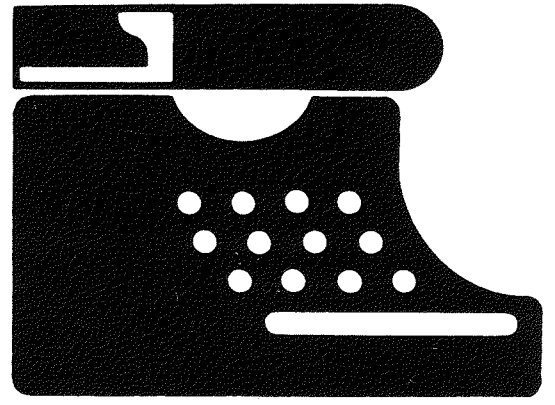


# Teachers & Writers



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## Poetry across Frontiers

by John Oliver Simon

*In February of 1986, John Oliver Simon and Roberto Bedoya, two poets from Oakland, California, spent a week in Mexico City teaching poetry writing, with local poets, to elementary school children. In April, three colleagues from the Mexican residency (poets Jorge Luján, Juvenal Acosta, and Roberto Lopez Moreno) returned the visit, working with children in Oakland. The program was sponsored by California Poets in the Schools and the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. This is the first such international exchange we know of. It is documented in Un techo del tamaño del mundo/A Roof the Size of the World, a bilingual anthology and project description (see the bibliography at the end of this article). In the excerpts below, Simon translated the children's poetry, most of which was written in Spanish. —Editor*

IN MOST CASES, WE BEGAN BY TALKING about the concept of Flower and Song, “flor y canto,” the *xochitl in cuicatl* of the Aztecs. We pointed out that the codices show an unadorned word coming out of the mouth of a king or a god to indicate ordinary speech; but when the word that emerges from the mouth is decorated with flowers, that is poetry. “The flowered word” mediated between man and the universe, between the community and the gods. In order to create this “palabra florida,” we must employ the imagination: that

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faculty within us that makes images, makes pictures, fantasizes, and travels beyond the confines of logic and the classroom. In poetry, we play with words. As if words were as light as petals and feathers. As if what we say had as much meaning as the songs of birds.

### Acrostics (Roberto Bedoya)

This introductory exercise uses a name of a person or a thing as a skeleton on which to hang a poem. The trick is to integrate a little narrative or play of ideas without creating a choppy phrase for each letter.

Roberto tiene el pelo  
Oscuro como un conejo negro  
Brincando sobre las montañas  
Enloquiéndose al encontrar su comida como unos  
Rábanos  
Tirados sobre la  
Oscuridad.  
—German Herrera Suárez

Roberto has dark  
hair like a black rabbit  
leaping on the mountains  
going crazy to find his food like some  
radishes  
thrown into  
darkness.  
—German Herrera Suárez

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## Questions (John Oliver Simon)

This exercise takes off from Pablo Neruda's posthumous collection *El libro de las preguntas* (*The Book of Questions*). "What distance in round numbers/ is there between the sun and the oranges?" "Why couldn't Christopher Columbus/ discover Spain?" "How many weeks in a day/ and how many years in a month?" The assignment is to write a poem composed completely of questions. Few of these succeeded as a whole poem, but some of the individual questions are arresting.

How long does it take a burro to climb a building?  
—Carlos Enrique Jiménez Hernández

What size clothes does the sun wear?  
—Jorge Enrique Mejía Rosas



## Lies to Quetzalcoatl (John Oliver Simon)

In the gallery devoted to the sacred city of Teotihuacan in the Museo Nacional, there is an impressive reconstruction of the Pyramid of Quetzalcoatl, adorned with seashells representing water; the goggle-eyed masks of Tlaloc, god of the rain; and the fierce plumed heads of the Feathered Serpent. These are so huge that you can stick your arm up to the shoulder in the mouth of the god. Legend has it that if you do so and tell a lie then, CHOMP! Quetzalcoatl will bite off your arm. The assignment, then, was to tell lies to Quetzalcoatl—with the ultimate paradox in mind that a good lie can be more true than the truth.

Quetzalcoatl, god of water,  
of song and fire.  
His pyramid has a thousand  
heads of birds and water  
issues from those heads,  
at night the moon comes by  
and dances with the sun and  
fifty rabbits play  
a jazz song,  
while some burros  
fire rockets.  
—Gabriel Gutiérrez García

Quetzalcoatl God of water  
lion full of dove's feathers.  
Soul of steel God of the universe  
passionate for love but  
if anyone does something to him  
he is fierce with warrior's blood  
his pyramid full of hearts  
with shells and fish.  
—Esmerelda Hernández Mendoza

I am the god  
of dance and my fangs  
sing, I have tiny fangs  
like hands  
with my yellow mouth  
I say colored words  
and when I fall  
to earth I change  
the words to music  
I look upon music  
and dance everywhere  
and inside of me  
there is dance and music  
and men surrender  
themselves to me  
my secret saying is:  
rhythm and horror  
give rhythm  
to the horror.  
—Israel Bautista

## Haiku (Jorge Luján)

In Mexico, the first and third lines of haiku usually rhyme. Juan José Tablada, whose home in Coyoacan is preserved as a national shrine, was the best known *haikuista* of Mexico. He writes:

Tierno saúz casi oro, casi ambar, casi luz. . .	Tender willow, almost gold, almost amber almost light. . .
-------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------------------------------------

Jorge Luján's haiku recipe with fourth-graders neither rhymed nor counted syllables:

1. First line: something usual
2. Second line: something that happens quickly, at once
3. Tie them together, wrap it up, what does it all mean, what happens next?

