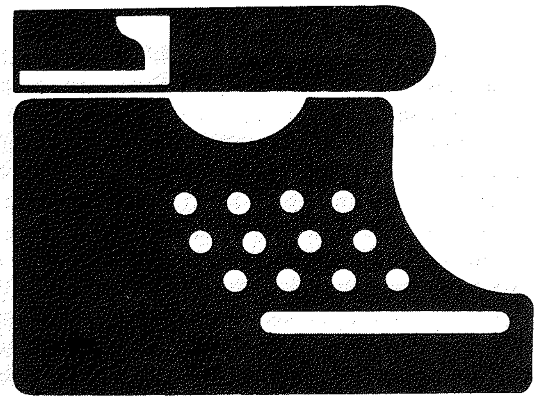
Teachers & Writers



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Special Issue!

My High School English Teacher

I ASKED ACCOMPLISHED WRITERS OF DIFFERENT STRIPES, "KNOWING WHAT YOU KNOW NOW ABOUT writing, what would you say to your favorite (or least favorite) high school English teacher?" Their answers, sometimes more in the form of recollections than of direct addresses to the teachers themselves, make up this issue of *Teachers & Writers* magazine.

As guest editor I have come to look at the commentaries as speeches at a banquet where I am the M.C. I see myself standing to introduce the speakers, perhaps getting the attention of the audience with a sharp rap of a ruler on the podium. I use the opportunity to single out a couple of my teachers from Robert E. Lee High School in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I praise Mrs. Sandefer for her even-handed support of her students' tentative literary efforts. I advise Mrs. Church to listen closer to the guys with the duck-tails instead of putting them down. (If they had been able to speak or write their minds in her class, they might not have torched the auditorium, a great domed structure hailed in *Time* magazine as a trend-setter in the architecture of educational buildings.) Then I introduce John Cage, who delivers a brief, wise, and loving benediction.

As other authors follow him to the lectern, the show begins to write itself. The teachers in the audience perhaps wish they could pencil into the margins of the banquet hall: "Stick to the subject!" The spotlight seeks out those teachers whose names are mentioned. Some are found standing in the glow of their haloes. Only the coattails of others are seen, however, diving beneath the tables and making their exits, the image of themselves replacing The King and The Duke in coats of tar and feathers giving them a new and surprising celerity.

Dale Worsley, Guest Editor

I CAN'T REMEMBER YOUR NAMES, BUT THANK you for the classes. The attention given to language, reading writing speaking, turned us all into poets, if not for life or a long time, at least for a moment. In no other classes was there such a concentration on a material, language, with which something could be made, prose and/or poetry.

—JOHN CAGE, author of *Themes and Variations* (Station Hill Press, 1982).

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IT WAS 7:15 A.M. IT WAS DES MOINES, 1963. THE high school halls were dim, the floors still clean and polished from the night before. We stood in line outside Miss Brody's classroom, awaiting her arrival. We were beautiful; we were affluent; we were ambitious. Our hair was teased into beehives or forced into tight flips; our sweaters were dyed to match our tight skirts. Our men wore blue button-down Gants, chinos, and brown penny loafers. We were identical, yet we scrutinized and judged each other daily. But not this morning—our eyes were closed tight in concentration, our lips moving silently like those of old men and women praying before statues of saints. We were rehearsing for the ultimate cruelty: each student had to memorize and flawlessly recite two hundred lines of poetry to *pass* senior English.

Even the parents thought this was going too far. Already there was one short story or essay to be written each week, one book to be read and reviewed orally each month, one senior thesis to be formidably researched, written, and accurately footnoted before the end of the term—now only three weeks away. What kind of woman would expect all this, and in addition, require her students to line up *before and after* school hours to recite two hundred lines of verse?

The door at the end of the hall opened. In the woman came. She was wearing one of her usual shapeless purple crêpe dresses; her hair was ineffectively gathered into a gray bun, which she appeared to have fixed once, ten years ago. She lumbered noisily down the hall toward us, balancing as usual on the elaborate crutches cuffed to her forearms—dragging one hideous elevated shoe well behind the other. She had been crippled in a car accident in which her fiancé was killed; they were both twenty. We passed this sentence—the entire story of her life—among us easily, knowing such a thing could never happen to us. She hardly seemed loveable: her eyes did not twinkle—they glittered with irony. Her smile, also ironic, intimidated us. She seldom missed a chance to lance a wry bon mot at our expense. She challenged our casual misusages by consistently, publicly sending us to the *O.E.D.*, to read aloud the correct definition. We dreaded this humiliation. Only once had the dictionary penalty ever backfired, putting the joke on her. Dougie Beach called Francis Bacon a *nut.* "Look it up," Miss Brody snapped. With a marvelous poker face, he read aloud the official definition of a nut: *a hard fruit.* The class collapsed in hysterics. Perhaps our fear of Miss Brody raised the decibels and deepened the need for a long communal guffaw. We roared, we fell on the floor, we held our sides for ten minutes. Dougie had, in our current vernacular, called Francis Bacon a homosexual with an erection.

There would be no such laughter this morning, unless it was on us. Miss Brody unlocked the door, clambered to her desk, leaned her crutches against the blackboard, and sat, ears cocked, pencil poised over gradebook. I recited "Dover Beach," a Browning poem, and Macbeth's famous dark soliloquy. The sound of the words in my mouth was impressive, and from embarrassment I galloped along, murdering the lilt, violating the complexity. "Tis a tale," I finished (she let the *'tis* go by), "told by/An idiot, full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing." I was glad that she counted the half-empty closing line, "Signifying nothing," as a whole line. It made the total I needed to pass.

Twenty years later, I understood a bit more about what poetry might mean to a woman like that. I had come back to words myself, as a writer of short stories. Words and their order, words and their sounds, words and their meanings held me together like a net, a chickenwire form beneath the surface of a plaster doll. I had seen the nothing. The only antidote to the panic was to hear it beautifully named.

Perhaps I was predisposed to find such redemption in language. I had envied my mother's restrained and elegant voice, over the long distance wire, softly reciting an Emily Dickinson poem she knew by heart as she sat in the waiting room of the Mayo Clinic, waiting to hear how far dad's cancer had spread:

> Elysium is as far as to
> The very nearest room
> If in that room a friend await
> Felicity or doom.
>
> What fortitude the soul contains
> That it can so endure
> The accent of a coming foot
> The opening of a door.

