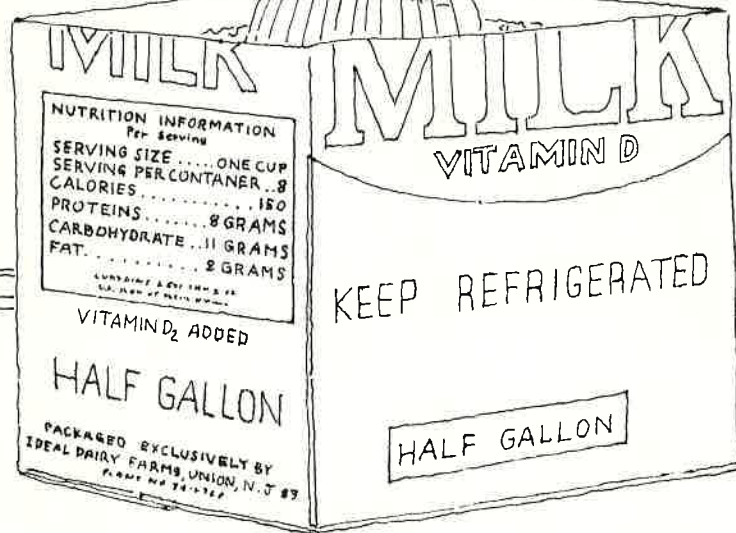


Teachers & Writers

Magazine

Volume 10, No. 3



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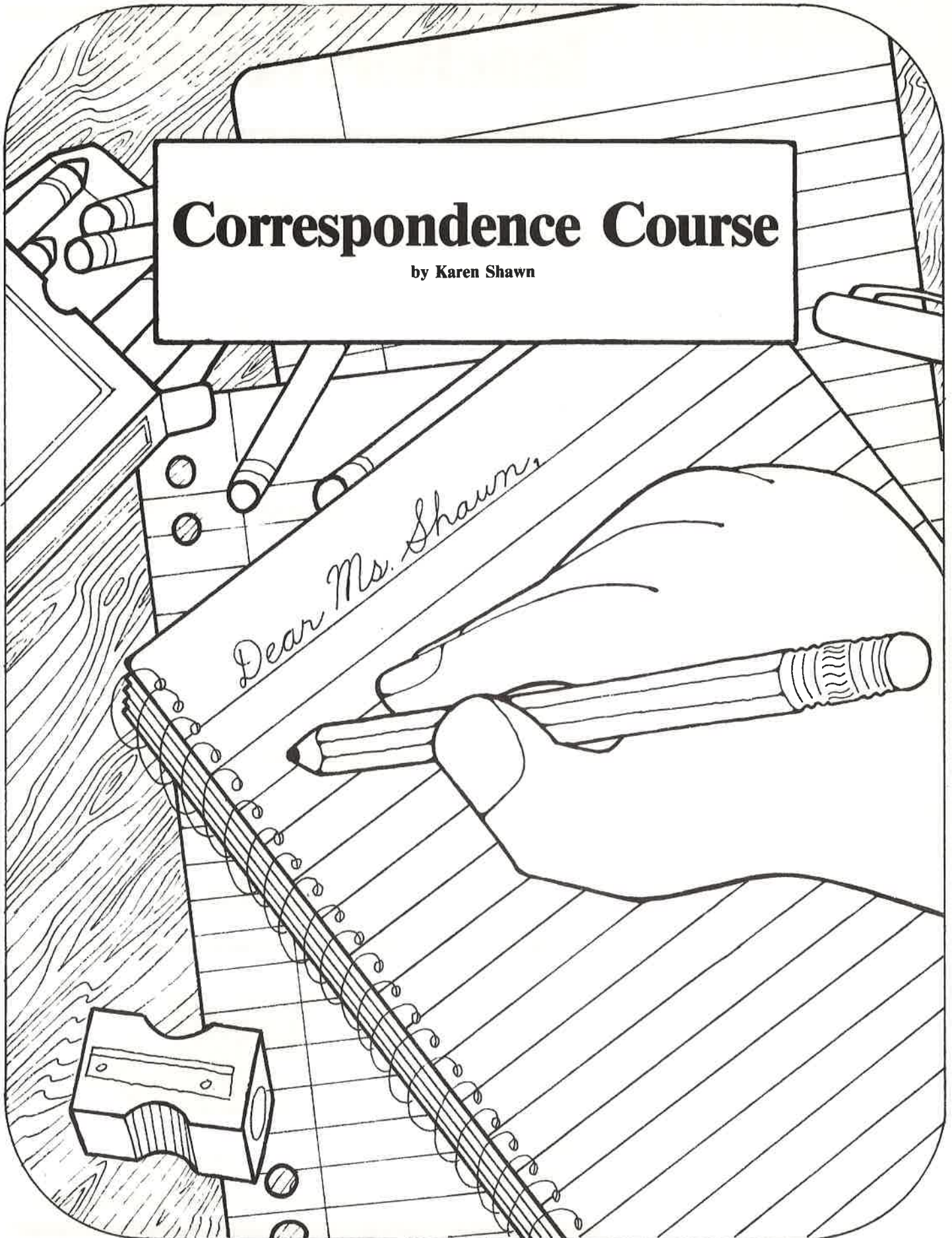


spring '79
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Correspondence Course

by Karen Shawn

Dear Ms. Shawn,



Dear Ms. Shawn,

Yesterday I think you was unfair because I was paying Debbie back for sticking me in the behind with a pin and I really didn't like it at all.

*Love Always,
La Tanya*

I used to think Bel Kaufman made up notes like that in *Up the Down Staircase*. I thought so because my kids had never written me anything more personal than, "In my opinion I like *Of Mice and Men* better than *The Pearl* although that is an interesting and exciting book also."

I wanted to hear what they thought, not what they thought I wanted. I wanted more of them, but I never knew how to get it.

Sometimes on those intimate, grey days when our "required" work was finished, I would ask for compositions with titles like "Thoughts on a Rainy Afternoon," hoping that surely this time the writing would be open and honest.

Instead, if they wrote anything personal at all, they added disclaimers:

"The following is Not a true story." Or, "The rain beating on the windows reminds me of the day my grandmother died. The rain beat on her hospital windows, and I was very sad. (only kidding!)"

Disappointed, I'd read and grade the papers, reaffirming my belief that adolescents just didn't share; couldn't, certainly not with a teacher; they were generally too emotionally immature to be open, too vulnerable, too fearful that I'd criticize. After all, how could they know I wasn't like that other teacher in Kaufman's novel, the kind who would red-pencil a love letter?

I never would have, even then. But I didn't see the contradiction in red-penciling those rainy-day compositions, because I didn't yet realize that every shared thought, every intimacy from a thirteen-year-old is a love letter in its own way.

I never saw the contradiction in asking them to be spontaneous while giving them their borders:

"Write anything you want as long as it's 250 words about your vacation."

I myself used to be a great colorer; the more lines I had to stay within, the

better I liked it. I learned early the importance of control.

"Let Karen color with you," my mother would say to my older sister. "She won't ruin the picture—she never goes out of the lines." My sister would grudgingly share her page, waiting hopefully for my hand to waver, so she could snatch the book away, screaming, "Look! She ruined the picture!" But she never got the chance.

I was a paint-by-numbers kid also, of course. I was reassured that I couldn't paint the horse the wrong color; the numbers on the animal matched the numbers on the paint; if I paid attention and followed the instructions, I wouldn't make a mistake.

"But why can't I paint these flowers red?" I once asked my sister in a brief moment of rebellion.

"Because they're *supposed* to be yellow. That's what the *Company* says they should be!" she answered imperiously. I understood. I was comfortable following directions; I grew up comfortable giving them. And when my students asked why, I was as imperious as my sister had been 25 years ago: "Because you're *supposed* to do it that way. That's the way the *School* says it should be!"

They understood, some of them; some were even comfortable with it. And their obedience was reflected in their writing: tight, controlled, dull, thought-less, all walled in, boring. I could see the smudges every few lines where they had erased numbers they had written to keep track of how close they were getting to the required amount of words. I had designed my own write-by-number method of composition, so how could the kids know what I really wanted?

How indeed? I'd certainly never told them. I'd never told them much of anything except what I was "supposed" to tell them. I came in as a stranger, and left ten months later, still, in essence, a stranger, providing no more opportunity for shared creativity and responsiveness than did those lined and numbered "art" forms. I never saw the contradiction in asking for honest writing when I never shared anything honest with them. They

didn't know my feelings about teaching, or my concerns, or philosophies; why I'd loved a certain book, or that I'd rather read than do just about anything else. They didn't know *why* I sometimes found it necessary to yell (often, in those days), or how I felt about tests, grades, book reports, homework, or detention; nor did I ever specifically ask them how they felt about any of those things either. Of course there were issues: racism was wrong; the war in Viet Nam was wrong; I shared my opinions on those issues with them, but still as a teacher providing some basic moral guidance, not as a person willing to listen to any ideas in opposition.

In fact, I never really listened to them at all. I mean, I listened for right answers; when learning is programmed, it cannot progress until the correct answer is given; but I didn't hear anything else. Anything that didn't stay within the lines was not relevant to the picture, was in fact distracting, and shouldn't be encouraged. (Students felt that way too. They often tried to get teachers "off the topic," because a discussion of anything other than what was planned for the day meant no work was being done.) I didn't listen to them; yet I saw no contradiction in expecting them to listen to me. When they didn't, I could say, and often did, "Will you please listen to what I'm saying?" And I could underline that by adding, "It'll be on your test." I never said, "I'd like to share this with you;" they never asked, "Will *you* please listen to us?" Yet somehow I expected they would want to share their feelings in their writing, and that I would be interested in hearing on paper what I missed in class.

But it didn't happen, and wouldn't happen this year either unless the classroom atmosphere changed. I was ready, I felt, for a new coloring book—the kind that had blank pages and suggested, "Make your own picture! Color it any way you like!" It was September; a whole year stretched ahead of me like a blank canvas; let the paint fall where it may. Nothing ventured, nothing lost, I always knew; I was finally beginning to realize I hadn't gained very much either.

It was the second day of school; we were discussing problems in communication.

"It seems so one-sided to me, my being able to say to you, 'I don't like what you're doing,' or, 'I really like this piece of writing,' when you can't really tell me your feelings about what's good and bad here."

I watched their faces—alert, suspicious—was this going to lead to a composition on "The Importance of Two-Way Communication?" One girl already had her assignment pad open.

"I'd like to know," I continued, "what you like, what you don't like, what you'd like to learn more about, because it's your class, your time, as much as it is mine. You'll have opinions and feelings about what goes on here, just as I will; I'll want to know them, just as I want you to know mine."

Silence. More suspicious glances.

"But if we stay after class to talk, we'll be late for our next class," one boy pointed out.

Someone else added, "And if I stay after school, I'll miss the school bus and I live two miles away."

Slyly, from a tall boy in the back row: "I told my teacher last year what I thought of her. I got suspended for three days!"

Laughter, repressed; they weren't sure whether it was okay to laugh out loud yet. (In the Teachers' Handbook we're instructed not to smile for the first two weeks of school, if we were to survive the year. I wondered briefly if there was similar underground information for students who cared about surviving.)

I smiled anyway, tentatively.

"It does happen that people get so angry that when they finally let it out, they get into trouble. But do you think if you'd had a choice to tell her what

was bothering you when you first started feeling upset, that maybe things could've been different?"

"Nope!" he replied emphatically. "She wouldn't've cared no matter when I told her. She hated me."

The kids waited. Had he stumped me? Would I abandon my request for honesty and openness?

I would not.

"Well," I countered, "I don't want what happened to—" I eyed the Delaney book, "—Ricky—to happen to him again, or anyone else. I want you all to have the chance to tell me things before they get out of hand. And I know there's no time during the day. So I'm going to ask you all to write me a letter, every week—just to keep me up to date on how things are, in here, or in general. I'll read them all, every week, and try to answer as many as I can."

"Is this homework?" the girl with the assignment pad asked, pencil poised.

"You can write it anytime you want—at home, during lunch, in class when we have independent study, anytime."

"Can we say anything we want to you?" someone asked hopefully.

"I'd hope so," I answered, but then my fear of attack won out. "Let's say, *almost* anything—I mean, don't write to tell me you hate my new haircut, or I'm gaining weight—and I won't say those things to you either."

They laughed, friendlier now.

"But if you think I've been unfair, or if you find some work boring, or confusing, or you're unhappy about a situation in class, yes, you can tell me that, by all means. And I'll tell you if you upset me also—I think that's better than telling you in front of the whole class."

"What if we have nothing to say? I

never write letters." Danny, contributing for the first time, sounded disgruntled.

"You can tell me about your day, or your weekend, or whatever about yourself you'd like me to know. Or just say that things are okay."

"How long do they have to be?" asked Natalie, obviously another victim of the write-by-number school.

"As long as you want them to be."

"What will they be graded on?"

The question surprised me, but I could see that everyone else wondered the same thing.

"Oh, these will never be graded! No corrections, no marks—these are letters, not tests. I'll read them just to hear what you have to say, not to tell you how you should have said it!"

"When do you want them?"

"If they're all in by Friday, I can read them over the weekend. So let's say every Friday."

"Every week?" One last try.

"Every week." I smiled, firmly.

They seemed satisfied, willing to chance at least the first letter; they asked no more questions.

I knew we had a long way to go in establishing a mutually trusting atmosphere; my own first thought had been that they would hurt me if I gave them the freedom to be honest. But if our care and concern for each other grew, if we found productive methods to ventilate our angry feelings, and test our intimate ones, trust would follow.

Today, at least, was a beginning.

The letters came, week after week. No one complained about writing them; no one said they were too much work, or stupid, or pointless. Even when kids had nothing to say, they wrote to tell me that. They wrote weekly letters from September 12th until the middle of June. It was the most successful, best-liked, long-term

assignment I'd ever given.

They began predictably enough, filled with compliments and flattering comparisons:

Dear Ms. Shawn,

I really like this class it's very realistic and you get more freedom and your a very interesting teacher and I like you Well Ms. Shawn I don't have that much to say this time.

L.C.

The past 2 weeks of English class was really fantastic! I really like your method of teaching, and I've really been having a great time. Most of my other teachers run the class in a very boring way. Theres one thing I'll have to get use to, and that's being so open...

One thing I'd have to get "use to," I saw quickly, was not correcting their errors. It took me some time to get beyond the spelling and punctuation (or lack of it) to the message, but I promised them I would. Besides, when I got letters from my daughter during her stay at overnight camp, I certainly never corrected her spelling, bad as it was. . . .There'd be time for that, other ways.

. . .Every day I can't wait to come to English. I think you're a great teacher because you teach on our level. It's like you know what it is to be an 8th grader.

My old class had a totally different teaching program. There, the teacher was sort of a teaching device. Now, the method and teaching device is yourself. . . .

I've never taken part in a class run this way and I think it's original and a fabulous change of pace. Most of my other teachers run the class in a very

boring old fashion way. I really love this class.

. . .I'm really glad I got a good English class. This year I can't wait for the bell to ring because when I come here I feel like I'm in camp, because we don't get detention if we stand up or talk. . . .

Most of the September letters were statements; I answered them usually with a "thank-you! I'm so glad things are going well for you." I was able to answer every one, and thoroughly enjoyed doing it. The whole process was so different from correcting essays: I looked forward to reading their letters, I felt relieved that there was to be no judgment on my part; I took care with my answers and had the satisfaction of seeing them read with care. Students never threw these letters away, as they did their essays; I never threw a whole class's contribution in the wastebasket, as I had done once or twice with those same essays.

