally, admit so clearly that the happiness of getting attention could supplant the fear proper to a building fire. And simplicity makes it stand out.

I remember the day I had to go away down to the lake.  
I remember the water was light like the sunlight. In the early morning.  
—Oyelino Genao, 5th grade

“In the early morning.” If this sentence fragment were written by an adult, I would think it a derivative attempt at poetic tone. But because I trust a kid, this kid, not to have mixed

that much in literary style, I’m brought back to the thing expressed, a key slant on the identity of water and light, in lake dawn. I am struck with a positive response to ignorance, but the “ignorance” is a transparency for pure observation.

I remember when it was snowing, all of that snow comes from the blue sky and ends up on the street.  
—Cynthia Gomez, 6th grade

The child’s touch, syntactically, is the use of the term “blue sky” (not just “sky”). The presence of “blue” makes the color (white) of the snow implicit, which in turn brings out the complicated color and all of the street. Which in turn, by contrast, opens thoughts of what whiteness “means”. All because “blue” was spoken.

I remember when I locked myself in the bathroom in the dark. The darkness came over me like a monster and swept my feet with fear.  
—David Kalicharan, 6th grade

“Swept my feet.” A perfect kid’s-observation. That the feet were chosen makes the monstrosity more inclusive (head to foot), but the verb “swept” is the crux, one of those applications never seen before but instantly recognizable (language thereby extended).

I remember when a car hit me and I jumped up into the hot air.  
—James Gausp, 6th grade

“Hot” makes the car-reality emerge. With the presence of temperature, the car is no longer merely a hitting thing. The air heat, being sensory, reminds us of the car’s heat, motor, smells, dirt, metal, gas.

Writing about common things (hand, egg, hair, street, floor, rock, etc.) helps maintain and express the sense that in the overlooked daily minutiae reside endless energies for us.

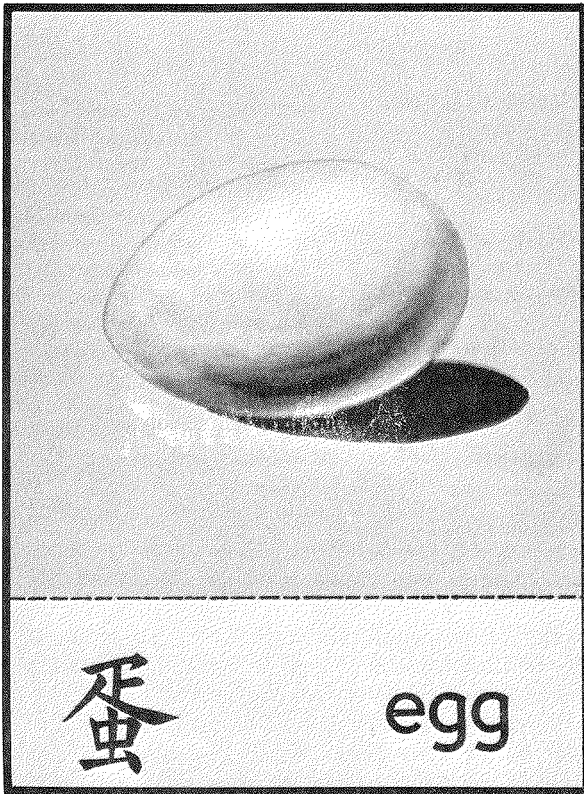
#### NYC Street

Cars honking people talking all the stores open big crowds in the stores drop your 20-dollar package does anybody care no nobody they all just step on it they don’t look where they’re going just want to get home!  
—Juan Martinez, 7th grade

Lack of punctuation (common with kids) in this case creates an unbroken rush appropriate to the New York street, and in many cases tends to promote the everything-flows sense much poetry seeks to uncover.

By the way hair comes out in the morning, it describes the experience you could have had during the night.  
—Priscila León, 8th grade

A good idea, a possible “branch” of phrenology for the soft-ware psychics of the day. “Come out” is the perfect verb form, with its dual meanings of emerge and result, and “could have had” seems to hint at dream, without denying the chance of “real” adventure.



New York can be colorful when thunder and lightning are splashing through the dark skies. . .

—Maria Villacis, 8th grade

Most adults would not be loose enough to apply “splashing” to thunder too, but it gives the dimension—sound *and* light—that *raises* images, even questions, rather than wrapping them up.

The egg amazes me, its oval shape is so soothing. . .

—Jorge Gezaio, 6th grade

That soothing is amazing amazes me, and that oval shape is soothing soothes me.

A nose is like a hole in the wall.  
But that’s not all. It falls between  
your mouth and your eyes, but when it  
falls it snores.

—José Rodriguez, 7th grade

Children love rhyme. Adults love rhyme. Many in the poetry workshop business have scorned rhyme because we know more subtly expressive alternatives, and because we know kids do abuse rhyme, let it take over and thus blot out everything else (*and* because we’ve been following our own historic rebellion), but rhyme is great; it does give a simple power, often funny by the nature of sound (extreme emphases). It makes solid connections. Also, kids often use rhyme in scattered ways, thus not committing the inaccuracy of over-regularizing life’s energies. In this poem, the double use of “falls” is very quick.

The acrostic is an admirable form for student use. There’s only one letter of requirement per line, which gives enough to go on (kids are often at sea without something leading on) but doesn’t over-dictate. The form’s lightness tends to stimulate surreal juxtapositions and other originalities. Also, the requirement comes at the line-beginning (not at the end as with rhyme), so once the letter is worded the rhythm is free. Acrostics encourage interesting linebreaks, show the kids that lines are not just sentences, or thoughts, but also sound units and fragmentation devices. The form abets the development of subtle, surprising, “off” connections between the spine-word and the text, as well as the economy of lists and near-lists (elimination of connectives).