Those of us—teachers, editors, writers, readers—who find in literature our morphine, our mantras, our St. Christopher's medals, consequently find ourselves in a socio-cultural vacuum. We would prefer, as would any healthy soul, to be at the center of our society's concerns, to be at the top of our nation's list of values. That we are not, we must deal with in our own ways. Some of us cultivate an illusion of *elite,* reversing the rejection. Others sink helplessly into passivity, deadened by the lack of acknowledgement, burdened with the weight of self-doubt. The lucky—those who are constitutionally able—find ways to say "fuck it," to force their good feelings for literature to the fore again and again, with workshops, seminars, writing groups, reading groups, letters, discussions. The reward is narrow but sure—a feeling of inner strength and substance, the satisfaction of doing something out of passion, out of love.

Last year a few things happened in rapid succession that had my head spinning and my spine tingling for weeks. It began January 1st, 1984. In honor of Orwell's Winston, I resolved to commit my favorite poems to memory. I began with the old "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow"—which I had forgotten since twelfth grade. Only a week later, I happened to be watching the great Shakespearean actor, Ian McKellan, perform his one-man show on Broadway. At an emotionally taut moment, he slid into an explication of those ten lines of Macbeth's—Shakespeare's—darkest vision. He concluded with the assertion that the final line, "Signifying nothing," was intended by Shakespeare to be metrically complete—its final four beats of nothingness a brilliant zen twist.

A few weeks later, Miss Brody died. A friend sent me the obituary clipped from the *Des Moines Register,* along with a copy of a recent feature article about her. Happily, at 79, her faculties were intact. She read avidly and conversed intelligently each day and reflected on her years of teaching—remembering by name which of her students had produced worthy senior theses, and which, unfortunately, had not.

—LUCIA NEVAI, whose most recent story will be appearing in *Prairie Schooner.*

WHAT CAN I TELL MY FORMER TEACHERS OF the English language, knowing what I know now about writing?

Well, if you, the Reader, can walk with me into some nostalgic zone, we can hang out as immigrants, observe fragments from my kaleidoscopic past, and perhaps discover something of what it means to "become" a writer.

Yes, to these teachers, I was more of an immigrant than a potential wordmaker. Witness for yourself the presence of a ten-year-old with silent eyes, timid yet pensive. He is entering an elementary school where he will be forced to surrender his living language, Spanish, while being bullied into turning his back on his home culture. From the very beginning, he was considered a funny-talker whose accent was far too thick to be accepted as native. The ABCs came hard, often intimidating that youngster. He was less a newcomer than a prisoner of education, helplessly fighting to maintain his own sense of integrity. Because he was not allowed to speak Spanish (and was often punished when he did so), it occurred to him that this was an act of war. And he was damn right: American schooling meant the suppression of self-expression.

But why? Why? he often asked himself. Why must I be made to act and think like everybody else? Why must such an indescribable language as English be used to dominate my thinking rather than to cultivate my mind and potential? All my I.Q. and reading tests were an outrageous attempt to invade my identity. When this did not work, I was straight-jacketed into some dull, characterless room that was also disguised as a workshop for the "slow," "culturally deprived" and "disadvantaged."

I was determined to survive the American Dream machine. No one was going to belittle me. My pride was intolerable to them. I was difficult. The English language was not going to red-pen and pencil-push my mind for the stuffed shirts. No one was going to jeer at and spit upon, push or elbow my sense of being. I was not going to be entangled in a web of acculturation. No way, José!

I escaped and hid in Art Appreciation classrooms, where I could dream or paint perfectly beautiful square houses with sun and shine gushing out of the skies. They were moments of respite, times when I did not have to feel that English was either some gigantic nuisance or an adversary hitting me from all sides with Who, What, When, Where, Why. . . and HOW!

And what happened when I stood defiant and spoke my native tongue? I was sent to the dean—a mild-mannered hypocrite with no deference for my roots. I was emotionally ripped off and left immobile after school hours to write across the entire blackboard:

SPEAK ENGLISH! SPANISH IS BAD FOR YOU!
I WILL NOT SPEAK SPANISH IN CLASS AGAIN!

Now tell me, dear Reader, is this a way to create détente?

The time came when I was pushed forward and "graduated" from elementary school to junior high. I was not sure if my 5- and 10-cent ribbon was my passport into excommunication. My crap-detecting innerself kept talking to my being, demanding that I listen much closer not simply to what people said, but *how.* And since I was into adventuresome times and daredevil hipness, I was ready to wrestle with anyone—but mostly with young women. It was my love and passion for women that befriended me to Poetry. After that, poetics saved my life. I began to respect the power of the spoken and written word while discovering that writing meant to seek and to envision. Thus I began reading people by using all my senses, including the sense of tact. I turned to acting to help shed my shyness in meeting new people. I felt a certain calling and Poetry was the messenger. It became my vocation, my comrade and confidant. There were too many little voices hanging out within me. I came to discover not merely to use words to write, but more so to create some fresh wind that enabled words to become rich and substantial.

When high school came I was no longer resentful of the English language, nor did I give up my native tongue. Still, it was such a damn pity that one could not be admired for having the best of two cultures and languages. There was much too much fear of the new wave of newcomers. The racism was an undeclared war. And the linguistic weapons used against my intelligence were at times unbearable. The grading system degraded me. Weird comments were written all over my compositions. The most charitable ones said, "Very good!" The most memorable one came years later when I was a goggle-eyed college freshman learning the rhythm of the language of the intelligentsia. It came from a professor of English literature: "I am completely befuddled by your inability to comprehend the American (or was it "English") language. . . . PLEASE SEE ME!" I did. And told him in perfect English to fuck off. Afterwards I apologized for the word "off."

—JOSÉ ANGEL FIGUEROA, whose book *Hypocrisy Held Hostage* is forthcoming.

MY FAVORITE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER did say I had a talent for writing; but what I remember best was his dry, cynical way of saying that what the Church needed was a good persecution, to weed out the weaklings. I would say to Fr. Skiffington, "God bless you, wherever you are."

—ELMORE LEONARD, author of *Glitz,* a novel.

DEAR JACK FIELDS,

It's not that I haven't written to you before, or that you didn't once kindly write to some newspaper protesting a lousy review I had gotten. But I've been asked to write to

you publicly, so to speak, and that has set me to thinking about the class you taught at Great Neck High School.

