

# Teachers & Writers

Magazine

Volume 11 No. 1



**SCHOOLTIME**  
positions

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# The Passion of Recollection: A Living History Group

Here's Death twitching my ear, "Live," says he, "for I'm coming."  
*Mors auren vellens, "vivite," ait, "venio."*  
from "Dancing-Girl of Syria" ("Copa Surisca")  
tradition attributes this poem to Virgil

by Barbara Baracks

We are sitting in a circle in a carpeted room. To one side is a coffee urn and what's left of the cake. In the middle of the floor is a tape recorder. Sonya, who recently emigrated here from the Soviet Union, occasionally jokes about my selling the tapes to the KGB. But for the most part, after meeting weekly for two months, everyone's become pretty good at ignoring the machine.

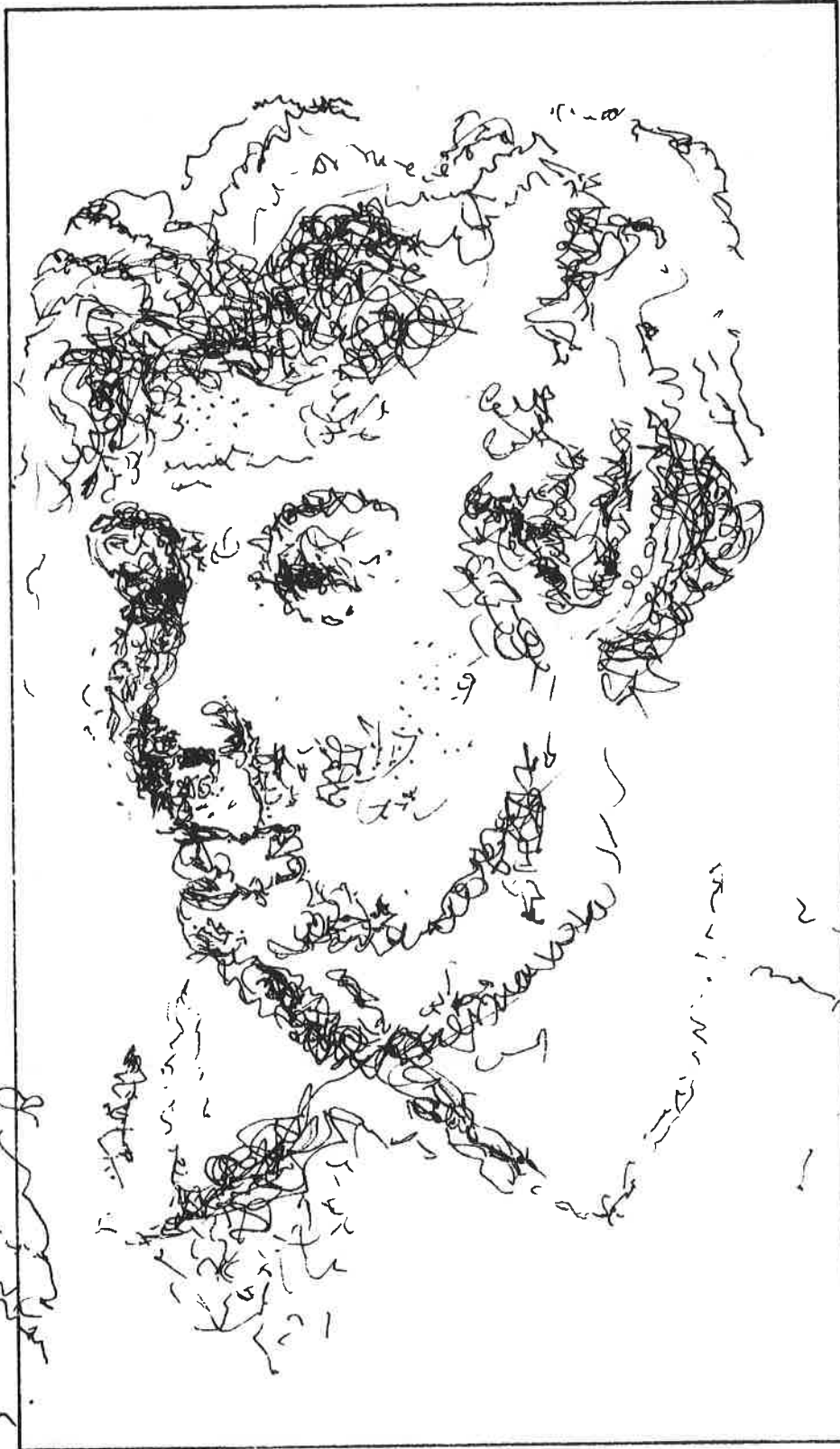
Aiesha, eighty-two years old, is describing becoming old:

This state of mind comes gradually. And because this comes gradually, you're accustomed to it. Last year I was in Freeport, I was helping a friend of mine. And every morning there is a point where the boats come in. Every morning to this point and back, I can make it, four miles a day. I was very satisfied. I believe this is a normal thing. But I will go to Freeport next week, and I will try to make the same thing, to make four miles. I am not sure of that. If I make the half of that I will be satisfied. I will tell you: "Is not bad." I cannot explain this medically or scientifically. But there is a state of our brain which tells you: Be satisfied. . . . Physical suffering is a terrible life, especially when you are alone and you know that there is no health. I believe there is more courage to suffer. To throw yourself out of the window, it's hard to do—but this is five seconds.

Soon after Aiesha spoke, Lisette, who also is eighty-two, began weeping, because, she said, she was not kind to her sister, who died twelve years ago. She has told this to the group many times. "I didn't talk to her for a long time before she died, and I heard when she was dying she cried for me—"

Sonya, in her seventies, gently interrupted Lila here: "I want to tell you a story, a funny story."

We are practicing the art of oral history, or living history, as some prefer to call it. We are newcomers to what we're doing. Because this group consists of particularly old people, there is difficulty, and tenderness, and illumination in the ways people in the group reach out not just to their



individual pasts, but to each other sitting in the room together.

Kitty Urquhart, a social worker, is co-leading this group with me. Her extraordinary ability to sense and draw out feelings in the group has been a rare lesson to me with all my impatience. This impatience, a journalistic bias towards facts rather than feelings, has gotten in my way, especially the first few times the group met. A lot has happened in a short period of time. After eight meetings—midpoint in the group's fifteen-week lifespan—I can offer documentation and some insights along the way on what the group and I are beginning to discover.

I am one of several writers, funded by CETA through the Cultural Council Foundation, who are working with Teachers & Writers. Marc Kaminsky, poet and pioneer in conducting writing workshops with older people, is directing under T&W's auspices a fledgling project, Artists & Elders. This, my first Artists & Elders assignment, is taking place at Service Program for Older People (SPOP), a not-for-profit social agency in Manhattan which counsels older people with psychological and/or physical problems. Caseworkers at SPOP suggested clients who might be interested in the project, and the agency has donated space and resources, and given Kitty time for the group meetings.

The group is not a large one. Some people drop in and out, but three women are regulars every week. Sonya, in love with America, fiercely independent, optimistic, sympathetic; Lisette, whose reading of pop psychology preens the plumage of her neuroses, lately beginning to trust her own perception of things; Aiesha, frail, passionate, intelligent, coy—a morbid, and thoughtful philosopher. Some people don't come every time because their physical disabilities are a great obstacle to travel, even with the assistance I'm willing to provide with a taxi ride. Others don't come at all because they see what we're doing as strange, frightening, confusing. Or

boring. There is no easy label to put on the kind of talking the group does. It isn't strictly a social group, like the "Friday group" which meets at SPOP. Nor is it oral history in the more directly documentary tradition of Studs Terkel.

I didn't know that when the group first met. I was eager for results and came armed with a selection of ready-made topics for recollection. I thought we would concentrate on specific themes—work, love relationships, childhood, etc.—with the narrowness of purpose of so many bees swarming out for the pollen. We couldn't just sit around and talk, this was supposed to be *work*—right? My anxiousness was quickly communicated and the results were brittle, like sitting down and trying to write without giving your mind a little breathing space to ramble along and talk to itself, warm up.

By the third meeting it looked like the whole project had fallen apart. From my notes, taken from listening to the tapes at home:

We then discussed Aiesha's forty-year sojourn in Egypt. She lived in Cairo. Unfortunately we didn't get much further than that. Lisette brought out a picture of her son and we got onto the subject of children instead. Aiesha was talking about China, all the while Lisette was showing me the picture of her son. It's frustrating listening to the tape of Lisette plunging in as soon as Aiesha starts saying something on her own. When Aiesha once again began talking about being a nurse in Cairo, Lisette showed me a picture of herself. I'm madder now than I was then about it! Then she brought out a picture of her daughter. Then we got onto the delicate subject of whether or not to have kids. I wanted to inquire into Aiesha's lack of kids, but in order not to be tactless about it, I talked about the probability that I may well never have children. And lo and behold, Lisette came in with a story about the King of Spain.

It was as if we were locked up in separate boxes lying side by side. We remained painfully isolated people rehearsing pain, both past and present,

aware that no one really was listening to anyone else. "The immobility of the things that surround us," Proust called it. "Things" are what we still were to each other.

It was then, supersaturated with formulae, that we—or, rather, Aiesha—broke through. She began talking about what really was on her mind, something that had happened just the other day. From my notes:

Aiesha was translating for a man with an old Russian mother. (It seems that though the mother speaks Russian the son does not, and they can't communicate with each other without a translator.) He had put his mother in a home, a "good" one—since he had money—in the Bronx. The son had called Aiesha because he'd written to the home three times without an answer. Aiesha went up to the home with a letter for the mother from her son. "This is Mother's Day," he wrote. "Tell my mother my best regards. We put her photo on the table on Mother's Day and eat around the photo." The mother, Aiesha found, was totally senile. She didn't remember anything, not even that she had a son. "She didn't remember," Aiesha said. "She asked, 'Who is Yanid?' and then she started to cry, to take her to the children, she wanted to be out of this house. It was pathetic. The problem is that she is in good health except her head." And now Aiesha came to her point. "I think," Aiesha continued, "there must be a law. When you come to certain age, when you have this kind of case, make an injection and finish with this kind of thing. . . . I certainly, after a year or two, when I am not able, I will make an injection and I will be finished, certain."

Thanks to Aiesha's introduction of death and dying to the conversation, everyone became alive again. Lisette in particular was furious at the idea of euthanasia, especially when Aiesha went on and said that if old people weren't willing to kill themselves, then a commission of doctors should decide for them. The great taboo about death had been violated, and the great thaw had begun.

The subject of death and dying

came up, after that, again and again, in the shape of losses of friends, family, powers of mind and body. It was invigorating. People began speaking with detailed commitment about the past and present. We began to like each other. (We decided to take a couple of trips outside of the group meetings—one to the Cloisters, and one to the Museum of Natural History's Pompeii exhibit.) Memories became resonant and the grappling hook of everyday experience began stirring up all kinds of strange material from the past: mud and debris, odd fishes, jokes, governesses, terrible corpses, childhood sweet-hearts.

We have begun to talk about relative degrees of loneliness. Sonya on her husband's cancer:

He couldn't work and he was in bed four months. He suffered so. He told me, "If there wouldn't be gossip about you I would make suicide. I would throw myself from the fifth floor." He loved me very much and he was a very good man. So when he died I didn't cry. He suffered. In three days I went back to work. [Kitty remarked that Sonya had said her husband was devoted to her. "How," Kitty asked, "did you feel about him?"] "He loved me," Sonya said, "more than I loved him."

Lisette on her escape from her family's strict French-Algerian household:

I didn't take a step outside unless my mother was with me, from when I was twelve years old until I was about twenty-one. I would marry anybody. He asked for my hand, he was an American soldier. He was ugly, he was terrible, and he was poor. I was very disgusted, I could not kiss him, but I said I will, and I married him.

Sonya has a job helping people in a nursing home. She described it:

I know a lovely woman, she plays accordion. She told me, "I am never lonely." She washes the windows in the room. Always she do something. What a wonderful woman. Ninety-two and three months. . . . She was a dressmaker for the best artist in New

York. She had a beauty salon, she was very rich. What else? She was a painter, she has her pictures on the wall. I love her very much. Her husband died three years ago and now because she fell she cannot walk, she is in a wheelchair. But she wants to go to the concert. . . . All day she does something. . . . You know, I became a philosopher in this nursing home. Because so many people, they were long ago. One was a famous architect, his pictures are in the room, and now he is nothing. We have one Hungarian diplomat here—and now he's nothing. He doesn't understand anything. So you have to be a philosopher, because—

Aiesha interrupted her: "So you have to make an injection and make it go away."

Sonya: "Not so easy. He wanted it, the former architect, he wanted to make suicide. But unfortunately they saved him."

Aiesha: "And I don't understand why they saved him."

Sonya: "I thought much time about that, even when I was young. Such people have not to live, but if they say it be a rule, they will begin to kill healthy people."

Aiesha: "We have a limit of time. We have a vegetable, a senile vegetable, for two years. It's finished!"

Aiesha later continued:

Most people—how sick you are you never believe. I tell you, I remember this boy, it was in the Russian Revolution. He was only twenty years old. And I took him from the battlefield, he had his belly open. Is nothing there, maybe some intestine. Everything was out, this was an explosive thing. Then we come to the battlefield, you know they took the dead, the critically wounded. He was a critical case, there was nothing to do. And we put him in the train. When we took him on the train, his bed was near the passage where I was coming and going, making injections, giving some drinks or some pills. Every time where I pass he was grabbing my—where he could reach, he couldn't talk properly. He was speaking to me, saying, "Nurse, I will not die, I will not die." He was a beautiful boy, maybe twenty-one, I was

twenty-one too. He was always grabbing me, by my shirt, hold me, "I will not die—"

Sonya interrupted: "I knew a man, it was at a resort. When he understood he had cancer, he cut his throat."

Lisette: "What happened to that boy?"

Aiesha finished:

I was always saying, "Misha, no. Never, never." But he died. When I brought him he was dead. I knew he would not come to the hospital, I was sure of that. I didn't want to tell him. He had plenty of life, plenty willing to live, to enjoy. He was grabbing me: "Nurse, nurse."

And so, back to the present. Sonya said: "I have an ulcer, but we live together in peace."

Aiesha: "When you're alone, how can you be optimistic. How normal are you if you stay alone. There is a certain decline in your mind—"

Sonya: "Loneliness is a very good thing if you have a friend to tell about your loneliness."

Already looming over us is the group's ending. We have our own momentum now—and stopping after fifteen weeks feels to me like flying a 747 from New York to Philadelphia. Why not go all the way to the Antipodes while we're at it? It's hard for me to think of ending the group, and for some of these people, who have fewer distractions and parallel projects than I, it may be harder.

But we haven't discussed continuing the group. No one has brought it up. There remain never-directly-stated suspicions and testing. Recently Sonya said: "I told my son, 'Now I go to a group. It seems to me I am a psychology rabbit.'"

Being a guinea pig, the object of someone else's manipulation—it's a reasonable fear. Kitty and I are strangers bearing gifts. In writing this, I keep testing my own feelings toward the group. Nicole, whose severe arthritis makes it hard for her to go anywhere, once said, "I always go up to Columbia and sit to see all the

young people around.”

But it was cheerful, people-loving Sonya who, in reply, drew the line: “Among young people I’m old, I’m not beautiful. I think the young people and the old people, they should be separate.”

A caste system of generations allows, under usual circumstances, only the most perfunctory exchange. Sonya described the realities very well:

“Sometimes if a woman lives all her life, she has everything, she is still depressed. In Russia is very good proverb: ‘From fat is crazy.’ She is excited and becomes mad. That’s true. Because in Russia, for example, if, in my age, I have to take care of four children—grandchildren, for example—because my children work. And I have to prepare for them the food but I have to go stand in line. And when I will stand three hours in line I will receive meat or butter, I will come and I will be lucky, very happy. But if I will wake up and I will have everything and I am alone—so I will be depressed.”

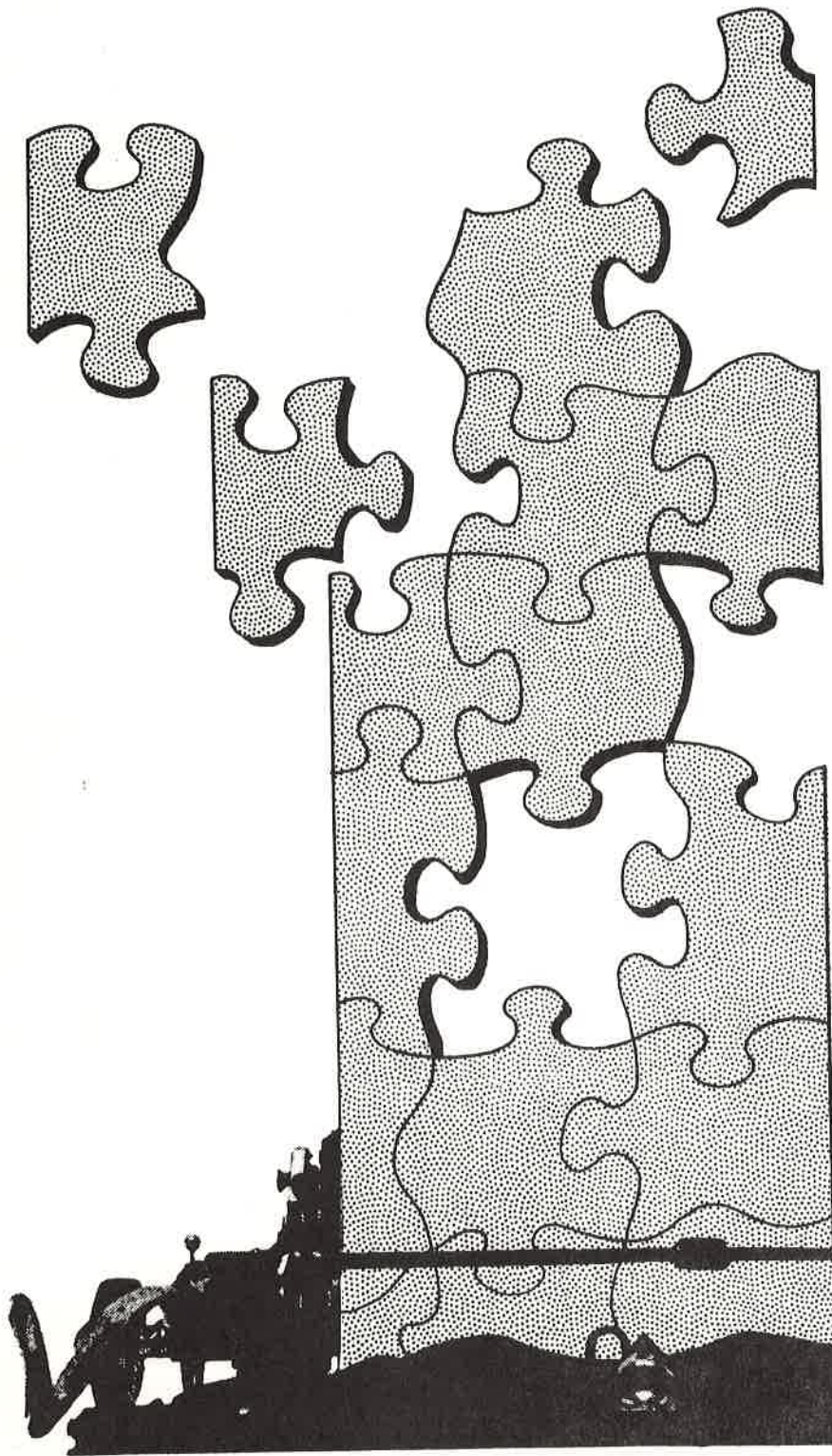
Sonya’s son lives in this country also, but not near her. How she dealt with this became clear when Aiesha asked her why she went to work (first as a volunteer, later as a paid employee) in a nursing home. Sonya answered:

“I have a disaster. When my grandson died, I wanted to be busy. Because I thought I had no right to live. So I wanted to be useful. I went to the nursing home . . . I wanted to justify my existence.”

Aiesha listened with intense interest to Sonya’s long descriptions of her work in the nursing home. Yet in previous weeks Aiesha had sourly complained that even though she was retired, people kept calling on her for medical services. (A few weeks ago a neighbor who had just collapsed with a stroke in a grocery store, called Aiesha instead of an ambulance!) Finally, unable to contain herself, Aiesha began firing questions at Sonya: Why was she working there? Wasn’t her professional a pianist? And finally: Where is this nursing home? □

# A Fragment Approach to Short Story Writing

by Kathleen Kranidas



The short story is an intimidating form. Perhaps because it is a self-contained unit, encompassing the dimensions of a single experience, it seems impregnable. It is difficult to envision a short story from beginning to end; the inexperienced writer often cannot make a beginning that does not run dry. If he/she begins with any one aspect (i.e., tone or setting or incident or character), how to proceed? and if he/she thinks of the totality, how begin?

Working with seventy-five to ninety high school writers a day (while also doing more traditional English courses with another sixty) I have evolved a process that allows each and every student to move easily and gradually from a fragment on the first day to a completed short story by ten weeks.

On the first day each student is asked to select a moment of his/her own experience that was particularly intense. It can be a childhood experience or a recent experience, but it must have been highly charged for the writer. This is suggested in most available terms, i.e. "something that really got to you," or "a time you were scared or angry or lonesome or uptight," etc. When the writer has chosen the scene, one particular scene, then the writer is asked to "be there" and to write his/her way through it, using first person, present tense. Examples are given: "I swerve the wheel sharply. The siren is louder and louder. The lights are coming at me. I smell smoke." The writers are asked to catch as many sensory details as they can. I urge them to start at whatever point they want and to stop whenever they feel that they have written it. There should be no introduction and no conclusion, and it can be as brief as they want. They re-experience the scene as they write their way through it. This piece is called a fragment.

