

## Specimen Days

# The Teaching Diaries of Greg Fraser

*When Walt Whitman set out to write the diaries that would ultimately be called Specimen Days, he reflected on how “few of life’s days and hours (and they not by relative value or proportion, but by chance) are ever noted.” He found it “curiously imperative” to keep a diary and hoped, if nothing else, to “illustrate one phase of humanity” (Specimen Days, July 2, 1882). In this new series, Teachers & Writers pays tribute to the complexities and revelations in an educator’s day. Since the early 1970s, T&W has asked its writers to keep diaries of their residencies. The extensive archive of T&W teaching diaries includes reflections from Anne Sexton, June Jordan, and Phillip Lopate, as well as more recent ones by Thalia Field and Lee Ann Brown. In this issue, T&W poet and teacher Greg Fraser continues the tradition with his own meditations on teaching.*  
—the Editors

It is often said that the best teaching experiences occur when the instructor learns as much as his or her students. The following diary excerpts emerged from two separate teaching experiences at Long Island schools: Jacob Gunther School, where I taught fifth graders, and Denton Avenue School, where I worked with students in the second grade. By taking account of my own lessons as well as the students’ responses to the exercises, I discovered in a new light many of poetry’s most fundamental truths. These excerpts do not represent any sort of final word on how to teach poetry or, still less, how to think about poetry. Rather, they reflect one poet’s efforts to communicate the wonder of language and imagination to students who are too often (given many schools’ emphasis on standard testing) encouraged to think within rather narrow parameters. It was as much my process of discovery as it was theirs.

"We tend not to think of children as having a lost empire, a paradise lost—but they do."

February 7

*The Blank Slate*

Poetry very often emerges through the recording of remembered events, but it's more often (and more successfully) about imaginative ways of filling in details where memory fails. That's why I thought that Theodore Roethke's "I Need, I Need"—a poem about filling in the "blank slate" of infancy—might be a fun way to strengthen the students' imaginative powers and expand their poetic range. No one vividly remembers what went on in those earliest years, and for poets that's a great gift. Early childhood becomes a canvas on which to paint, a screen on which to project all manner of visions and creative possibilities.

Here is the opening of Roethke's four-section poem:

A deep dish. Lumps in it.  
I can't taste my mother.  
Hoo. I know the spoon.  
Sit in my mouth.  
A sneeze can't sleep.  
Diddle we care  
Couldly.

Went down the cellar,  
Talked to a faucet;  
The drippy water  
Had nothing to say.

Whisper me over,  
Why don't you, begonia,  
There's no alas  
Where I live.

Roethke brilliantly reconstructs a state of consciousness that is, for all of us—including young students—long since past. The poems in Roethke's *Praise to the End!* resemble e.e. cummings's early experiments, but Roethke's poems are less arch in tone, less sardonic and biting. Instead, he captures a kind of Rousseauian wonder in primitive awareness, and this leads to provocative statements that simultaneously appear detached from, and resonant with, the adult mind.

We tend not to think of children as having a lost empire, a paradise lost—but they do. Through this exercise I discovered that even the youngest of students already has a sense of time passing and of the past, that they regard their younger selves with the kind of distance that we associate with adulthood. They had already begun to sense their own aging, with all the attendant gains and losses of that process. Many students were clearly fascinated with the project of imagining and indeed *inventing* themselves as infants, and composed rich descriptions of how they used to behave, what they looked like to their parents, what they feared and desired. I observed in their poems an almost wistful sense of absence, but also a buoyant will to re-enter the space of their own pasts and eschew what Roethke himself

refers to, in an essay entitled “On Identity,” as the institutionalization of growing up. Perhaps most importantly, because the students had so few conscious memories of themselves as babies, and because loss had not yet become nostalgia, imitating Roethke was for them a pure exercise of imagination. As seven-year-old Brian Voskerijian wrote, “It’s hard to remember that long ago.”