I remember you wrote a Prohibition poem on the board: "My son, don't go into the Palace of Sin," or something like that, and when we all wrote the respectful critiques we thought you wanted, you laughed at us. I felt thrown back on myself in the best possible way—I knew it was a rotten poem, of course, but had ignored my feeling.

When I asked you if you thought I could become a writer you said you didn't have any idea.

You were honest, and you taught me honesty.

The other teacher I would write to at Great Neck High School, were he still alive, is James Blakemore, one of the earliest World Federalists, and a high school social studies teacher because he felt he could influence people better at that age. He inspired me to work to capacity for the first time. He too taught honesty. He deplored the morality of certain nationalist leaders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, yet he was disappointed to see that when he asked us how many of us would be proud to have Bismarck as our grandfather, we nearly all raised our hands.

Learning from him and from you was really unlearning a conditioned amorality and a desire to please. At least it was the beginning of that process which, hopefully, continues.

From a profound place in me—thank you.

—JEAN-CLAUDE VAN ITALLIE, a playwright, who most recently translated Jean Genet's *The Balcony.*

CREATIVITY WITHIN THE STRUCTURE OF AN educational system can easily be stifled unless the teacher has an understanding of ways to develop and nourish the seeds of writing, so they will grow into beautiful flowers, even trees.

Many times during the course of a school year, my daughter told me that her teacher said a poem or story she wrote was unacceptable because of spelling and/or grammatical errors.

I would like to tell this teacher, "Please, look at the poem. Feel the poem. Nourish the seed. Water it. Watch it grow. Watch it as it grows into a beautiful flower. As the flower grows, perhaps it needs to be repotted. Nourish the seed. Do not destroy it. We need so many flowers in this world."

—AISHA ESHE, author of *I Usta Be Afraid of the Night,* a book of poems.

APART FROM FRANK STEELE'S ENGLISH CLASS, the Citadel exists for me as a haze of polished brass through which sawed-off canoe paddles whistle eternally toward lone, unprotected buttocks.

I prefer to remember Frank Steele.

A tall, gangling chap, handsome, most of his wispy hair lost at thirty, Steele photocopied for us James Dickey's "Cherrylog Road." "An important poem for Southern students," he said. A clear writer on mechanics—I still have his narrow, incisive *Poetry Explication*—Steele also stressed the poetic spirit. We spent three weeks on Dylan Thomas.

This is not to say Steele was any kind of friend. Once he overheard me saying "damn" to a classmate, and I spent the whole weekend in study hall.

No, the great thing about Steele was his willingness to add points to the average for creative work. I had been writing poems in secret for a few years, but when he announced this policy, I stepped out of the literary closet. Especially was I active the week of report cards! I guess it's a credit to Steele that none of my Bathroom Poems, written just before class to the rhythm of multiple waters, ever earned a zero.

That was also the spring I proferred my uniform as room deposit. The desk clerk of the Hardwick Hotel closed the door behind an adventurous, frightened boy and a half-ton bowl of jelly named *her.* ("You want *her*?" he had asked, jerking his thumb toward the barrel-sized backside of the woman watching the lobby's TV. "She's *it* tonight.")

My mistake then was the same as my mistake in being born: I hadn't brought along a buddy. How was I to know I'd never be able to tell my chums what it had been like? "No, stupe, not the awesome concupiscence—but the yellowed, country-style curtains over a bricked-up window! Not the string of bawdy jokes with their punchlines all swapped around; not the ridiculous compliments at the faucets—but the rust-mottied mirror!"

No use. For the same reasons I'd originally picked up pen and paper, I selected them again. It was late one April night. Down in the dark valley the cotton spinning mills had long ceased chattering. But not so at South Bethlehem Medicine Company—they churned out Black Draught Elixir round the clock to meet the needs of the many who wanted to get well, of the few who wanted to get even better.

Midnight or later I stumbled away from my desk with a sonnet. Well, something close to a sonnet. Whatever it was, it worked. I could read it and sleep. Next morning, surprised, I found a little beauty outside myself, belonging strictly to the poem. Like a narrow beam of steel at the center of a crumbling Southern column, poetry promised to outlive my youth. By corollary, I figured the rest of me might tag along.

However, poetry will not allay the state troopers when the poet has run all the stoplights in his hometown. Poetry cannot mute the clangor of a drunk in jail. And poetry can never affect the wealthy alumnus who views the poet wrestled from his parents' car on Main Street, the alumnus who says to his wife, "Disgusting!"

A boy could earn his freedom from the Citadel in such a way.

"Son, they're likely to boot you *out,*" said one worried investor in this military school education.

With one week left in the school year, I stared at the final punctuating mark: terrible grades. Nothing to be done either. Or was there?

The Headmaster himself had seized Steele's class. The awful whiteness of the whale, I recall. (Also, the frothy white hinges of a distinctly human mouth; the lone beady eye which lifted above the swell of biblical language and fell upon the Unredeemed: *me*?) I buttonholed Steele after class, pressed the poem on him. "Sir, please consider this for points on the semester's average."

"The semester average!"

Next day, nothing. Not even a sidelong glance. But day after: "See me after class."

We met in the emptying hallway.

"You write this yourself?"

"Yes."

"Sure you didn't happen to see something a lot like this somewhere?"

"No."

Steele had a way of pausing at critical moments, then charging after some intellectual point. Suddenly he took out his gradebook. "What do you want?" He lifted his pencil, in a hurry.

I was going to say 85, Honor Roll—but I was young. "Eighty-eight, sir."

He made the mark and disappeared. We never discussed the poem. Three days later he handed out the final exam and left the classroom. I never saw him again. The next day was our military commencement exercise after which I was formally given my option to pursue my senior year elsewhere.

When grades arrived a week later, everyone was preoccupied in finding another school for the jailbird. I opened the envelope in the empty living room, and smiled. English: 90.

I choose to remember Frank Steele.

—JOHN VERLENDEN, who has recently completed his first novel, *Circus Americus.*

IN MY JUNIOR AND SENIOR YEARS IN HIGH SCHOOL in Paterson, New Jersey, the outstanding, classic, Sherwood Andersonesque character was a Miss Francis Durban, who was a huge lady weighing perhaps 250 or 300 pounds, of immense girth and humor, who dressed in blue dresses with lace around the neck. She taught Walt Whitman by reading him aloud with tremendous enthusiasm, in particular the lines, "I find no fat sweeter than that which sticks to my own bones..." (and I have to paraphrase the rest: "the odor wafting from my body...admire my own armpits...breasts ...feet...").