My desk is always messy.  
I shut my desk and left.  
Then my desk is clean and I'm messy.  
—Lorena García

The street is dark  
people go along the street  
and people scare the darkness.  
—José Miranda

## Hymn to the Sun (John Oliver Simon)

On their first day in the National Museum, the children seated themselves in the outdoor auditorium and were greeted with the invitation to write a *bienvenida* to the sun. Children contributed one line apiece, orally, while poet Alberto Blanco acted as the group scribe. After a while Otto-Raúl González suggested we stop saying what the sun does and simply address it: "Hot mass. . . giant orange. . . great balloon of fire who covers us with light. . ." Then Alberto suggested we ask the sun questions (following up on the previous Neruda/Pregunta exercise). Finally I noted that we had covered three manuscript pages and it was time to begin seeking

a way out of the poem. Subliminally, or rather through process, the idea of a poet's strategy within the poem was conveyed. What surprised us was how *pre-hispanic* the poem was, even in the absence of specific suggestions or stimuli to that effect.

### Hymn to the Sun

Hi!  
Hi friend!  
How are you?  
You who shine  
and give us light all morning  
and illumine the Mexican earth  
—our country—;  
you who say goodbye to us  
with rays at evening.  
Your heat and brilliance  
give us joy and enthusiasm  
for work.

We can't look at you directly  
but we see you in the mind  
with the eyes closed.  
You who illumine  
all the corners of the world,  
at evening  
you seem to be covered with blood.  
You who make us wait  
for the fresh morning,  
from some places  
you let yourself be seen often.  
You are really our friend.

And when someone is sick  
you make him better the next morning.  
You who give the plants light  
and make the trees green again,  
you who warm  
the water of the pool  
you truly give us life.  
You who make shine  
the water of the sea,  
you also make the rainbow appear  
which feeds us with happiness  
every time we see it.

Hot mass!  
Giant orange!  
Balloon of fire covering us with light!  
A giant ball!

Why do you never fall to earth?  
Why can't we look at you directly?  
Why do you hide every night?  
Why can't we see you all day?

Did you ever catch cold?  
And where do you sleep at night?  
Why can't we touch you?  
Why don't you ever move?

You who dominate the whole city,  
may you never cease to shine,  
because for us  
you are everything;  
there is no one like you.

Goodbye religious star!  
So long friend of light!  
You are a golden dragon  
and your shining amazes us.  
That is all we can think.  
Never cease to be our friend.  
Goodbye comrade of the soul!

### Emerge from the Animal (John Oliver Simon)

Every Mesoamerican culture shows a preoccupation with the motif of the god or hero who emerges from the mouth of a beast. Tezcatlipoca, the tempter, comes out of a tiger's mouth (or wears a tiger's skin, revealing only his face); Quetzalcoatl is born out of the jaws of a serpent. A masterpiece of Toltec art shows a bearded warrior coming out of the mouth of a coyote encrusted with abalone and mother-of-pearl. The Aztec eagle knight wears the eagle mask, and the tiger knight is disguised as a jaguar. Kukulcan, at Uxmal, comes out of a snake's jaws, while the anonymous earth goddess of the Huastecas appears in the beak of a parrot. Standing outdoors in the door of the Temple of Chac, outside the Mayan Hall—and thus in the mouth of a monster animal-god of the rain—I gave the assignment: what animal is inside you, what animal comes out of you, or out of what animal do you emerge? The heavens responded: it began to rain as the children wrote their poems.

### The Tiger

The tiger is an animal  
that only has two lives,  
one inside me  
and the other in the body of space.  
—Soledad Funes

### What's inside Me

A while ago I discovered  
that I had  
a cat inside me  
because when they  
treat me well I'm  
affectionate, understanding,  
loving, but when  
they mistreat me I  
get mad and behave  
differently than usual  
I behave badly, I'm  
dense, difficult,  
just  
like a rooster, that's why  
I said what I had  
inside me because  
unfortunately today  
I discovered that I don't have  
anything inside me.  
—Claudia Uribe García

### Chac

Chac is raining, Chac is crying  
raining loosens his sadness, out of an animal,  
discharging his fury weeping,  
finally, we all came out of an animal  
—Juan Sosa

### Coyote Knight

It's a man swallowed by the imagination of a Toltec.  
—Jamsré Torres

### Songs of the Animals (Roberto Bedoya)

Using a model poem written by a fourth-grader in California, we asked the children to write about animals, using colors, seasons, and the five senses.