Again  
Left alone,  
Offended by others.  
No one cares when my love  
Escapes and comes to an end.

—Martha Perez, 8th grade

“Escapes” is an “off” usage hinting that even benevolent love may be a prison of sorts. That to be left alone “offends” is similarly interesting.

Running in circles  
Of love and passion,  
Brainless.  
Everything is  
Really happening because I am  
Thinking of you.

—Robert Marte, 8th grade

A spirited love solipsism.

Under the artificial me which  
No one really knows, I try to  
Deliver the message that I hope  
Everyone will see. What is  
Right or wrong, I am  
Starting to find out.  
Trying to know which one I should do.  
Although I am confused and  
No one is listening and I am almost near  
Death,  
I’m trying to  
Nervously tell  
God to fill me with understanding.

—Jane Martinez, 8th grade

This elaborate, sincere poem has, perhaps by luck, an appropriate confusion that balances the nervous rhythm (mostly via linebreaks) to express a mental process shaking along towards the goal of understanding.

Closed is  
Like blocking  
Off  
Something that might be  
Excellent, or maybe it’s just a plain  
Door.

—José Garcia, 6th grade

Line length here delineates a shapely double shutting—the slow “Off” prefiguring the final “door.”

### Period

Pacing every sentence,  
Erasing every meaning,  
Riding always at end,  
In and out of things;  
Outstanding point never  
Dies.

—Richard Suarez, 6th grade

“Pacing,” “Erasing,” “In and out” and “never/ Dies” bring up a complexity of question about the effects and nature of a period it would take books of philosophy to close again.

Climbing a mountain and  
Reaching the top seems to  
Open the gates of the  
Sun rising and  
Shining over me.

—Joyce Walters, 5th grade

The relationship of “Cross” to the lines is original but immediately clear—the religious spirit calling out the light.

Every  
Day is like a  
Dream from  
Yesterday.

—Eddy Almonte, 7th grade

Complete daily prophetic fulfillment in one’s given name. Also the musical resonance of “everyday/yesterday,” “day/dream” and the name “Eddy.”

Crying  
Roses  
Every moment  
Every day  
Pretending I like it.

—Maribel Cairo, 7th grade

A fresh and perfect rendition of the Ugly Duckling situation.

Pisces  
Is my  
Sign,  
Cool  
Every time. Can’t  
Stop thinking why I’m so fine.

—Ana Grullon, 7th grade

A charming boast. Interesting vowel progression, with an “I” in every line but one.

Bouncing  
Along  
Like the ground was just there to  
Let it spring back into the air.

—Juan Martinez, 7th grade

Neat. Check the rhythm, which is ball-like (as the bounces get shorter).

Fire is an  
Incredible friend  
Ready to turn into an incredible  
Enemy.

—Santiago Negrón, 6th grade

Rhythmically shows the turn.

Math is  
An interesting subject.  
To me it is a  
Hymn of numbers.

—Carmen Alvarez, 6th grade

The last line a beautiful epiphany.

Open your mind to the  
Universe and  
Run back home and get your lunch.

—Juan Lugo, 7th grade

A perfect deflation of overly expansive language.

There are very few collaborations in the following samples. In other connections, however, I’ve found this cluster of forms to be extremely rich, especially as training. Due to the compositional trade-off, the burden of intentionality is lifted. Instead of a point to make, the work’s main thrust becomes a common language to speak. The gap left by purpose tends to be filled with association and response. Focus on syntax as play (a big attitudinal step toward mastery) is encouraged by fragmentation of story and sense.

I have seen  
the tree on the corner  
in a spring bud  
and summer green  
yesterday  
it was yellow gold  
then a cold wind began to blow  
now I know you really don’t see a tree  
until you don’t see its bones.

—Tamara D. & Yvonne Luna, 7th grade

Here the “moves” resemble those of a contemporary poem, adult. “Seen” is echoed in “tree. . . corner;” “corner” expresses a fitting vulnerability of position. “In a spring bud” —a natural prophecy. “Summer green” —sound of “seen” again, also seasonal progression. “Yesterday” is sensible and rhythmic. “Yellow gold” among the spare lines is a striking extravagance, appropriate redundancy. The next line rings the O and blows out the tight rhythm. The last two lines leaf out even more and serve a perfect summing up thought, with sound unsullied.

flea  
flea fly flow  
vista  
commala commala commala vista  
na, na, na, na, na, na a vista  
she’s eni meine epo meine who wa  
awa who meine  
shana meine epo meine oh wa awa  
he’s bip billy epo an tope sho  
wa awa  
awa ani shhhh.

—Sandy Arthurton & Jodi White, 9th grade

Original experimentation with sound. The burden of sole

authorship being removed, the two had the nerve to play with the poem.

### The Moon—It's a Busy Place

Stars walking all over,  
Working hard to shine,  
Who still after years get very little  
pay. But they get a day off to watch  
Their favorite program the Jetsons  
and afterwards go out to light and  
play with their pals, but all of a  
sudden bang boom pop poop a little  
star with her star-pox who got sick  
and wants to find out from what, so  
she goes to the doctor and finds out  
she's allergic to the moon.

—Estella Pando & Maritza Rodrigues, 7th grade

Astral anthropomorphism, a little goofy charm.