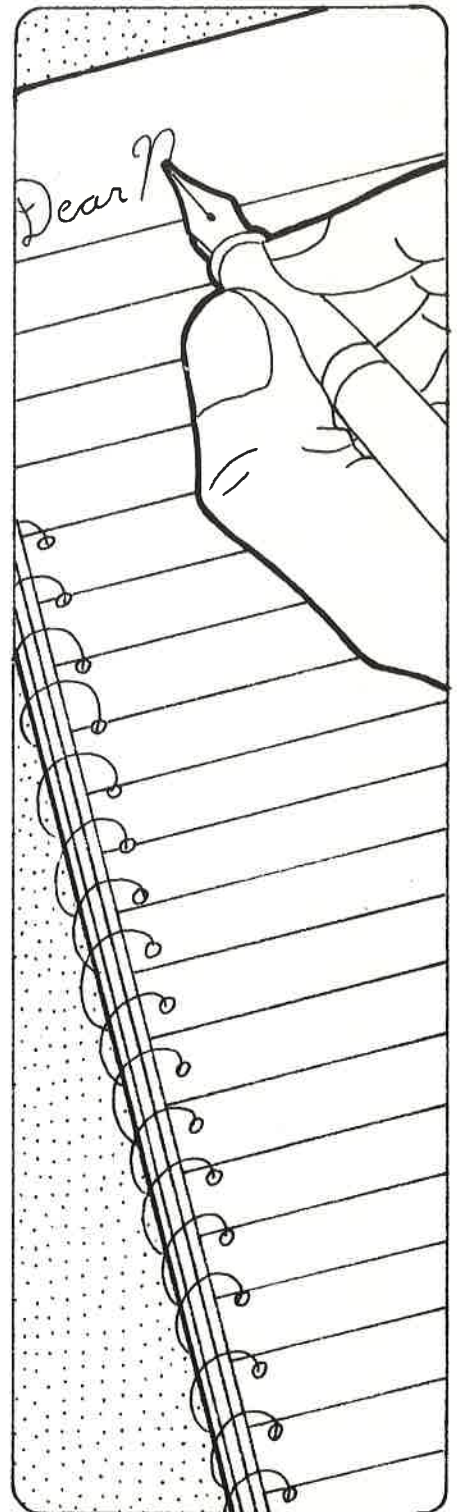
The letters continued their positive feedback:

I like the way we talk with people instead of just doing work out of a book. . . .

I liked when you said that my book reaction was really good. It made me feel like I worked really hard, which indeed I did.

I was curious to see what some students in particular would write. Robin, the girl with the ever-ready assignment pad, wrote, "I have written many compositions in my time, and each of them came to me as easily as writing the words on the page. I am not always inspired in such a manner, so please do not always expect it."

Ricky, suspended last year for tell-



ing his teacher what he thought of her, wrote honestly and optimistically:

I like the way you let the children participate in class. You really are a good teacher sometimes. In all of my other English classes we did nothing but grammar and composition. I always got into trouble because I be day-dreaming and never participate in class. But now it is half in half. You run the class and you let us run the class sometimes. I think I am going to pass.

Danny, afraid he wouldn't be able to think of anything to say, told me:

I like the way this class is done but I think you are making us read too many novels. I like these letters because we can tell you if we have problems in class.

Natalie, who asked about the length of the letter, wrote:

My week with you was just great. I had no problems at all. I enjoy the way you teach. It's much different than any other class I'm in. I am really happy in my group. We get all the work done and that's one reason why I like it.

They reassured me that they were learning, despite the different methods:

You're making English enjoyable and I am learning more. Thank you!

This year in English I'm learning in a different way. I've never learned English individualized.

I had a good week. I especially liked the writing session.

I like the idea of getting into grammar the way we are. The class is fun and

educational. I am learning a lot. Keep up the 'interestingness.'

Some needed me to reassure them:

If you can see were I can use improvement over the year please inform me. Thank you.

The second week of school brought this letter from Michael, a cheerful, easygoing kid in class:

I would like to know how I could improve myself, or is there any improvement needed.

I answered, "You're okay! There are no problems that I can see!"

The next week he wrote, "I would like to know if I'm failing, and if I am can you tell me what I could do to improve or pass."

I answered, "You're not failing. As long as you keep doing your contracts and take part in group work and class discussions you'll do fine!"

Two weeks later: "I would like to know how I could lift up my grade in this class."

Something strange was happening. "See me and we'll talk," I wrote.

When we sat down together during independent study, I found out that he was using these letters to show his football coach and his parents how concerned he was about his grades. Furthermore, my answers had reassured them that he could play ball without harm to his schoolwork. He didn't ask again; he didn't need to.

The letters began to get chatty:

I got 2 days of detention in h.r. and I days detention in music but I really don't deserve them. I really don't make trouble, it was just a very bad day for me.

This week has been pretty rough for me because of so many tests and reports due. I get quite annoyed sometimes when I get assigned reports every other day. Well, nobody can help me in that area so I might as well quit complaining. Thank you for listening anyway.

They reflected more trust and openness than they had before:

I write pretty well, I think, and I love to write poetry. Maybe if you're ever interested I'll show you a couple of my poems.

Our group's play didn't work out the way I expected it to. The truth is, we didn't work on it in a serious way. Next time we'll try a little bit harder.

By the end of October, people felt comfortable enough to complain. I was touched by this letter from Shira, an 8th grade honors student:

Yesterday in class, when we were talking about ways that discussions get terminated, I raised my hand. I had it up for at least 5 minutes, and then I put it down. You called on everyone else that put their hands up. I kept putting my hand up, and you still called on someone else. You said, 'Is there anyone else who wants to say something?' I had my hand up, and you ended the discussion without even looking my way! I'm not one to call out what I want to say, so I just put my hand down again. That bothered me the rest of the day.

I answered immediately:

I'm very sorry! That was careless of me and I feel bad that it bothered you all day. It was an oversight. I hope you know that I'd never ignore you on

purpose—I value all your contributions—and I can only say I’ll try not to do that again. I’m glad you were courageous enough to point it out to me.

Andy, an 8th grader in another class, also kept me in touch with myself:

You’re still cool but you’re getting in kind of a cranky mood. I’m not the only one to see it. As a matter of fact, someone told me, and then everybody was telling me, this happened when I was absent last Thurs. and Fri.

I answered, somewhat defensively:

I have been cranky, but it seems to me that the class has been different also—noisy and restless. But maybe that’s because I’ve been cranky . . . next week let’s all try to do better. Thanks for pointing it out. I’ll watch it.

Sometimes they were cranky too:

I hope you weren’t looking forward to this letter the same as you look forward to my other letters, because I am in a bad mood all day today and really have nothing else to say.

or concerned:

I have this feeling that a lot of people don’t like me because I’m Black. Also I have this habit of putting myself down that’s why I think nobody likes me because I’m Black.

or contemplative:

I never liked my name, Jonathan Harris. It is too long and strung out. Personally I like Joe Smith much more. . . . Have you ever thought about what would happen if there were no blue jean material?

But they were always honest:

This letter is different than the other letters in that this letter does not have good news. Two days ago my grandmother past away, and today was her funeral. I am very unhappy and really wish I could have been with her a little more often. We had a very good relationship, and I will miss her very much.

They shared themselves with me in a way I would not have thought possible a year ago, in writing that glowed with vitality. As the year progressed, I compromised my total acceptance by an occasional P.S.:

By the way, remember when we talked about homonyms? You’ve mixed up ‘their’ and ‘they’re’ in your 2nd sentence. If you’d like a quick review, see me.

The word ‘convenience’ seems to have given you difficulty this year. Please note the proper spelling.

If I felt that errors in a letter reflected a basic lack of understanding of a skill, I arranged for individual drill in that area. But generally their letters achieved a coherence and organization unmatched by most other writing that year. I like the way Robin’s letter summed it up:

Sometimes I don’t know what to write, but today I just wanted to say that this system is really good. We can tell you our problems and you can tell what problems we have in English. Thank you for thinking of a perfect way. □

A Vision Expressed by a Series of False Statements

by John Love

I had a dream that John Ashbery was reading the entire *Double Dream of Spring* to a cafeteria full of high school kids in Brooklyn. Paper Concordes swooped over kids who were drawing cartoons of Ashbery as a bi-ionic aardvark, and wadded-up paper baseballs landed in the Afros of kids who were fast asleep on pillows of Geometry books. In the back row Jose was giving Clarissa an anatomy lesson. Ashbery could barely be heard over the hundreds of animated conversations about the Bermuda Triangle, zombies, and UFOs. Suddenly the scene changed: Ashbery was reading the Manhattan phone book at the Guggenheim Museum. A packed house of hushed admirers and graduate students perked to hear his every syllable.

I had a dream that Robert Bly was reading Kabir at Eleanor Roosevelt Junior High, 182nd and Amsterdam. "The musk is inside the deer," he said with a flourish of his poncho, "but he wanders around looking for grass." Suddenly loud guffaws rocked the room, an Adidas sneaker went sailing toward the podium, and the scene switched to the Donnell Library, where Bly was getting a standing ovation from David Ignatow and Harvey Shapiro.

I had a dream that Ezra Pound, before he came to rest in the Venetian Lagoon, was reading the *Pisan Cantos* to a lunchroom full of English teachers in New Rochelle. The teachers were yawning and passing notes to each other about car payments and salary increments, and kept checking their digital watches.

I had a dream that Pablo Neruda was reading "Nothing But Death" to the advanced bilingual class at I.S. 52 in the Bronx, home of the Savage Skulls. He got to the part about the caskets sailing up the river of the dead, the river of dark purple, when Hector turned to Maria (his main squeeze) and blurted loudly: "Man,

that's bor-ing! He got all those crazy pictures in his head! This guy is mental!"

Roethke spoke of reading poetry to audiences as "the killer": the idea being that turning your mind inside-out in front of people can be terrifying. "We always try to hide the secret of our lives from the general stare." He must have had a premonition of the national Poets-in-the-Schools program ... that poets someday would be reading their work and the work of others in front of people who didn't necessarily want to be there.

Menacing, involuntary audiences. People under 18 harboring the most primitive notions about poets and poetry. Skateboard champions who can't sit still. Sons of hardhats wearing RANGERS T-shirts and snide grins. Jaded TV addicts. Miniature Fonzie's. Stoned-out Led Zeppelin disciples. Speedy young geniuses who invent solar-powered submarines during Social Studies. Expressionless neat kids who stay in a polite coma all day, who seem to be extras off the set of "Valley of the Chalk People." Young girls in tight white Levis with looks of impossible longing, as if they're suffering an exile from a miraculous disco. Gigglers and pranksters. Doodlers and Magic Marker wizards drawing spaceships, colliding galaxies, death rays, and Farrah Fawcett-Majors in heat. A room in a public school in America is a room of glares, sneers, snickers, and bored yawns. Is this the toughest room a poet will ever play?

Most poetry reading—in bars, cafes, and auditoriums—aren't a terror. They're relaxed gatherings of friends, usually people who have some direct or indirect connection with one of the seven ruling families of the Poetry Mafia. A quick mental scan of the audience proves this, revealing: several subscriptions to *Field*, *Kayak*, and the *American*

Poetry Review; fifteen failed CAPS applicants; six CCLM members; an N.E.A. fellowship winner; two MacDowell colonizers; twelve small-press editors, including one who produces a literary magazine printed inside fortune cookies—people whose brains crackle with images of Columbia writing seminars, the Poetry Project, the Gotham Book Mart, and the use of elision in the work of W.S. Merwin.

In a world of entertainment, of Peter Lemongello packing them in at the Rainbow Grill, poetry audiences are a rare and subtle breed. They come to listen to language do its stuff. They don't come to see exploding strobes or guitars that vomit blood. They come to hear words. As Pound might have said in that faculty lunchroom: "literature is nutrition of the impulses." A poetry audience is a friendly group of the convinced and faithful, come to listen to one of their own kind.

That's why the "involuntary" audience really is terrifying. They didn't pay to see this show; they don't get all warm inside at the mention of "poetry." They sit with blank looks. It means facing a group that doesn't share your basic premise... something like a WASP walking into the 2nd Avenue Delicatessen and ordering a rare pork sandwich, a glass of milk, and a side of mayo.

I walked into a class of tenth graders in Pearl River, New York, and asked them to write their "image of a poet." They wrote, verbatim:

...a poet is an elderly sissy who tries to be famous and sophisticated by using syllables to sound smooth.

...I think a poet is an egghead petunia who wears a sheet over his body and walks through the fields talking in rhymes.

...I think a poet is a boring old guy with a wrinkled mug who stays inside all day in Greenwich Village on Welfare, with a sack of pencils and a bunch of scribbled-on papers all around his desk.

...A poet—I don't come upon many. I would be shocked if I saw one. It would have a beard, be messy and weak. And also old. ...A poet is someone old and strict with a harsh voice, a tall hat, a long black robe, carrying books in his hands and when he

reads them it would sound funny because of the way he says them.

...A poet tries to get his feelings across with inspirations. First he figures them out, then he sells them to a company. He has long red hair and is lonely.

...A boring person who stays indoors and writes about experiences he has never experienced.

...A dull dreary person who is bald and you can't understand him, continually mumbling to himself in a kind of daze of thoughts.

...a carefree middle-aged person who reads a lot and is therefore quiet.

...About 62. Stuffy. Got time to look around. Owes money.

One girl wrote at the bottom of her paper: "Do you think you can profit from going around speaking poetry? Doesn't it take up and bore your whole life and girl relationships?"

At one point I asked the students to write a definition of an image in poetry. One kid wrote: "An image is a vision expressed by a series of false statements."

Suddenly you realize that the poems your friends will applaud in a bar won't necessarily work here. "The poet's job," Williams wrote, "is to body that sacred and secret presence into the world, but nobody will know what he's talking about."

Poets in the parks encounter the same thing: puzzled looks on the faces of lunchtime passersby, amused surprise...as if someone had slipped a page of Gertrude Stein into their copy of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

But: does it matter if a bunch of fifteen-year-olds, or a bunch of officeworkers, can't understand poetry? Does that mean we should all re-write our poems, or write a separate set they can relate to? Or have different sets of poems specially written for different people? With all the people in the world, it could become ridiculous...poems for retired Japanese home-run kings, poems for orthodontists who grew up in Vermont, poems for Republican librarians, poems for imprisoned ventriloquists...

This is a big issue, bigger than the both of us. Why doesn't somebody write an intelligent essay in *Field* about this? The issue is: is poetry, spoken poetry, a "popular" art? Should it try to touch a large audience of all kinds and sorts? Or does its

very nature, as compressed imaginative language, mean that it's meant for the few? Should spoken poetry move toward the popular arts (music, theatre, movies, bullfighting, base-running) or toward the private arts (decoupage, bonsai, needlepoint, ships-in-bottles)? Should poetry try to seduce people away from TV bowling? Or should the audience be an elite, incestuous club: *The New York Review of Each Others' Books*?

Do you get smarter when you're dead? I don't know, but here are three dead poets who attack this issue with smarts:

Frank O'Hara, in "Personism: A Manifesto": *But how can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them? Improves them for what? For death? Why hurry them along? Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don't give a damn whether they eat or not... nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them. I like the movies too. And after all, only Whitman, Crane, and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies."*

Ezra Pound (in a bad mood), in *Poetry*, June, 1916: *"Therefore we read again for the one-thousand-one-hundred-and-eleventh time that poetry is made to entertain. As follows: 'The beginnings of English poetry... made by a rude war-faring people for the entertainment of men-at-arms!...'*

(The works of Homer) were made for no man's entertainment, but because a man believing in silence found himself unable to withhold himself from speaking.

Such poems are not made for after-dinner speakers, nor was the eleventh book of the Odyssey. Still it flatters the mob to tell them that their importance is so great that the solace of lonely men, and the lordliest of the arts, was created for their amusement."

Ezra Pound (in a better mood), in *The Serious Artist*, 1913:

"You are a fool to read classics because you are told to and not because you like them. Also you are a fool not to have an open mind, not to be eager to enjoy something you might enjoy but don't know how to.

Now art never asks anybody to do anything, or to think anything, or to be anything. It exists as the trees exist, you can admire, you can sit in the shade, you can pick bananas, you can cut firewood, you can do as you damn well please."

William Carlos Williams: *"I wanted to write a poem that you would understand, because if you can't understand it, what good is it? But you have to try real hard."*

Hector and Maria may never like Neruda, and who's to say that's a tragedy? They can't get into it, no matter how powerful it is. They'd rather go see Bruce Lee in *Hurt Me Deeply*. Yankee Stadium will never fill to the upper decks with poetry lovers. Baudelaire compared the public to a dog: it hates the scent of a rare cologne, but loves to chew garbage.

"Nobody should experience anything they don't need to." True, but everybody should have an accurate idea about what's available to experience.

Some people—kids especially—simply don't know what's happening with writing. They've got no idea what's in there. Never touch the stuff.