I still remember Francis Durban's smell wafting across the classroom on hot May days. There was an awful body odor from such a sweating mass of fat. Somehow, repulsive as that was, her cherubic round face, half-smile, and huge-girthed laughter were miracles of pleasure and energy that imprinted Whitman on my head forever. Her presentation of his humor and self-acceptance was decisive in turning me on, not merely to his sympathy, not merely to his empathies, not merely to his range, but also to his humorous intelligence.

I had home teachings of all poetry, including Whitman, particularly, from my father. Whitman was on the curriculum in high school, too, so I knew something, particularly "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." But Francis Durban specialized in the self-acceptance poems in "Song of Myself."

—ALLEN GINSBERG, whose *Collected Poems: 1947-1980* was published last year by Harper & Row.

I WENT TO HIGH SCHOOL IN SAN FRANCISCO. WE had very good English teachers, and a separate poetry class with a dreadful, pompous teacher, who stands out as being very destructive. I don't remember Mr. X's name, but I can see his face. He was like a cliché, very dramatic, with sweeping gray hair. You can imagine him with a scarf around his neck and the wind blowing. He was a hypocrite and a cultural imperialist. He taught only one sort of poetry. To him Dylan Thomas was the height of the moderns. He didn't go beyond that. He encouraged us to see poetry as a mothball art form, a cornball, boring, dreamy, highfalutin' thing you do because you have a lot of time. Yuck.

He was condescending and cruel to students: "Well, you kids, you could never possibly understand Keats, but let me throw some at you anyway." This was a very progressive high school with a good academic reputation, so there was no reason to be teaching this way. I am not one to stress that you teach only contemporary writers. I think that American students in particular need a sense of history. But the connections must be shown quickly, so that when students go back to the old writers they see the points. Mr. X bored us to death with how great and inaccessible poetry was. It was like studying museum pieces.

For a person like me he was very bad news. I already knew I wanted to write. My grandfather was a writer and he was responsible for my love of books. I had to shut myself off from this teacher to protect myself, and as a consequence I flunked the class. I wonder if he's still around. He wasn't an old person. He may still be in that school.

Of the other English teachers there were two who stood out: Mr. Lombardi and Mr. Gamble. I respected them and they respected me. They appreciated my writing and had a respect for language. They made the students perk up. They encouraged students to give feedback. Students knew they had to produce. In Mr. Gamble's class we studied Dostoevsky. *Crime and Punishment* became an exciting detective story with metaphysical areas. We all got involved with why Raskolnikov was running. If I were Dostoevsky, I would feel good about being taught that way. Mr. Lombardi was very strict; but even though he terrified everyone, including me, I could sense he really loved literature and he wanted the best to come out of us.

There is a basic difference between Mr. X and Mr. Lombardi or Mr. Gamble. The latter encouraged us to look inside ourselves, use our imaginations, take our time, and make an effort. Mr. X made poetry exactly what it shouldn't be. I've seen a lot of his type in college studies too. Students continue to be exposed to this pretentious academic posturing. That, to me, is incredibly destructive, especially to poetry. It creates schools of writers who produce endless, boring poems. It really worries me.

If only I could think of Mr. X's name. I think: "Revenge!"

—JESSICA HAGEDORN, whose book *Pet Food & Apparitions* won a 1983 Before Columbus American Book Award.

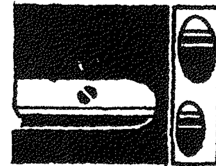
DEAR MISS ELLIS:

You are long dead and gone now, and I am now the age you were when you had me in your class and in the literary society you sponsored. But in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the years 1949 through 1951, I thought you were already dead to the world and to serious, important literature. Of course, you "just loved" "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and other verses you could distort to mimic biblical maxims; it took T. S. Eliot to show me Robert Browning's greatness and to feel his influence. You taught me one thing—the *negative* influence or effect upon the young writer; and so I became a teacher myself, hoping to avoid—with imagination, compassion, and intellect—your mistakes. You never encouraged my writing, not even after I won a statewide playwriting contest open to writers of all ages. You never encouraged my independent reading, calling *A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* by James Joyce and *Devil in the Flesh* by Raymond Radiguet trash, simply because they were published in paperback; you seemed never to have heard of them. As a last grab at my collar in my senior year, you teamed up with another teacher who feared for my soul to buy me a copy of Harry Emerson Fosdick's *The Man from Nazareth,* unable to believe that I was quite open to intelligent religious writing and didn't need this book as a goad (I liked it very much, and I thank you for that).

This mean-spirited summary of our relationship suggests that I have nurtured contempt and hatred of you for 35 years. But that is only half of our story. What I lacked then, at the age of 16 and 17, was the ability to create what was lacking. I have gradually learned since that the writer, like the true Christian, must cultivate, consciously and willfully, a capacity for compassion, informed with intellect and imagination. The modern, serious writer is famous for his or her ability to imagine lives other than his or her own, to become, in imagination and in the writing of fiction or poetry, a person who is his or her polar opposite, as I most recently did when I became a woman in my novel *The Suicide's Wife.* I wish then, that I had had that ability in my everyday life so that our relationship would not have been the mutually dehumanizing experience it was.

The irony must fall most heavily on me. You insisted that great literature be but a suburb of the City of God and teach moral lessons, teach us how to be better behaved, more obedient, conformist. It was I who, even that young, believed profoundly that a work of art need be only that; beauty is an end in itself. But inseparable from that beauty in literature was the opportunity for the reader, after the writer, to experience, in a kind of collaborative effort, people, places, events that are normally alien—emotionally, imaginatively, and intellectually a man may become a woman, a white man may become a black man, a pacifist may become a warrior, even a humanist may become a racist or a fundamentalist Christian. Out of that conviction, I wrote stories and read books, but failed to extend that conviction to my response to you. I murdered you in my heart. A major challenge to my artistic convictions today is the prospect of writing about you, faithfully, from your own point of view, with compassion.