The “lune” (adapted from a form of the same name by poet Robert Kelly) is a simplification of formal haiku. Instead of counting syllables, in which act many kids might become overly concerned with the mere mechanics, one counts words: 3/ 5/ 3. With lots of good examples given and discussed, the students do abundantly demonstrate a fine apprehension of the power of tiny, non-expositional, word-by-word effects, plus the necessity of balanced rhythm, which looms large in a short piece. Thus there's a push toward the knowledge that ideas do not exist without their expressive articulations; and the importance of language “per se” is brought home.

When the sun's  
rays hit the shades, it  
lights up lines.

This piece (dashed off by a Nebraska 5th grader years ago) excellently illustrates the possibility of poetry being plain talk of the immediate environment (sun striking venetian blinds on classroom window). It is also a deceptively complex maze of sound correspondences and play: simple rhythms in lines 1 and 3 contrasting with syncopation of line 2 (differing syllable lengths, comma pause, consonantal percussion), n's around soft “the” in line 1 forming a sound-swing, “ray-shades” assonance and “hit-it” rhyme, soft central “the” repeated, five terminal s's, “lights-lines,” “sun's-up,” n again in “lines,” t in “lights”—until “lights up lines” carries more import than the physical window pattern alone. I advise students that the author probably didn't calculate all this but that a careful, though nonspecific, concentration can let the musical phrases come.

In trains people  
are like crazy because they  
push to fit.

—Richard Gard, 5th grade

Idea—concisely crushed. And that it is crazy to “push to fit” is an idea with benevolent social repercussions.



Sky is light.  
Sun will fill the air.  
You will see.

—Monica Grief, 5th grade

Double meaning (see and understand) of last line covers the matter, eye to brain. Plenty of scope in a tiny poem.

Peo, Peo, Peo.  
The bird in the window  
is very hungry.

—Naomi Rodriguez, 6th grade

To me, “Peo” makes hunger immediate and religious.

In every snowflake  
there is a beautiful village  
waiting for you.

—Anelsa Lugo, 6th grade

A lovely thought, not too original (perhaps influenced by children's literature).

Black is dark,  
red and yellow very bright.  
Purple is both.

—Brenda Tavarez, 6th grade

Perfect economy in an original classification of colors.

To give students an unknown word to define playfully allows them obvious free imaginative rein and a chance to imitate a style (the dictionary). Nothing else to do, so play will out. Then, having begun so, upon being asked to make poems out of these images, they're likely to expand the sense of pure image play.

### Mosaic:

a brass instrument or a 2-legged animal or a Chinese calendar  
or a French word or a drop of blood.  
a pair of moccasins, a new traffic sign, children from another  
planet.  
a married boy, a crazy cloud.  
something made of horses' legs.  
a person's name that comes from the sky and glows in  
the dark.

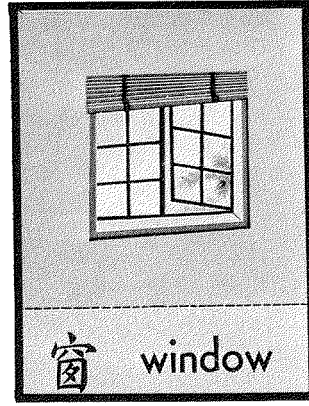
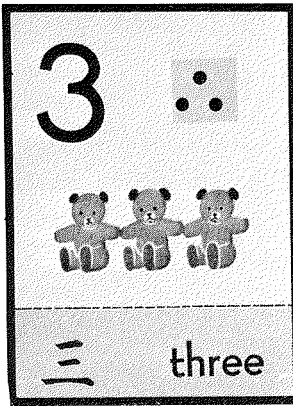
The person is a cloud that glows in the dark. It comes from the sky and sings through the night. Every night I hear the tone, it sounds so beautiful that I sing with that person. Then that person comes out from the sky and starts singing the song once more. Then I knew who the person was, but she's beautiful. She told me her name and it was Mosaic. Then she sang a song about her name.

—Sandra Santiago, 5th grade

### Praline:

a duck with a burned leg.  
a bag of dirty tricks.  
a line of peas.  
a beautiful flower with the scent of Death.  
a mouse that sucks blood.  
a soft road with cushions to sleep on, or maybe a tent.  
a pair of blue pants.  
the planet of  
the peas came on TV,  
the green takeover.

—Daniel Constant, 6th grade



This place in Dominican Republic is in the country. There is no electricity but there is a feeling of necessity to talk in the dark. We make jokes and riddles but then there's sleepiness and people start to leave. We are all in what you might call a shack but there's no doors, just logs, which hold the shack up, and the roof is all of tree palms. Now it's very dark, we put one candle in the middle of the shack and then the candle goes off because of the breeze. So then we wait and then moonlight comes from the sky of the night. And the moonlight gives light to the outside of the shack, which is good; when we go we can see where we are going. It sometimes gets spooky and I get nervous but the stories, jokes and riddles calm me down. After that I sleep on the rocking chair.

—Rafael Torres, 8th grade

I don't wish to dwell on haiku here, but one of the chief effects in such compression may be a stunning time-warp, as in:

Snow on a bare tree,  
suddenly sunshine comes through.  
Pop! The leaves come out.

—Maribelle Suarez, 7th grade

You don't have to make  
your bed, because sooner or  
later you'll be dead.

—Marc Santiago, 7th grade

One of the great areas of possible expression which are at least as poignantly available to children's sensibilities as to adults' is that of place. Kids are, by nature of their special need to define themselves, especially keen in getting takes on their surroundings, and are also likely to be open, without prejudice, to the local facts. Generally, kids need only be pushed in the direction of details to uncover a vivid, individuated articulation about the places they know.