Sometimes when I look out at a classroom of kids I have the haunting feeling that out there somewhere is a replica of myself, who in the famous long ago thought of poetry as an agony somewhere between prune juice and poison ivy. I remember that time in the September of seventh grade: there she was: Miss Haines, five-foot-one, in a granny dress with a brown sparrow print, hair in a bun, spectacles, about a hundred and forty-six years old, dragging us to the dreary shores of Gitche Gumee and the Big Sea Water. Or on a sing-songy *Midnight Ride*, leavened with some kneelappers by Ogden Nash. Nearly anything held more mystery for a twelve-year old: a Frisbee, a treehouse, *Lassie*, dreams, even Suzy Mendenhall across the aisle. I was one of the dummies who didn't need to experience *The Legend of Sam McGee*.

It's not pop evangelism that sends poets into the schools and parks and onto the public stage, but simply an impulse to let people know what's happening this side of *Hiawatha*. You don't want to bully anybody, collar people on the streetcorners or barge into an uptown bodega shouting early Lorca. You don't want to force-feed anybody; you simply want to free those replicas of yourself from a horrifying time-warp where elderly sissies in long black robes prance through the fields mumbling rhymes. There are words they ought to know about that can give them a kick, that may actually incite them to continue to continue.

The "involuntary audience" can feed the poet some kicks, too. It's refreshing to know, as you look at faces, that *not one person* in the audience has ever read Charles Olson's *Projective Verse*, been to a meeting of the James Joyce Society, or submitted poems to *The New Yorker*. Their innocence of the literary who's-who, the style-schools and movements, makes them ideal listeners. You save the quirky inaccessible stuff for later. (Berryman on Stevens: "Mutter we must as best we can. He mutter spiffy.") You save the spiffy stuff for later, because an audience like this has got a healthy restlessness. They have a low threshold of boredom (Yeats: "The more vivid their nature, the greater their boredom.") They've got no time for subtle enjambments or literary in-jokes. They'd really rather be outside, but if they have to listen to poems they want it up front: a story, a song, a strong mood, a dream.

They're full of energy and they want a talky, energetic poetry. Body electric. They like visual language; kids in school (I don't know about people lunching in Bryant Park) can usually write images of their own that would make Yannis Ritsos run to sharpen his pencil.

They're sharp critics. They hate depressing poems of staring-out-the-window-at-the-rain, or lemme-tell-you-about-my-operation-and-generally-sad-life. They like poems about real experiences: a brush with death, gettin' burned by your girl, the dullness of the workaday, sex on the mountaintop, a *deja-vu* for lunch. They love humor, "that delight that death teaches" (Edson). They like poems about mysterious stuff: they're as interested in ESP and UFO's as

Yeats was in magic, astral projections, and invisible folk who come out of the mountains at night. They want music in words, exactly the thumping pulse Roethke loved.

Poets should welcome such an audience. It throws responsibility on them, makes them clean up their act. "You've got to try real hard."

An incredibly generous government is giving poets the chance to meet this open audience: readings are being funded in libraries, restaurants, nursing homes, cafes, galleries, schools, parks, and museums. With so many poets on stage, it would seem that before long the primitive ideas about poetry would be erased, and we'd become a nation of poetry consumers: poetry in Bloomingdales, poetry at half-time at the Super Bowl, poetry books made into movies, Poetry Burgers, where would it stop?

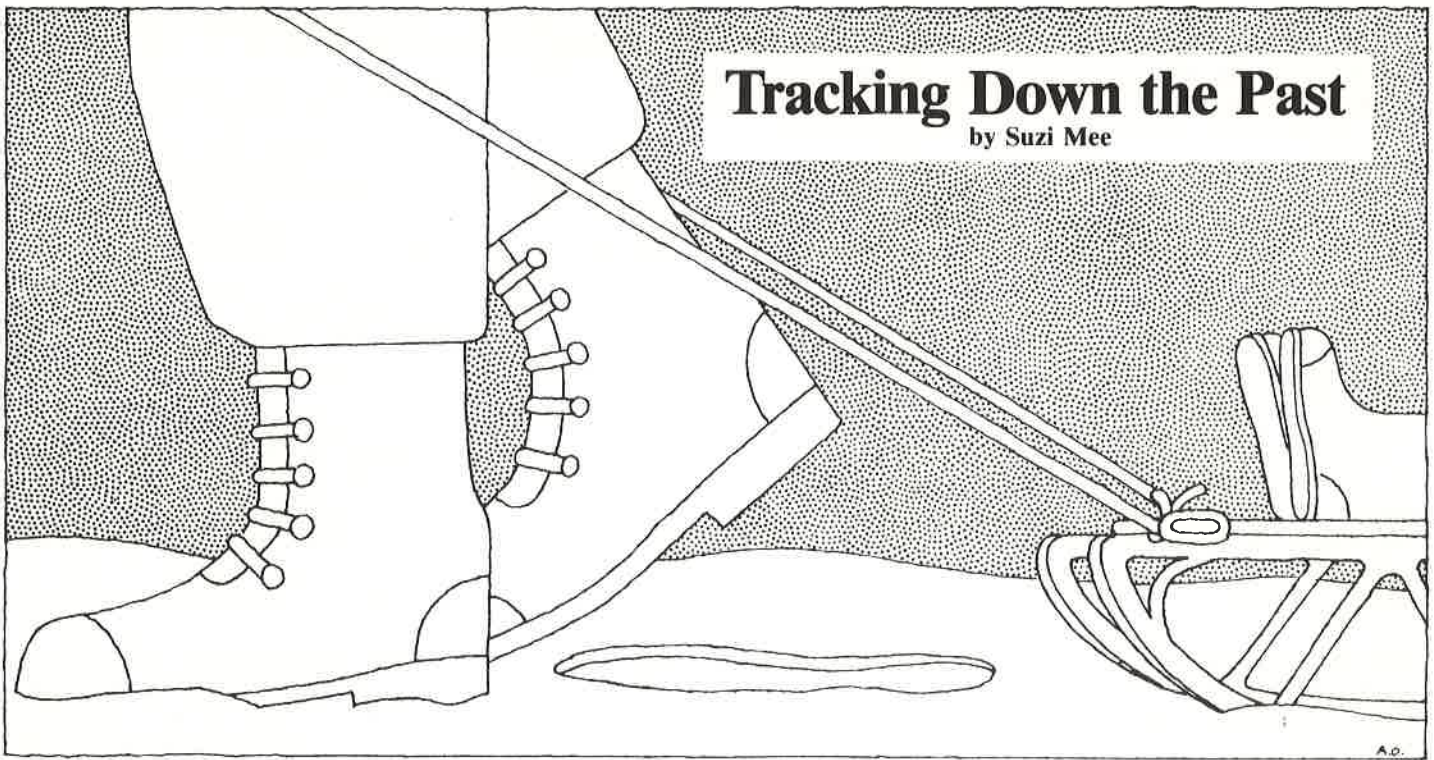
That'll never happen, even though more poets than ever are trying hard to touch the untouchables. It won't happen because every poet, even the most tame, will defend to the death the right to create stuff that won't play to the balconies. Writing has to be invention, experiment, curiosity, and discovery—or else it's dead furniture. "Troubadour" comes from the word for "finder" etc. An experiment means you try everything once. This can include maddening incomprehensible imagery, wails belches swoons rallieries and whispers of whatever feelings come knocking. "Cling to the inner calypso" (Knott). If you seek new places, those places are often confusing, stark, or overwhelming: "and when he reads them it sounds funny and you can't understand them."

I had this dream. I don't remember it too well, some guy standing in front of this huge cafeteria full of America: New Jersey in the pit, Ohio in the second row, then Texas out on the left, California way in back and Alaska doing the lights. He was talking, but talking special: pictures would come into the air, and hypnotizing music, and the people were actually listening. These were kids and workers. One of them, in Michigan in the twelfth row, turned to another and said Hey, this is better than the movies. □

"A Vision Expressed by a Series of False Statements" first appeared in *Poets on Stage: The Some Symposium on Poetry Readings* (Release Press).

Tracking Down the Past

by Suzi Mee



My Father And My Sled

*It was very cold,
snow covered the ground.
My father was coming, I was told.
I had not seen him for some time.
He was so tall
and his eyes were large and blue.
I was small
but I also had blue eyes.
We took my sled
out into the cold
and that great big man
ran before and pulled me
along.*

—John Noyer
Fifth Grade

Look at this poem closely. It tells you, even at first glance, (1) that the boy's parents are probably divorced or separated, (2) that he lives with his mother (3) but very much misses his father, (4) whom he has a strong desire to look up to and identify with. A poignant message from a ten year old boy, especially one who affects an I-don't-care attitude about everything. I remember him well: clean cut, dark brown hair with bangs, braces, dressed in the current uniform of striped shirt and blue jeans. I also remember how his face dropped its mask of indifference when he saw the sympathetic response of his classmates to his poem—he had shared some of his innermost feelings, and they had understood and praised him for it. It was this experience which confirmed my belief in the importance of writing about the family, especially about events which happened a long time ago. One of the most vivid memories of my own childhood is of sitting around the fire on winter evenings when my mother would tell me stories about the one-room school she attended in the mountains of north Georgia. Unfortunately in this age of vast television consump-

tion, such communication has virtually ceased and many children have little knowledge about their past. Writing about family history— even imagining family history—is an attempt to fill this void. It is particularly a rich area to explore with kids because not only are they vitally interested in the forces which shaped their lives, but many seem to sense intuitively that it leads to a deeper sense of self.

Three years ago, when I first began working with the New York State Poets-in-the-School program in New York City and environs, I knew that family history was one of the areas I wanted to concentrate on, but I wasn't sure how to go about it. At first I simply brought a Hart Crane poem ("My Grandmother's Love Letters") into the class, read it to the children and asked them to write a similar poem about one of *their* grandparents. Needless to say, this was not enough stimulation and too many fell back on that old complaint, "...but I don't know what to write about." Others said their grandparents had died long before they were born, and they didn't know anything about them—yet, if they wrote about their parents, it was always the same kind of surface stuff ("I love my mother because she is so nice.") The poems produced were pretty meager. Gradually, however—as I went back over my own thought processes in writing about the past—some sort of method began to emerge. This "method," as I call it, consists of three basic ideas.

1. Writing as though you are a detective searching for clues in the past as to why a member of your family acts a certain way. (Children love to play "detective" anyway—it's one of their strongest fantasy roles and they immediately grab onto it for writing purposes.)
2. Writing about one of your grandparents, or parents, through an object which you connect with him or her.
3. Imagining what it was like before or during the time your ancestors came to America from the "old country" (and each of us has an "old country").

Though a certain amount of explanation is required—mostly anecdotal, the suggestions do offer the children a choice: in writing about their own past, they may select from any one of these.

To illustrate the “detective search,” I tell the class about how I came to write a poem about my grandfather, who was known for always flying off the handle—a habit he passed on to his children. I had heard enough stories about him to know how much he hated farming even though this is what he did for most of his life, but it wasn’t until I visited his old farm, years later, that I found out what really must have caused his bitterness—the barren clay soil (which quickly turned to mud when it rained) spotted with rocks, the steep mountain roads, and the lack of neighbors to exchange the time of day with.

After relating a bit of my own family history, a child often will want to tell the rest of the class about *his* grandmother or grandfather, and I encourage this. Not only does it give support to those children who are more inhibited about their backgrounds but it is also one more way of sharing experiences—an essential part of poetry-writing. One black boy in a Brooklyn public school told a very moving story about why his grandmother—who lives in the South and has worked for the same white family for 35 years—is different from his mother—who came North at an early age and is now a teacher. He loved the kind of attention his grandmother gave him—such as making special cobbler pies for him, and jellies—but didn’t like the fact that she dipped snuff and would spit the juices into a can.

When this kind of discussion appears to have stirred up a certain amount of interest, I ask the kids to think of a trait of one of their grandparents, or parents, and then try to imagine something in the past which might have caused him or her to behave that way—and needless to say, it can as easily be something good as something bad.

Here are a few examples of “detective search” poems. They were both written by sixth graders at a neighborhood school in West Hempstead, L.I.—the first is by a girl from a large Italian family who was given to writing sad poems about love, the second by a shy blond boy whose father, he confessed to me, was a nurse.

WHO IS HE?

*Who is that man
I only see at weddings and wakes,
Whom I must kiss
When the rare occasion comes?
Who is he?
I know he’s my father’s father...
But I think I understand...
For when his wife stepped
Off the curb,
A car came and hit her.*

—Robin Ferrante

MY FATHER

*The apartment building was pretty cold
And as a boy he carried coal
Up to the room where he slept.
Then he was evacuated to a country home.
When he came home from school
He sat on his front steps*

*And cried and cried
Because his mother was not there
To warm him.*

—David Rich

Another way of dealing with grandparents or other family members is to write a poem about an object which you connect with one of them. A seventh grader once told a chilling story about this kind of association: when she was a very little girl, her grandfather (who lived on the other side of town) would come by once or twice a week to eat supper. She remembered him always sitting in the same brown chair where he would sometimes hold her in his lap.

One night after his usual weekly visit, he left early saying that he felt tired and wanted to go to bed. Later he had a heart attack and died before anyone could reach him. For months after his death, the girl wouldn’t go near his chair because she was afraid that if she touched it, she might die too. Even when she was older and realized that this was only a superstition, she still thought of her grandfather in terms of that old brown armchair. Most of us have had similar experiences of attaching people to the things they use or used—in the same way that we tend to attach good or bad news to the place we happened to be at the time we hear it. I wrote a poem several years ago about an overcoat my father wore which had its own special smell and touch. Because it is a sample of this particular exercise, I sometimes read it to a class.

*My father’s coat
was made of sinews
of finest muscle;
fish-scales were its lining,
from them water-falls glistened;
rainbow trout swam safely
in the depths of its pockets
among twigs and polished stones.
Inside this coat my father was invisible:
he became the smell of leaves,
the smoke of camp-fires;
and when he wrapped me in his sleeves,
I slept in the secret places
of the dark forest.*

Below are several poems written by children which I also read to classes—and, like “My Father and My Sled,” one poem can reach all 35 students when they identify with it.

MY GRANDMOTHER’S POT

*I have a Grandmother.
She has a pot
Sixty years old,
Nice and shiny.
It is silver
And not chipped one bit.
She still uses it.
When we come over
She cooks lots of things
And then washes it
For another time.*

—John Seamore
Fourth Grade

I remember I was at my aunt’s house

because my grandmother
had died
and my mother said I was old enough
to go to her funeral.
That night I was sitting in bed
looking at the doll
she had made me for Christmas.
When I went to sleep
I dreamed
that her face was my doll's face
and everytime I looked at the doll
I was afraid.

—Mary Mahoney

The third way of writing about the past is almost totally imaginative, therefore more time has to be spent giving the children some sort of foundation. One possible starting-point is to ask them where their grandparents or great-grandparents, etc. lived before coming to America. There is usually such a rich variety of backgrounds that I list the countries on the board as they call them out: "Russia, Italy, Japan, Ireland, Germany, Syria..." Often students will volunteer information about customs, landscapes, languages, or food. (One Greek girl described precisely her grandparent's small pistachio farm on the island of Aegina: how they began gathering the nuts in August, using the discarded shells to pave a walk in the garden.) If this doesn't happen, I try to evoke—off the top of my head—the village in Scotland where my great-grandparents lived ("...a one-room cottage with mud floor...the nearest village 5 miles away,") always emphasizing that the description does not have to be "true"—in fact, sometimes we can create our own family past just by the way we write about it. In this respect, certain questions are important: what kind of work did your great-grandparents do in the country they came from (involving what kind of tools); how did they amuse themselves; what sort of houses did they live in? Probably the children won't know, but at least it will start them fantasizing.

If there is difficulty in getting the imaginations working, we sometimes discuss the boat trip across the ocean: Did they get seasick?; What were the weather conditions?; Were they afraid? I might give them an outline of what life on the early pack-boats must have been like (leaving them to fill in the details): people crowded together in the lower deck, the scarcity of food, the possibility of disease and even death. When the children really begin to think and wonder, certain pictures become very distinct in their minds—as the following poems will attest. The first two were written by fifth graders in a school near Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn (where they perhaps had first-hand experience of the sea), and the third is by a chubby sixth grade girl who spends her after school hours working in the family delicatessen in upper Manhattan.

My grandfather was coming to America.
It was a large boat.
As the boat sailed along the water,
it turned into snow-white foam
and there was a reflection
of winter sun
as the clear-blue waves
stumbled and tumbled
over each other.