In my heart lives a horse  
that horse says to me  
come and I'll take you to the country  
get up on me and you'll see  
how much fun we will have  
galloping and jumping.  
—Azahel Estudillo

### My Hen

My hen  
my hen  
is mine  
is mine  
on her little path  
on her little path  
goes into the night  
the hen is mine  
the hen is mine  
there are lots and lots  
there's no other like mine  
—Francisco Morales Rosas

### The Singing Shoes (several poets)

The rhythms of the *lirica infantil* of Mexico are as alive to recent immigrant children in the U.S. as Mary-had-a-little-lamb is for standard-culture Americans. The accents of the *corrido* and *mariachi* are as alive in the inner ear as the latest rap from the ghetto blaster. And what about the other rhythms of life, the shoes slapping, the galaxies revolving, red and green and yellow lights, dusk and dawn, birth and death?

### Bark

When the mailman  
comes by I hear a  
bark when the newspaper  
boy comes by I hear  
a bark I'm tired of  
hearing sounds that go  
bark bark bark I'm tired  
of it because I'm trying  
to sleep when the garbage  
man comes the barks get  
even louder so I have

to buy a gun and  
waste my money and  
on every Tuesday I have  
to kill the garbage man so I  
can sleep. But this goes  
on and on. But one day  
I might be in jail  
for killing the garbage man  
but the dogs will still  
go bark, bark, bark  
and bark.  
—Gilbert Vega



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### Little Coyote Coyote

Little coyote coyote  
where are you going?  
to the hacienda of Saint Nicholas  
and there I will  
eat a little hen  
that you won't give me  
and the one that you gave me  
I already ate  
and the one you will give me  
I will eat  
how do you like it  
fried or roasted?  
fried  
so heat up the butter  
so heat up the butter  
—Guadalupe Jiménez

### Shoes Singing

I went to school  
shoes singing rapidly  
I went to open the door  
shoes singing rapidly  
I went to the dance  
shoes singing rapidly  
I couldn't stand it already and  
shoes singing rapidly  
I stood out on a mountain  
and shoes singing rapidly  
I threw them in the garbage  
and they sang more rapidly  
they said you're getting mad  
you're getting mad you're getting mad

—Ricardo Ahumada

### Letter to Mexico (Roberto López Moreno and others)

Within Chicano children, there is a complex magnetic image of Mexico. They felt a special connection to the dramatic disaster of the earthquake that shook Mexico City, September 19, 1985. They like the idea of writing letter-poems that can actually be sent to Mexican children.

#### For my friend far away,

The wind in Oakland is like a  
blue bird with wings  
a thousand meters long.  
The wind in Oakland forms  
the trees, some are like winged  
crocodiles, others like  
falling squirrels.  
In my neighborhood the cats'  
eyes explode at night like  
rockets going up  
afire into space.  
The houses in my neighborhood  
are like castles, at night  
above the castles a flashlight  
goes out to look  
for lost princesses.  
Here in Oakland  
peoples' smiles are  
flavor of mango,  
some people smile because  
they see dinosaurs in the street.  
My smile is like  
the city of Mexico.  
Kindness has many colors here:  
blue, green and yellow  
and smells of strawberries  
and is big as the moon.



### The Memory of Poetry (Roberto Bedoya)

After working with a poet, children report that their ways of looking have changed. "It took the real me out of my body." "It showed you how to get ideas from ordinary things." "Poetry is about a person that wonders around." At the end of the workshop, Roberto Bedoya asked his students at La Escuelita in Oakland to write about the power and meaning of poetry.

#### The Power of Poetry

I was listening to music.  
It sounded like violins playing with trumpets.  
I was in an angry mood.  
All I had to do was pick up a pencil and start writing;  
It sounded better than anything I heard.  
I could hear the music echoing in my head.  
All I did was pick up a pencil and start writing  
what came to my head.  
When I was done I would change the world a little bit.  
And there was music waiting to be heard.  
It's not like music where you turn it into a record  
so people can play it.  
It's like fun homework just by picking up a pencil  
and start writing.  
And there was my music.

—Alma Martínez

## BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR POETRY-TEACHING IN SPANISH

*Un techo del tamaño del mundo: A Roof the Size of the World*, ed. John Oliver Simon, Oakland Unified School District, 1987. Documentary of an international poetry-teaching exchange between California Poets in the Schools and the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. Bilingual text with 40 writing exercises and hundreds of student poems from Mexico and Oakland. To order, send \$5.00 to John Oliver Simon, 2209 California, Berkeley, CA 94703.