Feeling low and  
Feeling down,  
I go to the special place.  
I quietly sit, forcing myself to stay.  
I was out, now I'm back.  
Now I want to play.  
But my fingers won't bring forth a  
melody.  
I try to imagine myself far away  
from what is reality.  
I'm sitting in a little corner of  
the room.  
It's small and it's ordinary.  
But it's my special place.  
Because it's the only place that I can  
Run away with my mind.  
Sitting very still,  
Only my fingers doing the moving.  
I concentrate very hard.  
And suddenly I'm not there any more.  
I'm in my imaginary world,  
completely gone.  
The only trace of me that's left in  
My little corner of the room  
Is the melody that my hands bring  
Forth, from the magic box in front of me.

—Jane Martinez, 8th grade

Innocence—of literary conventions, of a matured scheme of thought, of regular English usage—in children allows certain brightnesses to come through that tend to pass less freely into the poems of adults. Relative innocence of grammar and syntax leaves room for oddities of expression to emerge and force, in the reader/hearer, fresh looks at the words or combinations used. Innocence of philosophy (except the most obvious generalities) allows original and concrete juxtapositions of idea. The concreteness, the dominance of sense data, leads to speed, concision, sudden leaps and shifts, and playfulness of association, qualities that seem to resemble the momentary workings of the mind. Innocence of literariness encourages unembellished, “natural” speech patterns, with their history-honed rhythms, economy and fitness of emphasis. Innocence makes possible an ease of communication with the moment. Children's works sometimes have a clear documentary authenticity of the immediate authorial awareness.

These qualities, resulting from lack of sophistication, as I take it, are valuable. In adults' poetry, violations of English standards are commonly allowed, even encouraged, as artistic experimentation, and then judged on how they seem to work. Children may be similarly abetted in their originalities. (I often wonder how many striking images or phrasings are thought of only to be crossed out or even unwritten as “stupid,” or as risking disapproval, and lost to us all.) We understand the necessity of “the child in the poet,” so why not create similar room for the poet in the child without harming educational discipline. In fact, the child who takes to poetry experimentally will certainly develop a love of language leading to increased mastery of standards as well as to an artistic sense. If the initiation into making poems is led with an appreciation for untrammelled, even jarring, verbal energies, with teacherly suggestions formally poised between too much and too little, the poetic impetus may then exist, in the first place, and then can move toward exactitude as work goes on. It's important not only to praise the successes written but also to point out just how they seem to succeed, because technical details, especially when put in physical terms, can be both absorbing and reassuring to children.

In any case, the seeing and judging of children's poetry should proceed case-by-case as, on whatever level, the best of it is made.

# Finding a Window

by Dan Cheifetz

SOMETHING DISTURBINGLY AMISS IN MY teaching.

I've taught creative writing workshops in public schools all over the city but have never encountered the problems I am having with this class of suburban junior high schoolers.

I start to conduct an exercise and one of them makes a remark out loud. Another picks it up, raucous laughter breaks out, the noise level rises, my anger rises. Some seem to like what I'm doing but little writing gets done because of the disruptions, the peer pressure to delay and goof. It's getting to me.

Their classroom teacher, an imposingly tall man, sits in the class during my workshop period, grading papers. He involves himself not at all in what I'm trying to do, as if to say to his students, it's time out, do what you want, this isn't important anyhow. When they really go off the wall, he yells at them that they'll have to stay after school if they don't behave. They quiet down, he goes back to grading papers, they go back to sabotaging what I'm doing.

Am I losing my touch? I don't think so. I'm conducting a videotape project with another class in the same school, getting some surprisingly good writing from students who are supposed to be "remedial" in language arts. Their classroom teacher actively participates in the project. She conducts her class like Mehta conducts the Philharmonic, everyone in tune, playing and producing. Our collaboration and success with students only intensify my sense of victimization in the big guy's class.

He had said to me when we started that kids are lazy, they do nothing they don't have to. He doesn't seem to know anything about how to help youngsters enjoy learning. I think it's because he doesn't enjoy teaching, or likes only the power part of it. His students seem to respect him only as an authority figure they've got to please in order to advance.

I try an invention exercise that has always been sure-fire. I ask them to invent something in their heads that doesn't exist now but that might make life easier and more fun for them. It can be powered by electricity, thought control, magic, anything they choose. Then they are to write a one-minute TV commercial selling their invention.

As example, I read the description of "Side-Way Glasses", invented by a former student: You use Side-Way Glasses to see the answers on the test paper of the smart person sitting next to you. As usual, some of them like the project and want to try it but others get restless almost immediately.

One boy who seems obsessed with sex, calls out an obscene invention. Another, mesmerized by sports, drives an imaginary hockey puck against the wall, "wham!" A boy

harrasses a blooming girl whose feeble protest invites more attention. I try to stem the rising tide. I say sternly how much other students have liked this project. There's a plaintive note in this, as if I'm asking, how can you be so mean to such a dedicated, creative teacher?

They get quiet for a moment when their teacher remonstrates with them, and do some writing, but later the rowdiness starts up again. I end up shouting and sending two of them to the principal's office.

After the session, their teacher tells me bluntly that what I'm doing isn't working. "You better think of something else." Furious, I say that what I do almost always works but his class is too undisciplined and unmotivated to handle the creative freedom I give them. He says, "They're just not interested." I retort that I'm going to continue my curriculum; it's a proven way to help young people realize how enjoyable writing can be. (That's a laugh. . . nothing enjoyable is happening, for them, for him or for me.) I end up stalking out of the classroom.