*February 9*  
*Praise-Makers*

I have been trying to give the students a sense of what poets love to do—make wishes, make believe, use the imagination, et cetera. In future classes, I’d like to add “to praise” and “to give thanks” to that list. Wallace Stevens, like Walt Whitman, was well known for his exuberant offerings of thanks to the world. Stevens once wrote: “For the poet, the most beautiful thing in the world is the world itself.” My main objective will be to encourage the students to praise things with language.

In Stephen Mitchell’s translation of Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*, we find the lines: “Everything that has been wrestled from doubt / I welcome the mouths that burst open after / long knowledge of what it is to be mute.” Poetry is, in some sense, always a liberation from muteness, an implicit praising of the possibilities of language. This is not, of course, to reject silence (which is in itself worthy of praise), but rather to reject the deadened, the trite, the conventional, the cliché. Poetry constitutes praise for the possibility of language to liberate itself from itself. The world is enough, as Stevens suggests; we don’t need more—but we must enter into it with an attitude of enlarged connection, through a language that refuses to succumb to the terrible muteness of conventional speech.

*February 17*  
*To Lead and To Follow*

As the weeks progress, I hope that the students will come to recognize writing as a three-stage process: pre-writing, writing, and revising. The pre-writing stage is a journey without a map. During that initial setting out, a path is discovered that the writer will follow in the second phase—the formal writing process, the actual creation of a first draft. The rewriting (or revising) process can then be understood as a process of re-seeing based on concrete principles that can serve as guides, but which can also be adjusted if promising opportunities present themselves.

The revising poet should be prepared both to lead and to follow the poem. I want the students to realize that revision should never be haphazard or unguided (an approach that is usually reserved for the pre-writing phase), but neither should it be overly formulaic or rigid. The idea is to achieve a balance between strengthening the old by drawing on specific principles, and revitalizing the old by letting the imagination wander down new, yet related, paths.

"Poetry constitutes praise for the possibility of language to liberate itself from itself."

*March 7*

*The Heaven of Paper*

Before reading James Dickey's "The Heaven of Animals" aloud, I asked the students to paint a verbal picture of heaven for me. As expected, they talked about angels, white clouds, purity, peace, and love. I then explained that Dickey's poem is a little bit weird and that his vision of a heaven of animals is quite different from the heaven they had described. I also noted that the word *weird* has a unique history dating back to Anglo-Saxon times. Today, of course, the word suggests the strange, the unusual, the unfamiliar. For the Anglo-Saxons, it meant something akin to "fate" or "life." I asked the students to stop and think about that for a minute. Had they ever thought of life as a little bit weird? Many of them smiled and nodded. I told them that poets are especially interested in the weird and quirky aspects of life, and that poetry often tries to shake people out of their familiar views of the world. I warned the students that they should be ready for some strangeness in Dickey's poem.

For the purposes of this exercise, I distilled Dickey's poem from its original eight five-line stanzas to a shorter poem in three stanzas. I wanted to offer students the poem's dominant conceit and to preserve Dickey's imaginative leap, while also condensing the poem to what felt like a workable segment of text:

*The Heaven of Animals*

Here they are. The soft eyes open.  
If they have lived in a wood  
It is a wood.  
If they have lived on plains  
It is grass rolling  
Under their feet forever.

For some of these,  
It could not be the place  
It is without blood.  
These hunt, as they have done,  
But with claws and teeth grown perfect.  
They stalk more silently  
And crouch on the limbs of the trees.

And those that are hunted  
Know this as their reward: to feel no fear,  
Fulfilling themselves without pain.  
They tremble, they walk  
Under the tree,  
They fall, they are torn,  
They rise, they walk again.

"The Heaven of Animals" is a serious and provocative poem, but my main reason for using it was to prepare the students to write their own heaven poems. I asked them: "Can anyone think of something in the world—an object, a thing—that we might create a heaven for?" One student said, "The heaven of paper." "And what," I asked, "would occur in the heaven of paper?" Another student suggested, "You could write on the paper, but the words would disappear, so you'd always have a fresh sheet to write on." A third called out: "When you tear the paper, it heals right away."

