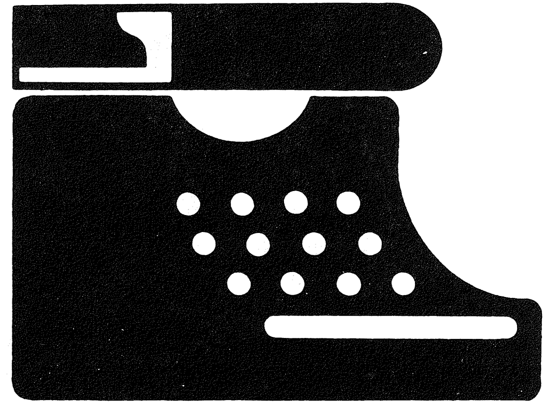
Teachers & Writers



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Wishes, Lies, and Dreams Revisited

by Jeff Morley

ROOM 502 OF P.S. 61 ON 12TH STREET BETWEEN avenues B and C was already simmering with noise when Tommie Torres, whose desk was next to mine, whispered to me, "Mr. Coke is coming." I was a new kid in the winter of 1969; Tommie and much of the rest of the class had welcomed this teacher before. But like the time he tried to translate a dirty joke from Spanish, Tommie couldn't quite convey to me the hidden pleasure of what was involved. Then "Mr. Coke" himself strolled in, and the room bubbled over into a recess riot of desk thumping, foot stomping, laughing, squealing, saying hello, hand waving, and talking. His name—he wrote it on the blackboard—was Kenneth Koch. He was tall, upright, polite as a grown-up but sly as a kid, and the first thing he said was, "Let's take a walk."

More gleeful pandemonium. We all got up and paraded around the room, around the corner where the tall, wooden, brass-tipped window opener stood, past the blackboards at the front of the room, past the current-events board with its pictures of President-elect Nixon and Mayor Lindsay, past the heavy sliding doors of the coat closet, across the back of the room where our reports on South American countries were pinned up, down alongside the tall windows and the clanking radiators, and back to our desks. This little tour, which would've been unthinkable in our regular day, put the fifth-grade routine far behind us.

As the clatter subsided, Koch began talking about lies, how it wasn't good to lie but how we could lie in poems to tell about any crazy or untrue or funny thing we liked. We put our number-two pencils to our wide-lined paper, and the noise ebbed—this Koch was *serious* about writing poems—leaving a sudden absorbed silence. I started, trying to think up something that wasn't true, something completely untrue, as big a lie as I could come up with. It wasn't easy.

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It is immodest but not inaccurate to say that the poems we wrote that year convinced many that young people could write poetry. In April 1970 *The New York Review of Books*, which had, not long before, featured a diagram of a Molotov cocktail, published a long article by Koch on our writings. Koch, a professor of English at Columbia whose own poetry is full of childlike colors and disasters, then turned the article into the introduction to *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, a book of poetry written by first through sixth graders at P.S. 61. When the book came out in the summer of 1970, the front-page review

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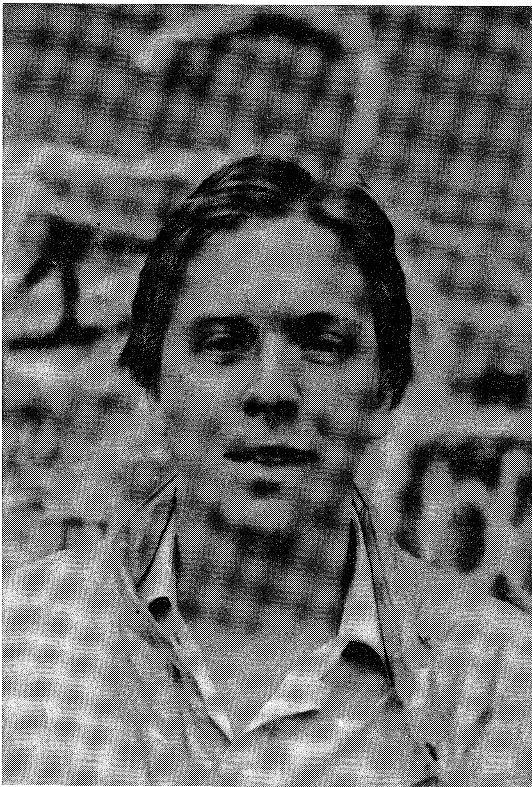

Jeff Morley

in *The New York Times Book Review* was ecstatic. *Newsweek* ran a complimentary if patronizing article about ''slum children'' who wrote poetry. David Frost interviewed several kids on his show. *Life* published a feature on us. So did *The New York Times Magazine*. Channel 13 taped some of the kids reading their poems, for station breaks. The auditorium at the 92nd Street Y was packed for a reading by the young poets.

As the idea that kids could write good poetry spread, the original P.S. 61 poets grew up and scattered. By the mid-1970s all of the more than 100 kids whose poems were published in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* had graduated from P.S. 61. Some went on to J.H.S. 60 on 12th Street, some to J.H.S. 104 on 21st Street, some to private schools. Parents died, got divorced; families moved to Corona, Prospect Park, Staten Island, Long Island, upstate, out of state. Even the few who remained in the neighborhood moved away from grade school friends and toward high school, jobs, drugs, boyfriends, girlfriends, college, careers.