I'm quite upset and feel in the grip of a repression composed of critical teacher and undisciplined class. I attribute the children's attitude to his. There's male competitiveness in it too; I'm showing his students an alternate way of learning, and I imagine he regards me as an interloper, interfering with his grip on his class. The struggle is certainly uneven; he's their classroom teacher after all. Yet I vow that he's not going to bully me into changing my course.

But I'm not having a good time at all. If I don't do something, I'll either have to quit or resign myself to being miserable the rest of the term.

Some of the teachers I've worked with have told me how they've tried new roles and methods in stress situations, changing their own attitude rather than concentrating on the external dilemma. I can elect to be stubborn, competitive, hold on to the repression like a Gila monster clamps down on what's between its jaws; or, find a window in it somewhere, an opening to challenge my teaching skill. I admit painfully that I'm no longer all that interested in the kind of activities I have been doing with the unruly class.

I tell myself, forget the class and the teacher. Do something that pleases and challenges *you*. I've never taught poetry, though I've written some, and I've been intrigued with what some of my teaching colleagues have done with haiku. I've been a little afraid of doing likewise, fearing I could be out of my element. But I had recently read about teaching haiku in *The Whole Word Catalogue 2*, and on the train to the school, I try writing some. I write in the precise, satisfying three-line structure about what I see around me. A silvery train hissing and hesitating in a station. A tilted pile of old tires jaunty in a junkyard. A frowning tall woman in a frowsy white hat. I enjoy the laconic images I set down, the compactness of the form, the suggestible mystery of the un-said. I am so tied up with my haiku I almost miss my stop.

Elated by my new skill, I walk quickly to the school through a snowfall. I open my workshop with the students by joking about myself in the train, so busy writing haiku I have to fumble for my things at the last moment, with not even enough time to put on my coat before I have to get out. The students enjoy this portrait of an absent-minded professor. One boy, the sports fanatic, asks me to read what I've writ-

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ten. I do. Some of them “put down” my haiku, almost reflexively, but one student says she likes the one about the lady in the white hat. Another liked the jaunty tire stack.

I read them some classical haiku, then give them to read aloud some haiku written by other students their age. There is a freshness and attentiveness in the room. I hear one student say, “I could do that,” and another, “Yeah!” The room is a little noisy, but with excitement and anticipation, not hysteria.

I ask them to describe haiku and they call out—short; lots of adjectives; three lines. One girl says it’s what you might see a moment after you blink your eyes. “It’s like taking a picture,” a boy says. I feel they now understand the form, and I let them take a crack at it.

The boys call out to each other but this time it’s to share their haiku. Students want to read aloud what they’ve written and do. “How many should we write?” asks someone and I say, “As many as you can think of.” I write some more myself and read one aloud; it gets a groan but I couldn’t care less. It’s hard to believe this is the same group of kids.

The sports-minded boy reads one of his, the first time he’s really done anything in the group. I praise it. I also say there may be some unnecessary words in it, so would he mind if the class worked on it as a lesson in using words economically? Learning to use words economically is like a player learning to eliminate excess movements. He doesn’t mind, he’s happy to be the center of attention, and his haiku becomes

Darryl Dawkins  
Dunks shot  
Breaks backboard!

He does another on his own and it’s clear he’s learned quickly:

Todd on the 30  
Fades back  
Sacked!

The blooming pre-teenager writes,

Look up  
Be happy  
Try to impress.

The tall teacher, my nemesis, is paying attention now. He’s impressed with the focused energy in the room, clearly happy that his class is finally performing well. I realize he’s taken their scatteredness as a reflection on him; now he can be proud of them instead of defensive.

Our eyes meet and I feel our differences dissolve for a moment in the experience teachers so passionately desire: the excitement of seeing their students turned on by learning. It’s the teacher’s act of creation.

What I had been doing before seemed the essence of educational creativity, but underneath it was frozen. I had been insisting that what I was doing *had to work*; the students only had to work at it. I saw only the repressiveness until I looked for the window of play for me. My risking the unknown a little, looking for the surprise for myself around the corner, helped free me from the repression which, it turned out, was a lot in *me*.

I realized too that good curriculum is often a match between what the students need and what the teacher needs. When a teacher challenges himself or herself, the students, sensing the teacher’s excitement in new learning, may be excited and challenged themselves. And I took the competition with the teacher to a deeper level, to what competition is really all about: competition with myself, to keep my work—my play in work—vital. ●

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## Splats and Metaphors

by Joan Daniels Gozzi

I CAN’T DRAW. I CAN’T SCULPT. I CAN’T PAINT. Clearly, I am not an art teacher. So, when I asked my fifth graders to bring an old smock to their next language arts class, they responded with looks of disbelief. How could a woman whose chalkboard stick figures look as if they’d been drawn by a chimpanzee dare to suggest that she could conduct an art lesson and one during language arts time at that?

I deliberately kept the reasons for my audacity from my students throughout the first of two fifty-minute lessons that would integrate the verbal and visual arts. They did not know that watercolor “happenings” would become the medium through which I would teach metaphor.

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Naturally, I had prepared for this experience. I had waited until midyear when my students knew me well enough to trust me. By this time, they were certain that I would not be harshly judgmental about first efforts and were aware that I often placed high priority on process rather than product. Also, I had often shown them how book illustrations and text work together, which helped the students make stronger connections between the visual and verbal.

The classroom had to be ready, too. Newspapers on the floor around the edges of the room lay ready to receive finished wet work. Since we had no sink in our room, we used two buckets, one filled with clean water and the other empty to catch dirty water. Six clusters of four desks, also covered with newspaper, held paint boxes, cups for water, precut white drawing paper of various sizes, brushes, pieces of sponge, straws, and tissues. We were ready to begin.