—Susanne Hendler

My grandfather and grandmother came
from another country.
to the land called "America."
It was a hard voyage
but it had to be done.
The moon was full and bright
reflected upon the water.
It made the boat's bright paint glow.

—Lance Barnett

GRANDMA CAME FROM ITALY

How Italian she was.
Though I never knew her,
the way my mother told stories
of her and Italy,
I felt I was there living with her.
I could imagine how it was
when she had to leave.
I can see her on the boat
waving goodbye—
how she was dressed
in an orchid dress,
her black hair
black as midnight
and tears.

—Patty Dallo

The above exercises are only guidelines. Some of the children will not need this kind of impetus and will say to me: "I have my own idea—do I have to stick to these three things?" My answer is, "Of course not...I was just trying to give you a small boost." Here, then, is a poem from a studious fifth grade girl in Harrison, N.Y. who obviously had a very personal family event to write about:

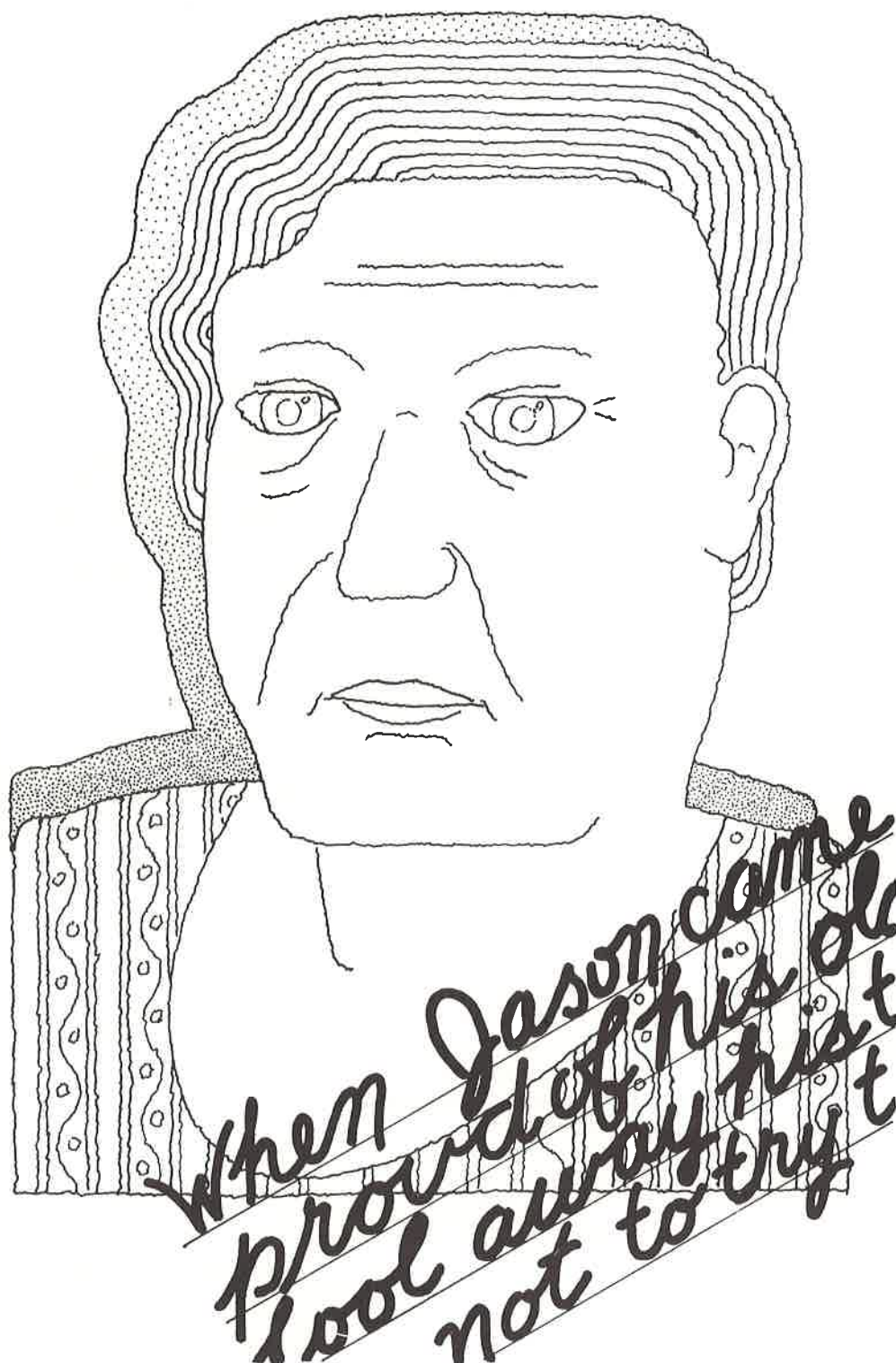
It was World War II.
Bombs were going off—
it was frightening!
Right behind the house
there was a fire.
People were running.
My grandparents were starving—
to get food you had to go
miles and miles
without getting hit.
My father was 3 years old.
He and my grandfather
would run from tree to tree
terrified.
Then everyone—my grandfather,
my grandmother, my father's
sisters and brothers—
were sitting around a fire
when a bomb came down...
the worst one.
They ran downstairs
to the basement,
the safest place,
until it was all over.

—Margarite Singer

□

Gray Heads Not Gray Voices

by Lois Kalb Bouchard



I'm almost forty, no spring chicken: I read books on the adult life cycle and on aerobics. I expected no surprises from my students aged sixty and over in the Elderhostel Program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, an overflow section of Jane Yolen's course on writing books for children. But there were surprises. Teaching writing is so intimate that the shape and nature of the experience depends upon who the students are. And teaching older people raised questions at every turn: were they old? or only older than I? Was I young? Was I a peer? Did we think alike about death? The questions would flutter between syllables in our conversations, but answers would also flutter, elusively. Besides questions about aging, issues arose which had not occurred in my previous classes of children, college students or working teachers; issues such as condescension (mine toward my students), the class's need for support beyond my expectations, death as a subject, displayed emotion. These were barely surprising, however, compared to the final issue: the politics of aging. Let me take these in order, making teaching suggestions when I can.

Feeling condescension interrupted and soured my exuberance on the second day. Believing my approach to writing for children was more enlightened because less didactic, I consequently hedged and softened the articulation of my opinion. Ruth Kelly brought in a little tale written for her grandson, clearly in the tradition of didactic stories for children. If you think of it, a sixty-five year old person's childhood must have been full of cautionary tales. It ended thusly:

...When Jason came the next day, he was very proud of his older brother Danny...and so Danny has decided not to fool away his time, but to try to get a gold star every day.

Annoyed at the simplistic didacticism, I still wanted to be supportive of the writer, and sat there stunned that a difference in point of view should come up so soon. I should have said this, but didn't. Instead I murmured that at least the writer should perhaps not use her grandson's actual name in

the tales, so as not to insult him.

Moralizing persisted. Florence Frost, a retired teacher passionate about her work, had begun a series of stories illustrating and exercising sound-letter relationships. One story concerned a schoolboy who needed a bath, and I squirmed through the reading. This time I responded a little less briefly, suggesting that the theme was inappropriate for a classroom because a child's feelings could be hurt by the issue. I feared that moralizing was the main impetus for writing. But that was not so. It did not forecast the entire person, her subsequent stories, or our relationship (nor did it for the first writer, either). Besides, Florence Frost had a point to make: that if a child's dirtiness was an issue in that child's life, better it was out in the open in a classroom and not a sneaky threat in the corridors. Her presentation of that point was compassionate and kindly. My position, that dirtiness was a sensitive matter but both private and unimportant, was perhaps tied to my generation. But at least by speaking out, I was no longer condescending. And my fears that these issues would pervade the week were unfounded.

The next surprise was the extraordinary amount of support the class gave to each other. Of course I had previously encouraged group support in classes and had witnessed a great deal among students—but not this much. Although perhaps more was kept private than among other adults I've taught, what was shared, whether an intense poem about aging, written months before, or a journal entry from the previous afternoon about napping in the dorm, was listened to with more alertness and more praise than I had noticed in a group before. For the first time in my classes, pieces were reread the next day—not rewritten; simply reread—and heard again with the same attention. It seemed important to those students that the details of their days, whether at college or back at home, were written down. A few had previously published in local newspapers and professional newsletters, and the polished work was duly congratulated, but beginners were energetically praised as

well. In a way, everyone was a beginner because all were interested in any new writing idea presented, whether interviews, free writing, journal entries, poems, or articles. Writing for children turned out to be, for most, just a way of taking a writing workshop. Besides music appreciation, there was one other writing course given, R.H. Abel's morning class on producing a magazine, through which I learned even more about this issue of support.

One of the first exercises I presented was remembering back to childhood and then writing from those vivid and felt memories—I had heard about the long-term memory of old people. The exercise was successful, but not until the first issue of the group's magazine came out did I learn that I had not been supportive enough to at least one person. Herman Levitt wrote the following about the memory exercise:

I thought and thought but nothing worth writing about appeared. Those around me were busily writing while I just sat there. Nothing inspired me. I knew I was a failure....When my turn came to read I shamefacedly announced that my sheet was blank. I was not happy. I was dismayed. I sat through the balance of the session, downhearted.

—in *Expanding Horizons*,
Fall, 1977, p. 6

I had no idea such failure was being experienced. On that urbane man, it didn't show. He was, of course, judging himself in a way I wouldn't and didn't, and it didn't occur to me that people who had experienced years of successes, as these zestful people clearly had, would care if they weren't excellent at something completely new. Happily, Herman Levitt wrote later in his article about the memories finally coming late at night:

...Ghosts of my childhood days appeared before me. They reminded me of the happy hours we spent together. There was Caruso, Martinelli, Chaliapin, Galli-Ceerci, Lily Pons, Melba, Heifitz, Zimbalist, and many more. How could I have forgotten such friends? I am happy to say that we have renewed our friendship and I offer my thanks to Elderhostel for this opportunity.

The students took unabashed pleasure in sharing their lives. Interviewing each other as well as themselves were major vehicles for this self-disclosure. (I always participate in such questioning and answering.) Another vehicle was free writing which we then looked through for "energized" words, as Peter Elbow and Robin Skelton suggest. When you take these words out of their context, they sometimes make a poem. In that room made electric with telling, the statements moved me, even simple descriptive sentences:

How to adjust to life after my husband died. Took a civil service job and went to work for the Air Force.

—Adeline Nixon

Do I find that I have a more secure ego? I don't have a feeling of security but I mean that I have more confidence in myself and my opinions.

Do you refuse to tell your age?
I am 73—When I am 93 I will say so.

Wondering what the younger college groups think of us old fogies back in college again.

traveling
long walks
rain
carrying an umbrella
dodging the puddles
wondering

—Ruth Kelly

right direction
actually it doesn't matter
We are all compensated

do know
can do

Most moving to me were pieces which touched on death, for example, Herman Levitt's statement:

Strangely, I have no gripes. I am happily married and enjoying life. I am happy with my children and grandchildren. My only regret is that I was always very much involved with earning a living and suddenly realized that I am no longer a youngster and have lived the average years most people live to, and hopefully I will have a few more, but I don't believe in miracles and feel the inevitable may soon arrive as many of my neighbors have become widows in the near past.

Or, here: Lilah Vought brought a poem she had previously written, and read it aloud to us. She later published it in the magazine:

TO BRUCE

The time will come when sunlight
fades away
And I no longer walk beneath the trees
Nor feel the earth made soft with
fallen leaves
But I'll not grieve.
There is a child with feet so small
and swift
Who darts through leafy shadows
Into pools of light,
A child who talks with me
And laughs
And as we walk I know
When daylight goes and darkness
comes to me,
The beauty will not fade
For eyes will see.

Expanding Horizons, Fall, 1977, p.7

It was no surprise that death was as frequent a subject in that class as the Depression or going back to college classes. The surprise was that death simply took its place next to humorous domestic crises, reflections on careers, poverty in childhood, etc. But in the sequence it was loudest, and predisposed me to think more about death: how I am in one sense as near death as an old person because, through illness or accident, my life, like theirs, could end at any time; but how there is a difference between the possibility of death and the inevitable nearness of death, between "could die" and "will soon." These feelings tinted the air for me; both sunlight and grayness were more strongly colored than usual. I felt an unusual energy in teaching among these feelings, and also a desire to go home and write the feelings out. Next time, I shall write these feelings down and share them, risking tears (mine) but asking for more words from the older people.

And I shall risk one more subject that I think was avoided: illness and infirmity. Why was it? Perhaps the people who get to Elderhostel are those who put aside what infirmities they can. There was an arthritic woman who was clear about her pain and stiffness, but who spent no more words on it than answering other peo-

ple's questions. There was a lame woman and another who could not show up for every class. I do not mean to imply that most of the students were ill or lame: most were not extremely old. Most seemed hearty. But surely illness and dependence upon others were ideas troubling their minds. Old age is often a trial. The body's decay is not gentle. The father of a friend of mine, to attend Elderhostel once a year, must leave his unstable and difficult wife in someone's care, yet this man sits in someone's class looking happy.

I think there was a quicker access to emotion than in other groups I have taught. I read Taro Yashima's great picture book for children, *Crow Boy*, warning them that I had never managed to read it aloud without my tears causing some kind of interruption or distraction. Reading it without crying had become a challenge. This was the first time, however, that I was ever joined in my tears by almost an entire class. The women poked at tears at the bridges of their noses. Three men needed handkerchiefs, as I did. I read Robert Kraus's picture book, *Bunya The Witch*, for comic relief which still touches emotion, and for its character, an old woman who whines at the end:

So if I'm a witch, I'm a witch. Magic powers aren't the worst thing in the world to have. Maybe I could use them to help the poor, and who is poorer than poor Bunya? Nobody!

(Kraus, 1971)

These two children's book treat the entire life span, childhood to adulthood. In both cases, their subject matter is a revision of attitudes toward an individual's strengths and weaknesses granted by the perspective of growing up or growing old. Although their depth and conciseness are nearly impossible to master, they are promising forms to attempt in a writing class.

The last surprise was the emergence in class of a political issue and ensuing action. Based on a discussion he had initiated in R.H. Abel's class in the morning, Murray Corman read the following statement one afternoon:

Why am I concerned about being required to retire? The key word is

"required." The concept of retirement is frightening only in the context of what the word communicates. If it implies a kind of living death, of course it is frightening. If it projects an opportunity to consummate projects long incubating, it may be welcomed with joy. But there is no joy if there is no choice—if there is no option.

The following afternoon, Murray read an expanded and polished article about power and the abuse of the elderly. He touched on powerlessness—Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, American Blacks in recent history, old people now. He claimed that the White House Council for the Elderly, the American Associations for Retired Persons, and the Gray Panthers were not adequate: that the need was for a more political organization. Murray wound up by announcing that the magazine being produced in the morning class was to be the launching issue of a new organization! (Bob Abel told me later how astounded he was, and gratified, by the group's energy.)

The afternoon was now passionate and charged. Some people read written statements while others spoke. Work and retirement were dominant themes, as well as the Great Depression. Beth Heath told us how her grandfather died the day he lost everything in the Crash. Murray told about his father's terrible stress in the Works Progress Administration. The stress came from being pressured by supervisors and fellow workers to spread his work out, never completing it, faking all the time. Lilah Vought described how she raised and sold eggs for eleven cents a dozen, collecting the eggs each morning and bringing them to town—unable to afford to give even one of those eggs to her own two children.

Max Lenowitz played "devil's advocate," as he put it, with Murray's statement, and challenged it: Why argue against retirement? Wasn't everyone's goal to eventually stop working? And if one couldn't stop working, maybe that was a fault, an overdone work ethic.... Alice Corman heatedly pointed out that the issue was *forced* retirement, not that everyone had to keep on working. Max re-

joined: maybe we should make room for younger people. Murray interjected the expense of replacing an older worker with someone untrained.

The class was running overtime by now. The music appreciation teacher was waiting for them in the next building. The discussion wended its way with the group out of the door and down the corridor, going slow because of the lame person, the frail person and the one stiff with rheumatism. The voices stayed with me in the empty room and became the voices of my uncles and aunts, some now dead, as well as the countless old people I knew with whom I never before assessed what was shared or unshared between us. There was no demeaning my own adulthood and knowledge of relationships and death. Yet there was no erasing the twenty-five to thirty-five years those people had on me and

what they knew of work and life-patterns and fixed incomes and time. Although work and forced retirement and summing up one's life are my issues too, did we share those issues in the same way? Should I join their organization when I'm sixty, or should I join it now?