*Diccionario de la imaginación*, ed. Jorge Luján, Taller Nacimiento, Mexico City, 1986. Jorge Luján independently invented the idea of poetry-teaching in a private workshop in Mexico. His students, ranging from 7 to 12 years old, have produced superb poems. Spanish text. To order, send international money order for \$10.00 to Jorge Luján, Av. Arteaga y Salazar 446, Casa 5, Colonia Contadero Cuajimalpa, México DF, 05500, México.

*La Luciérnaga: Antología para niños de la poesía mexicana contemporánea*, ed. Francisco Serrano with illustrations by Alberto Blanco, Editorial Cidcli, Mexico City, 1983. A comprehensive and delightful collection of twentieth-century Mexican poetry chosen for children, with magnificent collages by Blanco. Spanish text. This anthology is generally available in better bookshops in Mexico City, and can probably be ordered through Spanish-language distributors such as Bookworks in San Francisco.

*In Xochitl in Cuicatl: Flor y Canto: La poesía de los Aztecas*, Birgitta Leander, Instituto Nacional Indigenista, SEP, Mexico City, 1972. The “flower and song” poetry of the Aztecs is fundamental to the deep culture of Mexican and Chicano children. Nahuatl texts are available in Spanish and English for the teacher who’s willing to hunt through libraries and bookstores. Some pre-Columbian texts are translated (into English) in Jerome Rothenberg’s anthologies *Technicians of the Sacred* and *Shaking the Pumpkin*.

*Antología de la poesía hispanoamericana*, ed. Juan Gustavo Cobo Borda, FCE, Mexico, 1985; *Antología de la poesía hispanoamericana actual*, ed. Julio Ortega, siglo veintiuno, Mexico City, 1987; and *Poesía Mexicana II: 1915-1979*, ed. Carlos Monsiváis, Promexa Editores, Mexico City, 1979. There is no shortage of excellent anthologies in Spanish of modern Latin American poetry. The North American teacher who wants to use these books in a bilingual classroom must first find the books, and then sort through the poetry to find works that are appropriate and accessible to children. Daunting task.

*Poets of Nicaragua 1918-1979: A Bilingual Anthology*, translated by Steven F. White, Unicorn Press, Greensboro, NC, 1982, and *Poets of Chile 1960-1985: A Bilingual Anthology*, also translated by Steven F. White, Unicorn Press, Greensboro, NC, 1986. These excellent anthologies make available the important recent and contemporary poetry of Nicaragua and Chile in facing bilingual format. There are many gems here that can be used in the classroom. Highly recommended.

*A Nation of Poets: Writings from the Poetry Workshops of Nicaragua*, translated with an introduction by Kent Johnson, West End Press, Los Angeles, 1985; and *Nicaraguan Peasant Poetry from Solentiname*, translated by David Gullette, West End Press, Los Angeles, 1986. Naive and moving poems by peasants, soldiers, and students, recounting experiences of love and revolution. Bilingual text.

*Roots & Wings: Poetry from Spain 1900-75*, ed. Hardie St. Martin, Harper & Row, 1976. Bilingual anthology of the great poems from *la patria madre* in this century.

*Destruction of the Jaguar: Poems from the Books of Chilam Balam*, translated by Christopher Swayer-Laucanno, City Lights, San Francisco, 1987. New English edition of lyric passages from one of the great Mayan books.

*Volcán: Poems from El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras*, translated by Alejandro Murguía and Barbara Paschke, City Lights, San Francisco, 1983. Excellent bilingual anthology from Central America. Many poems with a political orientation.

*Love Poems from Spain and Spanish America*, translated by Perry Highman, City Lights, San Francisco, 1988. Bilingual anthology.

*The Renewal of the Vision: Latin American Women Poets 1940-80*, Spectacular Diseases Press, San Francisco, 1987. The poetry establishment in Latin America is heavily male-dominated: a sampling, for instance, of anthologies of Peruvian poetry is 97% male! But some good woman poets, such as Blanca Verela in Peru, Rosario Castellanos in Mexico, Claribel Alegria in El Salvador, and Gioconda Belli in Nicaragua, with a host of younger writers, challenge that assumption. Bilingual text.

*El Libro de la Escritura* by Pingüino Tinto, Teachers & Writers, New York, 1989. An expanded, revised translation of T&W’s *The Writing Book*, a creative writing workbook for students in grades 3-6, students in elementary Spanish, etc. The only such workbook in Spanish. Includes many good examples.

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## El libro de la escritura

by Pingüino Tinto

My name used to be Inky Penguin. I wrote *The Writing Book*, which Teachers & Writers published. Peruvian novelist Isaac Goldemberg translated it into Spanish, we added some extra writing ideas, and now it’s called *El Libro de la Escritura* (T&W, \$6.95) and my name is now Pingüino Tinto. On the following two pages, you will

find just a tiny selection. If you don’t understand Spanish, try reading it anyway—see what happens. Or, if you’re not feeling adventurous, please show these pages to a colleague who teaches Spanish or works in a bilingual program. *Gracias*.