This approach slashes through much weak writing, leaving out explanations, apologies, softenings, generalizations, etc. It makes for one vivid scene. During the following five weeks, I ask them to write two or three times a week. I assure them that good writing is writing that communicates, that affects the reader. We are at no time in this course concerned with spelling, grammar, neatness, penmanship, nor do we ever attack

any piece of writing or comment negatively on any piece of writing. We listen with care. We respond associatively. We are here to do "real writing," I tell them, and not "school writing." They are to write only that which they care about. Any scene that is important to them is appropriate to write and any language appropriate to the scene is appropriate language. I provide a lead-in such as a section of a story or a poem that is provocative and clear. I seldom use a whole story as this is more intimidating than stimulating, and scraps are more productive as lead-ins. I ask them not to write anything they don't want to, not to write at all if they don't feel like it, and I keep no records during the first six weeks. I read everything, write "good" or "very good" or "interesting" or "fine" or "you may want to write more about this sometime" (if it's a fragment that is likely to lead somewhere). I grade nothing. Everything each student writes, after being read anonymously in class, is kept in his/her folder. Six weeks into the term we begin individual conferences at which we talk about his/her own writing, the direction he/she might take into a short story, and a quarter grade based on the quality of the writing (does it move us? does it work? do we care?) and the distance the writer has progressed on a continuum.

During the first seven weeks the lead-ins are designed to produce fragments in which their own feelings are engaged in specific scenes dealing with anger, fear, love, death, physical disorientation, isolation, lies, physical confrontation, *deja vu*, unexpected outcomes, accommodation and the abuse of accommodation, eavesdropping, "chicken," dares, telling on someone, getting caught, not getting caught, cutting, and all the other things that come up out of their own writing as well as my own notions concerning what might be provocative to that particular group of students. They are encouraged to write anything that is already in their minds or that comes into their minds or to respond to the lead-in in any way they wish. Their own sense of their own voice always has priority. One writer's experience triggers another and one revelation, another and the subject matter ranges over all of their concerns with increasing intensity.

I claim one day a week, usually Monday, as my day "to present something I think might be useful," "show you how to do some things." I deliberately ask them to experiment with certain "techniques." On writing days, usually Tuesday and Thursday, they have the entire period (except for a few minutes at the beginning for a lead-in) in which to write. We never read back on a writing day; this allows wide variation in writing time; some finish in twenty minutes while others take it home to finish, and no one feels out of line. Two days we read, and everyone must respect the work being read out loud. While on writing days class is informal and the writers may talk quietly with one another and move about the room freely, on reading days, while a manuscript is being read, I insist on silence. I tell them they will not be listening all the time and that's fine. They will go in and out of daydreams and thoughts as they listen, and whenever something in the manuscript launches them into something of their own they should let their minds go there. This frees them of being a captive audience, and as the term progresses they become extraordinarily intent listeners.

During the first few weeks I ask them to write a "letter poem" or fragment in which they speak directly to someone, saying something they wish they had said or something they want, but lack courage, to say. Another day they blast someone. They use dreams and nightmares. Whatever is of consequence to them is viewed as significant. When a certain level of intensity and authenticity is achieved, I ask them to focus and to give us scenes, not commentary.

The difference between journal writing or free writing and this kind of fragment writing consists primarily in the insistence on focus. The choice of subject is always theirs. I ask them to choose one time, one event, and within that scene to be specific. I remind them of photography and the difference between swinging a camera across a scene and taking one particular shot. I bring up the difference between saying to someone, "Last night I went to a party," and meeting a close friend and saying, "You know what happened last night? We were over Johnny's and . . ." and telling

the friend the details of the event. We begin to notice that scenes that are focused and active affect us strongly.

We spend a day exploring stream of consciousness. Sometimes I read them a page of Joyce and sometimes we just work our way in. We consider the number of levels on which they are functioning most of the time: the immediate physical level, composed of sensory awareness via their senses, the peripheral sensory awareness level, the remembered sensory level, the anticipated sensory levels; the immediate verbal level, including word exchanges in class, at work, in polite social scenes; the extended verbal level, etc.; the daydream level; the re-run and re-write of past experiences; the good anticipatory daydream, the bad (anxious) anticipatory daydream; memory; plans for future action, concrete and abstract. I ask them to consider these levels (modes; ways of being) as light-up points on a giant board (like an arrival and departure board at an airport) or a pinball machine or a computer. The writer chooses which level to tune in on, which mode to use, shifting at will from one to another. (Much later the sophisticated writer can be reminded of this light-board as a means to vary level and avoid monotony.) At this point they are only to begin to think about levels and to write without sorting, letting the levels jumble any which way. If they have trouble, I play word association with them: "I say chair, you say. . .," etc. I remind them that the response can be single words or phrases or sentences, and they write in this way for the remainder of the period. Later I suggest that this method is particularly suited to the writing of certain scenes: scenes in which the participant is disoriented from pot, alcohol, anaesthetic, altitude, etc, or disoriented from extreme intensity of feeling, from love, death, shock, rage, fear, etc.

About the fifth week we work on flashbacks. I read them several scenes in which the writer moves from the moment to the past, re-experiencing the past. The difference between a flashback and a memory consists of this re-experiencing as opposed to summarizing a memory—the memory is static, the flashback is on stage, happening. I ask them to write a scene which triggers a flashback and a flashback itself. We talk about music,



voices, a place, an event, a phone call or letter, and other specific stimuli that might activate a flashback. They ask how to get from the scene into the flashback. I tell them to skip a line instead of trying to handle a transition. "Skip a line and be there."

When everyone is writing scenes and we have covered stream of consciousness and flashbacks, they are ready to consider their short story. This is after six or seven weeks. It also takes this long for each writer to establish his/herself as an individual voice and for each to trust his/her own experience as having sufficient significance to warrant writing a *meaningful self-centered* story. First, I remind them of the simple straightforward narrative format, and confirm that it is the simplest and most appropriate for certain stories: a one-night party story, a trip story (backpacking or with the chorus or with the team), or any other straightforward event/event/event piece. In this way the least secure writer in the group can keep his/her feet on the ground and write, if he/she chooses to do so, a simple account of an important event, and usually two or three students do so.

The short story is approached as a collage: an assortment of pieces mounted adjacent to one another but not obviously connected. It is approached as a mobile: a group of fragments moving in the same spatial (emotional-spatial) area; the movement of one affecting the movement of the other but each hanging free, not touching any other. We approach it as a gathering together of fragments drawn together by a magnet fragment. These fragments will be bonded organically. It is the writer's

feeling that these fragments go together that justifies the juxtaposition. He/she doesn't have to prove or demonstrate that the fragments go together; he/she only has to feel that they do.

To use this approach each writer must initially find *one* fragment that has intensity. From that he/she free associates and discovers one more fragment, which is written on a separate piece of paper. And then one more. The fragments may be as orderly as beads on a string, or as disorderly as the components of a conglomerate rock. If the writer feels them to belong together, they will in the end possess an organic unity that will accomplish the purpose of a short story: the reader will be content; the discovery by the writer will itself be process and product.

When we read in class a single fragment which might be joined by another, we make suggestions sometimes as to what sort of fragment might accrue. I work individually with each writer to make him/her believe that this process will work. Once the second fragment is discovered the writer is usually off and away. I remind them to choose one particular scene at a time, not to summarize, to go into a flashback whenever they feel like it, to use stream of consciousness if it seems appropriate, to use daydreams (and to ground us with alternating reality scenes).

The scenes gather. At the end, each writer decides in which order to place the fragments, clips them together in that way, and the story is complete.

When these stories are read aloud they are virtually without exception smooth flowing, varied in technique, and largely devoid of bad writing.

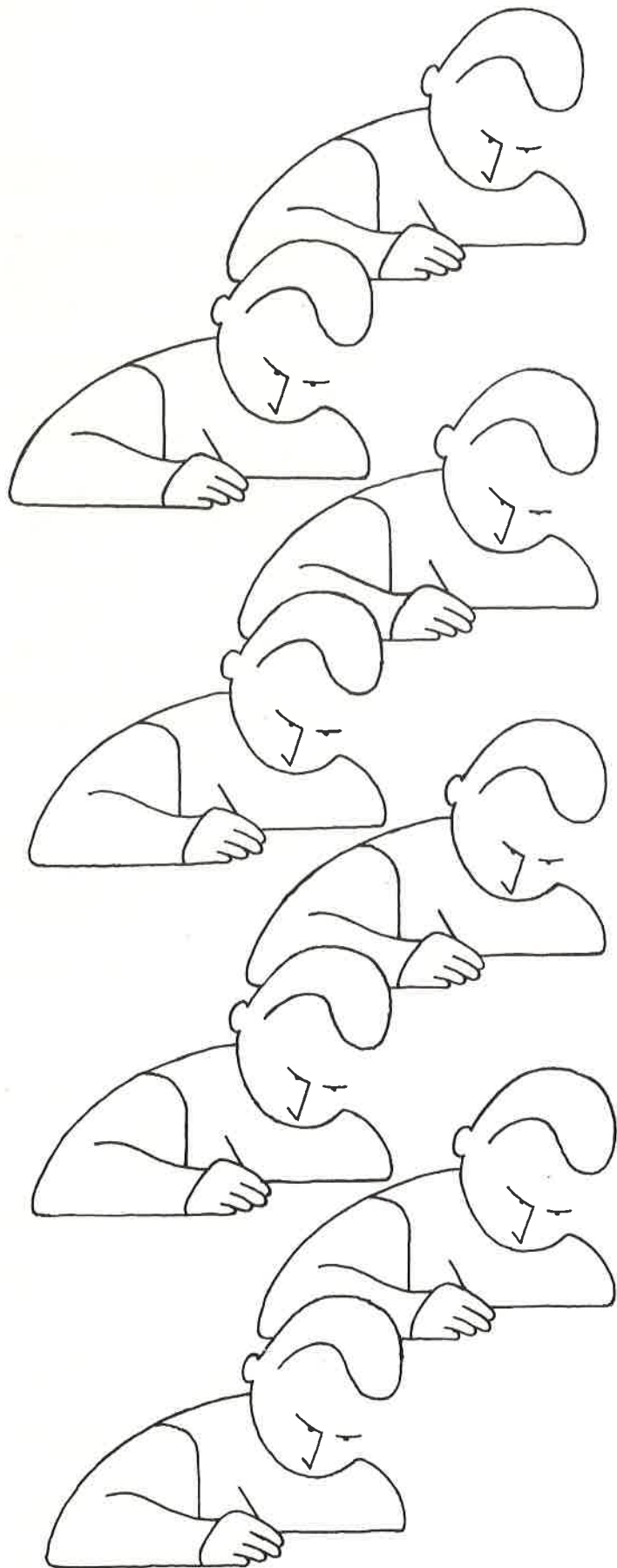
Transitions, often tedious and unnecessary in student writing, and often leading to dull diversions, are notably absent. Because they have become gradually accustomed to the intensity possible in a fragment, the form is familiar to them. Only the final grouping is startling. When they hear others' pieces read and recognize the emotional glue holding the scenes together, they stop arguing about the fragmented nature of their own.

This process, deceptively simple, guarantees a story of seven-ten pages from each student by ten weeks. This story is however not a predictable plot fabrication nor any other formula nor imitative piece, but an authentic, often compelling, short story of power commensurate with the experience and individuality of each writer. This approach provides for a steady growth in the use of each student's own voice and a way to learn and use a variety of techniques without having to masterplan a story before writing its parts.

Writing each fragment by itself keeps the work manageable. The associative impetus keeps material coming. No writer is confronted with a whole story to emulate or to conceive. There is no plan, no outline, no sense of the whole to begin with. Neither, however, is there slackness nor long-windedness nor meaningless ambling. Each student need only conceive of one fragment. This initial fragment must be important to the writer, must possess intensity, must be a moment that "really got to you," as I say to the writer. After that, fragments emerge, one by one. With recognizable artistic certitude these young writers, as Roethke says, "learn by going where we have to go." □

# Wringlish, Spinglish

by Karen Shawn



I'd tried. It's not that I hadn't tried every imaginable approach to improve my students' writing. Having not had the traditional deprivations of inner-city students, they weren't paralyzed when confronted by a blank sheet of paper; they had dutifully produced on countless Fridays countless essays on their "Best Friends" or "Favorite Pets." In workbook exercises they usually recognized fragments, run-ons, lack of agreement, and topic sentences.

Why, then, were their parents agreeing with others across the nation that their children cannot write?

Confronted so frequently this year with the same complaint, I began to understand that different people meant different things when they insisted that their children couldn't "write."

Some referred to illegible handwriting; some referred to poor spelling, grammar, editing and proofreading skills in general. Others objected to misuses of standard written English; still others, to an immaturity and lack of purpose. And more felt that their children never wrote anything thoughtful, provocative, well-organized, forceful, amusing, or even simply interesting.

Furthermore, students frequently differ with teachers and parents as to how they view their writing problems. One student summed it up neatly during a class discussion of these difficulties.

"I have a big problem with writing," she said wearily. "I hate it."

Before solutions could be found, therefore, I saw that problems had to be identified more specifically than "can't write."

To this end, I had my students fill out a questionnaire designed to measure difficulties in attitudes as well as in mechanics. Any plan formulated to improve writing, it seemed, would have to overcome both.

Never having been much of a scientist or statistician, however, I was rather at a loss to know what exactly to do with the results. I began the tedious process of counting the "yes," "no," and "sometimes" responses, but gave up halfway through when I realized what I really wanted to do was talk to the kids about the problem. Since I had them in person, I didn't need their statistical response. So I filed the written questions, and opened the topic for discussion.

"Have you any suggestions for helping yourselves?" I ventured, ready to list possibilities on the board for future consideration. The brainstorming that followed elicited thirty responses!

In an attempt to eliminate some of the more unworkable suggestions ("Have a personal ghost-writer"), I asked the kids to rank-order the list. To my amazement, their first six choices echoed methods that educators all over the country were describing:

1. read more
2. write more
3. write about what *we're* interested in
4. let friends correct our papers

5. learn grammar from our own errors
6. have an interested audience

Their intuitiveness astounded me, and I was eager to implement each suggestion. But one fact troubled me: I had, at various times in the past, attempted each of the above, without much measurable success. True, these ideas came from the students themselves and not me, so they were eager to try them. But would their enthusiasm be enough? Would they maintain it from one week to the next? Tomorrow we had scheduled an oral reading lesson; then there were spelling lessons, vocabulary, grammar, and literature to cover. . . but suddenly, "covering material" seemed less important than pursuing these ideas. It didn't make sense to interrupt the process; motivation and interest were high. It didn't make sense pedagogically, either, I realized. Parents speak to their infants continually, not once a week for forty-five minutes; this maximum stimulation and feedback is essential for languaging to occur. Teachers of foreign languages understand this; students are scheduled for those classes every day and are immersed in a stream of language. First they develop an ear for it, then a facility for using it, and finally it becomes their own.

Oral English is taught this way, too—but not the language of writing. But why not? Why not, for a month or so, daily think, read, talk, and write about writing; hear writing, respond to writing, and most of all, write?

We agreed to try.

Using a *Newsweek* cover story entitled "Why Johnny Can't Write" to help their random thoughts find a focus, students selected one aspect of the ongoing "writing crisis" to comment upon. They discussed their ideas with each other; when ready, they wrote, and talked about their writing; they proofread and commented on each other's work. (As I walked around, visiting groups, listening, commenting, I was struck by the illogic of the all-too-frequent command of "No Talking!" in an English class!)

They submitted their first copies to me. Since writing was a process, we agreed, as well as a product, when they were "finished" was up to them. Some would rewrite three times, some five. Some would begin again from a new point of view; others would stop and move on to a new topic. But each piece of writing in this first stage was discussed. Content and form were analyzed, but mechanical errors were attended to only as they interfered with the point of the essay, or when the work was ready for "publication." As common errors emerged, mini-grammar lessons were held for those who needed them, sometimes taught by another student. The use of contractions and the possessive case caused general class difficulty, for example, so grammar-workbook sheets on those topics were used to reinforce explanations. I also distributed dittoed usage errors from the students' own papers, when further reinforcement was necessary, or, as occasionally happened, was requested. To individual papers I sometimes stapled a workbook sheet which dealt with a recurrent problem for that particular student. The drill would be done at home

and corrected by me or another student. This method proved effective for those needing remedial work in basic skills.

That written English was indeed a different language became clear as the work progressed. To "correct" a sentence or usage was neither productive nor accurate; I hesitated to do so. I understood what they were trying to say; what was I finding "wrong?"

The answer came when a young woman, in defense of this issue, wrote, "On the whole, kids in this class write real good." During our discussion, I asked her how that sentence would be written in a book. With no hesitation she replied, "Students in this class write very well."

That was it! Another dimension in the concept of teaching writing as a language in itself was open to exploration. The problem wasn't one of right and wrong, but one of translation from the language of speech to the language of writing. Students did not have to be "taught" the "correct" answer; they knew it. Their "error" was simply using the wrong language—not using the language wrongly.

To clarify this, I distributed worksheets, such as the following, with common examples of spoken English, which we dubbed "Spinglish," and asked students to translate them into written English—"Wringlish."

#### Write!

Below are examples of a language we use every day to speak with each other. If you read them out loud, they may sound "correct." But you're familiar enough with another language, the one we use to *write* ideas, to know that these examples would not be "correct" on paper. Translate each sentence from *Spinglish* to *Wringlish*:

1. What's happnin, man?
2. Wadja get on yer test?
3. He don hear so good, I guess.
4. Awright, who's got my pen? Who took my pen offa me?
5. My fren, she's sleepin over my house tonite.
6. It ain easy, commina class every day, ya know.
7. Howya doin, teach?
8. Howja know them answers? Wadja do, write em ona desk or sumpin?

Eventually, these exercises were expanded to include "translations" from newspapers, magazines, and books we had read in class:

The following selections of Wringlish have been taken from Tuesday's *Times*. Read them aloud; then, in your own words, say the general meaning aloud. Note the difference.

1. The Supreme Court upheld today ordinances that require municipal employees to live within a city's boundaries.
2. Representatives of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization clashed in debate before the Security Council today, as the Council began discussing anti-Israel unrest in the occupied West Bank of the Jordan River.

Use the space below to copy articles of your own choosing.

Then ask your partner to translate the article from Wringlish to Spinglish. You try it too!

The following selections are from a novel we'll be reading together: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Translate the characters' spoken language into your written language.

...he's crazy, I reckon, like you say, but I swear to God he ain't ever harmed us, he ain't ever hurt us, he coulda cut my throat from ear to ear, but I swear he ain't ever hurt us.

Hush your mouth! Don't matter who they are, anybody sets foot in this house's yo' comp'ny, and don't let me catch you remarkin' on their ways like you was so high and mighty! If you can't act fit to eat at the table you can just set here and eat in the kitchen!

The following selections are from *A Tale of Two Cities*. They are written for a different audience than you would write for, which is why they might sound strange to your ear. Translate these sentences into *your* language.

1. It was in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five.
2. ...them and their descendants, to the last of their race, I Alexandre Manette, unhappy prisoner, do this last night of the year 1767, in my unbearable agony, denounce to the times when all these things shall be answered for.
3. It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.

Always, students answered questions about their written work: Is it clear? Have I used Wringlish? Is there an introduction? Body? Conclusion? Have I proofread? Has another person proofread? Have I read it aloud to *listen* to the words? Am I satisfied with it?

Every day I prepared myself to face some complaints, but they didn't come. Somehow, nobody felt that the work was too much, although they were doing more writing than they had ever done in such a concentrated period of time. Part of the reason was, I think, because there was a great deal of conversation along with the writing. Nobody sat in one seat for the whole period; they were free to move and share their writing, talk to me or anyone else about an idea they had, use the dictionary, or just look out the window for a while if that's what was needed.

Also, we did other things related to writing that didn't demand the effort and concentration that original work did. We had agreed that hearing writing aloud was necessary to develop an "ear" for it, so I set aside daily time for reading aloud. Newspaper articles, pages from favorite books, lots of Poe; we took turns reading to the class whatever struck our fancy. (I must admit that I did more than my share; every so often my actress alter ego surfaces and I give in.) I also read about writing—articles about the art of writing and how to master it. Borrowing from foreign language teaching again, we tried dictation: I'd read a passage, then reread it slowly while they copied it. One benefit, at least, was clear: the kids began to understand the critical importance of punctuation in a way that hadn't been conscious before. They understood me because I paused in my speaking whenever such a pause was neces-

sary for understanding; one girl soon pointed out that readers need visual signals to indicate these pauses.

Timed writing was a favorite exercise. Joseph came in one day proudly showing off a large and complicated-looking timer that his mother had given him.

"I brought it in for you to use, Mrs. Shawn," he said. "You know how you say you'll give us five minutes to finish somethin' but then you get to lookin' at someone's paper or readin' somethin' and then it's ten minutes. This way you'll know without havin' to ask everybody what time it is." Our clock had been broken for three years; the custodian said it couldn't be fixed.

"Thank you, Joseph! This is great! I certainly can use it. Just show me how it works first...."

That's how the timed writing started. After I explained the idea and some of the purposes ("It's kind of like—" "Kind of like?" someone mocked; "It's *like*," I amended with a sheepish grin, "revving up a car"), I set the timer for three minutes, and they began to write—anything and everything that came into their heads, without stopping for any reason—not to think, not to reread, not to check for spelling or punctuation—just write.

It was hard. But they did it, and afterwards compared notes. They were amazed that they could say so much in so short a time. They were amazed to discover where their thoughts led them; that they felt resentful when they were interrupted by the timer; that after only three minutes, their wrists hurt.

We did it every day. In addition, the students wrote letters, stories, articles for the class newspaper, journals, diaries, book reports, book reactions, movie reviews, wordlists—any and all forms of writing were encouraged. As they began to experience peer approval ("Hey, I like this! Why don't you read it out loud?"), their writing improved. They wrote more; they wrote "better."

By the end of the month, three or four students said they were bored. Some expressed a concern that they were missing required work being done in other classes.