You may wonder, wherever you are, what, after all, I had expected of you, what I now imagine you ought to have demanded of yourself and of me, in that situation. Well, I have a problem answering that question, one that has hovered over my life for 35 years of writing and teaching writing and literature. I know now, and knew to some extent even then, that your negative effect on me and my writing contributed to my fervent efforts to write, to become a writer. The more I felt your contempt, lack of interest, sympathy, and understanding of my approach to writing, the harder I worked; and recently, writing my autobiography, I discovered that those two years I knew you were among my most productive: I wrote two long plays, 20 poems, 50 short stories (three of which I published in collections of my stories decades later), three partial novels (about 100 pages each), 10 radio dramas, three essays, and I read about 50 books that were key experiences in my life, and that remain important. What can I reproach you for? The question that really haunts me and has relevance perhaps for the whole question of teaching creative writing in high school is this: What effect would it have had on me and my writing had you encouraged me in all the many fine ways students have been encouraged in so many more schools in the past 20 years? I remember vividly how you lovingly encouraged six or seven other students, from whom, after your class, the world has not heard a word, as far as I know. Did you then curse or bless me? Knowing what I know now about my own temperament, I can only thank you for your neglect.



But the fact is that I do teach creative writing, and not by the neglect method, not, I hope, by negative inspiration. My own experience certainly bears out F. Scott Fitzgerald's credo, which I have long taken as my own: "The test of a first rate intelligence—" which is what I expect we are most of us striving to achieve—"is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and"—this is the critical part—"still retain the ability to function." Thus, I hated you and in spite of all, your effect was good, but I failed to love you simultaneously and your effect was also bad. I think that had you taught me Fitzgerald's basic precept and all that follows from it, regarding not only life, not only literature, but writing as well, you would have conveyed to me something of major and lasting importance. I would have read the classics then—and not waited until I was 40 to start—seeing that I did not have to identify my own life with David Copperfield, for instance, to experience the total artistry of Dickens (whom I hated simply because you praised him). And I could have written about a person like you without stacking the deck against every breath you took. I could have also seen that inspiration, of which I had always a surplus, did not suffer when equal effort and attention were given to technique, of which I had always too little. I would, I suppose, have come sooner to the realization that the technical aspects of writing, to which one must finally devote the greater amount of time, are just as powerfully a source of inspiration and exhilaration as character, plot, and theme. And wouldn't the primary and major importance of *point of view* in fiction and *voice* in poetry have been clearer to me sooner had I felt in my very being the ringing truth of Fitzgerald's concept? What you might have best tried to convey to me then was a

basic concept and attitude out of which all other aspects of writing may have gradually flowed then and throughout my life.

This attempt by an aging student to instruct his dead teacher seems doomed from the start, but I am, at this moment, very keenly aware of how alive you are in me, without a trace of resentment or bitterness, and with a sense of emerging compassion.

—DAVID MADDEN, whose most recent novel is *On the Big Wind,* Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

KNOWING WHAT I KNOW NOW ABOUT WRITING, I'd say to my high school English teacher Jon Beck Shank then of Friends Seminary, New York City: Thank you for the marvelous, spirited *reading* of the poems of Wallace Stevens in your slightly nasal, persnickity voice. I've not forgotten the "poem of the act of the mind" and how "it has to be living, to learn the speech of the place" or "Tom-tom, c'est moi. The blue guitar/ And I are one"...thinking this is what poetry's to do, to be ordinary (natural) and yet give a kick, a shiver of excitement because it's full of surprise. It's fun to be a drum & a guitar & in a painting by Picasso, and speaking French too! This immediate oral "hit" made me want to try to make poems myself, and I did, terrible serious girl poems with colors & laundry & animals in them, and I also wanted to read them aloud (they were, after all, my soul's songs) and did, earnestly & shyly, and indeed doing this repeatedly was getting somewhere near that first shiver & then I guess poetry became a habit with me.

—ANNE WALDMAN, whose most recent book of poetry is *Skin Meat Bones,* Coffee House Press.

CONCERNING ENGLISH TEACHERS, I HAVE TWO moments of reference:

The first involves the Reverend Matthew Conlin, O.F.M., freshman composition teacher at Siena College. I wrote an essay on a subject long forgotten, but what I cannot forget is the profound humiliation I felt when he read excerpts of my essay out loud and, to the vast amusement of the class, mocked its pretentious language. I have been enormously grateful to Father Matt ever since on three counts: one, for not naming the pretender; two, for making me aware of the importance of commonplace language; and three, for instilling in me a respect for exalted language only when it's thoroughly under control.

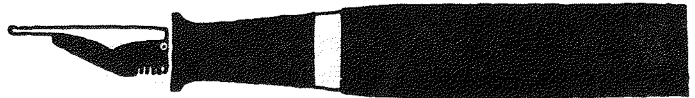
The second instance has also faded from memory, but only in the particulars. In high school Brother Eugene, F.S.C. taught me senior English. I can't recall any of the books we dealt with or anything specific that he said, but what I remember is his continuing enthusiasm for literature, and the importance of it to our lives. He was very astute in his critical response to books, but the importance of what he said was not in that as much as it was in his joyful appreciation of, and gratitude for, good and great writing. Brother Eugene made me want to read, Father Matt made me want to write well.

—WILLIAM KENNEDY, whose latest novel, *Ironweed,* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

WHEN I WAS IN THE SEVENTH GRADE AT Bolton Grammar School in Bolton, Georgia, a very small community outside Atlanta, my teacher was not from the area. She was a Yankee. I can't remember her name. She was unusual, out of sync with the community. During the McCarthy hearings she and her husband had had to testify. They were obviously the kind of people who had strong feelings. To us they were quite shocking. They must have been socialists. I had never met any socialists. There was something in the newspaper about her and her husband... they had come south to get out of some kind of situation... and she was under stress.

She was obviously a very intelligent person, and the first woman I met who took her intelligence seriously. Her ethics were different from the other teachers'. I carved my boyfriend's name on the top of the desk, about ¼″ deep. She made me sand the desk top in front of the other students for a half-hour every day until the name was obliterated.

I had several ambitions at that point. One was to become a painter; one was to become a writer; but the most important was to get married at 17 in a baby blue wedding, with six bridesmaids wearing blue net dresses, and have six children, and bake perfect cakes in my Betty Crocker kitchen, and then, on the side, write novels while the cakes were in the oven. This teacher spoke a heresy to me: a girl like me should not get married right away. Of course I ended up not listening to her. It was disgusting that she would present this point of view. Everyone around thought that getting married as early as possible and having kids was the best thing a girl could possibly do.