## Sueños

Tus recuerdos—desde la primera cosa que recuerdas hasta el recuerdo que guardas de lo que pasó hace cinco minutos—forman un gran país dentro de tu cabeza. Junto a ese país hay otro igualmente grande: el país de los sueños.

Algunos sueños son divertidos, como los sueños en que uno vuela, encuentra dinero o se hacen realidad nuestros deseos. Algunos sueños—los malos o las pesadillas—no son tan divertidos. Pero todos los sueños son fascinantes porque aunque sean muy extraños, parecen reales mientras están sucediendo. Aunque tú no lo creas, todo el mundo tiene sueños raros.

Piensa en un sueño intenso que hayas tenido, ya sea de hace mucho tiempo o que hayas soñado anoche. Trata de recordar todos los detalles que puedas. Escribe lo que pasó en el sueño, no importa cuán extraño haya sido. Trata de recordar cómo cambiaban las cosas dentro de tu sueño. Escríbelo como si se lo estuvieras contando a un amigo.

Y si no puedes acordarte de ningún sueño, inventa uno. Por ejemplo, haz creer que estás soñando varias cosas en este momento y escríbelas empleando como punto de partida la frase “Sueño que”.

### Sugerencias: Cómo Acordarte Mejor de tus Sueños

- Cuando te despiertes por la mañana, mantén los ojos cerrados por un rato. Regresa al sueño o sueños que hayas tenido esa noche. Repite las acciones e imágenes en tu cabeza. Luego, abre los ojos y repítelas otra vez. Esto te ayudará a traerlos de vuelta a tu memoria.
- Guarda una libreta al lado de tu cama y escribe en ella todos tus sueños apenas te despiertes. Así tendrás un Diario de Sueños.

## Ejemplos

### La soñadora de árboles

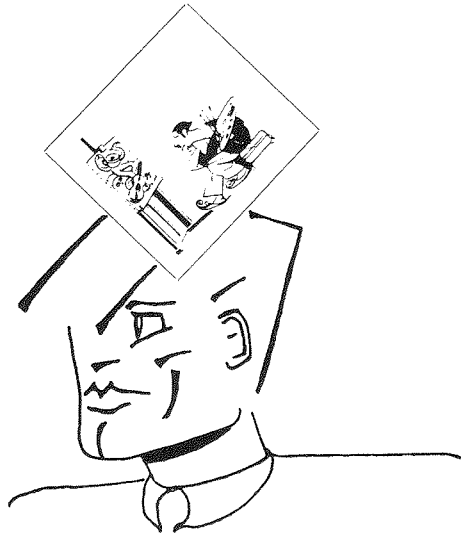
Cuando yo era pequeña casi siempre soñaba con árboles altos, toda clase de hojas hermosas. Yo estaba sentada en el suelo pintando los árboles, y los árboles venían y se inclinaban y me preguntaban si necesitaba ayuda. A veces los árboles y yo cantábamos y jugábamos y hacíamos muchas cosas más, pero siempre terminaba igual. La gente que estaba haciendo camping al lado del bosque se olvidaba de apagar sus fogatas y todos los árboles se quemaban.

—Anita/Grado 6

### Sueño que duermo sueño que sueño

Sueño que mi maestra es una rosa  
 Sueño que mis compañeros son mis  
 hermanos  
 Sueño que mis maestros son mis padres  
 Sueño que los poemas son oros.  
 Sueño que voy en un barco pirata  
 (y también soñé contigo  
 pero no te volveré a ver)  
 Sueño con un tiburón con lentes  
 Sueño con un pulpo que anda en patines y  
 bicicleta

—poema colectivo escrito por los niños  
 del Grado 6/Escuela Méndez



## Diccionario de la Imaginación

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El diccionario es un libro muy útil porque nos da, entre otras cosas, el significado de las palabras. Sin embargo, las palabras aparecen definidas en su acepción real; es decir, según el significado que les da la gente en el uso diario. Por ejemplo, si buscamos la palabra *río* en el diccionario, éste nos dirá que *río* quiere decir corriente de agua bastante considerable que desemboca en otra o en el mar. Pero si existiera un *diccionario de la imaginación*, tal vez éste nos

daría esta definición; *Río*, espejo que corre y canta. ¿Ves la diferencia?

Tú puedes hacer tu propio diccionario de la imaginación, escogiendo las palabras que más te gusten y dándoles tu propio significado. Todo lo que necesitas es dejar que tu imaginación vuele libremente.

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### Ejemplos

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LUNA: plátano blanco que está colgado en el cielo.

—*Héctor Morales Rivera*/Escuela Elorduy

ESTRELLA: pequeño becerro blanco comiendo arroz en el espacio

—*Belén Filomena-Montañez*/Hawthorne

SUETER: avión azul que aterriza en nuestro cuerpo.

—*Ricardo Romero Fernández*/Escuela Elorduy

LAPIZ: es una palabra que nos permite dibujar el trabajo en la mente.