"What about the final? Ms. Byrne's class already has 350 vocabulary words in their notebooks."

"Are we going to do a unit on myths? My friend has a whole section in her notebook on myths."

"This writing idea is good, but when are we going to do English?"

I reassured them frequently that any required work would be accomplished.

Despite those concerns, their letters unanimously reflected a conviction that this approach had led to better writing. This assessment was accurate. Very simply, writing had improved. Mechanical errors vastly decreased, and the content of their work was occasionally thought-provoking and dynamic, frequently lively and witty, and always honest, interesting, well-organized, and thoughtful. They were saying more than they had before, more exactly, and with more conviction. Their parents were saying less. For both those reasons, I felt glad. □

# Unskilled Writers as Composers

by Sondra Perl



Composing is a process. Yet, frequently, the teaching of composition proceeds as if only finished products were involved. It is with considerable knowledge and assurance that teachers evaluate what students write and recite the criteria and rules that govern their assessments. But when asked to describe what happens as students write, teachers are baffled. How are they to describe a process as complex and intricate as writing? Yet, without even a rudimentary understanding of the process, how can they expect to teach students to write?

Questions like these are not new. They have been raised in English education journals and at gatherings of English teachers for the past decade. What is new is that researchers have begun to find ways to answer them. (1) In this paper, I will describe one such study based on my own work with five adult unskilled writers at the City University of New York. (2) I chose unskilled writers for two reasons: first, they have been seriously constrained by the traditional approach used to teach writing, the "product-approach" that focuses on the errors of performance without acknowledging the writing competencies that lie beneath the surface; second, they pose the greatest challenge to teachers because of the magnitude of problems displayed in their writing. Whether these writers have any facility with composing—facility that might be masked by their inadequate products—seemed a question worthy of pursuit.

### General Observations

After many observations of the five students at work, I began to detect within the composing process of individual students patterns that seemed common to the entire group. Interestingly enough, these observations revealed not only shortcomings in how these unskilled students write but certain specific strengths as well. It appears to me that writers who are understandably labeled "unskilled" may nonetheless perform some of the crucial operations involved in composing in a skilled fashion. Their performance led me to formulate four hypotheses, two on what appears skilled in their composing and two on what appears to inhibit the flow of composing. (3)

1. Composing does not occur in a

straightforward, linear fashion. The process is one of accumulating discrete words or phrases down on the paper and then working from these bits to reflect upon, structure, and then further develop what one means to say. It can be thought of as a kind of "retrospective structuring"; movement forward occurs only after one has reached back, which in turn occurs only after one has some sense of where one wants to go. Both aspects, the reaching back and the sensing forward, have a clarifying effect.

2. The development of meaning through writing always involves some measure of both construction and discovery. Writers construct their discourse inasmuch as they begin with an implicit sense of what they want to write. This sense, as long as it remains implicit, is not equivalent to the explicit form that it gives rise to. Thus a process of constructing meaning is required. Rereading or backward movements become a way of assessing whether or not the words on the page adequately capture the original sense intended. But constructing simultaneously involves discovery. Writers know more fully what they mean only after having written it. In this way the explicit written form serves as a window on the implicit sense with which one began.

3. With these students editing intrudes so often and to such a degree that it breaks down the rhythms generated by thinking and writing. When this happens the students are forced to go back and recapture the strands of their thinking once the editing operation has been completed. Thus editing occurs prematurely, before the writers have generated enough discourse to approximate the ideas they have, and it often results in their losing track of their ideas.

4. Editing is primarily an exercise in error-hunting. These students are prematurely concerned with the "look" of their writing; thus, as soon as a few words are written on the paper, detection and correction of errors replaces writing and revising.

The students in this study make an equation between writing and correctness. Although they repeatedly demonstrate that writing is a process of discovery that cannot go on without an open-ended search for saying something in a new way, they brush over this part of the process in favor

of perfecting their partially developed messages. They remain convinced that successful writing is "getting it right" the first time and that second drafts are not for revising or seeing in a new way but for recopying.

These hypotheses derive from extensive observation of students during the act of composing. Thus they are an outgrowth of the study, not a justification for it. Each hypothesis needs further testing before anyone can say with certainty that the composing patterns found in the five case studies are shared by other writers, skilled or unskilled. In the following discussion of an individual case study, I will provide preliminary support for these hypotheses. Case studies are appropriate for initial research into a relatively unexplored area. From the work of Binet, Freud, and Piaget to more recent studies in language acquisition and the sociology of education, important theories have originated in the minute and careful observation of a few subjects.

### A Case Study

How do unskilled writers write? Do they exhibit consistent behaviors as they compose? Do they perceive the errors that stand out so glaringly to their teachers? These are among the questions that guided me in an investigation of the composing processes of five college students. I selected students on the basis of two criteria: writing samples that qualified them as unskilled writers and willingness to participate. I met with each of the students for five tape-recorded ninety-minute sessions. Four sessions were devoted to writing and one to an interview concerning perceptions and memories of writing and writing instruction. At each writing session, the students were directed to compose aloud, to verbalize as much of the internal flow of composing as they possibly could. Throughout, I assumed a noninterfering pose.

The topics for writing were based on material the students were studying in an introductory social science course. In session 1 they were asked to write about how the concept *equality of opportunity* was going to be affected by New York City's financial crisis. In session 2 they were asked to relate the concept of *equality of opportunity* to their own lives. In the study I was concerned less with

whether students remained faithful to the topic and more with how they used the topic to initiate a composing process that could be analyzed and described.

Tape recordings of each session along with detailed notes made it possible for me to review the composing process. To aid my review, I devised a coding scheme for scoring the major behaviors identified among these students. I then reduced each session to a chart or schematized sequence of behaviors along a time-line. Analysis of the charts allowed me to determine whether any composing patterns existed for the students and, if so, to what degree those patterns were shared. (4) The following section on one student, Louella R., presents in narrative form a few of those observed patterns.

Louella, a twenty-seven-year-old black woman, dropped out of high school at seventeen, returning seven years later to take the New York State high school equivalency exam. She is the head of a household of four children and hopes to graduate from college with a degree in nursing.

At home Louella writes frequently. She states that this is private writing, and her description of the setting indicates that writing puts her into a dialogue with herself. "I'm sitting in bed at night, relaxing, and I sit down to write to myself—that's what I call it—writing to myself." When asked what she gains from this activity she remarks, "When I read back over them, and I do that constantly, I think back to myself and I feel better."

When questioned about her problems with writing, Louella comments, "English never was one of my best subjects...I don't write the correct way." She indicates that she has "lots of problems," including "spelling and punctuation...saying one thing and writing another, [and] not producing writing that sounds like good English." For Louella, "good English" is "the difference between what's expected of you and the way you really speak...There are some things I'm used to saying; when I think about it, it don't really sound like I'm saying it right." She recalls that teachers pointed out these problems to her and claims, "If I could pronounce words better, my spelling would improve."

Louella remembers little of classroom instruction in writing and what she does remember is recited in a tone of parody. "Indent when you have a new paragraph. Remember your commas. Don't have a run-on sentence. Look for a good ending. Summarize what you say. Keep the same margins." She comments that she prefers to do writing assignments "at home, at night [when] everything is quiet." She states that she rewrites school papers two, three, and four times, making changes each time, and that her "best topic centers around children and marriage. I like most to write about what I feel. Even with topics from school, I like to say this is my opinion. This is how I think it should be—what I would like it to be."

When presented with a topic for writing, Louella starts with little forethought. Her subsequent explanation of this lack of planning, "When I'm writing, things come to me. I can think," indicates that through the act of writing thoughts keep emerging, and these thoughts then lead to more words upon the page. Since she begins writing almost immediately upon receiving the writing task, planning for her is not a separate activity but occurs along with and as an integral part of the way she produces discourse.

In session 1 Louella spends two minutes organizing. She reads the directions and the question twice, asks for one clarification, comments, "That's hard—so much—let's see," and begins writing. In session 2 organizing is reduced to one and a half minutes. She reads the statement, laughs, verbalizes her immediate understanding of the topic: "Boy, I have some views on it," and again starts right in. However, in both sessions, as soon as Louella begins writing, she experiences difficulty keeping her ideas flowing. Then she stops writing and truly begins to plan what she wants to say. In session 1, for example, after producing the first few words, she spends fifteen seconds asking for a clarification, reading the question again, and commenting, "Let me see—so many words. Let me see which way to start off. I really got to think how to start it," before she continues writing. Then, after producing the next six words, she pauses, writes three more words, sighs, and

pauses again. At this point she says that she has an idea but that she has not yet found the words she wants to express it. (The bracketed words refer to my way of coding Louella's statements.)

[PLANNING] I'm thinking about how can I put, um, like New York City is supposed to be one of the best city, um, like school-wise, and you know, for entertainment-wise and stuff, and then here it is defaulting. And I'm trying to put it all—[COMMENTING] See, I can speak it, but I can't write it. I'm trying to figure out how to put this in, you know, the right terms.

Throughout the entire process of writing, Louella does not maintain a strict linear movement from beginning to end. Rather she moves back to reread the question and digest what she has written and then projects ahead to anticipate what will come next. For example, after completing the third sentence, Louella backs up and attempts to limit the topic: "You just want about the city, right? That's all we interested in now, is the City of New York, right?" And after completing the fourth sentence, she pauses and finally states:

[PLANNING] I'm trying to say somewhere, something has been going wrong. [DIGESTING/REPEATING] I wrote about, you know, I'm sitting here wondering how could a city that is supposed to be so great, right, defaulting. [PROJECTING/ANTICIPATING] Somebody down through the years have escaping not doing, not doing something, somewhere, and they have just really caught up with it, the city. [COMMENTING] That's the only thing I can come up with. Now to put it on paper.

In the middle of producing discourse then, Louella can be seen formulating, rephrasing, trying to find the words that match the internal sense she has of what she wants to say. In session 2 a similar pattern occurs. After producing three words, Louella rereads the statement, continues writing, deletes part of what she has written, rewrites, sighs, continues writing, and in the middle of the second sentence again comments, "I'm trying to find the right words."

Although ideas emerge as she is writing, Louella often experiences difficulty translating these thoughts onto the page. It is a difficulty of

### Session 1, First Draft

I believe that the problem of New You City is being threatened because  
New City is suppose to be one of the hottest spot in the county / entertang-  
ing and school wise. New York city is noted for these thing as well as  
Jobs. But the city that is suppose to be so good in many different  
ing I sit down and woulder how a city that is suppose to ~~so~~ / bussiness, com-  
let  
mersials, and entertanding wise. I say how could / this had happen to ~~it~~ us. I  
say there the problem couldn't have just started. It had to be started some-  
time years ago. And New York City have ~~i~~ And now the problem has just  
caught up with us. I say this ~~too~~ I think the government and mayor of New  
Your City in the past had to see some of these problems coming before  
now. But proble~~my~~ just tried to cover up by shifting the buget around ~~until~~  
until they just could do it any more. I also think a lot of this has to do with  
taxe taxes. Because I think that everytime taxes are raised, It causes the in-  
dusters more money and soon or later they move there bussiness to another  
because they can't afore to pay higher taxes  
city./which This causes a cut in money coming into New York. I think if ~~s~~  
the government or state of New York don't get together and try to bring  
New York out of there crisis. It going to bring the stander of New York and  
down  
the county look bad.

### Session 1, Second Draft

I believe that the problem of New York City is being threatened because  
New York is suppose to be one of the hottest spot in the Nation because of  
the entertaning and school stander. New York is noted for these things as  
many  
well as jobs. But the city that is suppose to be so good in many different fields  
is defaulting. I sit down and woulder how a city that is suppose to be good  
let  
bussiness, commersial and entertaning wise could be this happen to us. This  
problem couldn't have just started. It had to started some years ago. And  
now the problem has ~~+~~ caught up with us. I say this too, that I believe the  
government and mayor of New York in the past had to see some of these  
problems coming before now. But problebly tried to cover up by shifing the  
budget around until they could do it any more. I also believe a lot of this has  
to do with taxes. Because everytime taxes are raised it causes the Industers  
more money and soon or later they move there bussiness to another city.  
They can't aford to pay higher taxes. This causes a cut in money coming in-  
that  
to New York. I think / if the government or state of New York don't get to-  
gether and try to bring New York out of these crisis. It going to bring the  
standers of New York City and the Nation down.

which she is conscious. "It's easy to talk but [with writing] you got to find the right words to put down for the right thing that you're trying to say." Here she recognizes that language in writing is different from and requires something more of her than the spontaneous flow of speech.

Writing also requires editing, and Louella does this constantly. During the creation of her first draft, while developing ideas and translating them onto paper, she simultaneously questions herself on word choice, syntax, and spelling. For example, during the composing of the first sentence of the first session, she writes a few words, comments that her spelling is "atrocious," completes the first sentence, goes back and adds "because of," and then wonders about word choice: "Let me see, what do you say [PAUSE] because of their entertainment and school, school, what do you say—teaching or schools? How do you put it? Yeah, schools." In another session, Louella composes sentences 1 and 2, pauses for one and a half minutes, composes sentences 3 and 4, and then worries about form: "You know what I'm trying to do? I got so much I'm trying to do that I'm trying to put; like this, run-on sentences and stuff, I'm trying to put the right punctuations in now." At this point Louella assesses her work negatively: "Maybe my understanding of it is wrong."

When a first draft is completed, Louella devotes an average of twenty-one minutes per session to rereading and reediting what she has written. During this time her concerns are lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical. She wonders about word choice, attempts to correct spelling and grammar, and occasionally elaborates upon ideas by adding phrases and clauses to the original draft.

When she produces a second draft, editing again plays an important role, this time with the sounds of words predominating. Here Louella repeats a word, listens to its sound, and, when she cannot spell it, looks it up in the dictionary. When that fails, she states that she tries "to get a picture of the word" in her mind, and when she is unable to do so she chooses a synonym that she can spell: "[There were] some things I wanted to put in that I didn't put in because I didn't know how to spell that would sound



better. It's not that they are such big words. It's just that my spelling is poor, and I can't get them all in."

Louella is also concerned with word choice, and as she both adds and deletes words she attempts to discover which of several possible choices "sounds best." Twice, she bases her choices on an external referent: its effect on the reader. In session 2, for example, the opening sentence is changed in the following manner:

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| Attempt 1    | I don't believe that American society—   |
| Attempt 2    | I don't believe that this is true.   |
| Attempt 3    | I don't believe that the statement about equal—  |
| Final choice | I don't believe that equality is being practiced to the fullest in American Society today. |

Louella explains her final choice by stating, "If I say 'I don't believe that is true,' [Attempt 2] What is true?...I put in here 'the American Society' so they wouldn't have to say, 'What is it?'" Here Louella acknowledges her awareness of and accommodation to an unseen audience.

Louella stops writing when she feels she has said enough and when writing more would only create a repetitive and boring paper. She explains that she "looks for a good ending, a good summary." In all but one of the four sessions, she indicates that she is satisfied with her written products.

In the two sessions described here, Louella produces four drafts with a total of 1,106 words and 107 editorial changes. Of the changes, two are related to content, and 105 are related to form (i.e., spelling, punctuation, sentence structure). Yet, in spite of the time and effort spent on editing, not all of the 105 changes succeed in resolving problems. In fact, sometimes a word or phrase is changed more than once, and each succeeding change results in further confusion. Quite often errors go undetected. Even though Louella considers her work completed, a total of forty-two problems related to form remain unresolved in her writing for the first two sessions. (Only papers from session 1 are included as examples in this article.)

One way to understand how Louel-

la can consider such seemingly incomplete texts finished is to look at the disparity between what actually appears on the written page (her text) and what she "sees" as written when she reads her text aloud. (5) For example, in the first session, she writes the words "entertaining" and "stander" and upon rereading consistently pronounces "entertainment" and "standards." Although the nature of the specific behaviors varies (sometimes she "reads in" words or word endings that are missing; other times she "reads" abbreviations or misspellings as though they were written correctly; other times she deletes or skips particular words or word endings), of the forty-two form-related problems remaining in her texts, thirty-seven can be accounted for by this selective "reading." One can conclude from this behavior that Louella reads her discourse from internal semantic and syntactic models. The minimal cues on her paper supply her with enough information to make sense out of her writing, and thus she often "reads in" features that are absent, features needed by other readers.

Throughout all of the composing sessions, Louella exhibits a concern for style and correct syntax. She continuously asks herself, "Is this word right? Does this sound okay?" Yet these questions, which represent serious attempts to revise and to edit, are never answered with any sense of security. In evaluating pieces of her discourse, she appears to have no rules to rely on that might help her arrive at answers to her questions. Thus she initiates a laborious correction process, but it yields few positive results.

Despite these difficulties, Louella does exhibit a consistent capacity to engage in a writing process through which she discovers and externalizes intended meanings upon a page. This observation runs counter to the common assumption concerning students like her, namely, that they do not know how to write. In this brief section I have tried to demonstrate that Louella does have definite strategies to stop, start, and sustain writing. In fact, many of her inadequate formulations are a result of not knowing which parts of her composing process aid her in writing and which inhibit her. Clearly, then, one of the jobs of her teachers will be to help her make

her way through the knots and tangles in an already highly developed process.

### Implications for Teaching

One problem of the students described in this article is that they, perhaps like their teachers before them, have accepted the notion that knowing the grammatical rules means knowing how to write. Yet this study and those that preceded it have shown that writing involves more than determining proper syntax or word order. It involves a creative search for meaning which becomes clear only as one engages in a composing process. In order to help students learn how to compose, then, teachers may need to broaden their definition of their task from an exclusive focus on the product to one that includes attention to the process.

A major obstacle to such a change arises from common conceptions of unskilled writers. Traditionally, these students have been labeled "remedial." The metaphor is medical. The students have an illness manifested in their writing, and teachers have the cure: short doses of instruction. More recently, unskilled writers have been referred to as "beginners," implying that these students have had little if any experience with writing and consequently ought to be treated as novices. While each view contains an element of truth—the writing experience of these students is limited and their writing *can* benefit from instruction—each also suggests a teaching methodology that ignores the fundamental nature of the composing process.

The remedial metaphor suggests that teaching ought to be aimed at what is "wrong" in the written product. Since the surface features in the writing of unskilled writers seriously interfere with the extraction of meaning from the page, much class time is devoted to examining the rules of the standard code. The pedagogical soundness of this procedure has been questioned frequently (6); but the practice continues, and it produces a further complication, namely, that students begin to conceive of writing as a "cosmetic" process where concern for correct form supersedes development of ideas. As a result, the excitement of composing, of creatively discovering meaning, is inhibited.

Conceiving of unskilled writers as

beginners poses other problems. In one sense, this view is more complimentary than the remedial one: In a more profound sense, however, it is less accurate. This view suggests that teachers can start anew. They need not "punish" students for making mistakes: "All beginners make mistakes," and they need not assume that their students have already been taught how to write: "Anyone with so many errors clearly cannot know how to write." Yet, this view ignores the highly elaborated, deeply embedded processes the students bring with them. These students are not beginners in a *tabula rasa* sense, and to assume so may only complicate the issue. In fact, what may be needed is for teachers to learn how to identify which characteristic components of each student's process facilitate writing and which inhibit it.

To carry out this task, I recommend that teachers devote more classroom time to observing students write and to acquainting students with the idea that each of them has a composing process. Once students glimpse what it is they do as they write, they often become willing—and even eager—to refine, change, or enrich their writing habits. At that point, teachers can work quite effectively on a whole range of composing skills, and they can introduce editing as one important skill among many.

A new attention to the composing

process may not be a panacea. But there may be much to gain from teaching that directly addresses each student's experience with composing. For example, some students may approach the act of writing with greater ease when they realize that planning actually does occur while they are writing and, therefore, they do not need to know "everything" they are going to write before they begin. Others may benefit from knowing that a new idea discovered during writing may result in the reworking of a laboriously constructed beginning. With this awareness, they may even postpone concern for introductions and titles until they have neared the end of their writing, that is, until they have truly discovered what they have to say. And students may benefit most by taking the responsibility of composing into their own hands. They may call upon editing rules and teachers' comments as a way to help them say what they mean more clearly. But when they recognize that what they want to communicate is something only they can construct, they will realize the power of composing.

#### NOTES

1. For pioneering work in this area see Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth-Graders*, NCTE Research Report No. 13 (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971); Donald H. Graves, "Children's Writing: Research Directions and Hypotheses Based on an

Examination of the Writing Processes of Seven-Year-Old Children" (Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York-Buffalo, 1973).