In fact I got married at 16 and had three children by the time I was 23. But this teacher did influence me in the long run. One thing she would do is send me outside to write poems about flowers and nature and so forth, probably to get me out of the classroom, because I was so rebellious. When I came back in she had me read the poems to the class. Her encouragement made me feel that I had talent, and this really stuck in my mind. Later, when I began writing, I thought back to her.

It was good that she was a woman. I had never met a woman who thought it was important to have a strong set of values, and to revere one's intelligence and to consider what one might do with it. She had high standards, but the standards had to do with the use of one's potential rather than what use that potential should be put to. I only wish I could recall her name so I could let her know what an influence she has had on my life.

—ROSEMARY DANIELL, author of *Sleeping with Soldiers* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston).

THE TEACHER WHO WAS VARIOUSLY THE MOST respected, feared, and loved in my high school was all of these because, for her, words were equal to actions. When Mrs. Snowden asked a question, we often squirmed in our sweaty plywood chairs because she didn't ask to hear parroted some pat response. She wasn't asking us to give back a flattering reflection of her own thoughts. She was asking us to think. And she needled us until we did, or tried to. This was highly risky business, thinking on our own. At the very least it laid us open to twitters of ridiculing laughter from our classmates, which was roughly the same as being pilloried.

But just as often as her questions struck fear in our hormone-pumped-up teenage blood, they also caused hands to shoot up. Somewhere in the body there crouched, tiger-like, an idea ready to leap out and devour the classroom. Sometimes we had original thoughts, or thought we did. But often we learned that our thoughts were readily connected to a long history, and that was all right too. We found out that our ideas could be connected with other ideas. So it didn't hurt that we were learning more through Shakespeare than we'd ever thought we'd want to. Of course it was easier to read the current stuff, in our language. But once we came to know that there might be some connections with our feelings and our thoughts, the forms that the words took—antiquated, poetic, funny, even embarrassing—became as welcome a part of our lives as lunch. The hours in that class were time alive.

I remember sitting in Mrs. Snowden's class when classmates came in late. On such occasions a few students used to bring notes of dubious origin to excuse tardiness or absence. All quiet on the eastern front. We knew these notes were a sham but Mrs. Snowden did not deliver lectures on the evils of forgery. She made us take responsibility for ourselves, even though we sometimes didn't want to. It seemed that much school experience up to this point had been directed at getting us students to jump through hoops. "You're jumping through hoops, why?" Mrs. Snowden was brave enough to ask.

—ARTHUR DORROS, author of the children's books *Pretzels* and *Alligator Shoes*.

I COULD NEVER UNDERSTAND WHY MR. KELLY was teaching Junior English. Yes, I can—he needed a job. He would say, "Class, open to page 691, read about Coleridge, and answer the questions on page 693. No homework." Everyone would yell, "Yay!" We weren't really having a class, and we weren't having homework either. Mr. Kelly was the assistant football coach at Medford High and my Junior English teacher at Arlington Catholic High School. He was not only not a good English teacher, or a good teacher, he was probably not a good football coach either, or he would've been doing that instead of calling the football players in the room up one by one, till they all hung around his desk talking about how the girls in the room were built. He might've been a good football player in his youth, but probably was not, because if he had been, he either would've turned out pretty good today, i.e., in relation to sports equipment, or sales, or something appropriately American, or he would've been a *complete* dud—home on codeine and watching TV games, rubbing his belly and complaining about "that injury." Teaching in a Catholic high school is a dud job, doesn't pay. It's what you do the year you couldn't get a job. Mr. Kelly, I feel sorry for you, being such a flop in your thirties.

I think we had a good textbook that year and I read Wordsworth and Dylan Thomas a lot, whose work gave me an inner life, which I never had before. My high school career was a complete loss, I had some interesting experiences, but I could have had equally good ones, and did, while ringing a cash register in the Harvard Coop, or going to California to be a hippy, as many of my friends did. Mr. Kelly probably would've had fun in California. He was about 32 or 33 in 1965-66, when I was a junior in high school. He could have let that twinky flat-top grow out, and he could've gotten rid of that milk-fed fat look he had, which looks crummier and crummier the older ex-athletes get. He could've taken acid and starved in San Francisco. Frankly, it didn't much matter what Mr. Kelly did in relation to me. I wasn't talking to anybody in those days, no matter who they were.

There was a Miss Dorenbusch, my sophomore English teacher, the tiniest woman in the world and she stood in front of the room going: "I'm nobody, who are you? Are you nobody too?" I just laughed at that woman. It felt cruel, but the whole situation was cruel: high school, the theater of each new day inside a classroom on Medford Street, facing the Regent theater and the Regent tailors. I had been taught by nuns since age six, and now, when they were running out of nuns, and were getting humans to stand in for the teaching positions, they come up with these screwballs. I didn't know that teachers in public schools were all screwballs; humans are, especially people at work. Very few people really aspire to be teachers, and often they are horrified when they get there. A room full of kids, 46 little interest groups occasionally organizing into aggressive tribes against one another or worst of all, against you, who might have come there out of real love for your subject. Nothing could be more horrible than bursting with a real gift, and getting it smashed right back in your face, like the guest who came to the party with a cake. If Mr. Kelly really warmed to his subject, and me, who knows? But, I was brought up in an entirely oppressive institution, the Catholic church, and its teaching tool, the Catholic school, so waiting at a bus stop for twelve years might've been better. The ideal English teacher would pick

me up on graduation day, at my stop, the one I was assigned, and we would go for a brief ride, me and this compatible human guide, and when I was dropped off I would be out in the world to spread my message, stirred for twelve years, then briefly discussed, then espoused. I think people should be taught to communicate, and then they should be taught to evaluate the means of communication, TV or bank statements. People should be socialized rather than educated. They should learn to comprehend their impulses, communicate them, and negotiate. Rather than being perceived as a humorous prison, life might be an extended conversation with everything. For all I know Mr. Kelly might be having these same thoughts.

—EILEEN MYLES, whose last volume of poetry, *Sappho's Boat,* was published by Little Caesar in 1982.