—*Lorena Rosas*/Hawthorne

Ahora te toca a ti...



# The Real Thing

by Wendy Salinger

FOR THE PAST TWO YEARS, I'VE DIRECTED A project that has given high school students the opportunity to experience literature as something alive, made in and of their time. Known as the Pilot Project in Literature for High School Students, this program was initiated by the Poetry Center of the 92nd St. Y in New York City. The Poetry Center sponsors public readings by the nationally and internationally famous as well as important emerging writers. Our aim with the Pilot Project has been to make high school students a part of the city's literary audience and, thus, its literary community. Because New York is a literary mecca, such a project seems particularly fitting. But schools in any community with a college or a community arts center nearby can create such a program and discover, as we have, that students respond enthusiastically, with a new sense of the makers and the making of art.

For most high school students, literature is something they get from a textbook and a standard curriculum (which, in my experience, varies little from decade to decade). If they're lucky, a teacher with a serious interest in literature will introduce contemporary works not included in the regular syllabus, but there are always limits of money and time. Most students graduate with the sense that literature consists of masterpieces done in the past, not that it lives and grows in the present, especially their present. An enterprising teacher and a local reading series can change these assumptions. Hearing a writer read from his own work, meeting and talking with him, students begin to see words on a page in a new way.

Many high school students never get the chance to participate in their community's literary life. They may not even know about it. For me, perhaps the most moving thing about bringing these students—from all five boroughs of New York City—to Poetry Center performances is that many have never been to a cultural event of any sort in Manhattan. For them, it's the stage, the lights, the poet holding the attention of the audience that captures their imaginations.

Fifteen schools are participating in the Pilot Project this year. Each school attends two or three of the twelve Monday night readings selected for the project, sending

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as many as ten students each time. The week before a reading, I visit the classes scheduled to attend in order to introduce students to the work of the writer or writers they will hear. I give the students biographical information and hand out samples of the writer's work, which we read and discuss. Usually I then ask them to respond further to the work in a poetry or prose assignment that I give them. I read these aloud at the end of class or, when time runs out, I read the rest of the students' papers to them on the night of the reading.

On the night of the Poetry Center performance, we send vans to the schools to pick up the students and their teachers. They arrive early at the Y for a pizza supper, at the end of which they're visited by the writer performing that night. According to the students, this is a particularly exciting part of the evening's experience. They meet a writer as "a real person," someone "not any different from you and me!" For fifteen or twenty minutes, they question the writer about his work, life, or anything else they could never ask of the word on the page. Did your parents approve of your becoming a writer? How do you get published? What was it like to grow up in your country? How *do* you write a poem? Do you ever write about what's going down now? Do you watch "The Cosby Show"?

For the evening's performance, a special section in the auditorium is reserved for the high school students. Surprisingly, there's a minimal amount of note-passing and traffic to the bathrooms. The students are eager and attentive as Maya Angelou sweeps across the stage, or the voice of James Earl Jones booms with the oratory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., or Russian emigrée Irina Ratushinkaya reads poems about her life in the gulag. My students have also heard poets William Stafford, Liz Rosenberg, X.J. Kennedy, W.D. Snodgrass, and Stanley Kunitz; playwrights Marsha Norman, James Kirkwood, Albert Innaurato, and Paul Selig; novelist Isabel Allende (Chile), Eduardo Galeano (Uruguay), Shirley Hazzard and David Malouf (Australia). This year they'll also hear Grace Paley, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Nadine Gordimer, among others.

The Poetry Center offers an exciting roster of readers, and this is one of the attractions of the Pilot Project. But there are reading series all over the country, at the smallest colleges as well as big universities. Writers with their first books of poetry as well as writers of renown are out on the circuit. This means there are opportunities to bring literature to life for students everywhere. A teacher can tie into a local reading series by contacting the organizers and arranging an opportunity for students to meet and talk with a visiting writer as well as attend the performance. There might be two or three writers in a reading series whose work a teacher finds interesting and decides to introduce to a class. And what poet or

novelist doesn't respond to an audience already familiar with his work? My guess is that a writer could easily be convinced to spend an extra fifteen minutes or so with such a group. And, although it's a pleasure to introduce students to a Nobel Prize winner, in my experience it's not the name that matters to them but the living person who writes and who will talk to them. If you teach in an area where there is no regular reading series, you could bring a local writer to your class. What could result is a group of students excited about literature in a new way. And local artistic and literary communities, whose audiences are often small, could be invigorated by this new following.

For students, the impact of a live encounter with a writer is increased in proportion to their familiarity with that writer's work and concerns. Teachers may not have a great deal of flexibility when it comes to introducing new books into the curriculum (although they can always recommend outside reading). I've found, however, that even a short, mimeographed sample of the writer's work gets students interested—especially when they're then asked to write something themselves in which they relate what they've read to their own lives. In preparation for a performance by Marshá Norman, for example, I read students excerpts from her Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Night, Mother*. In that play a middle-aged daughter prepares herself and her mother for her own suicide, which takes place at the end of the play. I then asked students to write a dialogue in which they try to talk a friend out of committing suicide. Of course, questions of suicide are particularly real to teenagers, and their responses to this assignment reflected that. Here are two examples.