My clearest response was my eagerness to teach people older and old, no longer from curiosity but from the certainty of what I would take away. My feelings were matched by other teachers in the program. Walter M. Chestnut, who taught music appreciation, wrote the following in *Expanding Horizons*:

I am very happy to say that these were three of the most exciting weeks of teaching that I have had in my twenty years as an educator.... I would be happy to talk to anyone at any time

about my strong convictions concerning the Elderhostel program.

(Fall, 1977, p.6)

R.H. Abel said he was 'knocked over' when his students really applied for a grant to continue the magazine and to organize. Whether through Elderhostel or other avenues, teaching old people is not a simple-minded way to "do good" but is a special experience to seek.

Information on the network of college classes can be obtained through Elderhostel, 55 Chapel Street, Newton, Mass. 02160; and in New England, c/o The University of New Hampshire, Durham, N.H.

Subscriptions to *Expanding Horizons* are \$3 through A. Peden, Box 164, Belchertown, Massachusetts 01007. □

Almost Grown: Writing from the Photographs of Joseph Szabo

by Alan Ziegler



After being asked to consider writing an introduction for a manuscript of photographs of teenagers by Joe Szabo, I went to see an exhibit of some of the pictures, in order to get a sense of his work before meeting him. I came upon one picture after another vibrating with the moods and postures of adolescence: arrogance and shyness, hardness and vulnerability, independence and clinging. Sexuality (both pronounced and mumbled), awkwardness, and cockiness were also depicted; the faces wore smiles, snarls, smirks, and serious concerns.

Some of the pictures made me feel slightly voyeuristic; they were the kinds of scenes I would come across in school halls, but I'd turn away, not wanting to get caught staring. Szabo, a

high school photography teacher, either had been permitted by the kids to stare, or had an extremely quick shutter-finger. Or, most likely, both.

Long-sleeping memories of my teenage years began to stir. Later, in one flurry I wrote a draft of a story based on a teenage experience of mine—a party, a girl, some liquor, some rejection. Other specific memories came to mind, and I was left with a sense of a special time in my life: a time that is similar for most of us, no matter what place we spend that time in.

Adolescence is a time of mixed signals and fuzzy reception, but also magical connections. It is a time when things often seem to go awry as they attempt to fall into place. It is a time of first times, which are precious and

Almost Grown, photographs by Joseph Szabo, poetry collected by Alan Ziegler is published by Harmony Books.

*It's a frightening feeling, like a
neglected baby:*

*There's so much I want to say.
To tell you I am hungry
for love.*

*It's scary in the darkness.
No one is holding me.
All I can do is cry.*

*I'm not a baby anymore.
I understand more.
Still, I am hungry, scared
and more lonely.*

*I stand before a mirror and cry.
Why isn't someone holding me?
Can anyone understand
my need to know I am wanted
my want to know my needs.*

*Someone, capture me
with a caring smile.
Hold me, love me.
When you do,
I'll be a woman.*

*I'm walking in my future.
Never understanding my past.*

—BARBARA CIALONE

irretrievable (except in memory, a process which often sweetens the brew). Teenagers are stirred by onrushing sexuality, the capacity to reject and be rejected, and the waves of outside expectations (which can be stimulating or debilitating). This stirring can leave one dizzy with wonder and confusion. It is also a time for hanging out, with, as Chuck Berry sings, "no particular place to go."

It occurred to me that Szabo's photographs could be used as triggering devices to help high school students write. I asked him if I could have a set of prints to take into my writing workshops with teenagers; if some interesting writing developed, we could assemble a text for the book. The result, *Almost Grown*, was published recently

by Harmony Books, a division of Crown.

The title for the book came from a line by one of the student poets, Robin Frisco:

I am 16, almost grown, and need only my strength.

But all people find strength in the love of others.

Ironically, "Almost Grown" is the title of another Chuck Berry song, from 1959, one more indication that the experience of adolescence transcends generations.

When I pass these photographs around to a group of teenagers, exclamations of recognition accompany a flurry of picture-trading and looking over each other's shoulders. The kids usually want to see *all* the pictures, and I allow some time for shopping and gossiping about the photographs. Then I ask the students each to settle down with one picture. It could be an image they are particularly attracted to, or perhaps repulsed by; they might empathize with the situation, or it might be a scene they usually feel "outside" of. What is important is that they find the picture somehow compelling in its physical or emotional landscape.

Then it's time for writing. I don't want "caption" poems that label the photographs. I don't want, "This is a picture of a kid who looks unhappy (happy) because something bad (good) happened to him." I want an exploration, in language, of layers of experience and/or emotion suggested by the photograph.

One possibility is for the writers to put themselves into the situations depicted—pitch their poetic voices, be literary ventriloquists—and imagine what the people in the pictures might say if they were to write poems about themselves. The student might write about what led up to the moment when the camera clicked, what is going on in the mind of the subject and, perhaps, what will happen next. The poems should be able to stand on their

own, without the photographs. This gives the writer license to depart somewhat from the picture in order to pursue the movement of the poem.

Another possibility is for the writer to use a photograph as a springboard from which to dive into his or her own memories and feelings. The photograph would be a starting point, providing the spark which sets off a poem or story that has been waiting to get written. (This is what had happened to me when I first saw these pictures and was reminded of the party, girl, liquor, rejection I mentioned earlier.) Perhaps the best route for dealing with these pictures (and most creative writing) is to combine imaginative projections with "real" autobiography. The important thing is that these or similar photographs be used as aids for an enjoyable and meaningful writing session.

The use of photographs sometimes makes it easier for students to write something highly personal. Since the students have the choice of imagining what is going on behind the eyes of the subjects in the pictures and/or writing about their own feelings and experiences, they can choose to smile mysteriously if asked by a friend, "Did that really happen? Is that the way you really feel?" Or they might respond with something deliciously insufferable, like the writer in the movie "Diary of a Mad Housewife," who says, "I never talk about my work. Never."

It would be interesting to use these photographs with junior high school students, giving them an opportunity to live for awhile in the future; or, with a group of adults, to see what pops out from the past. Actually, for adults the writing wouldn't necessarily come from the past. After all, whoever heard of someone who is "fully grown"?

Note: Brief portions of this article are adapted from the introduction to *Almost Grown*.



*When I'm up here I feel free.
Way up in the sky,
I'm just cruising along.*

*We're up here,
I'm out on patrol,
engines roaring,
we're moving, let's go.*

*I feel a loss of power
my ship's getting low,
engines on fire,
we're gonna blow.*

*Bring it down low,
we have to jump,
just close your eyes,
it's gonna hurt.*

GERARD TROHA

DANCE

*My mind is wandering
I should be concentrating
on him*

*being as he's so
kind enough to
hold me like he'll never
let me go.*

*He feels so heavy and
hot on me, too hot,
and the crap on the back
of his jacket feels
rough and it's scratching
my wrists.*

*I want to dig my
long nails into his
back, from frustration
but he wouldn't
understand.*

*Oh, if I don't die
first I'll have to
tell him what I feel.*

*I can't wait for
the lights to go on
and for the music
to saturate the air
for the last time
to mark the end
but not before the
sweat dries on my
face*

if it ever will

—KIM STEFFGEN





*There she stands—she has a nerve.
 She's with him—I knew him, too.
 But he's not like her at least not to me.
 Her eyes, her spidery eyes, gazing
 out to the world—eyes that look back
 show a heart, a sadness, but
 not her, she's cool.
 Her long black hair hangs down to
 cover her sunken face.
 A look that says I did it so what
 stretches over her face.
 She walks with an ease her long
 legs not once touching the ground.*

—DIANA KRAUSE

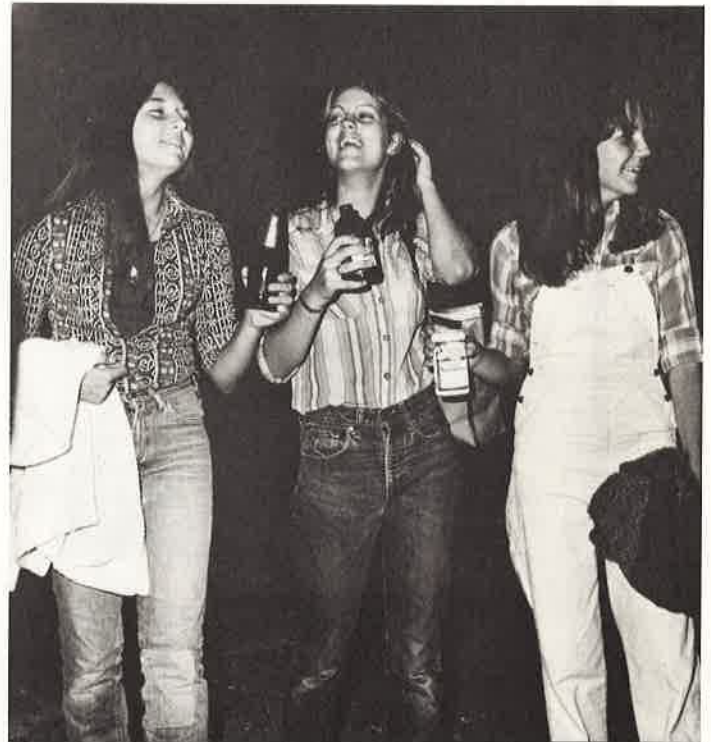
HAPPY BIRTHDAY JANE

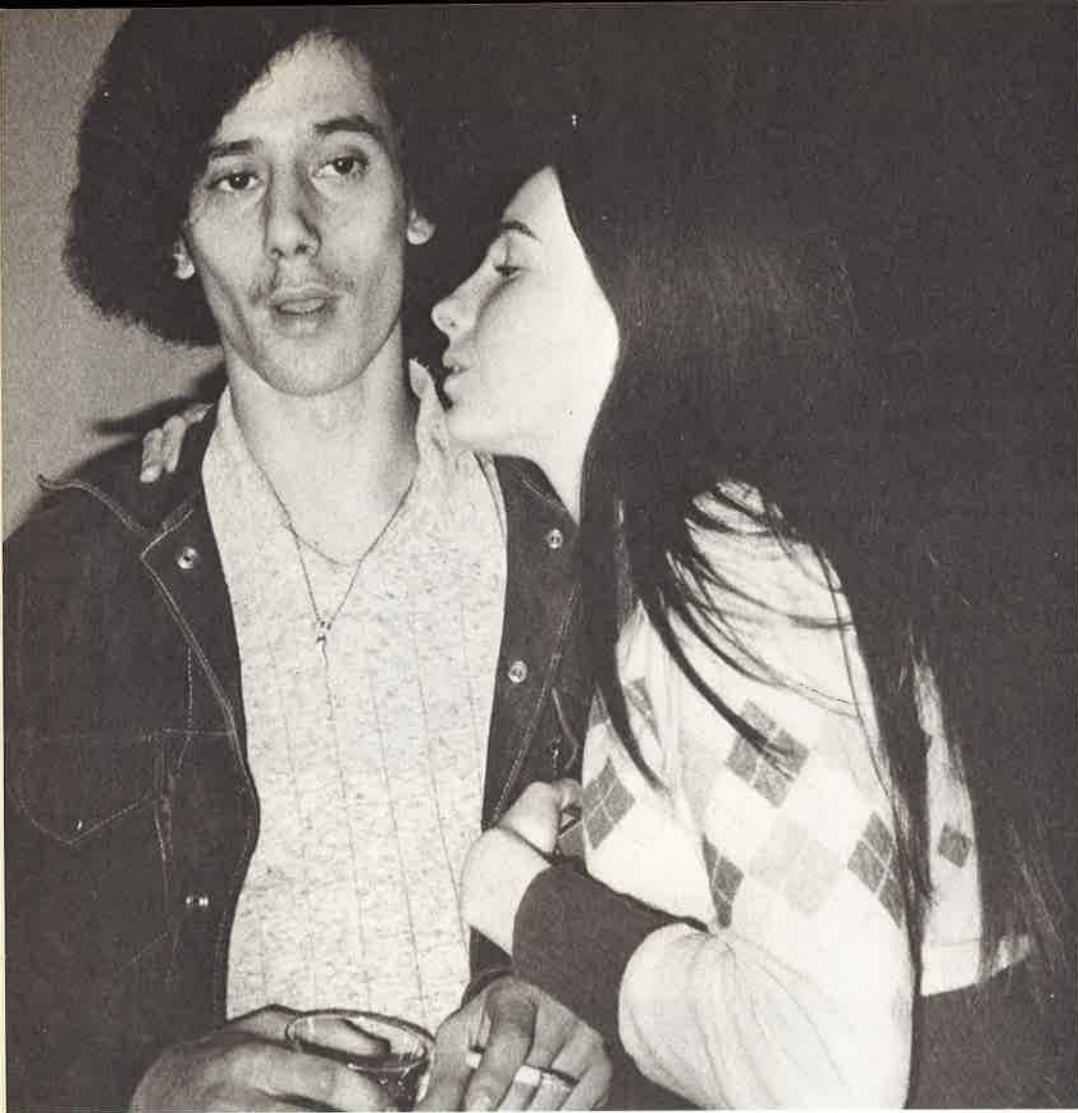
*Today is Jane's birthday
 She is 18.
 Jane wanted to buy beer
 to celebrate.
 She always gets
 proofed.
 I never get
 proofed
 because if it's
 an old guy behind
 the cash register
 I ask him
 how many kids
 does he have
 and it's a
 young guy
 I smile and talk
 of his wavy brown
 hair.
 Jane doesn't do that
 and that's why she can't
 buy beer.
 Today, though, she can*

*but the guy at
 the cash register
 is really stoned
 out
 and doesn't ask for
 her proof—just her
 money.
 Jane asks him if
 he wants to see her
 proof.
 He thinks she is
 underage and makes her
 put the beer back.
 She comes out crying.*

*I have to go in
 and buy
 the beer.*

—SUE SIPOS





*I know it hurts
all the pain
rips your heart apart
But I'm here
I'll hold you
shelter you from the wind
I can make it stop
raining on your soul.
Look into my heart
there the sun glows
I'll open up for you
I'll let you in
just try
test it
touch on the surface
and submerge yourself
in my love
I promise you
the deeper you fall
the tighter I'll hold.
I'll fill the holes you've
drilled
if only you'll throw
your drill away.*

—JILL NEWMAN



WE HAD A FIGHT

*We had a fight over nothing.
Ignored each other for thousands of
years.
Eternity.*