2. Sondra Perl, "Five Writers Writing: Case Studies of the Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1978).

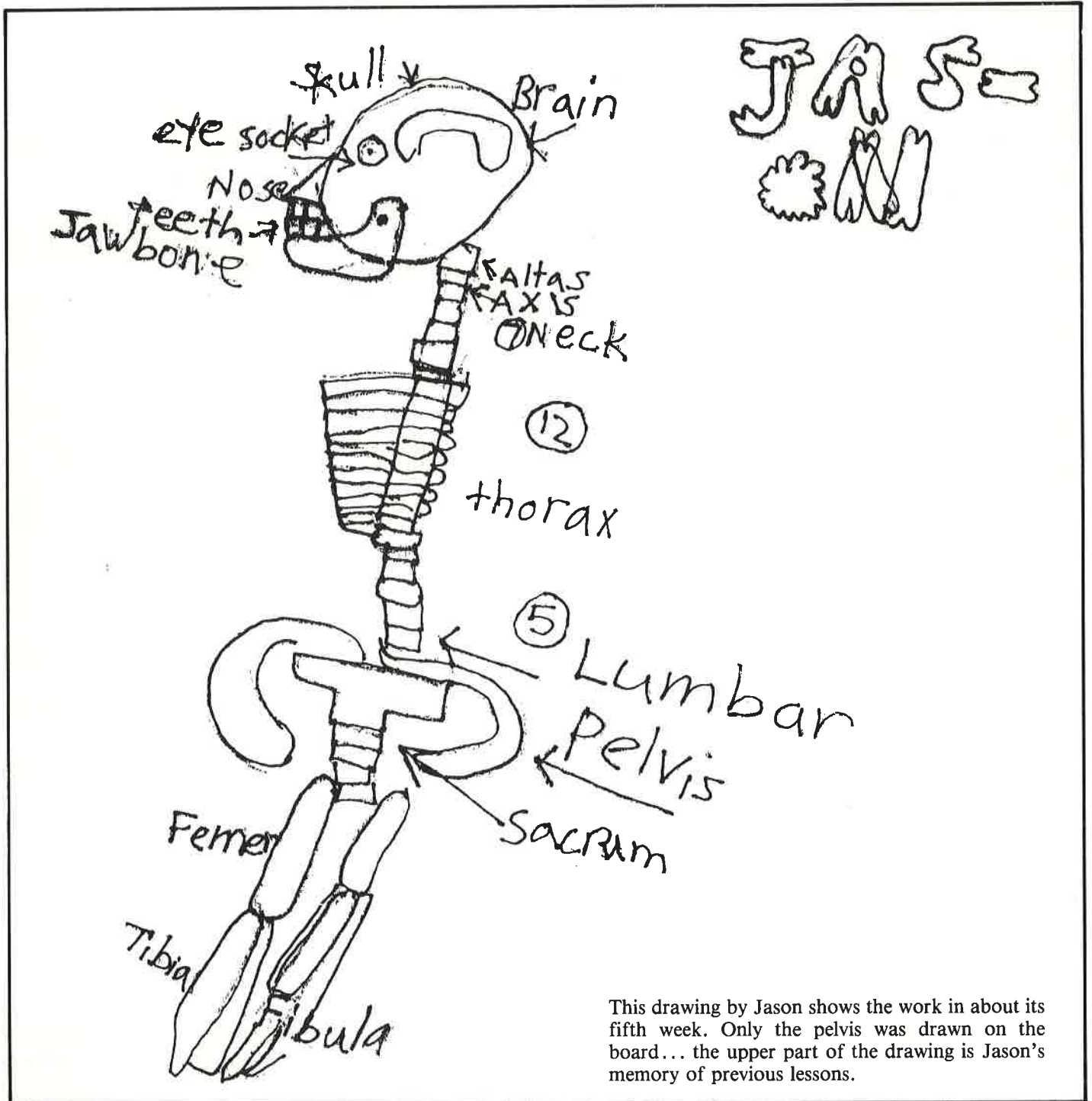
3. For a more extended discussion of the implications of these hypotheses for both theory and classroom practice, see Sondra Perl and Arthur Egendorf, "The Process of Creative Discovery: Theory, Research, and Implications for Teaching," in *Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition*, ed. D. McQuade (Akron, Ohio: L & S Books, forthcoming).

4. For a detailed explanation of the coding system and its uses in research and teaching, see Sondra Perl, *Coding the Composing Process* (Washington: National Institute of Education, forthcoming).

5. This procedure is a modified version of Kenneth Goodman's "miscue analysis," which is designed for research in reading and described in *Miscue Analysis: Applications for Reading Instruction*, ed. K. Goodman (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English and ERIC, 1973). In the present study it is used to analyze the mismatches that occur when writers read their own texts.

6. For discussions on the controversy over the effects of grammar instruction on writing ability see Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, *Research in Written Composition* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963); Frank O'Hare, *Sentence Combining*, NCTE Research Report No. 15 (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1973); Elizabeth F. Haynes, "Using Research in Preparing to Teach Writing," *English Journal* 67 (1978), 82-89. □

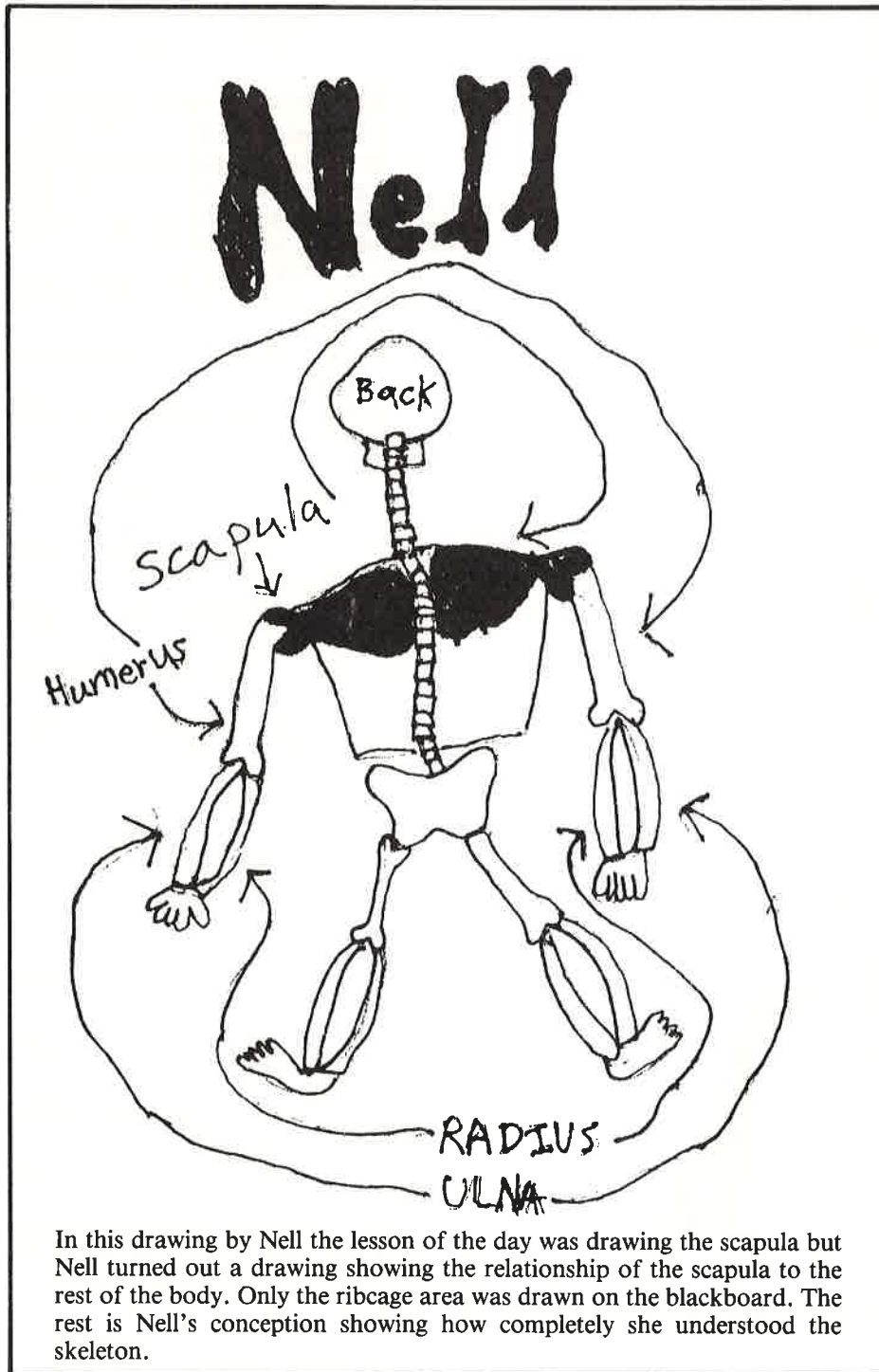
# Anatomy and Art



This drawing by Jason shows the work in about its fifth week. Only the pelvis was drawn on the board... the upper part of the drawing is Jason's memory of previous lessons.

# in Elementary School

by Robert Sievert

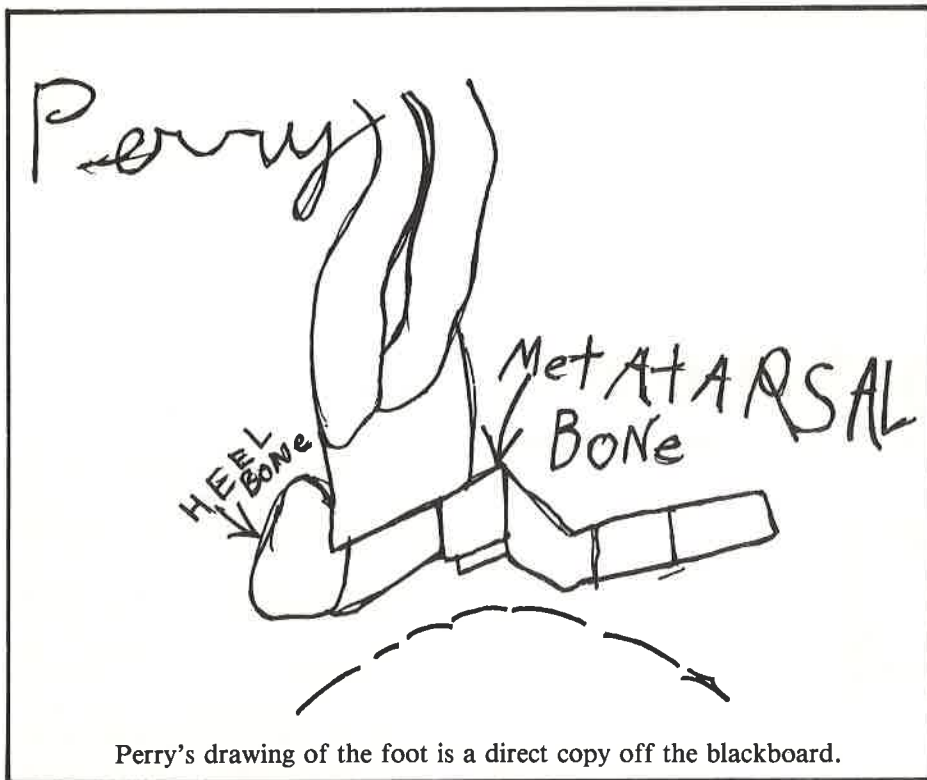


In this drawing by Nell the lesson of the day was drawing the scapula but Nell turned out a drawing showing the relationship of the scapula to the rest of the body. Only the ribcage area was drawn on the blackboard. The rest is Nell's conception showing how completely she understood the skeleton.

Choosing subject matter for art projects can be a problem. The project has to be set up in such a way that it unleashes the imagination. To sustain group interest, it has to hook on to the fantasy world of the participants. I discovered, however, that any material properly presented is capable of inspiring engaging art. I am always on the lookout for project ideas that originate in the school curriculum. Anatomy was one of those—a real find. Whenever I worked in this area students were captivated by the material. They worked hard to get things right, and the work was both scientific and fantastical.

Most of the skeleton drawings reproduced here come from a first, second and third grade (vertically grouped) class taught by Norma Brodsky at PS 84, Manhattan. They are part of a long line of anatomical drawings done in various workshops over the past four years.

My first experience in teaching students to draw anatomy was in 1975 when I was working at CS 152 in the Bronx. I was working with a fifth grade teacher, John Paul Biancci, who wanted to teach his fifth graders about their bodies through art. We started off making about ten life-size tracings of the students and then pasting in stomachs, livers, eyes and brains in the appropriate places. This collage technique got everyone into the swing of things, and an excitement over the work took over the class. One of my focuses for the project was finding new ways to express anatomy graphically in ways that I had not yet seen. We did a wonderful series of overlapping drawings tracing the body in as many positions as we could get into. We traced each other's chests both expanded and collapsed so that we could see the difference between the two. The last step in this



Perry's drawing of the foot is a direct copy off the blackboard.

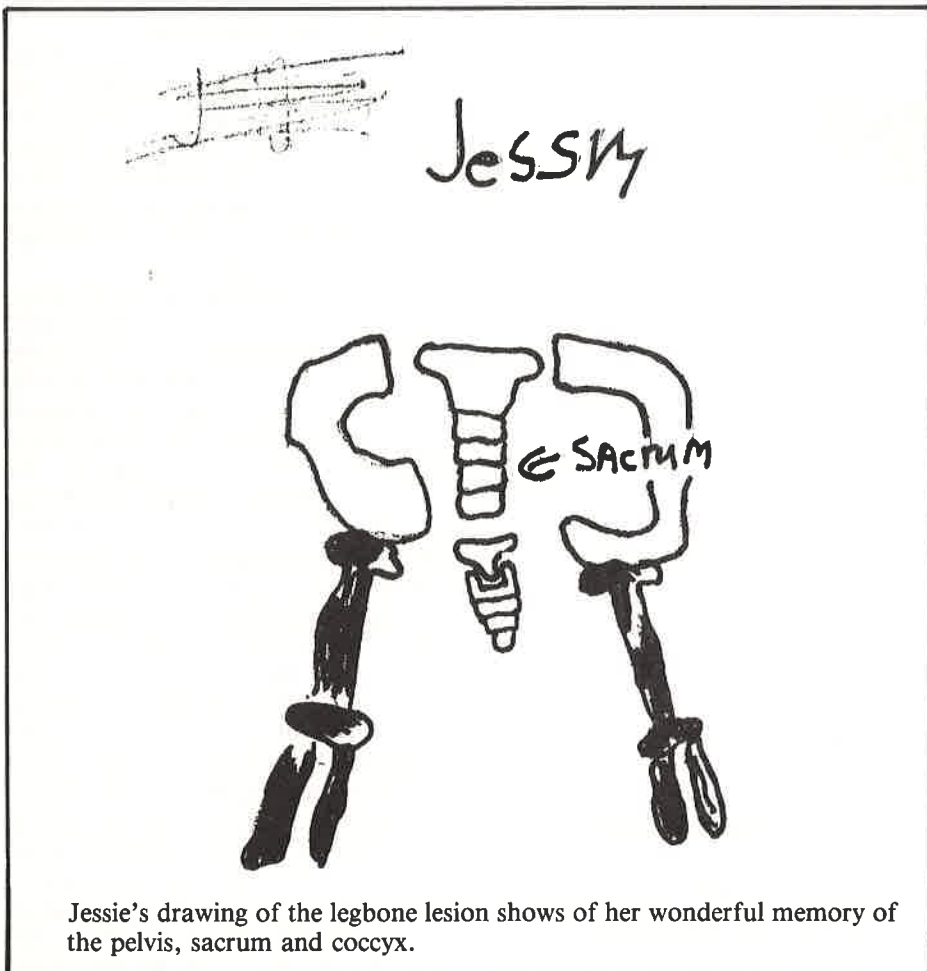
project was drawing a skeleton step by step. I drew it on the blackboard while they did it on paper. I was impressed by their efforts and tried the same drawing with other groups.

I went even further with the idea in a class taught by Russ Seymour at PS 84, Manhattan. Here I did the skeleton drawings with them, then we added muscles in red crayon. These drawings were the basis of a whole series of body projects Russ did with his class later on.

Earlier this year I was talking with Norma Brodsky about her curriculum for the year. She was using the body as her main topic with this mixed level class of young children. I told her I would work on the skeleton with them although at the time, I must admit, I was unsure these very young children could master the complexities of the skeleton. From the first session I put aside any reservations I had. The work they did was extremely competent.

I began by borrowing *Anatomical Atlas* by Maud Jepson, M.Sc. (Holt, Rhinehart and Winston) from my wife. Each week I would present a small area of the skeleton. Starting with the skull we moved down the spine and to the limbs. I did the drawings on the blackboard. I feel this is a very important step. Children always seem reluctant to draw directly from a chart or photo, feeling great disparities between their production and the printed design. However they enthusiastically copy any drawing you make on the board. As each bone was presented we tried to locate it on ourselves, feeling our neck, pelvis and arms. In fact, as I began the series I said to them that there were twenty-four skeletons in the classroom; this caused respectful and thoughtful silence.

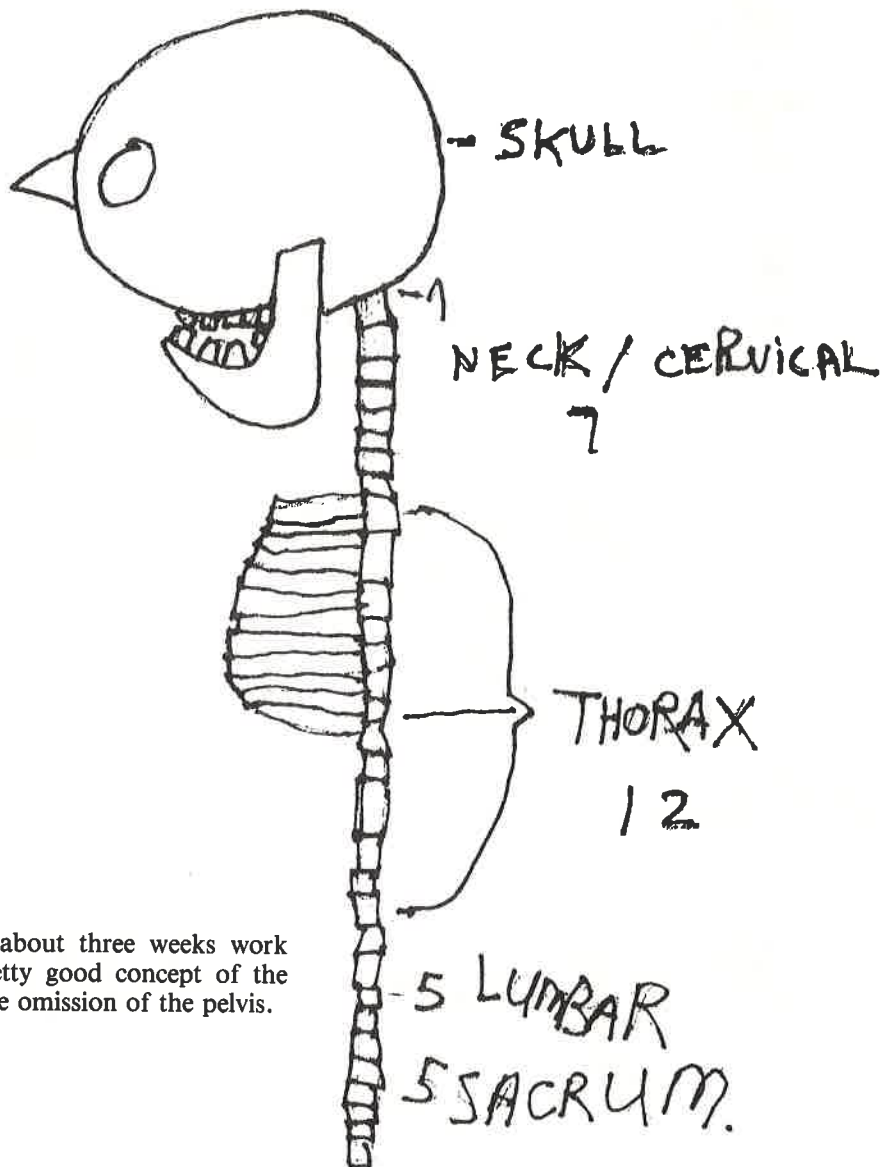
I would meet with the group for about forty minutes a week and we



Jessie's drawing of the legbone lesion shows of her wonderful memory of the pelvis, sacrum and coccyx.

W. Jessie

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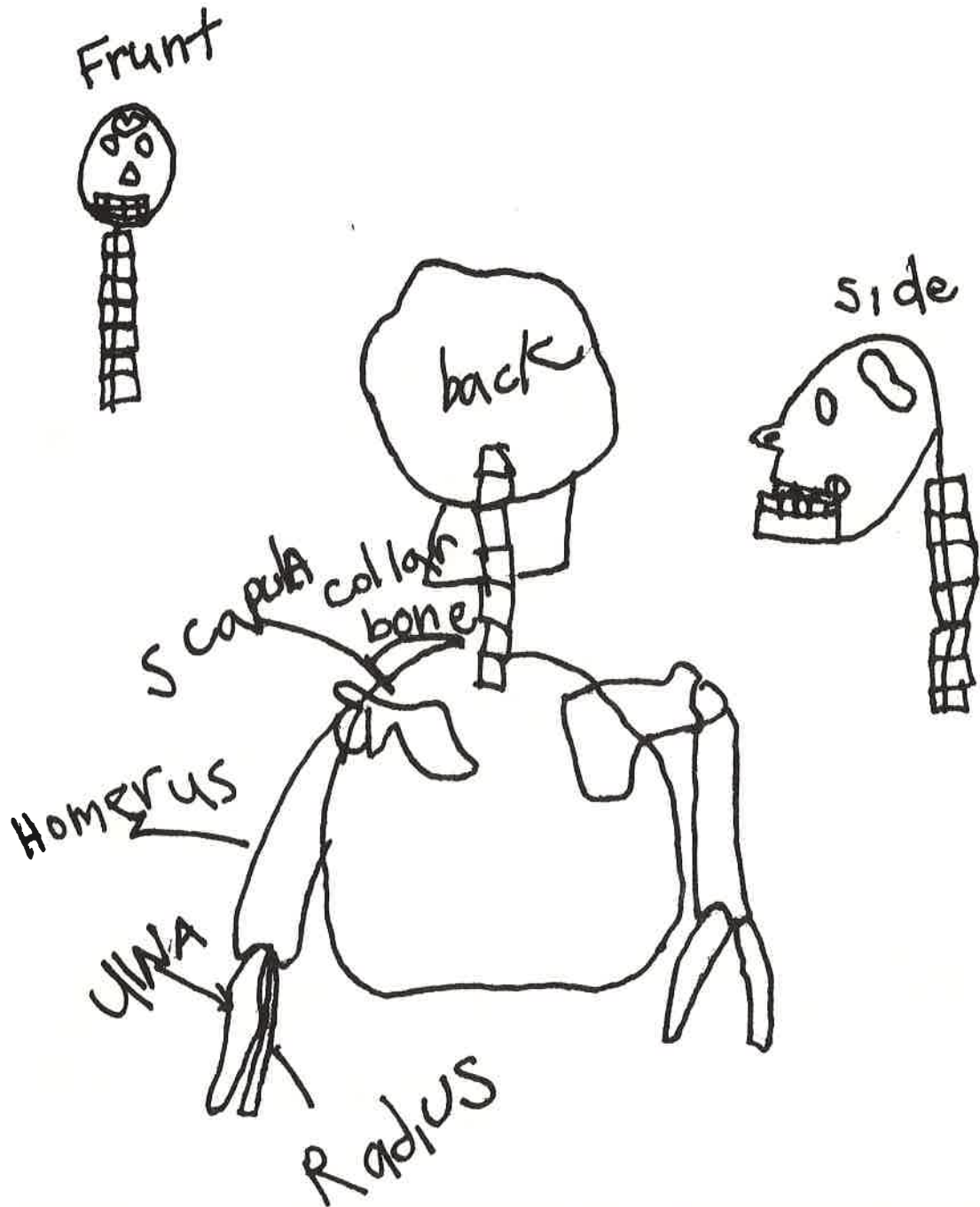


Jessie's drawing shows about three weeks work strung together in a pretty good concept of the spine. Notice however the omission of the pelvis.