- R: What! Are you out of your mind? For Christ's sake, why?
- J: Well, it just doesn't seem worth it anymore. School just isn't working. I'm so lost all the time and of course I'm getting shit for it at home.
- R: Don't be ridiculous, J. You're into college. You'll be away from your parents. The problem is that you don't sleep anymore; you're running on empty.
- J: Yeah, I know. I can't seem to think straight anymore. It all seems so confused. I feel awful. I just can't seem to concentrate. I feel stupid and unhappy. I really want to go away, really far away and this is about as far away as you can go.
- R: It seems like you're copping out. It's too easy. You're a living, breathing person. You've survived so much worse, come on. I can't believe you're thinking this.
- J: Look! What I do is my own affair in the end. I've come here to say goodbye and to have a wonderful last night, with you, my nearest and dearest friend. Don't make this so hard, R. Please let me be in peace.
- R: You're right, there is nothing I can do. I won't plead with you anymore. I'll just be here. Remember, I'm always here. Don't do it, if you don't want to. I have no words anymore. I guess I never had.

- DEE: It doesn't pay. . . .What I mean is, it's really no use.
- ODESSA: What's no use?
- DEE: Going on. I can't take it anymore. I used to have a family—when I was little. Now I have jail keepers. I used to have religion but you talked me out of that!
- ODESSA: I really didn't mean any harm. We were just talking about beliefs. You know, just two friends throwing ideas around. Listen, I know it's rough, but isn't there anything at all that makes living even remotely worthwhile?
- DEE: Well there's Sneaker—you know, my cat—and there's. . .well, there's. . .you.
- ODESSA: Then for me and Sneaker don't do it. Don't deprive us of your love and friendship. Let me ask you what I have to live for if I don't have you? I had my dog, but she's dead. Now what if you're not here.
- DEE: But is living for someone else really worthwhile? Does it make any sense for me to live my life for you?
- ODESSA: No, but maybe if you hang on just a little longer I can help you to live your life for yourself and then you don't have to worry about the jail or about God.
- DEE: And maybe living longer will just prove in the end that it really isn't worthwhile.
- ODESSA: How can you want to give up. . . .How can you stop what could be a great life. You had goals. . . .
- DEE: That was before.
- ODESSA: Before WHAT?
- DEE: Well, before I realized I was invisible, I mean, unimportant.
- ODESSA: That's not true. Remember I told you a long time ago, a beach is made of grains of sand. But without those billions of grains there is no beach.
- DEE: Yeah, but who will know if one is missing?

In preparation for Nobel Prize-winning, Nigerian poet and playwright Wole Soyinka, I gave students this excerpt from his autobiography, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, about the writer's first day of school. It tells how the writer, at age three, followed his older sister to school.

Tinu became even more smug. My erstwhile playmate had entered a new world and, though we still played together, she now had a new terrain to draw upon. Every morning she was woken earlier than I, scrubbed, fed and led to school by one of the older children of the house[. . .]

[. . .]I got up one morning as she was being woken up, demanded my bath at the same time, ate, selected the clothing which I thought came closest to the uniforms I had seen, and insisted on being dressed in them. I had marked down a number of books on father's table but did not yet remove them. I waited in the front room. When Tinu passed through with her escort, I let them leave the house, waited a few minutes, then seized the books I had earlier selected and followed them[. . .]I followed at a discreet distance, so I was not noticed until we arrived at the infant school. I waited at the door, watched where Tinu was seated, then went and climbed on to the bench beside her.

[. . .]I appeared to be everyone's object of fun. They looked at me, pointed and held their sides, rocked forwards and backwards with laughter. A man who appeared to be in

charge of the infant section next came in, he was also our father's friend and came often to the house. I recognized him and was pleased that he was not laughing with the others. Instead he stood in front of me and asked,

"Have you come to keep your sister company?"

"No. I have come to school."

Then he looked down at the books I had plucked from father's table.

"Aren't these your father's books?"

"Yes, I want to learn them."

"But you are not old enough, Wole!"

"I am three years old[. . .] I am nearly three. Anyway, I have come to school. I have books!"

He turned to the class-teacher and said, "Enter his name in the register." He then turned to me and said, "Of course you needn't come to school everyday—come only when you feel like it. You may wake up tomorrow and feel you would prefer to play at home[. . .]"

I looked at him in astonishment. Not feel like coming to school! The coloured maps, pictures, and other hangings on the walls, the coloured counters, markers, slates, inkwells in neat round holes, crayons and drawing-books, a shelf laden with modelled objects—animals, human beings, implements—raffia and basket-work in various stages of completion, even the blackboards, chalk and duster[. . .] I had yet to see a more inviting playroom!