Once my excited students were seated, I started my pep-talk. “Yes,” I reminded them, “this is a language class. Yes, words are the pieces of language which help us express ideas. But there are other ways to do this, without words. For example, who can say, ‘I’m angry!’ without words?” At this point, Paul made a fist and an ugly face. Mime, then,



was the first answer. Soon other children volunteered that dance, music, sculpture, and, of course, painting were also means of expression. “Today then,” I continued, “our language will be color, shape, line, and texture. We will let watercolors do the talking.”

Over the sighs of approval, a protest or two could be heard. “But I’m no good at art. I can’t paint!” This was my clue to refer to the abstract art my students had learned about in their art appreciation classes. They were relieved to learn that I did not want to see any realistic paintings. Instead, I wanted splats, spatters, drizzles, and blobs.

To prove I really meant this, I moved about the room praising the freest creations. When Terry discovered that he could make “soft rainbows” by wetting the paper before applying the colors, I urged him to share that discovery with his friends. When Ann realized that she could create a “puddle with legs” by tipping her paper, Pam tried it, too. She then took dry paper and blotted the first “happening” to make an interesting print. Again I encouraged sharing. Borrowing another person’s techniques was not to be seen as “copying,” but, rather, as a stepping stone to a more original effort later on.

When I saw that everyone was participating, I, too, joined the fun. Blowing through straws to spread drops of color on the paper made me a bit dizzy but produced some satisfying results.

Time passed almost too quickly, but the remaining ten minutes were enough to accomplish a reluctant cleanup. Lesson one had been a colorful success.

The next day, Lesson two began with furniture pushed to the edges of the room so students could sit in a circle on carpet squares on the floor. I reassured everyone that they would have a chance to share their paintings later on in the period, but that first I wanted them to experience something else. Holding up Natalia Belting’s book, *The Sun Is a Golden Earring*, I explained that I preferred not to show the illustrations this time (although they are lovely). Instead I

began reading from the text, selected pages of metaphorical nature images from folklore. I wanted the language to stand alone, for greater impact. “Some say the sun is a golden earring, the earring of a beautiful girl.” . . .

Discussion followed. “All through time,” I explained, “man has tried to understand his environment—the stars, moon, wind, sun, etc. Now we know that the sun is really a ball of hot gases. Early man didn’t know this. He did his best to explain it by making a comparison. The sun looked like the bright and shining jewelry worn by his wife or sister. But, notice that the words in the book do *not* include the word ‘like’ to make a simile. (You all remember what a simile is, don’t you?) By saying the sun *is* a golden earring, the comparison is made, but more strongly, more directly, and more poetically. This is called metaphor.”

After a bit more discussion, I suggested that if early man could express himself poetically, we certainly could. Yesterday’s artwork would help.

We spread our creations before us on the floor to make a sea of watercolors. After I urged the children to look at them for pictures or “images” which reminded them of things in nature, I asked them to describe these things as primitive people might. The room was soon flooded with metaphors. “Stars are skyflowers blooming in a night garden,” whispered Karen, one of the least verbal children in the class. “A TORNADO,” shouted George, waving a paper showing a dark grey squiggle, “is a hungry monster sucking up rocks and trees for dinner!” “And waterfalls are the tears of giants,” added Liz.

The culmination of these “happenings” was a thick colorful book, a collective nature poem. Each child had authored and illustrated his or her own page and was proud of it. My reward was in the realization that although I was no art teacher I had found that a visual approach to writing poetry, or at least fragments of it, definitely released the children’s ability to abstract and to explore the wonderfully suggestive connections between the visual and the verbal. ●

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## Writing in the Long Run

by Elaine Epstein

**M**ANY VISITING WRITERS IN THE CLASSROOM have found that articulate, imaginative literature evokes articulate, imaginative student writing, especially with detailed discussions before and after the students do their writing. Students can speak through their pens creatively, and in surprising detail, but what happens to these writing discoveries after the visiting writer departs? when a class doesn’t focus on “creative writing” projects? when a student wants to go a step beyond imitation and direct influence of great literature? Too often an articulated personality then goes adrift; the river of imagination works itself into a freeze.

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As the visiting writer, my advice for preventing this is uncomplicated and frightfully simple: have students write, write everyday. Encourage them to keep journals. Promote class responses in written as well as oral forms. Reawaken the art of letter writing (even to someone who lives in the same town or sits across the aisle in class). Pass out paper and have students write, impromptu, at the least expected times. Use writing for communication that is personal as well as formal, subjective as well as objective. Most importantly, expect some writing to express an incomplete thesis instead of a finished product. Writing should become a natural and intrinsic part of the process of inquiry and communication, i.e., something done everyday, like breathing, something that really involves an individual’s character.

You can teach your students separate writing skills; you can repeatedly point to outstanding passages in literature that employ those skills; you can possibly have the opportunity to engage a visiting writer to work with your class for any number of sessions; you can even bring about your students’ total, intense enthusiasm for literature and writing. But without a comprehensive writing program as part of the

everyday class structure, writing that sounds just like predictably “creative writing” will proliferate. That kind of “packaged” writing endangers the essential, authentic link that must be made between a student’s personality and writing “voice.” Writing is a creative act, but the product need not be the usual, stale “creative writing.” The result should be expression that is as honest and exact as possible, bearing the stamp of the writer’s character.