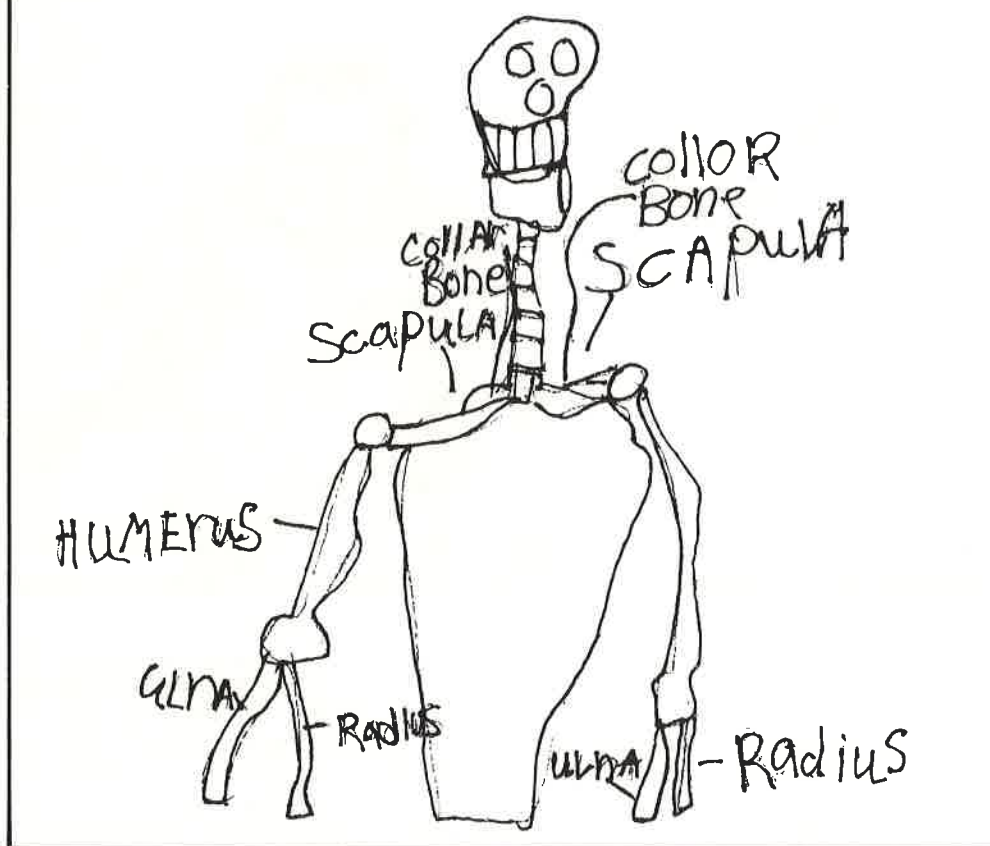
Eve's drawing of how the scapula fits into the rest of the skeleton also shows her awareness of the three dimensional aspects of the skull. "Back" was on the board; she added "frunt" and "side."

Eve Lategano

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Sebastian



Sebastian's drawing of the upper skeleton has a wonderfully animated expression that goes beyond scientific notation.

would begin by verbally going over the material of the previous weeks, then the new work would be drawn on the blackboard. As the weeks went by some of the more advanced students would string the work together. They would start with the first lesson (the skull) and work their way down the skeleton adding each new lesson. Many of the drawings were remarkably clear conceptions.

After finishing the drawing aspect of the project (we drew every section, every bone digital size and larger) I took a group of eight of the most interested and capable students, which Norma selected, and then set out to build a skeleton. It didn't seem like any big thing... a few sessions of drawing bones and cutting them out. I had confidence.

I began by getting several sheets of foamcore and black markers. Different sections of the skeleton were assigned to different people. Simon and

Sergio took the skull; Sayeda and Evening took the spine, cervis (neck) down to lumbar; Nell and Gail took the pelvis. The skull was built in block form; it had a movable jaw and was an anchor for the string on which the spine was threaded. The vertebrae were separated by circlets of tape.

After about three sessions of working on the model I began to feel that I was involved in one of those traumatic situations in which problems become worse and worse and solutions drift further and further away. The forty minutes shrank into a frenzy of intense activity in which progress was more and more difficult to see. The children had no trouble in drawing the bones on the foam core, but cutting it out proved very difficult. We were using very sharp knives, and I had to supervise closely what was going on. It was very difficult to do more than one section at a time. Children working in other sections

became bored when I could not give them as much attention as they needed. When we finally got to the point of assembling, things got much better. The children could easily manage the tape and string.

I just want to add a few words about working with sharp tools with young children. A number of years ago I was fascinated by a film in which Eskimo people were eating blubber, passing it from person to person along with an extremely sharp knife for cutting it. The very youngest were encouraged to cut with the blade. It seemed so logical, train them from the earliest to be careful. I have since tried my best to employ that psychology. I put into the hands of young children knives, cameras, paint brushes and tools; I have always found that at any age people appreciate serious work. □



# Writing About People

by Alan Ziegler



I once wrote a poem about someone named “Mr. Gutman.” There was no real Mr. Gutman, but the poem needed one, so I made one up. I showed the poem to David Ignatow, my teacher at the time, who read it and said, “Now, if you had showed this to William Carlos Williams, he would have said, ‘So, you *know* Mr. Gutman? Well, then *tell* me about him.’” Truth was, even though I had invented Mr. Gutman, I didn’t really know him.

In graduate school, I was in Kurt Vonnegut’s fiction workshop. He read a story I was working on and started asking me about the characters: what kind of people they are, what they like to do, and how they’d react to certain situations. As we discussed them as people, the characters began to grow, becoming more than functionaries programmed to perform fictional tasks. Ironically, the more dimensions they acquired, the better-equipped they became to perform their tasks, and new, interesting tasks materialized. Vonnegut started talking in the voice of one character speaking about two others: “Yeah, they’re lousy guys. Fire them.” I was about to defend their worthiness as characters, when I remembered he was talking about them as *people*.

In order for a reader to find a character convincing, that character must be perceived as a whole iceberg, not just a scrap of ice floating on the surface. The writer must give the reader enough information to convey the essence of a character without loading the reader down. (Often, it’s during the process of telling that the writer him/herself will get to know the character.)

I begin class sessions on characterization with a discussion of how people are differentiated from each other. For starters, there are physical differences. Some of these are genetically determined (height, facial features, color of eyes, etc.), but people have control over some physical aspects (the way we dress, how we wear our hair, etc.) and

varying degrees of control over others (facial expressions, body shape, etc.). In addition to physical features, people are differentiated by how we act, how we react, what we say and how we say it, how we deal with other people and ourselves, habits and ways of doing things, etc. Some people put ketchup on almost everything they eat, or we can tell when they are about to enter a room by the sound of their footsteps and the way they knock. I know someone who, when he is on the phone, paces back and forth, extending the wire to its limits. If I were to write about him, I would surely use this detail to help the reader get a sense of who he is. (As it happened, in creating a character recently I used this trait because it seemed to work. A writer usually warehouses such observations for future use; it’s like having money in the bank.)

All of the qualities that differentiate people should be kept in mind when writing about people. Writers who can detect and express these traits have a head start in developing characters who breathe. It is crucial that the reader *care* one way or another about the people in a story or poem, and it is easier to care about someone presented in a tangible way.

I’ve had students do “portrait exercises” in order to give them a feel for characterization, as a foundation for future writing. What follows are exercises in self-portraits, fictional portraits of famous people, and various others. In all cases, the writer is free to invent and/or exaggerate to make a point.

## SELF-PORTRAITS

Many kids are used to reading about (or watching on T.V. and in the movies) extraordinary people—superheroes and the like. But writers and other artists also deal with “ordinary people”; a good writer should be able to

present a common person as a unique character. Since it is helpful to know the character you are writing about, I've found that a good place to start is with oneself.

Most painters try their hand at a self-portrait (for one thing, the model is always available). In this writing exercise a self-portrait is made with words. "Who am I?" may be too large a question to try to deal with in a short poem, so it is easier for the students to think in terms of components: "What are some things that contribute to making 'me'?"

The main idea is for the students to isolate various aspects of themselves—to put together a series of statements that will result in a sum greater than its parts. Good writing has a lot to do with selectivity; out of all the things you could say about yourself, pick a few that seem to reverberate. The aim is not to compile a thorough profile, but to get practice in the ability to project a person on paper. In the following "sketches," emphasis is on behavior patterns rather than physical description.

*ME*

*Pulling Up My Sleeves:*

*I always seem to pull up my sleeves  
hot or cold even in snow  
it never fails me  
I pull up my sleeves*

*Putting On My Watch:*

*Every morning when I get up  
I put on my watch  
even if I'm not going anywhere  
I put on my watch*

*Combing My Hair:*

*I always comb my hair  
when it's neat I still comb it  
twice in the morning, twice in the afternoon  
and twice at night  
I comb my hair*

*Leaning Back In My Chair:*

*Every time I sit down  
I lean back in my chair  
even in a formal place  
I lean back in my chair  
even at my house I do it  
I lean back in my chair*

*I Always Want To Punch Someone:*

*I seem to do it  
playing or not  
I ask to see if they'll do it playing  
and if they don't  
I punch anyway*

DANIEL HANO

*Who is this?  
He walks with no sound  
He never fights  
With a bang of his feet  
He's off again  
Who is this?*

*I try to do homework,  
Then I stop.  
And stop and stop and stop.  
I always get distracted,  
I don't think but I walk.  
Up and down, down and up.  
Until I get the answer.*

*During the night  
I hope and pray  
That I'll make it till the next day.*

*When I buy  
A pack of slightly overpriced baseball cards  
My brother rants and raves  
"Too expensive  
Back to food, shelter, and water  
Nothing else"  
And caps it off with a big:  
"Don't spend money!"*

MICHAEL SID

*I try to do something  
Then I learn it,  
I do it for a few days  
Then I can't.*

*I'm busy working  
And I get a great idea  
For something to do later  
Then I can't remember it  
Till I'm busy again.*

*There's nothing in my way  
But I think there is  
But I go ahead anyway.*

*The day is dragging on  
I feel like it's never  
Going to end  
But when it's over  
I wonder where the  
Time went.*

PAMELA SCHWARZMANN

*I laugh so funny  
People think it's a joke.  
I mostly read at night  
And never in the day.*

*I sit so close to the  
T.V. set that I can  
Strangle my eyes.*

*When I answer the  
Phone I just say,  
"Hi. How are you? What's new?"  
And then give it  
To my parents.*

*Every time I see somebody  
I hardly know  
I get shy.*

SOPHIA TARHANIDIS

## FICTIONALIZED PORTRAITS OF FAMOUS PEOPLE

Donald Barthelme's book of stories, *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*, contains a piece called, "Robert Kennedy Saved From Drowning," in which the author weaves a compelling portrait of Senator Kennedy via a series of vignettes and quotations. Each section is individually titled, including: "K. at His Desk," "Described by Secretaries," "Attitude Toward His Work," "Dress," "Gallery-going," "K. Puzzled by His Children," "A Dream," and "K. Saved From Drowning."

The scenes are presented in such a convincing way that many people have taken them to be true. In fact, Barthelme has said that only "Gallery-going" actually occurred (Barthelme happened to be there at the time). Barthelme uses a variety of vantage points for establishing his version of Kennedy: what Kennedy says, what others say about him, Kennedy in various contexts (with employees, family, strangers, etc.), how he dresses, what he dreams, etc.

I read a class excerpts from this story and suggested they take a well-known person and write a portrait, trying to deal with the private as well as public side of the person. The objective, as with other portraits, is to shine the spotlight on telling moments.

Here is a portrait of President Carter which uses short vignettes, and one of Gilda Radner, comprised by one, longer vignette.

### PRESIDENT CARTER

*President Carter is at the grocery store with wall to wall people around him. Trying to get out, moveless, not knowing what to do. One person says, "Don't ruin his beautiful suit, or most important his shiny shoes." So finally the owner of the store pushes everyone away and President Carter is free to go.*

\*  
*President Carter is at his home town and everyone treats him like anyone else. Everyone is glad he is the President now. He just wants to rest and read his newspaper. He has on slippers, a white short sleeve shirt, summer pants, and a gold belt. He decides to walk down the street and say hello to his old friends. Now if President Carter walks around his friends just say, "It's nice to have you in town!" But his best friend calls him "short stuff." I don't think he minds what he calls him, but if everybody else does I think he would get mad.*

\*  
*President Carter is invited to a luxury restaurant and when he is going to sit down other people stand to salute him. When he sits down they give him champagne. The waiter says it's from a man across the room that thinks you are doing a great job and paid for your champagne. President Carter gets up to thank the man and asks him to join him and his family at their dinner table.*

\*  
*President Carter is at the White House. He is mad because he doesn't know what to say for a speech at a very special meeting. His daughter asks him to help her project for school and he says, "NOT NOW, YOU CAN DO IT YOURSELF!" So her mother helps her and calms President Carter down. He says "sorry" and everything's back to normal.*

\*  
*President Carter is in the Big City, New York. Everyone's glad to see him. He is going down the street shaking everyone's hand. They tell him their problems and he tries to help them. He cannot help all of them, but he will try hard to make them happy. President Carter is a person, too! He doesn't like being screamed at or people to complain a lot. When he comes home he sits down angrily and once more his wife calms him down.*

\*  
*President Carter is at a party. Everyone is offering him a drink, and he is covered with people. On the other side of the room there are people that don't like Carter, and they try not to look at him. All around him there are people that like him and people that don't. But he tells his friends he will not pay any attention to the others. All people don't have to like him.*

LISA BRACERO

### GILDA RADNER

*The lady with humor dressed in a summer dress walks into the Washington Square restaurant. She sits at a table politely waiting. A waiter comes to give her a glass of water and a menu. He doesn't realize who she is.*

*By accident she spills the water and another waiter recognizes her, rushes over to her. Meanwhile she is wiping the wet table. The waiter says, "I will clean it, Miss Gilda Radner. You might strain yourself." She says, "It's okay. Thanks." "No, no, no, no, I will," says the waiter. "Will you please stop treating me as if I were some kind of Queen. Can't I walk around without people trying to help me with things, can't I?" she shouts at the waiter. "But I just love to watch you, Jane Curtin and John Belushi on Saturday Night Live," the waiter announces. "I don't care. Now excuse me for ever coming here." Gilda walks out in a hurry.*

*Gilda says to herself, "Why me? God, why me?" People behind her say, "Oh, look, there's Miss Radner. Doesn't she look divine." "Oh my, yes." Gilda is frustrated by now. Her stomach is rumbling, so she goes to Blimpies.*

*She decides to order a hero to go instead of eating it there with people talking to her. So she goes home to eat there. She goes to the refrigerator, gets out a Pepsi, gets a glass and pours it in the glass. She puts the soda back.*

*She sits down with the soda and opens the hero. She takes a bite of the hero and the mayonnaise drips down her mouth. She doesn't feel it dripping because she is daydreaming.*

CHRISTINE MITSIS

### OTHER PORTRAITS

In the two following pieces of writing, exaggeration is used to convey the authors' perceptions of their characters.

#### MY FRIEND CHRIS

*Chris and his friends walk  
into the restaurant  
He flashes his money around,  
He shows off to his friends,  
They try to ignore him.  
He's wearing expensive clothes,  
He buys everything he wants,  
He owns all sorts of things,  
He also shows off.*

*We're in the restaurant,  
He orders three large pizzas,  
He buys ten sodas,  
We sit at the biggest table,  
We wait for the food.*

*The food comes,  
It won't fit on the table,  
Chris gets up and looks for another,  
He finds a big one,  
He sits down and tells us to bring  
over the food.*

*We finally bring the food,  
We see Chris resting in his chair,  
He's asleep.*

*We don't want to wake him,  
but a strong force pulls us toward him,  
We wake him.*

*We start eating,  
I see Chris eat five slices of pizza,  
He drinks my soda,  
I tell him to buy me another soda,  
He buys me three sodas.*

*We're finished eating  
Chris leaves a big tip,  
I see him lay down the green paper,  
He puts more and more,  
I want to go out.*

*We're finally outside,  
A car comes to take us home,  
Chris sent it here,  
He gets inside the car,  
He asks us to come,  
We decide to walk home,  
He drives away,  
We sigh with relief.*

*The next morning he calls me,  
He asks me to come over,  
I say I'm busy.*

MICHAEL BROMLEY

#### JOGGERS

*They run all day, they run all night. They don't stop until their knees are down to their bones. They ever eat, or smile. They stay silent until they stop running. Sometimes I wonder how they live by just jogging. One wears a cap, one wears a tie. Their shirts have holes in them, their pants are up to their knees. Their shoes are worn down to their toes. Their hair is over their*

shoulders. One has a mustache, one has a beard. They run as fast as deer. They bite their nails like candy because they are so hungry. They run when it's raining, they run when it's snowing. They don't even stop for cars to go by.

One day when I was outside, I saw them. They stopped running for the first time! Their house was an old one, sort of grayish. They went inside. They didn't come out for a long time. I began to wonder what had happened. I went inside and saw them lying down as if they were dead! I left them so they could rest. They didn't come out of the house for a year!

TERESA HANNA  
West End School,  
Lynbrook

In this one, character is captured through the use of imagery. In just nine lines, we get a picture of an intense, explosive person.

A person who is partly happy,  
with a memory of her father's death  
blocking the way  
to total happiness.

A fire cracker in its last second  
of silence.

A cheerful girl jumping  
rope, turning the rope so quickly  
that all you see is a blur.

PAMELA SCHWARTZMANN

Here's one about a local neighborhood character, known to many of the kids in the class. Although this piece is not as developed as it could be, it is useful in that it demonstrates how a resourceful writer can find a "story" in places where others have looked but not noted.

CIRCLES?

Who is Circles?

Circles is a bum that sleeps in Ft. Tryon Park. We call him Circles because he's always in circles. For instance, he's always walking up to 218th St. and back down to 168th St. Circles has a lot of friends.

What Does Circles Look Like?

Circles looks like an ordinary every day 70 year old man with a bald spot and white hair. You will probably never find him without a cup of soup, a can of soda, or a cup of coffee.

Circles Meets New People

Wherever Circles goes he always meets new people. In the parks he sets dates to meet his friend at a certain place and time.

What Does Circles Talk About?

I've always wondered what Circles talks about. One day I overheard him talking to a lady's baby. Then he started talking to the lady and telling her how quiet and pretty the baby is. He also started to tell her how nice the weather is and how he wanted to be a weatherman.

Circles in J. Hood Rite Park

A few years ago Circles spent one summer's month in the park. One Saturday my friends and I were skateboarding down the back hill and when we got to the bottom we saw him feeding the birds. He has a lot of friends in the park. On weekdays sometimes he plays chess and sometimes he plays checkers.

Circles Stays Uptown

Circles used to come back and forth. When Nancy and I went to 181st St. I'd point Circles out to her. Now it seems to be Circles is staying uptown. I wonder if he'll ever come back down?

JEANNINE BUDIKAS

High school student Nanci Siller used carefully selected memories to create a harsh portrait of a cold, unyielding person. The remarkable image in the first stanza ("Legs that ended in claws") sets the tone. We learn about the aunt not only by what she says and does, but also by what she doesn't do.

AUNT ELSIE

Once I had sat  
cross-legged by your feet  
studying the grooves and carved bottom  
of your chair.  
Legs that ended in claws.

My father's aunt  
who never baked me cookies  
ignored me because I asked too many questions  
made me cry for asking your age.  
My father's aunt  
who always bought me slippers  
(the wrong size)  
for every birthday and Christmas.

You were the house in Fairhaven  
and the dark-walnut chair.

They took you away.

*Sold your house  
and gave your chair to a stranger  
who smiled.*

*On Christmas  
I did not visit you  
in the cold white room  
with metal chairs  
where they said you lived  
and when you died  
I did not cry.  
There is no mourning in death  
the second time.*

NANCI SILLER  
(Finkelstein Memorial Library)

These are two family portraits. The first is straightforward, and the second utilizes visual imagery.

#### MY FATHER

*My father likes to work a lot so he got a job on April 15, 1968, in New Jersey. He works putting boxes in certain places and shipping them. He likes to talk a lot with the people that work there in that same department.*

*Once when he was working, a box fell on his shoulder and he was injured and did not get to work for 6 months and 4 days. He was very sad because for 6 months and 4 days he did not get money because he was not working and because my mother had to make all the payments on the house.*

*The place where my father works has a big garden full of flowers and grass all around the garden.*

*The company is divided into 3 departments, 3 cafeterias where the employees go to eat lunch or drink coffee or anything the employees want. They also have fire drills to test how fast they could react if a real fire were burning the company.*

*My father is 5 feet 8 inches, has black hair and brown eyes. He is very active. He likes to walk and run. He always goes to his sister's house to go out with his nephews. They go out to lots of places around the area. He likes to watch television programs every night and loves to watch baseball and boxing.*

*My father likes to do lots of things like going bowling with his friends, and he likes to take me on my bike to the park in the summer.*

*When he is alone and does not want to go out he opens the window, looks out, smokes a couple of*

*cigars and then just sits with a can of soda watching television.*

JOSE TAVAREZ

*My brother playing football like a pro and he throws like a clock going very fast. When he moves it's like an ape when he eats a banana, something looking so easy like making a line or falling asleep. His face has at least ten freckles on each side and his hair is like long thin strings hanging from his head. His hair waves back and forth when he moves his head—it looks like a weeping willow when the wind blows the leaves back and forth. He doesn't stay still, it's like a bear was running after him. His sneakers are white and get ruined very easily.*

KAREN O'CONNOR  
(West End School)  
Lynbrook

A final selection: I've told classes that when you are stuck without something to write about, the answer is sometimes at the tip of your fingers.