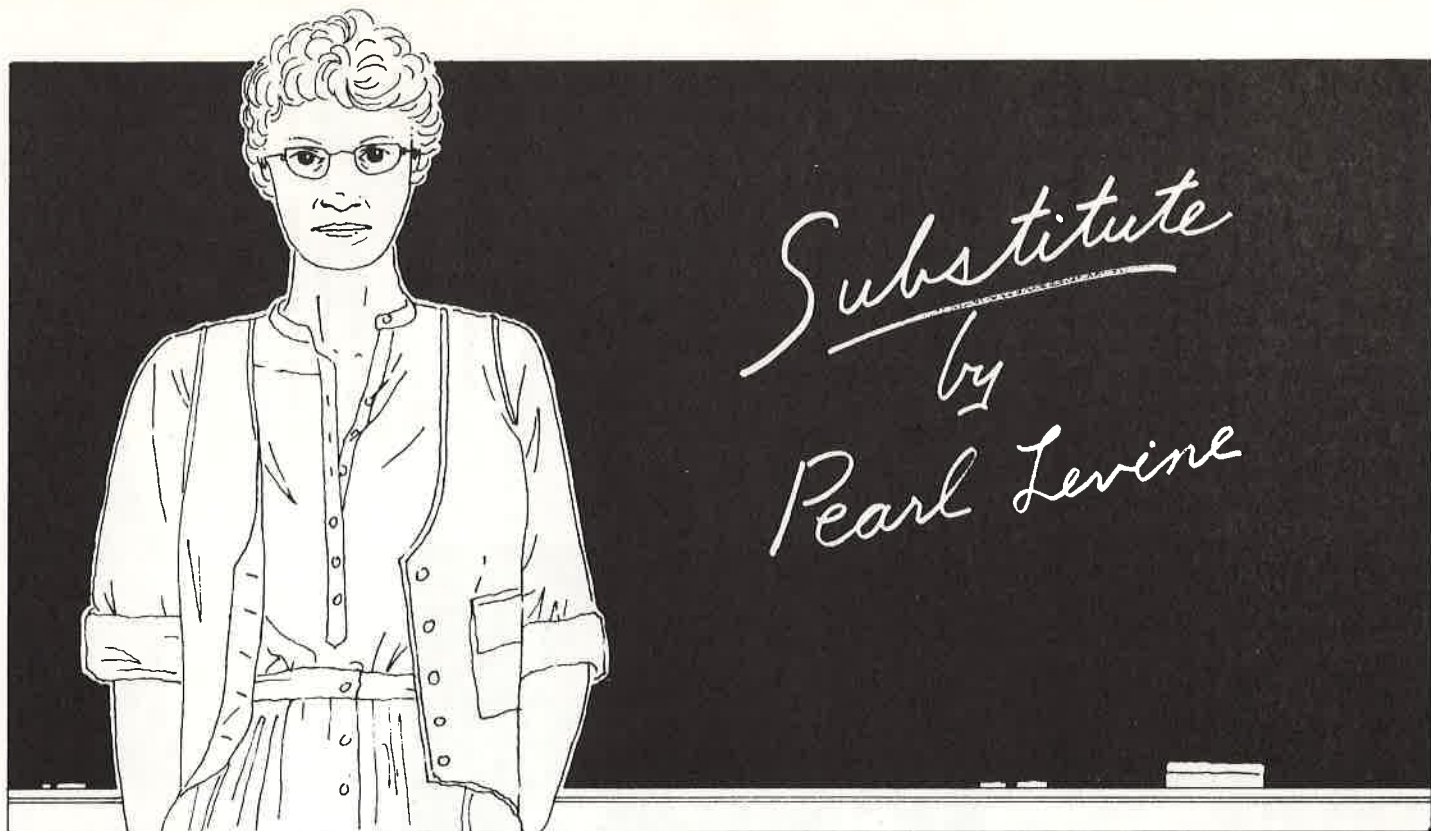
*Then we made up, a new earth, a
new friendship. The old was gone. But it
was too late. With the new earth,
we had become infants.
We knew each other no more.*

—GERRY PEARLBERG



*My arms are wrapped fast around
myself.
I hear my sister breathing loudly
down the hall.
The Begonia is living.
Lenore is my friend.
There are cigarettes I hate on the
dresser.
The door is wide open.
No one is coming in.
Steve is away, camping alone for
four days.
My dog has a tumor.
My mother and father have jobs.
I don't.
I'm middle class in America.
I love my country.
I walk the streets at two a.m. nude.
No, I don't.
My older sister is married.
I will go to college and soon be an
adult.
Ducks laugh in the pond at night
when no one's there.
My other sister is homosexual.
I can drive a car well.
I love the black sweater in the closet.
My father gave it to me.
I am seventeen and a spy.
My body is on the chair.
I don't shave my legs.
I am a woman.
It's autumn and cold outside.
Not inside.
My hands are ripe for you.
I cry.
I hate to go to sleep.
I love dessert and the sun going
down on the highway overpass.
Kiss me.*

—AMY SMILEY



What a day it was for us on Friday! If ever there was a learning-teaching period it was then. And it all happened in fifty minutes in a drab classroom full of C-tracked ninth-graders with no teacher, just me, a substitute, alone, in a school I had never been in before. I was armed with only a fragile lesson plan hurriedly scribbled by the school secretary who had taken it over the phone a few minutes before my arrival. The only real guidance I received was in the form of warnings from the teachers' room immediately before classtime.

"Just your luck—K.'s class has all the troublemakers."

"Watch out for Doreen—quiet but unpredictable."

"Clarissa's the worst of them. If she starts kickin' up, and she will, send her downstairs."

"Beware of Clarissa!"

"Beware of Doreen!"

"Lotsa luck!" Beware... beware...

As the children filled the room, active and noisy, I glanced uneasily at the attendance sheet but could make no identifications from the cold list of names. I wrote my own name on the blackboard.

"Hey, a sub! Ole-smelly ain't here."

"Hope he's sick."

"Hope he's dead."

"Hey, Clarissa, we got a substeetoot today! Whaddaya gonna do now?"

"Shaddup, Gregory!" Clarissa was skinny, wiry, dark and wore an orange knit cap on her head which matched a scarf which was flung around her shoulders and hung low down her back. As the others began to take their seats with pushing, and shoving, and shouts and yells, Clarissa walked directly up to my desk and looked at me defiantly, "Hey, I gotta go to my locker!"

"Don't trust her!"

"She don' hafta go to no locker!"

"She never come back!"

"Hey, teacher, she not allowed to go to her locker!"

"Do you have to go to your locker, Clarissa?" I asked her quietly.

"Yeah, how you know mah name?" She glared angrily at me as if I had taken something from her.

"I heard Gregory call you."

She lunged toward Gregory with two spindly arms.

"You stupid, Gregory—you tol' her mah name!"

Gregory ducked out of the way of the small fists and laughed tauntingly. She turned to me abruptly.

"Wa-al do I get a pass or not?"

"You may go to your locker without a pass." I began shuffling the

lesson plans on the desk in front of me while the cries came from all corners of the room.

"She gotta have a pass!"

"You the teacher, you gotta give a pass!"

"Tha's the rules. She gotta have a pass or she can't go. Clarissa, you can't go."

"Can't go without a pass. Tha's the rules!"

I looked directly into Clarissa's angry, alert eyes and spoke softly, firmly, "You may go to your locker without a pass." She turned away from me suddenly and flaunted out of the room, as the catcalls and harassment continued.

"She ba-ad, man, she ain't never comin' back."

"She ain't goin' to no locker."

"She ain't 'lowed do that. She need a pass."

"You supposed to give a pass. You the teacher."

"She'll come back," I said quietly amid derisive laughter.

I glanced over the lesson plans quickly. There were some page numbers of a text written there and something about a drill in verbs. I left the paper on my desk and walked over to a group of children who were absorbed in a conversation. The class

had settled down into small groups. The group I approached consisted of 4 or 5 girls and boys clustered around a dark, plump, placid girl who did most of the talking. She turned to me.

"Is verra sad—mah bes' friend dahd, an' she the secon' bes' friend that dahd—this yeah. Is verra sad."

Another girl eyed her suspiciously. "Doreen, you lying?"

"No, cross mah heart—two of 'em dahd this yeah!"

"How'd dey dah?" demanded Gregory who, like myself, was drawn into the conversation. "Wuz dey mugged?"

"Nah, day wuz sick."

"So what? How'd dey dah, anyway?"

"Dunno zactly. Mah mama say dey jus' lay down an' all de air run outta dem!"

The whole class had turned its attention to Doreen.

One girl said, "Two friends. That is sad."

Another girl, "Ah scared to dah."

Wisdom from a far corner of the room, "Everybody gotta dah—sooner or later."

"Ah wants it later."

"You ain't got no choice."

"Shaddup, Lillian, nobody wansa hear your big mouth."

Then Doreen again with a very loud and impressive sigh, "If ah wuz gonna dah tomorra, there's only one thing ah'd wanna do..."

"Wassat Doreen?"

"Wha Doreen say?"

Then Doreen made her statement very precisely to a silent and listening audience. "If ah dah tomorra ah wanna get pregnant.." and before any of the stunned listeners could respond she added, "'cause ah love babies an' ah wanna have one of mah own befo' ah dah."

There was an outburst of uproarious laughter. Doreen seemed offended. There was noise, giggling, mumbling. One boy shouted above the rest. "Hey, teacher, when dis lesson gonna begin? If dere ain't no lesson ah'm goin' to de lavatory."

"The lesson has begun," I said as I walked over to the blackboard and wrote—Doreen's Theme: If I Die Tomorrow.

I formally gave them an assignment. "You will all write a few words about Doreen's theme." They were shocked into silence. Doreen seemed most bewildered of all but pleased to see her name on the board. They were turning the words I had written over on their tongues. Doreen's Theme. Doreen's Theme. Then the commotion and the complaints started.

"Ah, hates 'ritin'"

"I'm no good at writing."

"Do we hafta?"

"One paragraph enough?"

"How many sentences?"

"Do it hafta be 'bout Doreen?"

"Do it hafta be 'bout dyin'?"

"How do you spell pregnant?"

"Ah hate dyin' it make me sad."

I faced the class and said, "Write as many words or sentences as you want. I will be your dictionary. If you don't know how to spell a word call it out and I will spell it on the board."

For a short while Clarissa had been standing unnoticed in the doorway peering into the room. As she began to enter slowly, someone shouted,

"Well, look who's here!"

"Wha' yo' cum back fo', Clarissa, yo' crazy?"

"Gwan back to your locker, Clarissa!"

A boy teased her in a sing-song voice, "Clarissa come back for the teacher...Clarissa come back for the teacher..."

She flared up, "Ah wouldn' come back fo' dat bird brain!"

There was a gasp. Someone signalled her to run. There were several cries in my defense.

"She heard you, Clarissa!"

"Teacher hear you!"

"You better 'pologize, Clarissa!"

"'poligize!"

"Wha don' you shaddup, Clarissa, you nasty to say dat to da teacher!"

"You're just in time to tell us what you think about all this, Clarissa," I said, handing her a piece of paper. She walked up to the front of the room to the empty desk that stood directly in front of the teacher's desk. She turned it completely around so that her back was to the teacher's desk and she was facing the class.

"Ah sits here!" she announced to the class. They laughed and giggled

and looked at me nervously.

"And I sit here," I announced to the class as I pulled up a student's desk and sat down at her side.

"We've been discussing Doreen's theme," I told her but she interrupted me and feverishly with dilating nostrils she turned toward Doreen.

"You crazy, Doreen. Wha you wanna get pregnan' for? You a crazy loon. I tell my boy friend Harry wha' you say an' he laugh hisself sick."

"Shaddup, Clarissa. Harry ain' your boyfrien' anyway!"

"Is too!"

"Ain't"

Then the class began to write and call out the words they could not spell. These were the words that appeared on the board: tomorrow, alive, pregnant, abortion, dying, diapers. And these were the words that appeared on the papers:

If I die tomorrow I will spend all day playing basketball today cause I am a jock when I am alive.

Gregory Newton

If I was gonna die tomorrow I be very mad cause I wanna live an enjoy myself.

Lillian Grayson

If I was gonna die tomorrow I get pregnant cause I love babies. They is soft and sweet. An when I die I give it to my mama an daddy cause they love babies too. I call it Doreen cause then it would be just like me again.

Doreen Hill

If I got pregnant tomorrow I would die for sure cause my mama would kill me. I think my boyfriend should die too cause he is to blame also. His name is Harry

Clarissa Milton

As Clarissa handed me her paper she stared at the floor and murmured just loud enough for my ears alone.

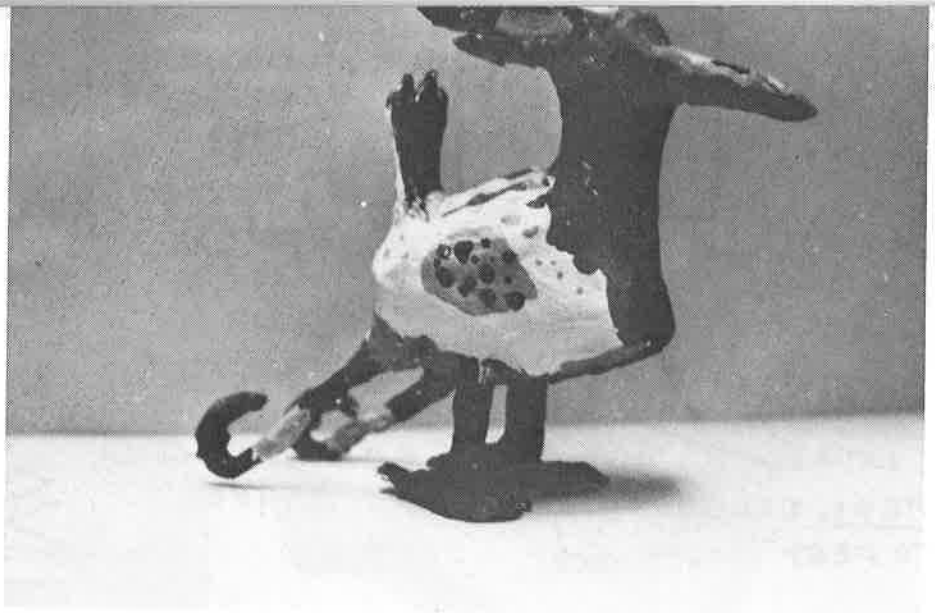
"Ah's sorry wha' ah says 'bout a bird brain. Ah 'pologize. Hope ole smelly dahs an' you comes back tomorra." Then she left very quickly. Thank you, Clarissa. Thank you, Doreen. Beware ole smelly. Beware the teachers' room. Beware. Beware. □



Papier-Mâché Birds

by Bob Sievert

Photographs by Bob Sievert



There are as many uses for papier-mâché as there are artists or people working with it. I have seen it piled on cardboard and pushed into relief maps, molded into delicate marionette heads and used to build animals that were three times my size. It's a very pliable medium.

Perhaps some of the finest work that I have seen done in papier-mâché is that of Joyce Sampson.

I first saw her papier-mâché work when I was working in a street program in the South Bronx ten years ago. Joyce was working in the same program, only in a different neighborhood. She was making large animals (a lion and a life size elephant) to be carried in a parade that was to wind its way through the hot congested streets of the South Bronx as a diversion for the community. Joyce needed help and asked me to work with her. The large number of people needed to construct these objects made them instant socializers. Everyone working on them

had fun and the final products were truly spectacular. These grand beasts were painted rainbow colors and mounted on carts.

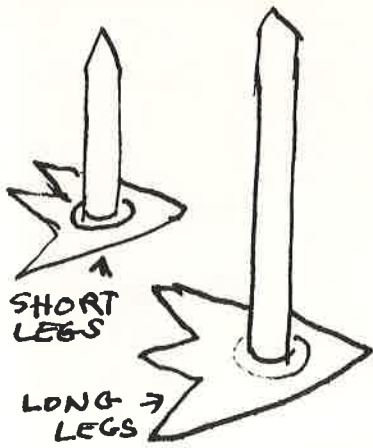
Of course there are great examples that come before this. These sculptures looked like the giant figures that are constructed in Mexico for the day of the dead. They also had a kinship with Nicki Saint Phael's work, a French lady who makes large breasted monumental figures that look like the classic Venus of Willendorf from the Ice Age. Saint Phael's work, however, is constructed primarily of polyester resin and not papier-mâché.

Over the years Joyce's work inspired me to make several large figures. As years progressed Joyce scaled down the size of her works. I also remember a large Hippopotamus she made for an exhibit in a bank; it was monstrously large and she painted it grey with a big wide open pink mouth. In recent years she has been producing incredible papier-mâché

birds. What they have lost in size they make up in presence, a feisty group of birds that have all sorts of plumage sticking out of them. They seem squawky and ready to snap, but very beautiful and wonderfully inventive.

In the spring of 1978 I was asked by Jeri Charney, a teacher at PS 84, to come in and see the work her class had been doing. They had made a study of birds. They studied wings and claws and all the adaptations found in birds. The work was very thorough. The children had come up with an abundance of facts about birds. Jeri showed me different models that the children had made of skeletal parts and of whole birds. The models of the birds were made of clay and bent the branches they rested on in a very unbirdlike manner. I asked Doris Ehrenfeld, a paraprofessional who works in Jeri's room and who usually has a lot to do with any art work that goes on in the room, why clay had been chosen and not some lighter





STEP 1. GLUE NAIL TO FEET (MATBOARD)



CRUSH NEWS PAPER AND TAPE TO GET A BEGINNING BODY SHAPE

STEP 2.