Let me give you an example. A ninth-grade boy, the first day of my second year in his class, wrote the following excerpt:

#### The Sun

With its burnt orange  
shade, it slowly glides  
across the naked sky.

It has a strong, natural rhythm, an active verb, thoughtful adjectives, and a fitting adverb; not bad. This student had remembered the components of lively writing, but hadn’t yet incorporated them into his own personal written communication. Writing, for him, lay in the realm of “creative writing.” This example confirmed my belief that visiting writers can strike a unique spark of enthusiasm for students and teachers, but the struggle for students to learn how to express their needs and ideas demands attention on a daily basis.

The lack of an authentic, natural voice and deep-seated imagery in this student passage is not solely a student’s problem. I find myself in the same boat when circumstances keep me from my desk for a long period of time. After such a hiatus, the first drafts of poems sound like what poems are *supposed* to be, in line with literature I’ve recently read. These initial drafts first seem eloquent, original, or of *my* voice and character, but rereading these first drafts later, I realize that I suffer from the same misconception of what “creative writing” is as my students do. The remedy for me is to keep writing, without preconceived notions of what a final product should look and sound like, with only the drive to write of my concerns and inclinations, using a language that mirrors my character. It is this daily process that finally produces an honest and interesting poem. I believe that many other writers endure a similar experience when returning to their desks after a long absence.

So, when I answer teachers’ inquiries about approaching a comprehensive writing program, I think of this dilemma not particular to students—the dilemma of producing lively writing with a stamp of an individual’s character is one we all face. No matter how much I may be able to accomplish with certain students in a short time, the most important teacher *is* time, and a student’s continual writing, be it poems, stories, letters, journals, or research papers. Only then will the experiences of the writer’s mind be engraved with a personal signature.

#### Questions Teachers Ask

*When faced with so much student writing, how can I grade it all, every week?*

1. You don’t have to. Leave personal writing ungraded, but discuss it occasionally with your students.
2. Use students as critics and editors in a writer of the week/month (or whatever time span suits your needs) program.\*

*If so much writing is ungraded, how can we keep up our emphasis on correct grammar and punctuation?*

1. Point out technical problems in ungraded papers by letting students know that grammar and punctuation rules simply *assure* the writer of not being misread or misunderstood. These rules give the writer control over what the reader finds out, and how, and when.
2. Over time, with encouragement and *continual* writing, correct grammar and punctuation will become naturally useful for the involved writer who has the need to say something in a certain, individualized fashion: the emergence of style!

*What are some end-of-the-year results to be expected from such a vast accumulation of writings?*

Ask yourself if a particular student has moved toward becoming more articulate in speaking and writing, has become less intimidated when faced with written communication, has discovered something about himself or herself through writing. If the answer is yes to any of the above questions, progress has definitely been accomplished.

\*Refer to *T&W Magazine* 13/2, “Some Pitfalls of Long Residencies.”

## How Well Do You Know Teachers?

(A Self-Test for Americans)

by Daniel Dyer

**Directions:** Put the letter of the best answer next to each question.

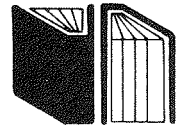
- \_\_\_\_ 1. Name of the housing development where a typical teacher lives
  - a. Brentwood Estates
  - b. Elk Grove Village
  - c. Sturbridge Canyon Condominiums
  - d. Bob’s Trailer Park
- \_\_\_\_ 2. The model of car a typical teacher drives
  - a. Cougar
  - b. Thunderbird
  - c. Fox
  - d. Wart Hog
- \_\_\_\_ 3. A typical teacher’s favorite TV show
  - a. Masterpiece Theatre
  - b. Sixty Minutes
  - c. The Shakespeare Plays
  - d. Re-runs of Room 222, Mr. Novak, Lucas Tanner, Our Miss Brooks, White Shadow, Mr. Peepers

DANIEL DYER is currently teaching English and German in the Aurora City Schools in Aurora, Ohio.

- \_\_\_ 4. A teacher's favorite beverage
  - a. Perrier
  - b. Cutty Sark
  - c. any 19th-century wine
  - d. Alka-Seltzer
- \_\_\_ 5. How a teacher spends his/her weekends
  - a. re-reading Proust
  - b. attending symphony concerts
  - c. engaging in original scholarly research
  - d. sleeping on the couch
- \_\_\_ 6. Color of a typical teacher's kitchen appliances
  - a. avocado
  - b. harvest gold
  - c. pearl gray
  - d. all of the above
- \_\_\_ 7. A teacher's favorite snack
  - a. shrimp
  - b. caviar
  - c. salmon dip
  - d. Valium
- \_\_\_ 8. A typical teacher's favorite sport
  - a. polo
  - b. thoroughbred racing
  - c. lawn tennis
  - d. lounge talk
- \_\_\_ 9. Designer of a teacher's clothes
  - a. Gloria Vanderbilt
  - b. Bill Blass
  - c. Jordache
  - d. Emmett Kelly
- \_\_\_ 10. Teachers' salaries
  - a. mean of \$50,000
  - b. mean of \$40,000
  - c. mean of \$30,000
  - d. mean
- \_\_\_ 11. Type of creative writing a teacher likes to do
  - a. short stories
  - b. poems
  - c. novels
  - d. report card comments
- \_\_\_ 12. Facial make-up worn by female teachers
  - a. Lancôme
  - b. Clinique
  - c. Chanel
  - d. Chalkdüst
- \_\_\_ 13. A teacher's lawn care is done by
  - a. Pierre's Pruning and Landscaping
  - b. ChemLawn
  - c. Lawnmark Assoc.
  - d. Three Billy Goats Gruff
- \_\_\_ 14. Heating fuel used in a teacher's home
  - a. solar energy
  - b. oil
  - c. natural gas
  - d. buffalo chips
- \_\_\_ 15. Reason people choose teaching as a career
  - a. money
  - b. status in community
  - c. job security
  - d. unknown