"[. . .] I shall come everyday!" I confidently declared.

I then asked students to remember their own first experiences of school, concentrating on sensory impressions: what visual, auditory, and other traces remained with them. Here are a few of the responses.

I did not loathe school but I was a little frightened. I saw many children crying, but, to tell the truth, I didn't know what was going on, except that it was big and I could not understand the teacher, only because she spoke English and I didn't. I felt lonely and wanted to leave but I got through the entire day.

The school looked big to me. I thought I was at the hospital. There was a smell of alcohol, I guess that's what brought the memory. I also remembered the fake stove, the puzzles, dolls, fish tank, and that sort of thing.

I remember being very lost. I see children talking English, the language which I had not learned yet. I remember the children playing with building blocks. I was taught to count in English by using little plastic sticks. My teacher's name was always a blur. I just remember a fat lady, blonde, short hair, sitting down trying to quiet the kids down. One of my favorite memories was when we all were given chocolate cookies and milk. We all sat quietly and enjoyed our snack to the last bite.

I tell you, those were the days when I was young and lost. I was lost in language and in my new style of life, schooling.

My first impression of kindergarten was simply "wow!" I remember these huge books given out every week, one for each letter of the alphabet. I remember doing the simple H.W. given to us during recess and reading far ahead of where the teacher, Mrs. Farrel, left off. I remember the small cookie we received at lunch time and occasionally going home for lunch, since I lived two blocks away. I remember carrying a small light blue briefcase with a lion head painted on it the first day of school, and finally I remember graduating into the nightmare called first grade.

It wasn't just a public school. It was probably the only English school in the whole city, but this school was where my learning started. My father took me to the school and left me at the main entrance. I was only 5, didn't know what to do or where to go.

I spoke to the guard who then led me to my class, where for being late my teacher came forward to punish me. I was only 5. I told the teacher that "don't use your hands, words are more effective." She was so astonished to hear that from a boy only 5 years old.

Next day she called my parents and told them about my misbehavior, but my father was proud of me for standing up to my teacher's wrongdoing.

It all happened in Pakistan's very small town where I once lived.

For students who come to the Poetry Center as part of the high school project, literature automatically becomes a more personal experience. All the schools that participated in the first year of the program asked to come back for a second season, and that seems to be one good measure of success. It also reflects the enthusiasm of good teachers: a key ingredient in any program like this. But, finally, I'd like you to hear what a few of the students themselves have to say about this kind of project: about meeting "the real thing," a writer; about the preparation and the experience itself of an event designed to bring them and literature into the same room.

My reaction to the performance I attended at the Y was an unexpected reaction, because from my perspective I had a different image of Mrs. Angelou, until that evening that I had the opportunity to be part of her audience. It helped me to see how well she has carried on with the reality of life and how successful she has become. . . . I would never forget that evening. It was actually the real thing. I saw with my own eyes Maya Angelou. She is my best writer. I admire her for the way she stood up with her life.

I liked the way the writers actually came and listened to questions, answered them, and talked to us like we were adults and friends rather than just high school students.

I enjoyed the pre-performance supper hour. The pizza was great, and I became friendly with one student from one of the other schools.

When I was asked to join a group of other students to hear James Earl Jones read, I thought I wouldn't like it, but when the performance was over, I realized that it was inspiring and my heart was overjoyed. It was as though Dr. King was in our presence speaking.

I enjoyed Ms. Salinger's visit. What I enjoyed most was when she asked us to write a sample poem and she was nice enough to make comments and also returned them.

I liked that the writers didn't talk down to us. And the performance was interesting as well as fun. Paul Selig and Albert Innaurato were funny, serious, and kept the audience at

the edge of their seats. I think it was a wonderful experience. Especially the company I was with. They too were fun.

I am most fond of pizza and soda. I feel they make one of the best combinations.

The Poetry Center's Pilot Project in Literature for High School Students should continue the way it is. Why mess up a good thing?

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## PLUGS

Poets & Writers—not to be confused with Teachers & Writers—is updating its *Author & Audience: A Readings and Workshop Guide* for a 1990 edition. *Author & Audience* is a state-by-state listing of universities, libraries, arts centers, etc. that frequently sponsor literary presentations. For more information, contact Poets & Writers, 72 Spring St., New York, NY 10012 (212/226-3586).

The Hofstra University Summer Writer's Conference is seeking workshop leaders in poetry, fiction, non-fiction, children's writing, playwriting, script writing, and the business of writing. The two-week conference will take place in mid-July of 1990. Interested conference teachers should send a résumé and cover letter to Lewis Shena, U.C.C.E., Memorial Hall—Room 232, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11550.

## OOPS

In our September-October issue (Vol. 21, No. 1), we should have mentioned that Lindsay McAuliffe co-authored the new T&W book, *Origins*.

**Donald Barthelme**

1931-1989

"Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, rather because it wishes to be art."

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