IT WOULDN'T BE BAD FOR YOUNG WRITERS IF their teachers did as Miss Lobsenz did for me. I sat in the front row, right in front of her desk, because I was a deportment problem. Too much benzedrine when I was a kid. The doctors gave me that for my metabolism. I was fat and they wanted me to be skinny. They thought the bulbar polio I had got over affected my metabolism, so why not speed, they thought. I wanted to be skinny, but even more than that I wanted to be a writer. This was in junior high school. I was going to be a short fat writer. Miss Lobsenz taught *The Red Badge of Courage* with all her spinster passion. She was a small woman with long arms and a skinny neck, and she had many of the mannerisms of a chicken on a farm; particularly, she had the clucking down pat, which she did after the pecking. Although she had a great nose to peck with, she liked to peck with her hand, thrusting it out like a blade on the end of her long arm to make her point about *The Red Badge of Courage.* She had many points to make about that book, though I don't remember what they were. I did read the book and was impressed, but what I remember most was dodging and ducking Miss Lobsenz' hand. She was quick as a bullet, and the training I got in that classroom served me well in my later years as a writer, when I understood you've got to be able to move your own head if you want to move anyone else's. Pardon me.

Mrs. Makarof would sit on your desk and show you some inside thigh. I sat in the back of her class writing my first novel. This was about tennis bums. I didn't know what a novel was, I was too young, but I liked the way the word sounded. I wrote it secretly in the back of her class. She let me do it. Once she sat on my desk and looked at the notebook. She smiled, touched my face, and let me do it. I was going on thirteen the first time I had to slip my writing out from under to let her sit on my desk. I loved that class from the back of the room, but it wasn't English, it was Science. She was the perfect science teacher. I suppose this isn't relevant to English, but there is something teachers of English can learn from Mrs. Makarof.

I was always a deportment problem in junior high school, and I think it was the bennies, although even without bennies these days I'm still a deportment problem. Mrs. Clayf hated me. She looked into my corner of the room from the blackboard where she was diagramming her sentence, and no matter what it was she picked on me, no matter who else let a fart, yelped, or threw chalk. She narrowed her eyes and started her "oooooooooo" growl that almost always culminated in her favorite expression, "The booold impertinence of the buhrazen lot." By this time she'd be shaking her wattles, and this lady's chins were the definition of wattles, at least three chins and other stuff hanging from her neck, flapping around like pj's on a clothesline. If you want to impress your students, learn to use that expression. It has a certain rhythm. As a curse it is not unflattering, and the writers among them will come to terms with words like "brazen," "impertinence," and the special meaning of the word "lot." They might even notice how the redundancy cops can shut one eye to allow the alliteration of the *b*'s.

My high school teachers made less of an impression, though they were impressive. Dr. Shipley (he was actually a Ph D) was hard at work on his dictionary of slang, and hardly noticed his class. I spent most of my time with him working on the literary magazine, which meant cutting out for the 14th Street Billiards, where there was always a rumor that Willy Hoppe was going to show up. Now there was a guy, you might say, really understood the effects of English. I got another year off from English just to work on the literary magazine, and that was useful. My senior year was spent with Mr. Astrachan about whom I remember very little, except a certain pomposity, expressed with his belly, that he thrust out above the class as he spoke, so he looked, when giving us Whitman or Frost, as if just a little more wind—say a jab of Dylan Thomas—and he would start to rise. He was actually jovial as a balloon. He wrote me a recommendation that got me into a special freshman English class in college. His nephew published a novel in the same year I published my first, 1968, that had a startling image in it still sticks with me, describes the shadow of his Russian grandfather lengthening through time at his death to shade himself, the writer, as he attempted the book. Mr. Astrachan's recommendation for me described the "startling imagery" of my poetry. That made me try to figure out what imagery was, and look back through the few poems I had written, and notice that by no definition I could manage could I find a real image in any one of them. That too was useful.

So teachers of today, hello. All I can suggest is that you leave the writers alone, those of you savvy enough to recognize who they are. You can't teach them. They'll invent their own teacher out of the writers they love, and they'll appreciate all the space you manage to give them. Teach the readers instead. Leave them alone too, but teach them to read. That's my advice, respectfully submitted by a former, ongoing, and hopefully future serious deportment problem.

—STEVE KATZ, whose most recent novel, *Wier & Pouce,* Sun & Moon Press, won the Sight Point No Nonsense Fiction Award for 1984.

DOROTHY LATSKI. I'VE ALWAYS BELIEVED, these past 17 years, that she was the pivotal person in my development as a writer and appreciator of literature. Fiftyish, thin, almost anemic, with fluffy grey hair. Now and then she was absent from school, suffered from some mysterious ailment that kept her at home, in and out of hospitals. Cancer? A disease that infects middle-aged lovers of literature? I never learned why.

She was of Polish extraction, had lived many years in Brooklyn working as a nurse in a psychiatric hospital before moving to Florida. She would not elaborate on her past, simply toss her head, murmur some ungraspable remark about those tough years in New York (I visualized a less frail Dorothy trying to put a strait-jacket on a brawny sailor or administering an injection to a howling patient). And what made her even more mysterious was the fact that she lived with a woman named Tito—an elementary school teacher twice her size, but extremely loving and protective in nature—who had left New York with her. I never said it, no one else did, but I suspected that these two aficionados of wine, theater, and French cuisine were lovers as well as household companions. In white, southern Baptist Miami Springs, where Dorothy taught, news of such an illicit bond would have created a public scandal. But Dorothy was special. Our lips were forever sealed.

Her approach hypnotized me. Something about the way she read *Beowulf* in old English made Grendel take on monstrous physical form before my very eyes. She forced us to learn facts—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes; William the Conqueror, 1066 A.D.—but then she would throw herself entirely into *Macbeth* and mimic the three witches: "Double, double toil and trouble,/ Fire burn and cauldron bubble." She had that rare ability to transport the mind and heart away into another age where passion, alliances, and betrayals ruled the day; in a second the two-car garages, the spiffed-up Firebirds and Camaros, the ludicrous pink three-tiered fountain in the heart of Miami Springs vanished into the witches' smoldering cauldron.

Literature, for her, was a rich seedbed, the stuff of life, that bore fruit amidst the tangle of thorns. She read Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* every year, religiously. Dylan Thomas' poetry, the subject of her hefty master's thesis, was her all-consuming passion and she was quick to point out the differences between his mellifluous lines and what she considered to be the crazy ravings of an Allen Ginsberg. I memorized the 54 lines of "Fern Hill" for her, an offering she was never made aware of, up to this very day. Simply, I was in her power.