My intention was to encourage students to think counter-intuitively. Dickey's poem strenuously complicates traditional notions of heaven, but my goal was strictly poetic rather than theological. Far from disputing or imposing any particular version of heaven, Dickey's poem teaches the writer to consider the unexpected, challenging us to think beyond the boundaries of the known, the assumed. This poem could work very well with older students, too, because its key point is about intensity. In Dickey's text, heaven is a concept of the heightened, a place where everything is emphasized into pure essence; this could provide an entrée, at a higher level, into a discussion about poetic language as "heightened speech." Thus the use of this poem in the classroom has less to do with faith (certainly not organized religion or dichotomies of Good and Evil, which Dickey works to unravel) than with poetic language and ways of lifting our imaginations to new heights.

### *March 13*

#### *Strange, but True*

This week, the students and I further discussed the importance of exercising the poetic mind by performing linguistic calisthenics. I reminded them that the word *calisthenics* derives from two Greek terms—*calis* ("beauty") and *sthenos* ("strength"). I told them that by doing verbal image-building exercises, poets learn to write with more beauty and strength.

The students seem to be challenging themselves. Not surprisingly, though, there were a few examples of over-adventurous figures of speech. One student made the following comparison: "While he struggled to lift the heavy rock, my father's face was a corn dog." I think he probably wrote this to get a rise out of his classmates, but I was grateful that he did. It opened the door for a discussion of the concept of the "strange, but true." I asked the students: "Does this metaphor seem strange?" Yes. "Does it also seem true? Do you think someone's face could actually look like a corn dog?" After some giggling, we concluded that the comparison didn't quite work. I explained that in order to be strong and interesting, figures of speech need to be strange, but also true. On the one hand they should be unusual, unique, and unlikely, but on the other, they shouldn't be totally arbitrary and ridiculous (unless, of course, absurdity is the poet's specific intent).

### *March 31*

#### *The Trouble with End-Rhymes*

I made an error when I neglected to tell the class to avoid end-rhymes in their last assignment. For the novice poet, regular end-rhymes tend to overpower the work and overrun the imagination. It's difficult for beginners to write good poems

under strict formal constraints, and regular end-rhyming is perhaps the most constraining of all. This is especially true because young people have limited vocabularies, and English, in comparison to most other languages, has a scarcity of words that rhyme.

But the central problem is this: most students have already read and heard innumerable nursery rhymes, and the sounds of these texts are deeply engrained in their minds. To instruct them to rhyme in a regular pattern is basically to ask them to summon what they already know from Dr. Seuss, Shel Silverstein, et al. The young writer will tend to produce easy, unimaginative couplets, monosyllabic “true” rhymes like *moon* and *June*, and consequently become distracted from the hard work of creating concrete details and imagery, evocative comparisons and associations. For this age group, rhyme typically has the effect of closing down the visual and figurative imagination.

Rhyme and meter may, of course, offer needed structure to students who might feel overwhelmed by the apparent open-endedness of free verse. (Everyone knows Robert Frost’s dismissal of free verse as “playing tennis without a net.”) But I’m persuaded that the deep-seated association between poetry and rhyme will inevitably yield a kind of imperative echoing: we can encourage students to pay attention to sound texture and rhythm while also dissuading them from mechanical end-rhymes and sing-song regularity. The so-called “freedom” of free verse implies an eschewal of established constraints, but also the burden of creating original constraints and new formal requirements.

#### *April 2*

##### *The Figurative Consciousness*

During my last couple of visits, I’ve tried to encourage each student to develop more of a “figurative consciousness”—a mind that thinks in simile, metaphor, personification, and other figures of speech. Instead of saying, “That guy really annoys me,” a person with a figurative consciousness might employ metaphor and say, “That guy is a stone in my shoe.” Instead of writing, “She looks sad,” someone might write, “Her face was a wilted bouquet.” A figurative consciousness relies on imagery to convey meaning and tends to compare things in the world as a way of understanding them. Such a mind makes sense of the world by “seeing” it through concrete, picture-building nouns and imagistic verbs. In my view, teaching young poets means teaching them the value of sensory details, of making interesting, unexpected comparisons and refiguring their surroundings.