POKE NAILS INTO BODY OR TAPE SHAPED TO NAILS



STEP 3. ATTACH SHAPE TO FEET. TAPE FEET TO TABLE IF NECESSARY



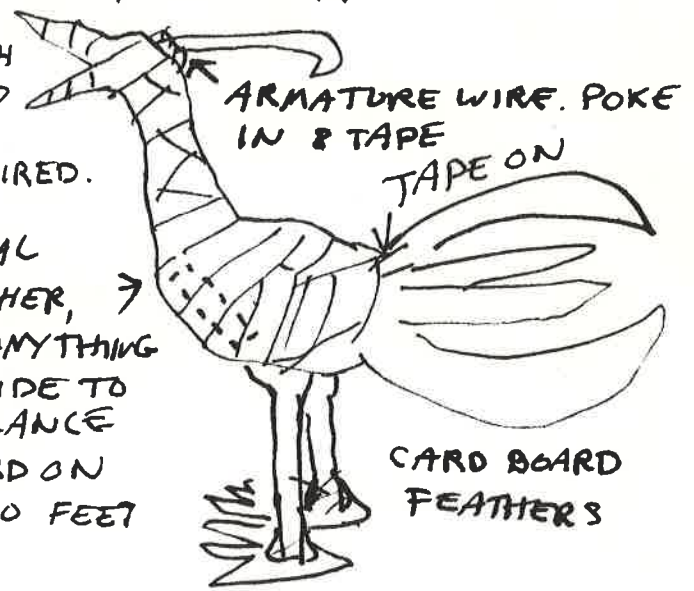
STEP 4. COMPLETE BASIC FORM



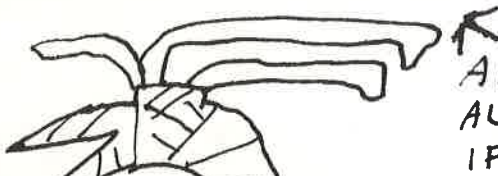
OPEN MOUTH →

IF DESIRED.

METAL WASHER, OR ANYTHING INSIDE TO BALANCE BIRD ON TWO FEET



STEP 5 A. ONE SOLUTION



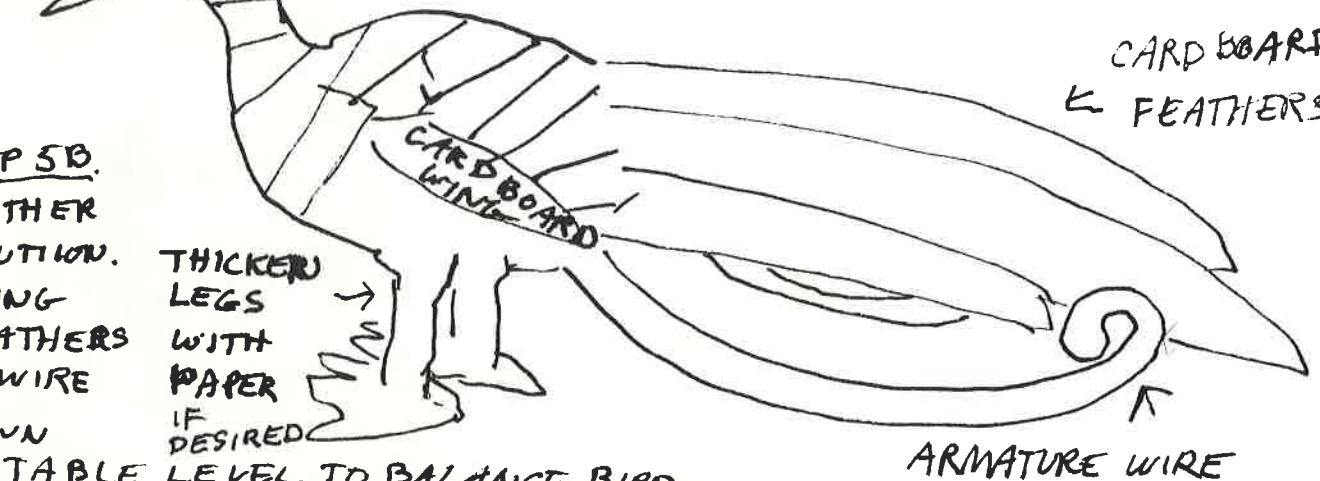
ARMATURE WIRE OR CARD BOARD OR ALUMINUM FOIL HEAD DECORATIONS IF DESIRED

CARD BOARD FEATHERS

STEP 5 B. ANOTHER SOLUTION. BRING FEATHERS OR WIRE DOWN TO TABLE

THICKEN LEGS WITH PAPER IF DESIRED

LEVEL TO BALANCE BIRD



material, such as papier-mâché. Doris complained of never having seen papier-mâché used effectively in the school, she was not sure quite how it was done. My thoughts flashed to Joyce and all the beautiful papier-mâché projects she had produced.

The obvious thing to do was to get Joyce, Jeri and Doris together. Joyce agreed to make birds with Jeri's class, and completed an amazing number of birds in three sessions. Actually it was four sessions, Joyce had initially come up to 84 to show everyone her birds and the first step. This first step was making the legs, which consisted of mat board cutouts of feet nailed into dowels. Everyone was very excited by the birds. When Joyce got there the following week there were many pairs of legs ready to go.

The first real session consisted of making the armature, the crucial point in a papier-mâché project. Having a sturdy armature is essential if one is to have an adequate finished project. Armatures were built on the legs they all had made, simple shapes of bodies, tails and wings cut out of chip or cardboard held together by a generous amount of masking tape. At first I thought the moulding of the bird's body with tape was a bit excessive on Joyce's part, but when you think about it, tape is really a reasonable item, unless you have to requisition it from a supply room where it is treated like gold. The wonderful results Joyce got by using the masking tape certainly justifies her extravagance.

The second session consisted of covering the armatures with several coats of papier-mâché. Because the birds were small, Joyce had everyone use white paper toweling. A larger project would have necessitated newspaper, but the white towels dried to a nice clean white surface, perfect for painting on. Wallpaper glue was applied to the paper with brushes wetting only one side and carefully pressing and shaping it into the form.

Everyone seemed pleased with the work and it seemed a nice way for this fifth/sixth grade to complete their bird study, on an upbeat, fanciful note. The final session was devoted to painting the birds. After seeing Joyce's beautiful designs little had to be said



and the group proceeded to complete their birds. They were painted with school tempera; the colors took to the dried paper toweling beautifully.

Because of time and the difficulty of working with a substance that is only soluble in alcohol, Joyce did not shellac the work, but if desired a coat of clear shellac will give the work a shiny, waterproof patina. □



Mimeograph— An Alternative Approach

by Bill Kough

I am aware that the mimeograph machine is close to the heart of public education. Next to the furnace, it is probably the most important machine in most schools. It is the tool used for making interschool communications, worksheets, and tests. I regret to say that it is also misused as a tool in teaching about visual art.

A few years ago, while beginning an artist-in-the schools residency in the Midwest, a principal who was understanding and sympathetic to the arts said that he wanted to first of all introduce me to the art teacher. With a sly smile on his face, he led me into a windowless room with a large, draped object in its center. As he pulled off the sheet to expose a shiny mimeograph machine, he said, "Your humanness will give you a definite advantage over Mr. Nutsandbolts."

Since that introduction, I have become increasingly concerned about how the mimeographed image, used in place of a child's own handmade image, affects a child's growth as a creative person. In too many classrooms children are handed comic or coloring book-like mimeographed pictures (of bunnies, turkeys, cupids, storybook characters) and asked to color them; sometimes they're even told to use specific colors. What educational value is there in making children conform to a singular vision? Couldn't these images and colors be easily interpreted by a child as being the *only* way of seeing something? The child is really asked to conform to an adult-made image. The child is not asked to rely on his or her own interpretation or understanding of a given object.

Over the years, I have confronted teachers who have used this "Color in the prescribed line" approach to teaching art. Practically every one of them has apologized first and justified it secondly. They have maintained that it increases eye-hand coordination and also that it increases the child's ability to follow a pattern and follow directions. My observations are that too much of a child's daily education is concerned with pattern and following very specific directions. Art programs that are "child-centered" offer the kind of

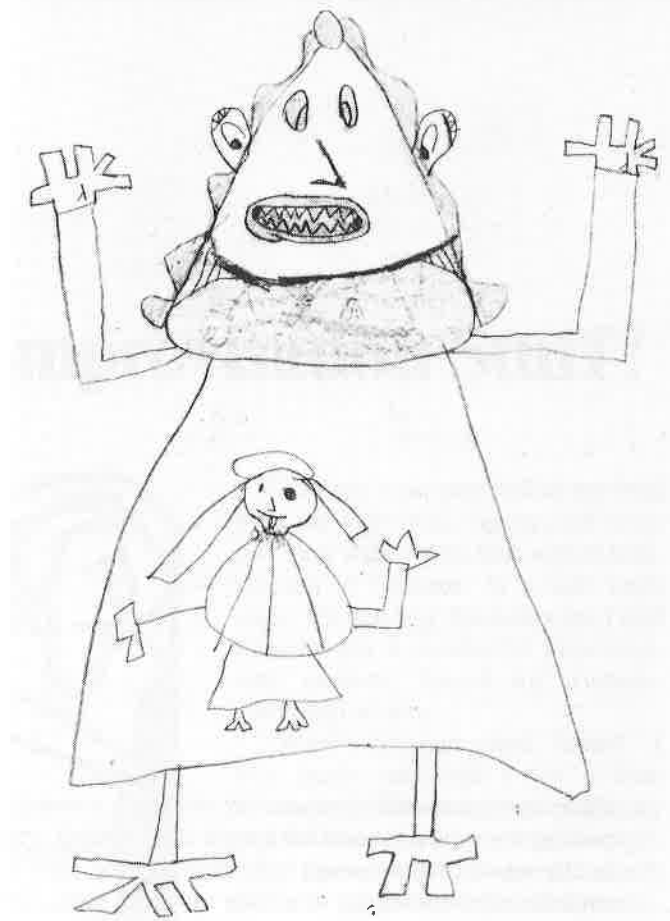


Red Feather an Indian Boy

Mimeograph Handout

Reverse





Reverse

Mimeograph Handout



emotional release that a physical education program offers physically. By child-centered, I mean an art program that allows a child to draw, paint, and construct using his or her own system of organization—a personal way of acting out visions and feelings. An art program that allows a child a few moments of self-reliance and open-ended problem solving is a big relief from the rigors of conformity in a child's school day. Not only does such a program enliven the child's day, however; it also genuinely has to do with ART and the creative process.

Not long ago my seven year old niece, Gretchen, sent me a package of her art work. She is a conscientious, quiet little girl who loves making things. I was especially excited by the drawings she sent me because they are a perfect example of a child's need for creative moments in the school day. They are a small act of rebellion, and rebellion is one important aspect of art. They show Gretchen's great need to work at knowing herself in spite of the conforming structure of the mimeographed image she was asked to work within. It is very obvious in looking at both sides of the mimeographed page that Gretchen first digested the mimeographed image given to her by her teacher, then turned the page over and interpreted it in her own way. How does the teacher respond to this little message? A teacher could interpret Gretchen's act as not following specific directions. What is unique in giving and following directions in art projects is that there is not just *one* way of doing the project. The mimeograph did seem to serve as a point of departure for Gretchen. "Following directions" in this case means adapting or making the best out of a situation—another thing artists do in their work.

So what are some alternatives that a teacher could do as meaningful art projects using the mimeograph machine. It must be stressed that I am not against the mimeograph machine as a tool for teaching visual art as long as it does not take away a child's personal involvement. I would like to offer six simple suggestions for a change of approach to mimeograph stencils.



Reverse

Mimeograph Handout



Carlos from Mexico

1. Have a group of children make the image on a stencil by passing the stencil around with each child adding a part to the whole. Mimeograph this drawing and have the children color the image in a wide range of ways, using lines, dots, squares, or crosses of color.
2. Hand out stencils of geometrical grids of different designs. With colored pencils, allow the children to construct designs within the grid.
3. Take a small group of children and have each design a "fine art" print in color. Make a coordinated image on different stencils—each stencil will be run off in a different color. In other words, try printing two or more different colored images on one sheet of paper, one on top of the other.
4. Have a mural contest. On a stencil define a shape like a circle or rectangle which is in direct proportion to space on a wall in your school. Each child would submit a design. The design would be gridded and enlarged to fit the wall.
5. Attach together, side by side, stencils to cover an area on a wall. Place a child in front of the stencil-covered area. Shine a light in order to cast a shadow of the child onto the stencils. Have other children trace around the shadow. Run off a few copies of each stencil. Reconstruct the copies into figures by taping them together from behind. Have the children color in interior details, creating a life-size group of very different people.
6. Make a stencil of different kinds of lines isolated from each other. Give a copy to each child and allow them to "tie" the lines together using their own logic and design.

When used in the above manner, the stencil can become a helpful tool in the creative process. Specifically, in the projects listed above the stencil is used to explore lines, grids, multiple images, chance happenings, and, above all, to assist the child in exploring his or her own perception. □

Why Are We Doing this Improvisation Stuff?

by Dan Cheifetz



The three boys approached my desk after my workshop, egging each other on. They were junior high school kids, thirteen to fourteen, in a high track class. We had just finished what I had thought was a productive improvisation session, based on student-developed scripts.

“What’s on your mind, fellas?” I said easily, although I felt a little uneasy with the mixture of pugnacity and deference they were communicating. I knew them to be good students but none of them had contributed anything to our improvisation session. Now they looked at one another, two of them nudging the third.

“Yes? What?” I encouraged.

“Well,” the spokesman finally said, “I don’t know, but some of the kids don’t like the kind of stuff we’re doing.”

“That surprises me,” I said. “I thought a lot of the kids liked doing the improvs. Are you saying *you* guys are having trouble with it?”

“Well,” one of them blurted out, “Why are we doing this improvisation stuff?”

A long-buried doubt of my own came up in me. Why *were* we doing this improvisation stuff? I studied the boys for a moment.

“Well,” I asked, “Why do you do math or science or grammar?”

They looked incredulous. “We have to do that,” said the spokesman indignantly.

“You know, to get a *grade*.”

“And graduate.

“And the improvisation stuff seems —what? Useless . . . no point to it?”

“Well, the writing we do sometimes is sort of good. But getting up in front of everybody and making up stuff . . . I don’t know.”

I admired their courage in bearding

a teacher and told them so. Few children reflect at all on their teacher's purposes, and I wanted them to know that such questioning was their right. On the other hand, I felt a little depressed by their priorities, although not at all surprised by them. They were natural children of traditional public school education.

But what the encounter with the boys most forcefully brought home to me was the degree of *conditioning* they were undergoing. These "good students" were actively suspicious of anything outside traditional modes of teaching and learning. Indeed, the very fact that what we had been doing was playful, that there was a lot of energy, enthusiasm and excitement about the activity among their classmates; that it was an activity with many elements, changing all the time, requiring group participation; that it was open-ended, without right or wrong answers, untestable, ungradable, and calling upon individualism and originality . . . all of this made it strange and threatening as a learning experience.

I'm sure that part of their problem was a reluctance to get up in front of their classmates and do something unstructured and off the cuff, a fear of making fools of themselves especially at their super self-conscious stage of life. At any age, improvising isn't easy and it isn't quite safe, since it requires a certain degree of self-exposure and therefore emotional and intellectual risk. But how much harder it is to take this kind of risk in a classroom where most of your time is spent being lectured at, taking tests, earning grades by memorizing the "right answers" . . . existing, in Paolo Friere's terminology as Objects in whom knowl-

edge is "deposited" instead of Subjects actively engaged in your own learning.

Yet, within their own lights, the boys had asked a fundamental question and deserved a thoughtful answer. I said that improvisation gives you practice in a skill you need now and will use all your lives . . . the ability to think on your feet. How about the times you give oral reports in a class and someone asks a question you didn't expect? Wouldn't it be great to be able to *improvise* an answer? How about the ability to think up answers on your feet when a parent or teacher questions something you very much want to do? Or being able to come up with a quick, convincing excuse for not turning in your homework, or for falling below your average on a test.

It also can be useful for social situations. It can help you get a conversation going with a member of the opposite sex, and keep it going. In fact, if you get good at improvising, you gain confidence in yourself that you won't get stuck in any interaction . . . with another kid, a teacher or a boss.

And there are more than day to day advantages. You will get a better sense of yourself as a free, creative person, someone who can come up with something new, instead of being restricted to what everyone else says and thinks. You become more aware of your own resources, and of the truth and value of your own experiences, feelings and ideas, when you can make up stuff as you go along. And this skill will be valuable to you as you grow up. And, later, as you grow up in our complicated, ever-changing world, you will be called on to come up with ideas, answer questions and create solutions to problems you don't even know about

now. If your education consists only of memorizing facts and learning rules . . . and looking to books or to someone else to give you answers . . . these new problems and questions could defeat you. By learning how to improvise, you'll gain confidence that the answers are to be found within yourself.