#### MISTER ZIEGLER

*He walks around the room helping, talking to children about people. My friend Ale asks, "How do you suck air?" Mr. Ziegler says, "Like this, slllllllurp!" Ale says, "Oh, that's how."*

*Mr. Ziegler's green eyes pop looking at the papers. While he looks he reads every single line. He stands up holding the paper and saying, "That's very good." Other times he says, "It's good but..." and other times he says, "You don't need this."*

*As he leaves with his brown bag he says, "Have a nice weekend." Next week he comes and we all cheer. He saves us from our math. He asks us what "isolate" means. No one knows. He reads a part of an image from a blue book.*

*He always waves his hand when he reads or talks. Whenever he comes he always walks around the room, looking, staring, talking. When the children do something wrong he corrects them. Whenever he goes by me he laughs because I am writing about him.*

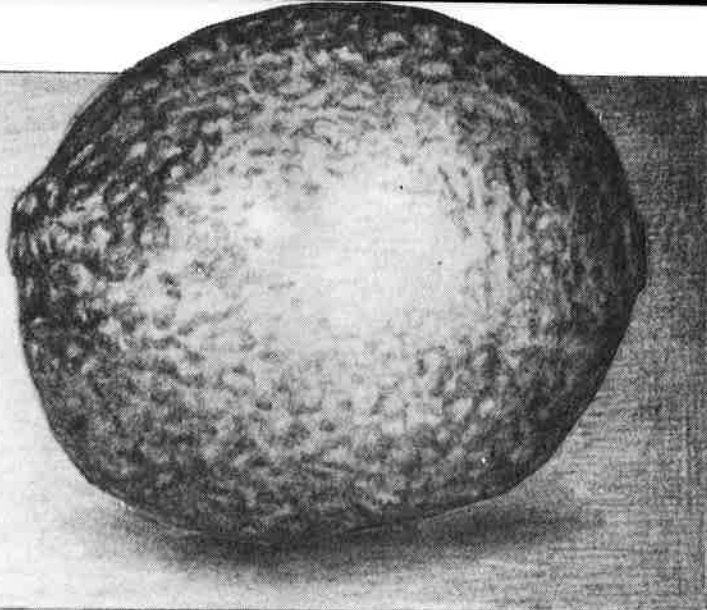
*I think when he goes home he reads our poems and then writes his own poem. Then he picks a book from his book rack and reads it. I think he's the best.*

ANTONIO GONZALEZ

NOTE: All student material in this article, unless otherwise noted, is from 5th graders at P.S. 173, Manhattan.

# Learning to See

by Barbara Danish



I

Write what you don't know about what you know, Grace Paley has said, and I add as commentary to that disarmingly simple wisdom: Hidden beneath every obvious clichéd surface, including our own image, are secrets which writing helps us discover and release. These secrets may even be the cliché finally felt, and therefore "made new" again. I have found that comparison is one very effective writing tool in getting at these unknowns.

Imagine we are writing about a lemon. You probably don't even have to look at one. It's round and yellow. How yellow? As yellow as the sun.

*A lemon is round, and yellow like the sun.*

That is almost true. The sun is yellow of course, but a lemon is not actually round, more oval or spherical. Okay then:

*A lemon is spherical, and yellow like the sun.*

Is that better? It is true. Then why is it likely, if you put this magazine down, that you will forget in a second that you read this sentence? And, what really matters, you will probably forget the lemon too and squeeze it into your tea tonight without a thought to its sphericalness or yellowness.

*A lemon is spherical, and yellow like the sun.*

In this sentence there is no lemon. Do you picture it? Does your mouth pucker? The heart of the lemon and the associations and feelings that it might stimulate in us are missing completely. In fact, we have only stated its clichéd reputation. Is there anything visible to a lemon? Is there anything to this "sphericalness" or "yellowness"? If so, we have not found a way to reveal it.

As part of six lessons in "Learning To See," I asked twelfth graders at Oceanside Senior High School to look at the lemon each had brought in "with wonder and amazement," "as if you've never seen a lemon before." For ten minutes the class was silent, looking, smelling, touching intently the outside only of the fruit. This silence and acute observation seemed to provide a bridge from self-consciousness, an impending test, and the noisy hall into the lemon. The time in the room seemed to slow down and thicken. Then people started sharing what they were discovering: "It has pores like my hand." "The tip looks like a dolphin's nose; hey, mine's swimming." "It's a lie—when you look closely you think it's going to be rough, but

it's smooth." "Mine has a yellow that smashes into cars." "It smells like there's a garden inside." "The yellow of my lemon glides."

The lemons were opened—peeled, split, squeezed, bitten into. Each way yielded a different view of the fruit inside. When the fruit was torn raggedly the filaments were clear, "a school of fish swimming towards one end." Peeled carefully the lemon was naked, translucent white, egg-like. In groups of three and four now, people were pointing out discoveries to each other, and almost every description was figurative, as if "yellow," "smooth," "tart," were inadequate to communicate a lemon the first time it was experienced. For the next class the students were to write something that, in any way, reflected that they had seen a lemon. Here is one:

## A Lemon

When you look at a lemon you see a burst of sun. But as you look at it much closer you see the pores of the lemon, like the pores of your hand with its lines like the life lines of the hand. As you peel the skin away you hear the crisp clean sound of ginger ale; sparkling and crackling. As we peel away its outer covering we feel the smoothness of the inner skin, yet a surprise occurs. As you taste the lemon a sudden cringe comes over your body and you throw it away.

Marshall Yellen

The preparation for writing about something is to examine it with all one's senses. In this manner the lemon is felt, projected into, fantasized about, connected with; that is to say, discovered. The explorer can't get away without having been discovered a little also.

I crawled inside  
a lemon today—  
don't know why I  
was so surprised  
by the gentle heart beat  
beneath my feet  
but, frightened, I leapt  
through the sweet, thick air  
and pierced the warm flesh,  
knee-deep in bitter lemon  
tears

Chemistry may hold

many interesting  
facts and figures  
But I've lived  
inside a lemon  
where numbers  
don't  
count

How can you claim  
to understand me  
and, in the same breath  
ask me why I write  
about lemons?

I was never so alone  
as I was inside  
my lemon.  
Quietly exploring  
every secret place  
and wondering why I  
hadn't taken time  
to pass this way  
before.

A strange satisfaction  
filled me as I peered  
into that portal  
and saw what  
no other had ventured  
to look upon;  
a different dimension  
with no room for  
complication.

Anonymous

It is the nature of comparison to aid in revealing such things. Try for yourself. Look at an object. List its physical attributes. For example:

This paper towel is white. It comes in sheets. It has bumps in it. It is dry.

Now paying attention to those same attributes describe the object again by comparison. Try to take the time you need until you hit a comparison that "feels right." It may actually "move you." For example:

The paper towel is white like snow, like baby powder, salt, a salt plain. It stretches out, the parched bottom of an old river, waiting for water to suck at.

The comparison, beginning with a cliché, finally makes available the thirst or dryness of the paper towel, which is not felt by the statement "It is dry."

Here are some examples from the work of third and fourth grade children that show the digging and connecting quality of comparison. I have preceded each with a statement of the physical "fact" of the line hoping you will feel the difference between each.

The sweater has black string and ugly buttons.

It had worms for buttons  
and strings black as the day I cut myself  
and had to go to the hospital.

—Sari Elkman

I'm quiet when I write.

When I write I feel like a new Olga.  
I think I'm in a new galaxy  
where no one lives and it's really quite.

—Olga Marrero

A rocket is fast and so am I.

A rocket is like a fat sword  
and it's like a fast comic.  
I feel like a rocket when I jump off  
a ramp with a bike  
trying to jump over 12 buckets.

—Joel Fern, Brian Schmitt, Dana Treadwell

It is raining hard.

The great open sky is an eye crying.  
It travels to my heart like a ball of fire.

—Dimitri Georges

These excerpts reflect four lessons in which I use comparison: the revealing of an object and attitude toward that object through the description of it; a discussion of what one's mind feels like when one writes; an exploration of an object's connection to other things and to oneself; and a lesson in which the students, having reviewed the tools available to them, including comparison, are free to write on any subject in any way.

These lessons center on the use of comparison as a way to reveal a subject and place it in a relationship to the world and oneself. The comparison of the abstract statement with the sensory and concrete comparison, hopefully provides a sharp *feeling* of difference between the two. Examining that difference, the reasons for the strength of one over the other begins to be clear. What if comparison is used to *present* a lesson, then what will be revealed?

## II

What is more stereotyped, laden with cliché, devoid of sentiment and yet widely practiced than the love poem? Faced with Valentine's Day at PS 107 I decided (having no choice, really) that we would write love poems to someone special. That was the subject. The skill I wanted to work on was extending a comparison to make it more visual and exact. My experience was that, when asked to do this, the student was at a loss as to what it meant. I needed to find a way to explain both the visualness and extension of a phrase. I also wanted to encourage the students to vary their structure, find unusual comparisons and avoid a regression to "Roses are red. . ."

The next day, armed with two poems I had written, I went into the fourth grade class and said, "Good morning and Happy Valentine's Day. Today we are going to write love poems." Everyone groaned. "Oh you always groan when you're going to write, don't you?" I said. "Well I wrote a love poem to you. Do you want hear it?" They nodded and I read:

Mrs. Wolfson's class I love you.  
You are like an orange.  
You are like the sun.  
You are like my socks.  
You are like salt.  
You are like a pillow.  
You are like words.

The class was listless, and except for some weak laughs at socks and salt, they were silent when I finished.

"You don't like it?" They shook their heads. "Why not?"

"It's boring," someone called out.

"Hmmm. Do you know from this poem that I love



you?" They shook their heads. "I was afraid of that. Well a poem doesn't always work the first time. I wrote another one."

Mrs. Wolfson's class, I love you.  
You are like the smell of an orange  
when my fingernail first breaks the skin.  
And you are like the first piece of sun  
that cracks the night sky.  
Do you know how much I love you?  
Do you mind that I love you so much?  
And it is my red socks you are like,  
little fires that keep me warm.  
You are the right amount of salt on my salad,  
You are a pillow that surprises me  
with its cool bottom side.  
Listen, I dream about you  
and in my dreams you are beautiful words  
that I sing to myself, over and over.

I could feel them listening as I read and when I finished they burst out applauding. I was very excited. I had been almost positive that they would be able to hear and feel the difference between the two versions and they clearly had. Now I wanted them to explain to themselves and me their reaction. If they could, then the point that was so hard to teach would be uncovered by them.

"You liked the second one better than the first?" I asked. They nodded vigorously. "Could you feel that I love you?" They nodded again. (It was true I loved them or I wouldn't have invented this lesson.) "What made the second one better?"

"It was fun listening to," one child said.

"Why?"

"You used funny things, like salt and socks."

"But I used those same things in the first poem."

"Details," a few of the children called out.

"Details. Well," I said, "I'm glad you remember that word but didn't the first poem have details? I didn't just say I like you."

"They were details," another child offered, "but they didn't have any feelings with them."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know."

"Try to figure it out." I wanted them to get in words as precisely as possible what they had sensed and felt.

"You explained what you meant."

"What do you mean? Use an example."

"Like this, anybody can say sun, right? But you kept going and said when we were like the sun."

"They were red socks, not just any ones," someone else said. "I think they were your favorite socks. You put in detail."

"You mean you could see it," I broke in. "It was visual. What other differences between the first and the second?"

"You didn't just say like like like, like in the first one. That was boring."

"What did I do instead?" I asked.

"You changed the way the words went. Like you said

you are a pillow instead of you're like a pillow."

"You mean I actually turned you into the thing?"

"Right."

"Questions," a girl in front of me said. "You didn't just compare us to things, you asked us questions."

"A different kind of sentence completely. I like how well you're remembering the two poems. Here's a question. If I hadn't said I loved you in the poem, would you have known it anyway?" They nodded. "Why?"

"Because the things you compared us to were things you like. You didn't say we were mud." Everyone laughed. "Then we would have known you thought we were disgusting."

"But if I said, 'You are like cool wet mud on a hot, muggy day,' then would you have thought I liked you?"

"Yes," everybody yelled. "You can't just say mud; it has to have something after it."

"But," said one student, "if you said we were like a dead, run-over squirrel—no way you liked us then."

When I felt they understood clearly the points they had brought up, extension of detail, sensory detail, choice of comparison, variation of syntax and direct address ("It's like a letter to us"), I said, "You lucky people, today you get to write a love poem to anyone you want!" They cheered, and we threw out ideas of different people they might write to. "And when you're finished you can copy it over if you want, make a valentine with it, here are paper and crayons, and give it to the person you're talking to." More cheers and everyone started to write.

For me, this lesson opened comparison as a new teaching technique. Since then I have used it often with different age groups, and its revealing quality has never failed. When students didn't understand Williams' use of detail in his poem "Nantucket," I asked, "What else might he have seen out the window? Does that change the poem? How?"

When a student wrote an exciting line I asked for someone to rephrase it in the most boring way possible. The students loved to think up something boring. The comparison made clear the power of the original line, often the reason for the power, and the fact that we always choose words when we write, and some work better than others.

When I taught a lesson in which students write to or about an object, describing it physically through comparison and through this description exposing their attitude toward it, I wrote two poems again and used the structure of the Love Poem class. Some students chose to do two versions themselves. Thus, classes were initiated to the use of first and second drafts.

This use of comparison takes trust on the part of the teacher—that given the evidence students willingly take on the task of uncovering for themselves, and then use those "secrets" of writing. Given time, many students will "re-invent" most of the elements anyway; discovering them as concrete ideas means they can use them over and over, knowingly and inventively.

## Love Poems

### TO RYAN

*You are like a tiger who roars to me.  
You are like a bird who sings to me.  
You are like a moon who lights me up at midnight  
and sings in the beautiful air.  
And when you sing to me  
my cat starts to dance  
and my dog goes crazy  
and my bird gets strong.*

—Robert Ruiz

### TO MY CAT DAISY

*So smooth your fur it is,  
White like the cotton just grown  
Black like the night rising new.  
Your name is a special flower.  
Your skin is made of cotton, pure.  
The meow you sing makes me glad.  
You sleep on my arm and make me feel  
I am touching smooth cotton.*

—Leonor Benitez

### TO WALT

*You are like a box of jokes that makes me laugh as much as if I  
and a friend had a lot of gum in our mouths so when we tried  
to talk it turned our words into sounds that were very funny.*

—David Adelson

### MY VALENTINE

*I picked my self for my own valentine.  
I wrote to me a letter  
and gave myself a box of candy.  
My mother said, who is your valentine?  
I said, I don't want to tell people.  
My father, sister, brother  
asked me the same thing.  
I got mad and threw the candy away  
and ripped the letter.*

—Kelly Sayers

## CHICKEN AND RICE

*Chicken I love you  
because when I eat you  
you are like crackly fire burning  
and make me think of biting  
into a juicy grapefruit.  
I do not like you alone.  
I like you with rice.  
Rice you make me think of the blue sky  
and flakes you make me think of  
white white paper.  
But I do not like you alone either.  
I like you with salad.  
Salad, you remind me  
of a juicy orange, just squeezed.*

—Olga Marrero

### TO DAYTUCHUS MY CAT

*My cat I like you very much.  
You are like dark chocolate when it is just  
going into the machine.  
You are like soft butter when it's just going to be spread.  
You are like home-made bread  
when it's just coming out of the oven.  
You are like boots with fur inside them.*

—Francesca Valerio

### MY FABULOUS FRIEND

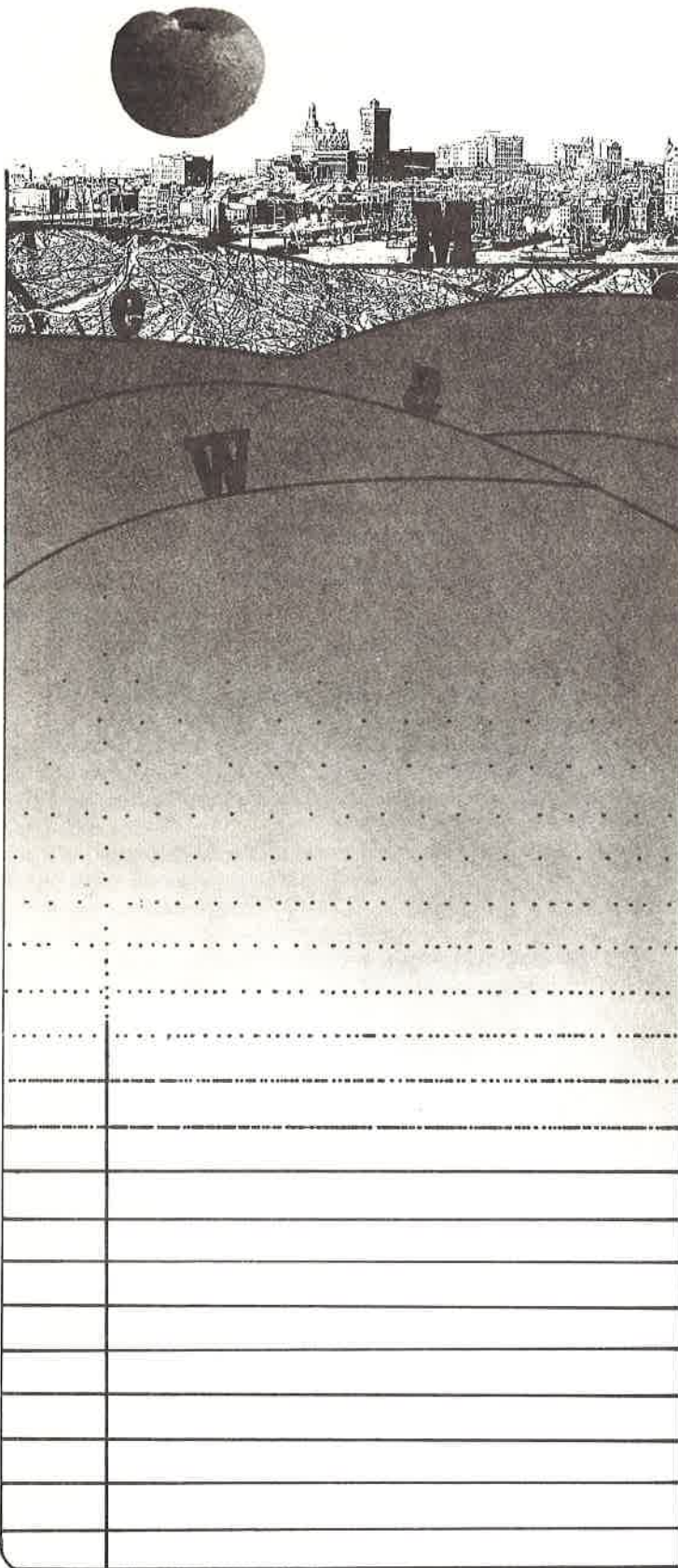
*Jimmy you are to me like an eagle flying  
in the night sky.  
Your wings of love cover me.  
My heart is filled with happiness  
when I see your delicate face.  
Your blue eyes match gracefully with the sea.  
Your jokes roll me over.  
And when you're serious I feel so proud of you,  
even when you don't feel happy.  
But you too stand and put your foot down for your rights  
and for me. But anyway, I love you.*

—Dimitri Georges



# Back to Basics: A Confession

by Elaine Epstein



Spring had come with winter's enervation anxious for reversal. My students (grades two through four) felt it. Their work came out of a deep sleep, and lively images filled with color, sound and movement would leap at me as I read works in progress at the end of each writing session. As the days grew warmer, the students became more restless, anticipating playground discoveries, bike riding, trips to the Bronx Zoo or the Statue of Liberty. I was growing jealous at the ease in which they translated these seasonal changes into their poetry. I had opened the door of language and imagery to them, and they filed right in as I watched from the other side, paralyzed with a case of writer's block.

The problem wasn't, literally, an inability to place ink on the blank page—I have pages upon pages of different colored papers, napkins and various other scraps written in pencil, ballpoint pen, fountain pen and an assortment of felt tips (ranging from razor point to laundry markers) to attest to my attempts. It was as though I had contracted a dread virus, displaying its symptoms: an inability to find a subject, or if the subject were found, a further debility in exploring its perimeter. I couldn't get past uninteresting, declarative statements ("It is spring" or "I don't feel good" or "I feel okay") or poorly conceived, internalized imagery that is best left in the land of obscurity.

To retain my sanity and composure for the duration of the school year, I told myself that this disease was caused by too much time and energy spent in the classroom (especially in elementary schools). I thought that summer vacation would bring the solution. I didn't look to the true source of the problem but, rather, found a temporary scapegoat. I believe these troubles would have been quickly solved if I had taken a good hard look at the process I had taught my students and practiced it, i.e. to start with a simple image or statement and let it grow, step by step, without worrying about the outcome—discovery through language and observation, pure and simple: the rudiments of writing. I let that basic notion slip for awhile, and found that the only ground I was breaking was a Guinness World Record for thrown away paper.

Students mostly learn by example. At the time, I didn't realize that their work, and the process I had witnessed in them week after week, was an example in itself that I could learn from—getting back to basics. My short-sightedness, though, was soon remedied when I began a ten day residency at Lynbrook High School....