B.D.—before Dorothy—I was a superior math and science student who awaited, albeit half-heartedly, the opportunity to study structural engineering at the University of Florida in Gainesville. But she opened a door to a world in which trigonometric functions simply didn't exist and a broader, much more vital reality did. I gravitated towards literature, as if learning English for the first time. I began to look at words in a special way, admiring the sounds as well as drawing pleasure from their effects. The word *surf. Petty pace from day to day.* Language affected my life and if I succeeded in my apprenticeship I, too, could be a Creator.

Dorothy, this woman with blue, almost floating eyes belied the reality around me which, till then, I had accepted as the only truth.

—DAVID UNGER, a poet, who recently edited Nicanor Parra's *Antipoems: New and Selected* for New Directions.

I WOULD HAVE TO HOLD A SEANCE TO TALK TO any of my teachers because they are all dead. I would have to get some people together, put a glass of water on a table, touch fingers, and start a chant to call them back again. Then you could see my English teachers as gullible, semi-articulate, semi-literate instructors who tried to deny the existence of their students.

They weren't out to educate recent immigrants like us but to monitor our behavior. The immigration was the result of Operation Bootstrap—the industrialization of a country where people had survived on agriculture. Refugees from Puerto Rico came here because this was the land of milk and honey—and condoms (there was no birth control in Puerto Rico yet). My mother was pursuing the American Dream. She thought this system was the best system. Where we came from there had been no change of weather, but we had been familiar with the land, with our neighbors, with the customs. We had had a tradition. We had had a culture. All of this was compromised for a "better way of life" in a tenement building, where you had to walk up. And the only time you saw a tree was when someone died and you went to the cemetery. It was deception at its best, this whole adventure into assimilation. What the United States needed was people to do the dirty work: in factories, as porters, keeping the streets clean. The country was growing and it needed more of these sub-slaves. This was our role, and the English teachers were there to insult us, humiliate us, and prepare us for this suicidal future.

What I would tell these teachers now is "Hey, fuck off!" It's what I should have told them then. "Duck!" I would tell them.

After high school I made an attempt at many different jobs: the post office. . .a stock clerk at S. Klein's. . .and I started working as a page at Columbia University Library. I met a lot of people there. I met Langston Hughes. I met Ted Joans. I met LeRoi Jones, who is now Amiri Baraka. Ginsberg. It was a whole different world. I read all these books. I found out the Spanish wrote also. They had some of the best authors out there, Garcia Lorca, Cervantes. This

was never explained to me by the English teachers. Gabriel Marquez was writing in those days and we never knew it.

Had this literature been handed to us in high school it would have been totally different. As a street poet it's been difficult, and it's been exciting, but maybe I could have had a chair in some university, if that's what I wanted to do. But I'll settle for a sofa.

—PEDRO PIETRI, who is the author of a book of touch poetry called *Public Execution,* to be released this year.

I HAD A VERY LUCKY SITUATION. ONE OF MY high school English teachers, Mrs. Flood, was really terrific. She inspired me to go ahead and do whatever I wanted to do. When my sophomore English teacher, Mrs. Gullett, refused to read a book report I wrote on *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* because it was written by J. D. Salinger, who used dirty words, Mrs. Flood stepped in and said that she would read it and grade it for me, which was approved. No one believed how bad a teacher Mrs. Gullett was until several years after I left, when she showed her cards by giving the students who flunked a test the choice of taking an F or kissing her feet to pass. That was her last stand. After that she was ousted.

Mrs. Flood had me do an assignment in which I rewrote the *Canterbury Tales* using contemporary types. That was something that really got me started in the different forms of poetry.

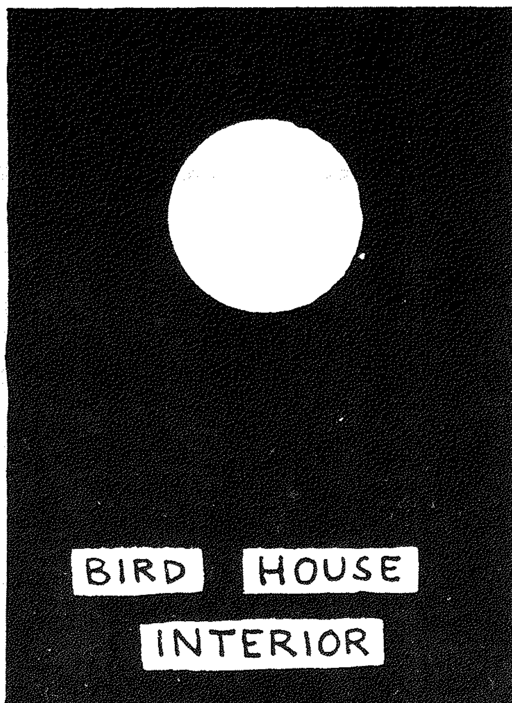
In my freshman English class, my teacher, Mr. Bolton, Barney "Barnyard" Bolton, who was a conservative religious fellow, as a lot of my teachers were, read "The Bells," by E. A. Poe. He stood in the back of the class and read it with great fervor while no one in class was allowed to turn around and look at him. He caught me sneaking a peek, and once again Mrs. Flood stood up for me.

This was in Richmond, Ohio, a little river town 20 miles upstream from Cincinnati. It was a rural school that consolidated three schools grades 1-12 to form a class of about a hundred students. My junior English teacher was Miss Todd, who was wonderful, except that twice in one year she made me come up and sit beside her because I was an acknowledged agnostic. She wanted to talk to me about, "How can there be no God when you can see a flower grow?" She thought this would be a difficult question for a poet to answer. That was the year I read Amy Lowell's poem "Patterns." This poem was very moving to me. I really believed her when she said, "Christ, what are these patterns for?" At that time the use of the word Christ in a textbook was extraordinary. It really grabbed me that someone could use that kind of vocabulary and get away with it.

Afterwards, when I was in college and read a lot of Amy Lowell and the Imagists (or, as Ezra Pound called the other American writers, "The Amy-gists"), I never could find a poem to equal "Patterns." I should read it again and see if it's all that good.

My advice to English teachers would be, "Let people turn around and look at you when you read "The Bells," and grade papers on J. D. Salinger for yourself."

—BOB HOLMAN, poet, who is co-host (with Pedro Pietri) of The Double Talk Show, which is currently being performed at various Manhattan night spots.



Joe Brainard