This is the gist of what I said to the boys, more improvisational, of course, than writing it down can indicate.

Long ago, I realized that improvisatory work in the classroom, used alone, lacks credibility to educators as well as kids. It seems too much like "playing around," which is probably what my young questioners were thinking. But, as they had indicated, what we were doing also had a "legitimate" element—the writing in connection with the improvisations. In the course of time—both because of my desire to gain the support and interest of educators, and because I wanted to connect improvisation to regular classroom work so students (and their teachers) would take it more seriously—I have developed complete learning programs around it.

I began the current year's program with the boys' class with workshop/seminars on the elements of fiction: the interaction of character and plot; conflict as a basic element in a story; how an author builds suspense in a scene. I illustrated these ideas with plays and stories they were reading in their regular class work, as well as pointing out that these same elements were present in their favorite TV shows and movies. "Star Wars" was a good "text" because they had all seen it.

Following this, I asked them to choose a partner in the class (or, if they preferred, they could work

alone), and with that partner to select and describe on paper two characters they were interested in—preferably real people they knew, or imaginary ones, not from the media. They were then to put the characters into a situation of conflict, and write a brief dialogue dramatizing the characters in conflict.

For those working with partners, the method was for each to identify with one of the characters they had jointly selected, and, alternately, write down his or her dialogue. Besides having an energizing motivation similar to parallel play, this device prevents one partner from dominating the dialogue and taking over the scene. By making each partner responsible for his or her own character, they could work as true collaborators.

They turned in their dialogues. Then (borrowing an idea from Sue Willis) I asked each person to take his/her character and write an interior monologue for the chosen character. They were to identify with their characters as closely as they could and write as freely as they could what that character might be thinking and feeling as the result of the crisis in which they found themselves. This would help them give the character a richer inner life and purposes of his/her own, instead of remaining a one-dimensional puppet the author could simply move around.

I then had them revise their scripts to reflect the new depth they had created for their characters and had some of them read their scripts for the class. Following this, I asked them to put their scripts aside and improvise on some of the themes and characters they had come up with.

Along the way, we talked about how

a scene moves in levels of ascending intensity, with different themes introduced, developed and resolved, the action rising each time to a new plateau which forms the launch pad for the succeeding scene. This seemed difficult for some of them to accept. One boy, quite bright, kept saying things like: "Why go through all this? Why don't we get right to the point?" I tried to explain that the plot actions themselves are not what keeps us watching a TV show or movie, or holds our attention when reading a play or story, but the suspense about what happens next, the increasing excitement of watching a character change and reveal himself as he gets deeper and deeper into a crisis, leading to a climax and then a resolution. If we "get to the point" immediately, there would be no story. And isn't this what happens in life, I asked, although with less structure and smoothness? Important conflicts faced by real people rarely get resolved without being worked through over time, with much struggle, and isn't our character revealed by the way we handle conflict? I illustrated this with examples from teenage life.

To illustrate fictional conflict, I again asked them to watch their favorite TV show, whether humorous or melodramatic, with an eye to grasping the basic conflicts, inner or outer, faced by the characters. I asked them to pay attention to the changes and struggles the characters go through because of their conflicts, to track the rising intensity of plot and character revelation, and to note how finally the conflict comes to some closure. . . just in time for the final commercial.

But I believe the creative work they did in our workshops was what really

got them involved in the learning. By themselves creating characters faced with conflict, and writing dialogue in which character and plot continually acted on one another, they were personally researching and playing with these principles. They were teaching themselves the basic structure of a great deal of drama and literature, which would both help them write better and help them better appreciate what they read and saw.

Improvisation added another dimension. When you work on an improvisation, you are creating the story and developing the characters with your own body, actions, imagination, and doing so on the wing, just as you "act" in life. By impersonating the character, you are for the moment living his/her story. Character and conflict are internalized by identification, which may be as close as you can come to meshing life and literature. For the student, the "principles of fiction" come alive because the learning is occurring on a gut level.

As we improvised, I had people in the class take down the dialogue as it was made up, so the authors/improvisors (as well as the whole class) would have the tangible benefit of how a script can be developed and enriched. And the activity involved the entire class, not just the ones improvising. I told them the scripts were all to be collaborative efforts. Everyone was to get involved in developing them. When one of the improvisors gets stuck, I said I would go to the class for help in coming up with the next line. And not just any line would do, but one that advances the story and is consistent with the characters in the situation presented.

The following is an example of how

a script was fully developed by the class from a basic premise. It involved a conflict close to their own lives, and was created during the course of an improvisation between the two boys who wrote the preliminary script. First, here is their script, which they performed for the class.

Narrator: The conflict is between Bobby and Shawn. Shawn, Bobby's friend, tries to convince Bobby to go out with Jackie. Bobby doesn't want to listen to Shawn's advice. Setting: In front of school at 3 o'clock when everybody has been dismissed:

Shawn: Go talk to her, man. She's right over there by the candy store.

Bobby: How many times do I have to tell you that I don't like the girl.

Shawn: How could you resist a girl as fine as Jackie?

Bobby: She may look fine to you but to me, she's just another girl. Another fine girl. Anyway what is it of your concern? Why don't you go out with her?

That's as far as they got. I praised them for setting forth two understandable characters through realistic dialogue and making each of their positions clear in a good dramatic conflict. I suggested, however, that the real conflict lies within Bobby, not between the boys. I asked them to improvise what happened next. The boy who played Shawn was a tall Jamaican who was always smiling and kidding. He had resisted doing the script the previous week, but with a little persuasion from friends in the class, had now agreed to try it. At first, he had difficulty staying with his role. To screen his shyness, and "be cool," he mugged and giggled with a friend at the rear of the classroom. But as the scene went forward, and more and more members of the class participated, I saw increas-

ing relish in the way he played his part. The scene, as with many improvisatory scenes, stopped many times when one of the players got stuck, or the scene itself reached an impasse. At that point, I would ask the class for help. They were an especially attentive group that morning, probably because the scene held so much personal significance. Here is how the scene progressed:

Shawn: I've got a girl. Every other guy has a girl except you.

Bobby: Maybe I am different.

Shawn: You're missing a very good chance with this girl. She is easy to get along with.

Bobby: I don't like her. I might hurt her feelings if I go with her.

They got stuck here. I asked the class, "What might Shawn say that would persuade Bobby?" A girl suggested that Shawn tell his friend that the girl likes him. I asked Bobby to repeat his last line, as a cue.

Bobby: I might hurt her feelings if I go out with her.

Shawn: How can you hurt her feelings? She likes you.

Bobby: Yeah? What did she say?

I pointed out that a change was occurring here. Bobby's resistance is giving way. Now a new cycle could begin.

Shawn: She told me yesterday that she really likes you and wants to go out with you.

Bobby: Maybe I ought to give her a chance.

Shawn: She likes you because you're tall and handsome.

Bobby: Yeah? But what am I gonna do with her?

Here was another plateau. There's been a change but some resistance remains. Shawn is now at a different level of doubt.

Shawn: Well, you won't be a guy without a girl and you can take her to parties.

Bobby: What if I get stuck.

Shawn: Maybe *she'll* talk.

Bobby: What if we both get stuck?

They got stuck over the stuckness question. A boy made the suggestion that Shawn bring his girl along and all of them would walk home together.

Shawn: I got an idea. I'll walk you home along with my girl and you'll be with Jackie.

Bobby: I wouldn't feel right walking with you.

Shawn: Then I'll leave you alone.

Bobby: It's my first time with her.

Shawn: I understand how it feels the first time.

Bobby: Well, I still don't know what I'm gonna talk about with her.

Stuck again. A girl suggested that Shawn tell Bobby to ask Jackie about what she likes to do.

Shawn: Ask her about herself. You know, what she does. What she likes.

Bobby: Well, maybe.

Another mini-cycle completed. Bobby's resistance seems to be overcome, and we're ready for a new scene, with new questions to keep us in suspense: Will he really ask Jackie out? What will she say?

Perceiving momentum, I moved right on to do that next logical scene between Bobby and Jackie. After discussion, the class decided to have Jackie in front of the school, talking with a friend. I wanted a Korean girl named Julie, who had written several scripts but was too shy to improvise, to try being the friend. When I asked her she smiled and shook her head, as she always did. But the class helped me gently persuade her to try it. Someone

said, "You won't be up there very long, Julie." I reassured her that she actually would be on just long enough to establish the scene and set things up for Bobby to come on. As it turned out, most of Julie's dialogue was supplied by class members not in the improvisation, but at least she had tried it.

I wanted another girl who had not previously improvised to play Jackie. She had not been paying attention to what was happening and was startled when I asked her, and began to refuse. But when a nearby friend whispered to her who the boy in the scene with her would be, she agreed to come up. Here is the scene:

Jackie: I saw this guy and I really like him.

Julie: I don't know him. (This was the only line Julie herself contributed.)

Jackie: He's a nice guy, tall with nice, handsome eyes. I like his attitude.

Julie: Tell me more about him.

Jackie: Well, Shawn is always sticking around him.

Julie: That guy over there looks just like the one you describe.

Jackie (smiling): It is. (Bobby approaches)

Julie: Bye. (she exits.)

Bobby: Hello. How are you?

Jackie: Fine. How are you?

Bobby: Good. You waiting for someone?

Jackie: No, I was just talking to my friend.

Bobby: Oh.

(They needed help and got some from the class.)

Jackie: Yesterday I saw you playing basketball real good.

Bobby: I don't play too good. I seen you play basketball and you play pretty good.

Jackie: Not really. You got any brothers or sisters?

Bobby: Sisters, yes, but keep my brothers out of this.

(Stuck here and more help came.)

Jackie: You go to the movies a lot?

Bobby: Yeah, I do.

Jackie: Me too but I don't have anyone to go with.

Bobby: I have the same problem.

Maybe someday we can go together.

Jackie: There's a good movie Ice Castles playing around.

Bobby: You wanna go Saturday?

Jackie: Yeah.

Bobby: You going my way?

Jackie: Yeah, why not.

Bobby: Great. Let's go.

One final note about the element of playfulness in improvisational work. I have observed often that playfulness lowers the anxiety for doing creative work . . . work, that is, in which one is asked to forget about being "correct" and dig into oneself for original perceptions and new syntheses of ideas. If it's not quite serious and "doesn't count," you need not worry so much about what you produce. And the lowering of that anxiety releases new energy, since anxiety sops up energy.

But, as I've indicated, just this playful, open-ended element is one thing that inhibits teachers from using improvisation as an educational tool—it doesn't seem serious. I would like to convince them that exactly because improvisation is "playing"—playing a scene, playing out a role, playing with words, ideas, motivation—it releases new energy and availability for learning. I believe that kids' love of "doing shows"—which of course improvisations connects with—is the permissible manifestation, of their old, abandoned-because-childish-but-still-beloved childhood play. And this new released energy can be used for all kinds of self-exploration that leads to creative work. □

Plugs

NAROPA INSTITUTE. Inspired by the large number of public school teachers among its summer students, the Institute initiated in 1977 a summer intensive, partially funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, specifically designed for teachers and administrators K-12 to work with a team of professional artists and explore how the arts, education, and living in general are interrelated.

The program is open to artists, teachers and school administrators, and youth counselors with at least 2 years of experience. During the summer, 1979, a two week intensive will be conducted June 18-June 29, and a five week intensive July 20-August 21. For more information, write: APT Program, NAROPA INSTITUTE, 1111 Pearl Street, Boulder, Colorado 80302, (303) 444-0202.

THE VIDEO RAINBOW LTD. Center for Children's Video, located in New York City and Westchester County is a newly formed non-profit corporation. Its purpose is to promote the use of original video as a positive experience and a source of information equal to that of quality children's literature and film. To accomplish this objective the Video Rainbow fosters the awareness, production and distribution of children's video through workshops, a newsletter and the development of an information and distribution center.

The corporation's board of advisors is composed of representatives from the field of librarianship, education, video, psychology, the arts and business. For more information contact: Pam Berger and Julie Gantcher, Video Rainbow Ltd., 72 Mercer Avenue, Hartsdale, N.Y. 10530.

Contributors' Notes

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DAN CHEIFETZ is the author of *Theater in My Head* (Little, Brown), about children's improvisational theatre. He has led Teachers & Writers workshops in creative dramatics and related arts in Harlem and Queens public schools and has trained teachers to use creative techniques in the classroom at CCNY, Lehman College and at several public and private schools.

BILL KOUGH received his MFA in print making from the University of Iowa. He was artist-in-residence in Scottsbluff, Nebraska through the Artist-in-the-Schools program during 1975-77. At present he works for Teachers & Writers.

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KAREN SHAWN has been teaching English for twelve years. Her work has appeared in *The English Journal*, *Arizona English Bulletin*, *Classroom Practices*, *Catalyst*, *Mati*, *Alaska Women*, *Essence*, and the *Chelsea-Clinton News*. She is a frequent guest lecturer at N.Y.U.

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Teachers & Writers Publications

THE WHOLE WORD CATALOGUE (72 pages) is a practical collection of assignments for stimulating student writing, designed for both elementary and secondary students. Activities designed as catalysts for classroom exercises include: personal writing, collective novels, diagram stories, fables, spoofs and parodies, and language games. It also contains an annotated bibliography.

THE WHOLE WORD CATALOGUE 2 edited by Bill Zavatsky and Ron Padgett (350 pages). A completely new collection of writing and art ideas for the elementary, secondary, and college classroom. Deepens and widens the educational ground broken by our underground best seller, the first *Whole Word Catalogue*.

IMAGINARY WORLDS (110 pages) originated from Richard Murphy's desire to find themes of sufficient breadth and interest to allow sustained, independent writing by students. Children invented their own Utopias of time and place, invented their own religions, new ways of fighting wars, different schools. They produced a great deal of extraordinary writing, much of it reprinted in the book.

A DAY DREAM I HAD AT NIGHT (120 pages) is a collection of oral literature from children who were not learning to read well or write competently or feel any real sense of satisfaction in school. The author, Roger Landrum, working in collaboration with two elementary school teachers, made class readers out of the children's own work.

FIVE TALES OF ADVENTURE (119 pages) is a new collection of short novels written by children at a Manhattan elementary school. The stories cover a wide range of styles and interests—a family mystery, an urban satire, a Himalayan adventure, a sci-fi spoof, and a tale of murder and retribution.

TEACHING AND WRITING POPULAR FICTION: HORROR, ADVENTURE, MYSTERY AND ROMANCE IN THE AMERICAN CLASSROOM by Karen Hubert (236 pages). A new step-by-step guide on using the different literary genres to help students to write, based on the author's intensive workshops conducted for Teachers & Writers in elementary and secondary schools. Ms. Hubert explores the psychological necessities of each genre and discusses the various ways of tailoring each one to individual students. Includes hundreds of "recipes" to be used as story starters, with an anthology of student work to show the exciting results possible.

JUST WRITING by Bill Bernhardt. A book of exercises designed to make the reader aware of all the necessary steps in the writing process. This book can be used as a do-it-yourself writing course. It is also an invaluable resource for writing teachers.

TO DEFEND A FORM by Ardis Kimzey. Tells the inside story of administering a poets-in-the-schools program. It is full of helpful procedures that will insure a smoothly running program. The book also contains many classroom tested ideas to launch kids into poetry writing and an extensive bibliography of poetry anthologies and related material indispensable to anyone who teaches poetry.

BEING WITH CHILDREN, a book by Phillip Lopate, whose articles have appeared regularly in our magazine, is based on his work as project coordinator for Teachers & Writers Collaborative at P.S. 75 in Manhattan. Herb Kohl writes: "There is no other book that I know that combines the personal and the practical so well..." *Being With Children* is published by Doubleday at \$7.95. It is available through Teachers & Writers Collaborative for \$4.00 Paperback \$1.95.

VERMONT DIARY (180 pages) by Marvin Hoffman. A description of an attempt to set up a writing center within a rural elementary school. The book covers a two year period during which the author and several other teachers endeavor to build a unified curriculum based on a language arts approach.

THE POETRY CONNECTION by Nina Nyhart and Kinereth Gensler. This is a collection of adult and children's poetry with strategies to get students writing, an invaluable aid in the planning and execution of any poetry lesson.

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VERMONT DIARY

Language Arts in the Open Classroom

by Marvin Hoffman

180 pages, \$4.00 paperback

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