- 15 right: You are a teacher—or a teacher's spouse. (No fair.)
- 12-14 right: You figured out the pattern to the answers but just couldn't believe they'd *all* be "d."
- 9-11 right: You are functionally illiterate.
- 5-8 right: You are deceased.
- 0-4 right: You voted NO on your last school tax issue. ●

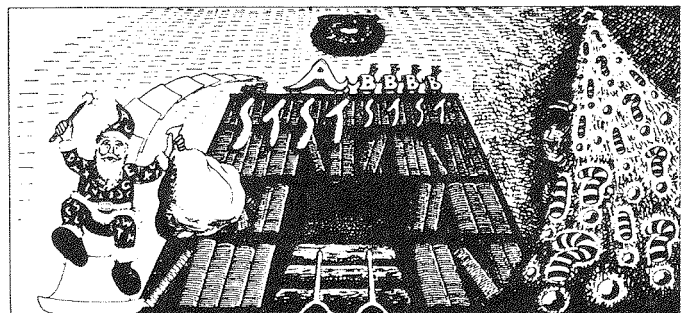
# BOOKS



*A Visit from St. Alphabet*, poem and illustrations by  
 Dave Morice  
 (The Toothpaste Press, 1982, P.O. Box 546, West Branch,  
 Iowa 52358)  
 \$5 paperback, 24 pp.

## Review by Ron Padgett

LIKE MANY OTHERS BEFORE HIM, POET DAVE Morice has taken Clement Moore's poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" and turned it into something else, usually with comic results. What is exceptional about Morice's *A Visit from St. Alphabet* is that it is a light, delicate, and charming piece of fantasy. And it has educational overtones.



In it we have St. Alphabet instead of St. Nicholas, with corresponding substitutions throughout. Morice's poem begins:

'Twas the night before X, when all through the Y  
 Not a letter was stirring, not even an I;  
 The S's were hung by the T's with care  
 In the hopes that St. Alphabet would soon be there;  
 The Z's were nestled all snug in their beds,  
 While visions of W's danced in their heads;  
 And U in your kerchief, and I in my cap,  
 Had just settled our words for a long writer's nap,—  
 When out of the paper there rose such a clatter,  
 I sprang from my sentence to see what was the matter.

RON PADGETT edits *T&W Magazine*. With Bill Zavatsky he co-edited *The Whole Word Catalogue 2* (T&W/McGraw-Hill).

**Scoring key & interpretation of scores:**  
 All answers are letter "d."

It is of course the arrival of St. Alphabet.

More rapid than pencils his pages they came,  
And he wrote and typed, and called them by name:  
"Now, P! now, O! now, E and T!  
On, P! on, A! on, G and E!  
To the top of the shelf, to the top of the wall!  
Now tell away, yell away, spell away all!"

Instead of ordinary presents, he has brought the magic of the letters of our alphabet, which sparkle and fly like little visions. The poem ends with:

But I read in the sky, ere he wrote out of sight,  
"Happy Alphabet to all, and to all a good write!"

This airy and happy fantasy is complemented by eight illustrations (also by the poet), clever drawings tinted with light pink and light blue. It's all enough to make you like Christmas as much as your students do.

I should imagine they would like this book, too. Tastefully produced by the Toothpaste Press, one of the best independent publishers in the country, *A Visit from St. Alphabet* is perfect for both elementary and junior high students (and high school students who have been lucky enough to retain some of their childishness), around Christmas or any other time. Maybe one of the reasons this book is so fresh and attractive is that it obviously wasn't conceived as a commercial educational product specifically designed for teachers of grades one through blah blah blah. It just happens to be perfect.

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# LETTER



June 15, 1982

Dear T&W,

It's near the end of school, but I have to write you about your article, "Writing Creative Facts" (*T&W Magazine* 13/5). It was just great! Most of what needs to be said you

gracefully mentioned, and I hope many English teachers eventually read this piece. . .

I'm going to show this issue of *T&W* to my fellow seventh grade science teacher, who joined with me in a "Nature Poetry" unit that followed your experience pretty closely. What you felt and learned, we did too. Your article confirms for both my science colleague and me the good feelings we had when we finished the unit and sent some of our student poetry off to a local newspaper for publication.

Sean Budlong  
Fox Lane Middle School  
Bedford, N.Y.

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## PLUGS



The 1982-83 *Teachers & Writers Catalogue* is now available, offering over 60 books and magazines, many of them new, for creative teachers. If you'd like a copy of the catalogue, or if you'd like one sent to a colleague, or if you need copies for your teachers' center, please contact Charles Liebling, Publications Distribution Manager, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 84 Fifth Avenue, Room 307, New York, N.Y. 10011 (212/691-6590). It's free.

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The 1982 edition of the CCLM (Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines) *Catalog of Literary Magazines* is now available. A directory with descriptive entries for over 340 literary magazines, it is used by writers interested in publishing in such magazines, by librarians as a reference tool, and by booksellers, publishers, and teachers. The *Catalog* includes addresses, editors' names, telephone numbers, types of material published, special interests, frequency, circulation, single copy and subscription rates, and advertising rates. It is indexed by state and by special interest, and entries are listed alphabetically by magazine. The *Catalog* is available for \$4.95, post paid, from CCLM, 1133 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10010. All orders must be pre-paid.

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