My previous residencies had been in elementary schools and I, admittedly, looked forward to this change of pace—especially in terms of the poems I would bring into class, the discussions I thought would ensue, and the students' reactions to their intricate, in-depth observations in life and language. I was excited while preparing for this first class, psyching myself like a cheerleader at the county basketball championship, aware of the fact that her team had the only seven foot center in the entire state. I thought my chosen group of poems would be an ace in the hole. This cloud of

anticipatory excitement dissipated soon after I entered the room the next day. The ace seemed to be in a bottomless hole, lost in the ruins of my expectations.

The students' major complaint, that first session, was that poetry was too melodramatic. Poets always talked about death. If not death, love (always its more painful aspects). And when, and if, they were not writing about the above two categories, they were saying something else dreadfully serious (bordering on the morose) about themselves and the world. This general consensus poured in after I had read a selection of poems by Gregory Orr, W.S. Merwin, James Wright, and Jon Anderson.

Gregory Orr's imagery in "The Doll" evolves from the death of his brother (who he shot in a hunting accident when he was a boy). James Wright's "In Fear of Harvests" addresses itself to an oppressive winter cycle that buries the earth and draws one, emotionally, into a lonely hive. "When You Go Away," by W.S. Merwin, focuses on the loss of love, and Jon Anderson's "The Secret of Poetry," ends with a two-couplet, devastating two last sentences:

I'd like, please, to leave on your sill  
Just one cold flower, whose beauty  
Would leave you inconsolable all day.  
The secret of poetry is cruelty.

As my mother would probably say (after hearing these poems as her *introduction* to poetry): "So, who wants to know such things! Better to be outside, get some sun, have a nice meal and talk with friends." I think I understand what she would mean. This onslaught of difficult subjects (compensating for the loss of subject in my own writing) was an overload. Reading these poems first, it is hard to see through to the myriad experiments one can perform with words—one gets lost in the deep-seated difficulties of life. Where, and how, do students start this new endeavor of writing poetry after all that? Their reactions were immediate and strong, so I knew some chord, somewhere, had been struck. They weren't converted to roaming the world of these poets' observations as yet, but they weren't wholeheartedly ready to skip out to the beach, voiding this new experience, either. The problem, here, was placing the cart before the horse. (I had not yet learned my lesson from the elementary school students, and was about to get a taste of my own uncuring medicine.)

Their first assignment was kept quite loose, so I could get a sense of where their interests lie. They were to write about an emotion, or state of mind, using at least one image. My general impression of their first attempts at poetry was that the writing was melodramatic, talking about death, loss of love, loneliness, etc., and void of interesting language and/or imagery. This was greatly due to the poems I had read to them in class; partially due to the fact that some students thought that that approach would please me; and partially due to the fact that what *they* termed "melodramatic" sub-

jects were very much part of their experience and feelings. On a personal level, I was pleased with their honesty—from the critic's corner, I wasn't too excited by these first results. I had to, somehow, investigate my experiences in the elementary schools and find some fresh, applicable approaches for the high school. (At this point, I wasn't consciously identifying the student's writing problems with my own, but within the next few sessions the light at the end of the tunnel came into view.)

The next few classes involved experiments with word associations, using these to initiate images, and using the images to create poems. Another experiment (which I picked up from Sue Willis of Teachers & Writers) involved a group of students instructing someone to untie his or her shoelaces without hand gestures or mention of "shoe," "laces," "tying," etc. (the victim was unaware of the function he or she was to perform). After a few seemingly hopeless attempts, they were able to sharpen their powers of description and, within three minutes, the laces of a victim's sneakers were unhinged, to everyone's surprise and delight. Also, a few collaborative poems and stories were written with each student building on what the previous person had come up with. None of these experiments involved a preconceived subject of great depth, but the precision and power of language was tapped, and that carried over to their own poems and stories. Writing became discovery, finding yourself outside of yourself, observation, experimentation. All the basic medicine both they and I needed.

Two class sessions, in particular, got me back on the path with my own work. The first was writing a poem or story from a picture postcard. Most of the cards I brought in were of famous paintings. I asked each student to write something about the painting beyond straight description—to believe the painting as a real world that they had some insight into. Here's a sampling of the results:

#### "ADORATION OF THE MOON"

After Max Weber

*Four men stand on a street corner. It is night—It's cold, foggy, and damp. The city is empty, the street dirty and gritty. The men are cold and hungry. They have no jobs or money. They have just stolen a handful of books. They are planning on selling them, but not yet. First they look at them. Three of the men are laughing and exclaiming over pictures in their books. The fourth man stands a little apart from the others, his book held loosely in his hand. He is looking at the bright moon far above. He thinks it is more beautiful than some pictures in a grimy, tattered book. As he looks at the moon, he dreams of another life, one he might have had... "A house, a little garden, a white picket fence—A smiling wife by his side with little children playing in the yard. A cold drink in his hand and*

*a soft cushion under him. What luxury!" A laugh from one of the men startles him out of his dream. He looks around, realizing he is once again on a cold street in a dirty city. He sighs as he thinks of his dream. It is too late.....*

**HEIDI SCHMIDT**  
9th Grade

**"TULIP FIELD AT SASSENHEIN, NEAR HEIDEN"**

*After Monet*

*There's a storm coming on as I gaze out my window. The sky is so dark and dreary. I feel death in the air. The wind is blowing, blowing furiously like a lion had just roared and shook the earth. But as I gaze on the field, I see bright colors. The sun is rising and fighting down the storm. The trees, as they blow in the wind, look like claws cowering over someone trying to scream for help. But the sky scares me most, looking as though death just came down to say hello.*

**CAROLYN WEISSENBURGER**  
11th Grade

**THE CLIFFS OF ETRETAT**

*After Monet*

*The sun is beating down hard.  
It's ultra-violet rays are settling on the rocks.  
There is a light breeze,  
Just enough to let the boat travel easily.  
The image is on the threshold  
of another world.  
On the other side it is deserted,  
No air, no breeze.  
The facing side is open;  
An unknown island  
That no one knows.*

**PAULA CRAMES**  
9th Grade

*He wants this game to end.  
In the midst of this important game  
The telephone begins to ring.  
The ringing gets louder and longer, louder and longer.  
Running feet down the stairs to answer its beckoning.  
Ring, ring, "Hello...."  
A dial tone is the mysterious caller.  
Damn it!  
A fourth sudden death overtime.  
Dad is getting fed up with the game.  
He mumbles something and goes out for a walk.  
Maybe the game will end.  
Now to work on the description...  
Yeah...the game is finally over  
With six overtimes, all sudden death.  
Back to the assignment.  
Fingers turning red from writing,  
Sweat pouring down the face...  
The baby is throwing a tantrum since dad went out.  
Her face is red with fury.*

**FLORENCE MC VAY**  
11th Grade

**ANGER**

*Anger is like a wave  
Rolling to the shore  
Rising to a peak  
Suddenly breaking madly against the rocks  
Then gone as if it had never happened.*

**LENNY BONASIA**  
11th Grade

**BOREDOM**

*Soundless noise  
Sightless people  
Tasteless food  
Scentless smells  
Like untouchable ghosts*

**LISA SOLGA**  
9th Grade

The next assignment was to write about an emotion or state of mind without mentioning it once in the poem, except in the title or last line. As a warm up, in class, we spoke of different landscapes (oceans, mountains, forests, deserts, etc.) and the feelings they conjured up. The purpose of this assignment was to keep the word "I" to a minimum so the emotion, its setting and effects, would take center stage. Again, a few examples:

**FRUSTRATION**

*The sports broadcaster on the television announces,  
"Gee, folks, looks like a third sudden death overtime."  
His voice sounds tense, tired and hoarse.*

The growth in their work from day one to ten was great. By the end of my stay, they could look back at the first poems I had brought in and get a better idea of the processes and discoveries that had taken place on the page. In turn, the difficult subjects were far more appreciated as something other than "melodrama."

But, back to my own declining poetic health...I decided to employ the assignments I had given the students, with slight variations. I created a scene as if it were actually a painting on canvas. I used what was on the canvas (and not on this mental canvas) to describe a state of mind, keeping the use of the word "I" to a minimum. Simply, I let the poem discover itself, without expectations. At first I took it lightly (a writing exercise!), but soon enough got involved in the process and found my first non-disposable poem in a long time.

SCENE: WAITING FOR AN ANSWER

The grey mare stands  
at the center of a fenced-in  
field. She would move  
toward the wires,  
muzzle sugar from a hand  
if it were there.

This landscape is unpeopled,  
though she remembers  
a man's brush strokes  
and hoof hammers ringing  
in the harvest.

Trees rise over  
the pasture. Their distance  
from the barn  
is deceptive. A hand  
can easily brush over  
the top twigs and trace  
each branch to its source.  
The summer berries  
cannot be picked this way.  
They stand alone and rot  
against a brilliant sky.

If there were water and a boat,  
we could drift;  
but there is none.

If the farmer would appear,  
he could direct us;  
but he will not.

We could dismantle each crystal  
if the season would freeze;  
but it cannot.

Therefore, it is their turn:  
small animals of the field  
rise.

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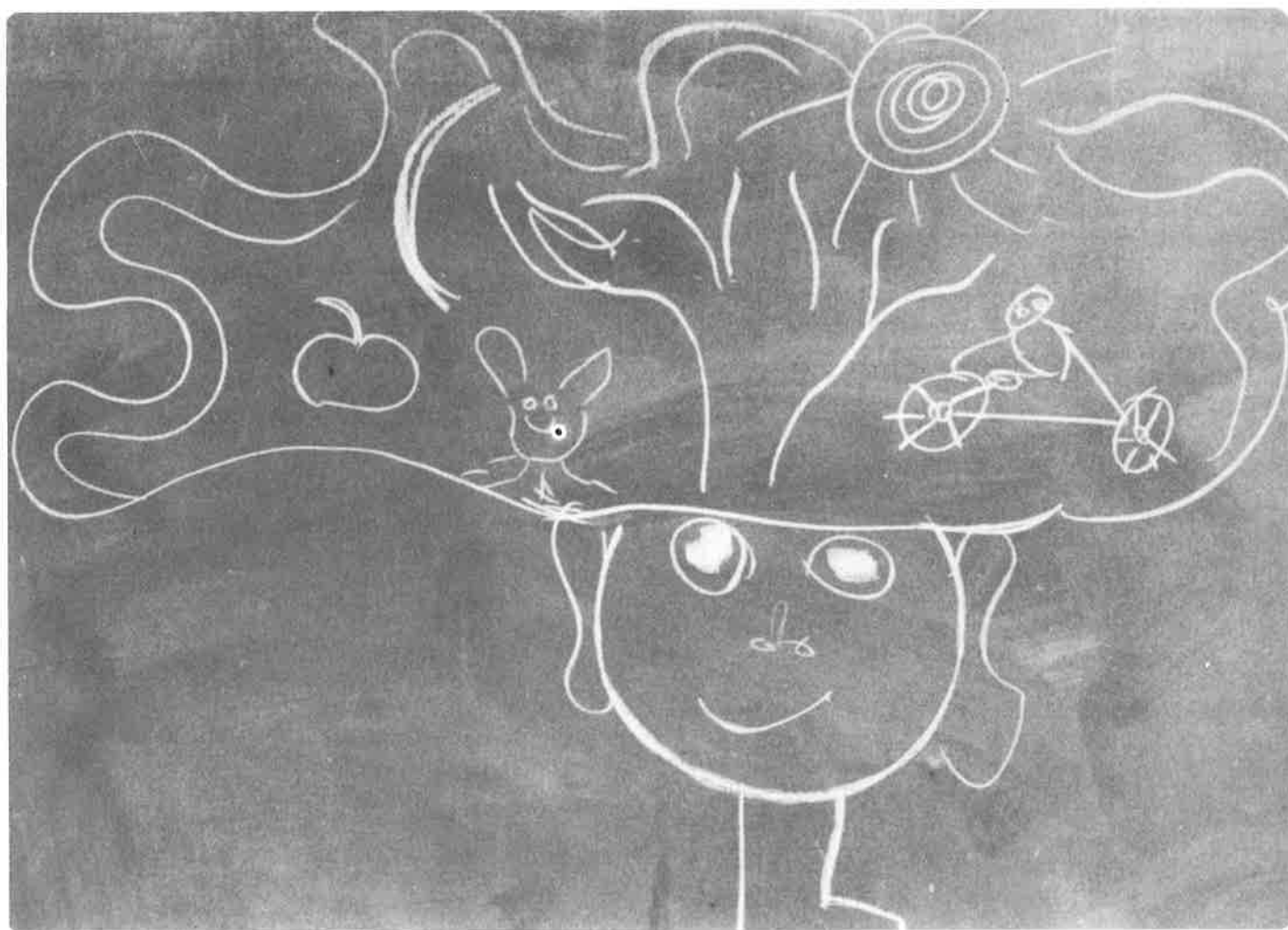
It was three AM. I wanted to immediately track down, and thank, each student for his or her unknowing participation in my cure. I thought of the old educational adage of teaching being a give and take process. I suppose that basic notion had gone temporarily underground along with my amnesia about how to start writing a poem.

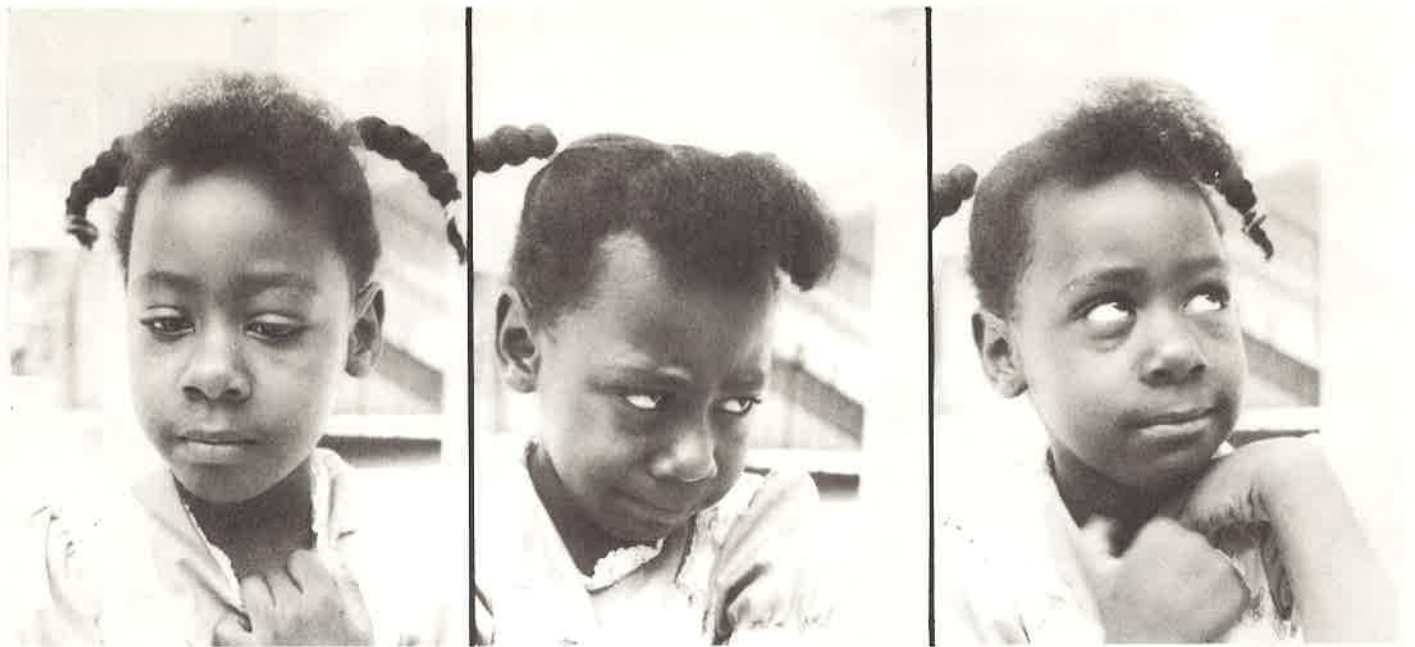
I don't think that this was an unnecessary, or bad, experience for me as a writer or teacher. It was a true-to-life example of reciprocal education. As a writer, it became a source of refreshment, a reminder of process, a revitalizing path back to basics. As J. Alfred Prufrock says, "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea...Till human voices wake us, and we drown." In my case (as I assume is the case with other writing teachers), at times these student voices dredge the water of impurities and allow us to begin again.

It is summer. Winter's enervation has been reversed. I go to my desk each morning, keeping in mind my recent school experiences, aware of the fact that artists need students as much as students need artists. □

# Dream Index

by Jon Madian and Monica Andrews





In the Artists-In-Residence Reading Project at Cienega Elementary School in Los Angeles, a group of teachers, artists, and psychologists have been encouraging children to share, draw, dramatize and create books about their dreams.

This process began when we were writing a story for a class of second graders. Because we wanted to involve the children in the story as totally as possible, we placed each child in the class in the story, by name, as a character. This personalization was very successful; however, we wanted more information about the imaginations of the children.

We hoped that sharing dreams might further our awareness. With this in mind, we asked, "How many children had a dream last night?" and "Who has a dream they would like to share?"

After the session in which several children had shared their dreams, the teacher was very excited: "Do you realize what just happened?" she asked. "Robert, the boy who

told the dream about the ice cream truck turning into a monster and chasing him...I haven't heard two words out of him all semester. He was speaking to the whole class, and in sentences. Did you see his face?"

Perhaps Robert's willingness to share his dreams was based upon the fact that he was telling an intensely meaningful experience which had originated within himself, an experience which, until then, had probably never been shared.

But what produced the fluency of speech, the animated delivery, and the ease with which he spoke, creating clear images for all of us? Since dreams are thought to be a coordinated production of both the visual and verbal pathways of the brain, perhaps the synchronization of visual and verbal imagery enabled Robert to speak with such unusual ease and clarity.

The goal of our work was to develop language arts curriculum which would help children become aware of their







inner lives (senses, feelings, thoughts, and intuitions) and to provide channels for meaningful development of language skills within this context. We continued to encourage the children to share, draw and write their dreams.

As our visits progressed so did the teachers' and students' enthusiasm. Participation was good. The teachers were seeing more clearly the interconnection between the children's inner lives, their behavior, their needs and attitudes, and their language skills.

When children dream, they are natural artists, creating characters, sets, situations, and themes. Perceiving and verbalizing dreams requires organizations of visual and verbal thought similar to those in other educational tasks. When the child shares his dream, he is a natural storyteller revealing himself and the themes of his imagination which are full of significance for him and for his classmates.

Some of the dreams the children shared were imitations of other children's dreams. Some dreams began as dreams and became fantasies, but imitation and fantasy seemed worthwhile means of enabling children to develop their confidence and storytelling powers. When imitation seemed unproductive we tried to focus the child on his own inner experience.

The children were looking forward to their next opportunity to share. They would say, "Tomorrow is dream-telling time. I'm going to go home and have a dream tonight."

As they told their dreams, we were impressed with the quality of their involvement. Sharing their dreams was one of the most joyful and meaningful experiences of their school day.

We were able to incorporate many of the images, language patterns, concerns and jokes from the children's dreams into the stories we were writing. The result seemed to be a literature which spoke directly to the children's imaginations. This, combined with the children's being placed into the stories as characters, seemed to help them experience, comprehend and retain the stories we were sharing.

We began to write stories for children at grade levels Kindergarten through sixth. In grades three through six, the stories were serialized, with a chapter being presented each week. They were told in the first person narrative voice of a child in the class. The students began to imitate this style—writing their own serialized books.

Following is an example which was written by one 5th grade boy:

#### *THE HAUNTED HOUSE*

*One day after school, Shawn and I walked home a different way than usual, and we stumbled upon an old, creepy, large, ugly house. The sign in front of it said, "BEWARE." Shawn, as usual, said "Let's go in."*

*"No," I said very loudly, "the sign says 'BEWARE.'"*

**TABLE 1**  
**Index of Dream Topics**  
 (by Percentages and Grade Level)

TOPICS	K	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Get Me*	41.2%	64.9%	37.2%	35.7%	41.7%	46.3%	25.4%
Mother	33.3%	43.2%	32.6%	29.6%	37.5%	26.9%	19.4%
Bro. Sis. Cou.	23.5%	19.0%	29.0%	24.3%	23.0%	23.9%	18.0%
Animals	35.3%	27.0%	22.1%	20.9%	16.7%	17.9%	11.9%
Friends	5.9%	9.5%	16.3%	28.7%	25.0%	11.9%	38.8%
Monsters**(U)	27.5%	43.2%	19.8%	12.2%	6.2%	16.4%	3.0%
Threats***	7.8%	6.8%	15.1%	21.7%	25.0%	19.4%	23.9%
Fathers	19.6%	19.0%	19.8%	15.7%	20.8%	9.0%	13.4%
Food	11.8%	19.0%	30.2%	10.4%	18.8%	10.4%	14.9%
Fantasy	3.9%	5.4%	12.8%	13.0%	8.3%	19.4%	47.8%
Cars, Bikes	13.7%	8.1%	16.3%	14.8%	16.7%	7.5%	26.9%
Accidents	9.8%	8.1%	11.6%	19.1%	14.6%	13.4%	17.9%
Beach, Pool	15.7%	12.2%	12.8%	12.2%	12.5%	13.4%	4.5%
Money	3.9%	2.7%	7.0%	9.6%	18.8%	11.9%	28.3%
Heroes	17.6%	4.0%	12.8%	9.6%	4.2%	11.9%	13.4%
School	2.0%	4.0%	9.3%	14.8%	10.4%	10.4%	16.4%
Monsters**(I)	13.7%	10.8%	22.1%	7.8%	2.1%	9.0%	1.5%
Being Eaten	11.8%	20.3%	12.8%	6.0%	4.2%	9.0%	0
Police	7.8%	8.1%	8.1%	7.0%	12.5%	6.0%	16.4%
Fights	3.9%	5.4%	4.6%	11.3%	4.2%	13.4%	10.5%
Spooks****	17.6%	8.1%	15.1%	4.3%	2.0%	7.5%	1.5%
Death	9.8%	6.8%	4.6%	13.0%	6.2%	4.5%	6.0%
Parties	0	4.0%	5.8%	4.3%	6.2%	6.0%	28.4%
Abandonment	5.9%	2.7%	4.6%	13.0%	4.2%	13.4%	3.0%
Space People	0	0	2.3%	13.0%	2.0%	16.4%	1.5%
Sports	0	1.3%	9.3%	6.0%	8.3%	6.0%	9.0%
Romance	0	0	0	2.6%	4.2%	0	35.8%
Transformation	3.9%	0	8.1%	8.7%	6.2%	9.0%	0
Showbiz	0	0	1.2%	2.6%	0	1.5%	26.9%

\*Get Me—refers to a dream involving fear and pursuit of the child.

\*\*Monsters (I) Identified and (U) Unidentified, Frankenstein vs A big hairy thing.

\*\*\*Threats is more specific than Get Me in that it contains fear and pursuit plus alien circumstances and/or strangers.

\*\*\*\*Spooks—includes ghosts, skeletons, haunted houses, and things that go “Whoooooo” in the night.

The following table, “Key Elements in Primary Grade Dreams,” was determined from 11 first grade and 27 second grade dreams. The data from this sample coincides with the totals and percentages calculated from over 200 primary grade dreams as presented in The Index of Dream Topics.

**TABLE 2**  
**Key Elements in Primary Grade Dreams**

Characters		Places		Objects		Actions		Feelings	
Mother:	18	Home:	25	Food:	9	Eating:	14	Undetermined:	17
Monsters:	15	Haunted House:	11	Car:	7	Playing:	10	Scared:	12
Friends:	12	Street:	10	Ball:	6	Being Chased:	13	Happy:	4
Animals:	10	Store:	7	Bike, Recording		Breaking:	11	Good:	3
Father:	9	Beach, Park,		Equip., Soda Pop:	4	Riding (car):	10	Hurt:	2
		School:	5	Ambulance,					
				Motorcycle:	3				

*"Are you scared of a little old sign?" Shawn asked bravely. "O.K.," I said, "But you lead the way." So Shawn and I walked up the cracked stairs and went into the old house. After we were in, the door slammed in back of us. Then we kept on walking and we saw a picture of a witch and the eyes seemed to be following us. So I picked up a rock nearby and threw it at the picture. When it hit the picture, it said "Ouch!" So we ran up the stairs and when we got up the stairs, five bats came flying down. So Shawn and I were so scared, we jumped out of the window and we landed in a mattress truck, and as we were riding, he spotted a sign that said, "Fun House."*

*The End.*

The incorporation of "our styles" which was based upon "their styles" was so complete that people reading their work and ours were impressed with how successfully our work had served as a model for the students'. One fifth grade boy created a mystery involving several of his classmates. The story unfolded in more than twenty episodes taking as many weeks. This gifted boy, who previously had ditched school for weeks on end due to his alienation from the life of the classroom was now a central person in the world of room 10.

Following is an excerpt from his story, "The Mystery of The Old Warehouse":

*Chapter Three: THE GANG.*

*First I went to Mario's house, he was watching television (Captain Kangaroo).*

*"Mario!" I hollered.*

*"What do you want?" he hollered back.*

*"You wanna solve a mystery?" I asked.*

*He said "Yes," but I could hardly hear him because he had a mouth full of a peanut butter, jelly, fish, mayonnaise, bologna, and cheese sandwich (one of his favorite inventions).*

*"What is that?" I asked.*

*"What do you mean? This is one of my inventions. And boy, is it delicious!" he said temptingly.*

*Then Mario and I went to Arthur's house. I asked him if he wanted to help us solve a mystery. He said, "Yes," and we were on our way. I told them what I had seen.*

*We went to the warehouse. It was dark and had a horrible odor.*

*"Yech, let's get out of here!" said Arthur.*

*"I second that!" said Mario.*

*Then we heard a door slam. It was the warehouse door. We were trapped.*

*Excerpt end.*

Because of the growing awareness of the educational value of dream sharing, during the Spring semester of 1978 at Cienega School, a group of artists, college students, psychologists, and paraprofessional counselors from a local counseling center systematically recorded children's

dreams from grades K-6 to further our understanding of the children's inner lives as they progressed from grade to grade.

More than five hundred dreams were recorded from individual conversations, tape recordings, and classroom presentations. Most dreams were gathered in private sessions. A child would leave class and tell his dream to an adult who would transcribe the dream and record the child's reactions and verbal style. Having the child tell his dream in private decreased the likelihood of his imitating other children. However, since dreams were still being shared in class, all of the dreams recorded in private sessions were reviewed, and dreams which seemed to be imitations were not included in the final percentages of the index.

In dream research, it is sometimes difficult to discriminate between a true dream and a fantasy. Experience helps a recorder to make this discrimination. From kindergarten through fifth grades, we felt that fantasies were not a common occurrence, although some dreams were elaborated into fantasies. In sixth grade, however, nearly half of what were presented as dreams were judged to be wishful fantasies. Included in the Index of Dream Topics (Table 1) are the percentages, by grade level, of the dreams which were considered consciously created fantasies. Since the themes and characteristics created in fantasy are significant, we calculated the topics from the fantasies into the final percentages.

The following "Index of Dream Topics" presents the twenty-nine most popular dream topics by percentage and grade level. The percentages add up to more than 100% since one dream often contains many categories.

From studying the Index of Dream Topics (Table 1), several generalizations can be made about the dreams in this one inner city school during the spring of 1977:

1. The play of evil creatures threatening vulnerable youngsters and magical transformations—the stuff of fairy tales—is apparent in children's dreams of all ages.
2. The combined percentages of "Get Me" and "Threat" themes show that the most common quality in the dreams is the feeling of vulnerability.
3. The two highest percentages are "Get Me" and "Mothers," a factor that indicates the child's struggle between threat and security, evil and good, the dangerous and the protective, the unknown and the very familiar.
4. Children in primary grades dream about family members more than any other characters. At later ages, children dream more about friends and idols.

5. A major shift occurs in the sixth grade, and being gotten by monsters is supplanted by dreams of teenage heroes, cars, bikes, motorcycles, romance and stardom. Their dreams seem to reflect a wish for authority, power and social status.

The following is a case history of one child. The relationship between dreams and creative writing is nicely illustrated by this capable youngster who was having a great deal of trouble finding value in his fourth grade classroom. His feelings of rebellion are well illustrated by this dream:

*Dream Grade 4*

*"The whole class was in a bus going to Magic Mountain. I was on my bicycle and I told the kids, 'Don't go to Magic Mountain. Come on, let's ditch and ride our bikes.' Then I went around the corner and crashed. A car hit me. I was in the hospital and the doctor was there."*

*Dream ends.*

In the fifth grade he was in a more congenial classroom and was making a better adjustment. He shared the following dream with his class.

*Dream Grade 5*

*"I went out of my house and a flying saucer was there. It put down its beam and I floated up. Then the spacemen gave me an injection and I had to tell the truth. They put me back on earth, and for two days, you know, I felt strange."*

*Dream ends.*

Shortly after sharing this dream he wrote the following story:

**A SCHOOL WITH NO RULES**

*This school had no rules. Fights always occurred in the school every day. Bubble gum was stuck on walls everywhere. People were walking out of class cussing, playing, not listening to the teacher, and not cleaning up the classroom. Not just one or two students did this, but everybody in the school acted like this.*

*Teachers couldn't stand it, so they quit and didn't do anything. When they came to school, they didn't do anything but watch the kids fool around. The kids liked this even better. When the teachers tried to sit them down, the kids told them that they wouldn't because there were no rules. The kids thought the teachers didn't like the rule that there were no rules.*

*The school went on and on like this for some time. Now, maybe one day a rule will be made.*

*The End.*

## SUMMARY

Author Bruno Bettelheim, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, argues for the value of the fairy tale for helping children realize the primitive and magical contents of their imaginations. Our own work squarely supports Dr. Bettelheim's conclusions. As Dr. Bettelheim suggests, the fairy and fable tales so avidly enjoyed by young children—*The Three Little Pigs*, *The Billy Goats Gruff*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Jack and the Bean Stalk*—are stories which present issues and images which are alive in the children's dreams. They speak in dream language. Our primary-grade children's enjoyment of Maurice Sendak's *Where The Wild Things Are* and the Hallmark Company's little book *Lamont, The Lonely Monster* reflects the children's dreams about monsters, 'Get Me's' and haunted houses.

Sharing dreams brings a new oral literature into the classroom. The motivations behind dreams and the motivations which create and comprehend literature are closely related. Dream themes and artistic literary themes deal with common images and experiences. The dream function is an unconscious twin sister to the artistic, creative process.

In reflecting upon the value of dreams for education, it may be worthwhile to consider that both Freud and Jung used dreams as a primary source of data for their theories and as a cornerstone for their therapeutic process. The Senoi people who shared their dreams with their families each morning were reportedly one of the most peaceful and mentally healthy societies in the world. Finally, creation myths and initiation experiences of peoples in many "primitive" cultures give dreams a central role. Thus dreams are central in ancient cultural and modern medical traditions designed to mature and educate people.

From the three years of work in the Artist-In-Residence Reading Project we believe that children's dreams are an important addition to the curriculum. Dreams help children become aware of their inner lives and provide a unique set of personally and socially valuable experiences to share. Creating from and sharing dreams is a very effective means of developing skills, individuality, understanding and rapport in the classroom.

As one fifth grader concluded: "I like sharing dreams. It's fun and mysterious because every dream is different. You never know what you're going to dream or what someone else is going to share when they tell their dream. And there's no right or wrong because it's your mind doing the dreaming." □

# Exchanges

December 31st, 1978  
11:58 p.m.

Dear Phil Lopate,

I have no idea if this letter will ever reach you; I don't even know how to contact you. My name is Yvonne Kingon, I was a former student of P.S. 75 ("P.S. 90") and am now a sophomore at Stuyvesant. At this moment I am babysitting in a lavish, 5th Avenue apartment at 12:00 midnight on New Years Eve, and I should be writing a history report.

Instead, I have just finished (more or less) *Being with Children*, and I felt the sudden need to write to you.

I was very involved in Creative Writing with Teachers and Writers, and reading the book really warmed me. I was in the lower grades—I think third—when *West Side Story* was performed, but I remember it vividly, and I still love the memory as much as I loved the first moments of the first scene. P.S. 75 has been recalled to me through your book with such humor, tenderness, sadness, irony—a *mélange* of emotions, always characteristic of that school—that I haven't had time to be lonely tonight. I see all the familiar faces, all the moods I felt then are being recreated in me now... it's making me feel so good!

I have been troubled, as far as writing goes. In 75 I was encouraged to the fullest, and my abilities (in my opinion) flourished—at that point. I think I was doing the best that I was capable of doing. Since then, however, my motivation has decreased, with the exception of a brief interval last summer, and right now my ability is stagnant. I find that horribly depressing. My ability to express myself when I sit down with a pen and paper has declined even as the desire—indeed need—has increased steadily.

Writing has always been one of my best outlets. The only other way I have of really letting loose when I'm bogged down is my music, or sometimes a good, hard cry, neither of which I

have sufficient time for. I miss writing with all I have inside me. Reading *Being With Children* has recalled to my mind the discussions Karen Hubert held with my sixth-grade class (Fred Baljano's class, 302 I think—I forget the years) and those that Sue Willis held with my fourth grade class (Robin Rubingen, 118), and I feel myself being stimulated. Something inside me is being stirred alive...but the naivety, the innocence that so marks children's writing—and sometimes the unexpected absence of innocence and such—is gone. I feel alien to that world of long ago, but I can't face up to sophisticated adult writing. I'm afraid to be an adult when it comes to writing—I want to be a kid again.

Stuy may be the best high school in the city, but you guys at 75 taught me some beautiful things that I realize now I may not have forgotten. They're just buried under years of typical, standardized curricular learning, with no loose, write-what-you-feel-like-writing attitudes. I feel cheated.

I could write all nite but this damn history report is calling. Please write back, just to tell me that you received this!

Love, Peace,  
Yvonne

January 6, 1979

Dear Yvonne,

Your letter was very moving, and shows that you have not lost your ability to write. Among other things it seems to me the best tribute we have ever gotten on the success and impact of the PS 75 Teachers & Writers Team. We always wonder what our students take away with them, how much they retain, and how they fare with their writing in secondary schools. Your letter confirms that you

remember us and appreciated us (something we need to hear) at least as much as we remembered and appreciated you. I should tell you that sometimes when I've given lectures to teachers on the West Coast or elsewhere, I pulled out the yellow "Yvonne," book and read a piece or two, with happy results.

Thank you especially for the nice things you said about *Being With Children*. My author's heart gloats.

Now on to the main question your letter raises: how to continue the living connection to writing which you made use of when you were in P.S. 75. I'm always hearing the view that younger children write fresher, better, more imaginatively and freely than teenagers—or adults. To some extent this is true—yet in another it's sentimental and distorting. On the one hand, yes, a certain freshness is lost: the naivete of *not knowing* what things sound like or what is standard, trite or clichéd allows young children to write whatever pops into their minds. They have not yet internalized a strong critical voice. But, however much this critical "conscience," like a bossy over-demanding supervisor, may stifle the flow at times, the development of an analytical critical intelligence is a good thing. (Besides, knowing your highly self-reflective writings, you already had it at a very young age. When were you ever "innocent"?) Innocence is a funny property: in one sense, you've never had it and are always looking back regretfully to its loss; in another sense, you can never lose it. You'll always be gullible, naive, capable of surprise—every feeling, intelligent person stays innocent. So don't worry about it. As you can tell from the mocking way I described Francis in my "Adult in the Child" chapter, there's something just a little ridiculous about looking back at one's fourth grade as a Golden Age of Creativity when one is standing at the august poing of twelve or sixteen years old. Writing comes and goes: it can't

be beckoned like a waiter by snapping your fingers. All you can do is keep the predisposition alive when it's not there, and wait for its return. How do you do that? Simple. Keep a diary—or better yet, a "writer's journal," in which you keep records of details, impressions and feelings. You don't have to write in it every day—that's a stupid kind of tyranny—just when you have something to say that you don't want to lose or *one* detail that you know will refresh your whole memory of a character or a day. Second, be resigned to writing lost of fragments now. A curious thing: when very young, things have a wholeness. Every kindergartener's drawing is "complete." Later on, especially in adolescence, one experiences the world as more disconnected, fragmented, intense and overwhelming. It's hard to find agreeable formal structures for that experience. That's why I think fragments note-taking, first pages of short stories that may never be completed, are important now. I can remember starting a novel when I was 14 or 15, and getting to 60 pages or so and realizing I had no idea where I was going, no experience of "middles." Sartre speaks of beginning dozens of stories and losing interest in them, in his autobiography *The Words* (a terrific book, by the way).

This leads me to my third suggestion: Read, Read, read, read, read, read! This more than anything will return you to writing. Don't just read things at your "grade level," read things possibly above your head. Read Chekhov and Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and Jane Austen and Dickens and Children's books and comic books; read everything. While you're in high school and locec into that forced-march curriculum you won't get much time to read (or write), you'll be spending most of the time trying to pass your courses. So—suggestion #4—go easy on yourself. Give your full energy to schoolwork and don't be feeling guilty all the time about not

writing. (Of course who am I to talk? The mark of a real writer is that he or she almost *always* feels guilty about not writing enough. That guilt complex eventually becomes a secret friend, like your shadows.) You can get a lot of writing done in the summer-time, even if you just write when the mood strikes you.

I don't know if you intend to be a professional writer, or if it's something you'd like to keep up just for the pleasure of it, like playing an instrument. Whichever you decide to do is equally valid. Personally, I think you have the talent to be a writer. The rest is easy: all you have to do is work like a mule all your life. What makes a writer is not talent so much as *need*—the need to write whether people approve or disapprove of your words—and sheer steady toil. But it's fun toil.

I've neglected to mention another reason why sometimes one writes less in higher school than in the lower grades. It's because in adolescence you go through experiences and stresses that may seem more private and that you simply *don't want* to tell other people about, or even commit to a hidden blank page. There's more to conceal. But that impulse to conceal of course eventually stops the flow of all writing. For a writer like you who began with a strongly factual, personal, first-person voice, you have two equally good options: one is to learn how to fictionalize and translate the same conflicts into other characters and milieus; the other is to break on through the barrier of discretion and make yourself say on paper what the is most difficult to say, in that authentic first-person commentator's voice. Either way will be a struggle. Then suddenly it will get very easy.

I hope some of this is useful to you and that you don't find it silly or obvious or too Dutch-uncle. I'm glad you wrote to say what you did, and I wish you well.

All my best,

Philip

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# Contributors' Notes

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MONICA ANDREWS is a student of psychobiology at the University of California at Santa Cruz. She is the principal researcher for the Artist-in-Residence Reading Project.

BARBARA BARACKS is writing a novel to be titled *Pleasure*. Her fiction, poetry and art criticism have appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines. In 1977 she received a CAPS grant in fiction. She publishes and edits an aperiodical called *Big Deal*. For the past year-and-a-half she has worked as a CETA artist for the Cultural Council Foundation.

BARBARA DANISH is the author of a children's book, *The Dragon and the Doctor* (Feminist Press, 1971). She is the coinventor of "Herstory," a board game published by *MS Magazine*.

ELAINE EPSTEIN works for Teachers & Writers. Her poems have appeared in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Pequod* and others.

KATHLEEN KRANIDAS has been teaching for the past eight years in the English Dept. of Northport High School. She has taught writing workshops at SUNY, Stony Brook, in adult ed., for senior citizens, and in-service courses for teachers K-12. She is the author of a novel, *One Year in Autumn* (Lippincott), and a collection of stories, *The Mountain, the Stone* (Puckerbrush).

JON MADJAN has his masters degree in educational psychology and is a practicing counselor. The author of

*Beautiful Junk, A Story of the Watts Towers* (Little, Brown) and other children's books. He is director of mental health services for the Hemophilia Foundation of Southern California and coordinator of the Artist-in-Residence Reading Project.

SONDRA PERL teaches writing at Lehman College. She is a member of the New York City Writing Project, a teacher training institution, affiliated with the Bay Area Writing Project. The National Council of Teachers of English has named her a promising researcher for 1979.

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.

BOB SIEVERT regularly exhibits his paintings at the Green Mt. Gallery. He has done a mural for The Metropolitan Museum of Art. His writing has appeared in *Art*, *Art/World* and *Learning Magazine*.

ALAN ZIEGLER's article in this issue is from a book-in-progress, tentatively titled *Teaching Creative Writing*. His new book of poems, *So Much To Do*, will be out in the Fall. For Teachers & Writers he coordinates the Writers-in-Lynbrook program on Long Island and teaches workshops there and in Manhattan. He is co-editor of *Some* magazine/Release Press.

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## Plugs

TRUE MYTHS. A book written for children ages 10 and up and illustrated by children ages 10-12, based on solid research, easy reading, thought provoking. By Lillian Rifkin Blumenfeld. Creative Children's Publications, 147 N. Franklin Street, Wilkes-Barre, PA 18711.

NAEIR, The National Association for the Exchange of Industrial Resources, is a non-profit organization that finds items from industry and individuals, and distributes these items FREE to schools that are members of the NAEIR association.

Membership includes both private and public schools, from elementary through higher education. Schools pay a membership fee of \$180.00 per year and submit a list of their needs to NAEIR. As items appear around the country from participating donor companies and individuals, they are distributed to schools making requests for the same item.

For membership information, write Norbert C. Smith, President NAEIR, 540 Frontage Road, Northfield, Illinois 60093 or call 312-446-9111.

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## Listings

Announcements of publications, showings and performances by artists affiliated with Teachers & Writers Collaborative.

*A Space Apart*, a novel by Meredith Sue Willis, Charles Scribner's Sons, May 1979, \$8.95.

"This is my first published novel, and it draws on the experiences I had growing up in a small coal mining town in West Virginia. My great interest as a novelist is in the tensions and supports between the inner, personal life of individuals and the individuals' places in a family and society. I am presently working on a novel about adolescence."

—Meredith Sue Willis

*Confessions of Summer*, a novel by Phillip Lopate, Doubleday, 1979, \$9.95.

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## WRITERS AND ARTISTS IN THE 1979 PROGRAM

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Phillip Lopate	Sue Willis
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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 this 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.

JOURNAL OF A LIVING EXPERIMENT: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF THE FIRST TEN YEARS OF TEACHERS AND WRITERS COLLABORATIVE edited by Phillip Lopate (358 pages). This new book traces the development of T&W from the turbulent Sixties into the Seventies with humor and poignancy. Herb Kohn, Anne Sexton, June Jordan, Kenneth Koch, and Muriel Rukeyser are only some of the people who talk about

their dual identities as artists and teachers. This is a book about activists—then and now.

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.

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.

TEACHERS & WRITERS Magazine, issued three times a year, draws together the experience and ideas of the writers and other artists who conduct T & W workshops in schools and community groups. A typical issue contains excerpts from the detailed work diaries and articles of the artists, along with the works of the students and outside contributions.

- The Whole Word Catalogue 2 @ \$6.95
- The Whole Word Catalogue @ \$4.00
- Teaching & Writing Popular Fiction @ \$4.00
- Being With Children @ \$4.00
- Five Tales of Adventure @ \$(10 copies or more @ \$2.00)
- Imaginary Worlds @ \$3.00
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- Just Writing @ \$4.00
- To Defend a Form @ \$4.00
- Vermont Diary @ \$4.00
- The Poetry Connection @ \$4.00
- Journal of a Living Experiment @ \$6.00
- Subscription(s) to **T&W Newsletter**, three issues \$5.00, six issues \$9.00, nine issues \$12.00

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