My own family fled the Lower East Side for the Midwest. In 1976 I came back east for college and work, but I had long since lost touch with everything about P.S. 61—everything including poetry. What Koch called ''the great and terrible onslaught of self-consciousness'' that inhibits poetry writing hit me at about age 12, and its effects have never left. Dutiful swipes at freshman English and sophomore creative writing proved to be of little help in regaining the poetic delight of Room 502. I believed that poetry was like calculus—abstruse and impenetrable without advanced training—so it followed that we at P.S. 61 had never really written it, or had written it only in a childlike way, irrelevant to understanding ''real'' poetry.

Wishes, Lies, and Dreams had aimed to wipe out the presumption that kids could not write poetry like poets. Koch thought that most kids had the desire—and ability—to say something poetically, and all the reviews, articles, TV shows, and readings had proclaimed him right. But more than a decade after *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams,* I couldn't, in my gut, believe it. Something had squelched the poetic impulse in me after P.S. 61. I didn't like poetry because it, unlike the poems I wrote in fifth grade, had little connection to me.

Despite, or maybe because of, that realization, I wondered what had happened to everyone else at P.S. 61. Had our poems really meant anything to us in 1968 and 1969 besides a respite from our spelling tests and geography lessons? Were the poems just childish musings overblown by the period's enthusiasm for youth and self-expression? Would they still mean anything in the winter of 1983?

For the first time I read every single poem in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams,* and I could understand why everybody from *The New York Times* newsroom to Room 502 had been thumping the desk. My premature jadedness as an undergraduate might have made me diffident to Spenser and Yeats, but I couldn't help but laugh with pleasure at the poetry in Ana Gomes's little-girl romanticism: *Her tan looked like sand/. . .His hair was as wavy as the ocean.* And reel with Eddy Diaz's abandon: *The big bad baby bus came busy bussing down Avenue B.* And admire Fontessa Moore's cheer: *I have a hat/Full of laughs/A book of kisses.* And enjoy Michael Carlton's teasing: *When the sun goes down in my mind the sky is brown/In your mind maybe yellow, red or pink.*

But my new appreciation generated its own kind of skepticism. Added to my lingering estrangement from poetry was a pessimism that the world would have any use for poetry like this. As I began to track down the original P.S. 61 poets, I doubted that after 15 years poetry could be anything more for us than a wish, a lie, or a dream.

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For five minutes, maybe more, I was stumped by Mr. Koch's assignment. Lord knows I was one lying 11 year old, but how did I tell a lie to a piece of paper? And why should I? Finally I just decided to put down any old thing. Mr. Koch had said that was okay, so I began: *I was born nowhere/And I live in a tree/I never leave my tree.* These were definitely lies: I was born in New York, I lived in an apartment building on Avenue C, and I left it all the time. I had a picture of a treehouse in my mind, but otherwise I wasn't sure what this was going to lead to.

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One of the first poets I catch up with is Ruben Marcilla. At 10 in the morning he is relaxing in his tree-shaded, two-story brick house on West Jackson Street in Mountain Home, Idaho (pop. 7,522). He is watching the soaps and waiting for Andy the crop-duster to stop by. For 50 bucks cash, Ruben is going to paint ''ANDY'S FLYING SERVICE'' on the doors of the man's pickup. As far as 25-year-old Ruben is concerned, life 40 miles south of Boise beats life south of 14th Street hands down.

Ruben grew up with his mother and three brothers in Haven Plaza at 13th and C. Unlike many other former P.S. 61 students, he doesn't have particularly exciting memories of writing poetry. Koch taught poetry at P.S. 61 only one year before Ruben moved on to J.H.S. 104. Hearing one of his old poems long distance, Ruben sounds a little embarrassed. It begins *My little green plant was like a big jungle/Her earrings were as green as jade/When I opened the box I saw all the*

colors of the rainbow. Ruben says he doesn't write poetry anymore.

He learned sign painting at Art and Design High School, and while he loved it, hanging out was his top priority. His friends were mostly "criminals, real bad guys," he says. He wanted to own a gun.

"But I got tired of that lifestyle, always trying to keep up with who died, who got shot," he says, disgusted. "You needed a scorecard to keep track. I warned one guy, 'Get out of there man, before you get wasted.' I heard a couple of weeks ago some guys mugged him down on Avenue D. Stomped on his face and broke all these bones in his cheek."

He began to think about Mountain Home, where he had enjoyed a summer-long visit with his brother, who was stationed at the Air Force base there. "New York's a rat race," he says, describing his feelings then as well as now. "The neighborhood stinks. You got to breathe everybody's bad breath. You slave at work all day. You get ripped off by everybody—75 cents for the bus, another 75 for the train, $1 for cigarettes. I got my taxes back one year and tore the envelope open. I'd been working like a fiend all year, and my refund was only 200 bucks. I said, 'Things can't be any worse in Idaho.' "

Ruben caught the next Greyhound, and 60 hours later he was in Mountain Home to stay. *I saw reds as red as a book,* his poem continues, *I saw greens as green as the sea on a calm, sunny day.* Within a few months he had met an Air Force dental technician from Little Rock, Arkansas, named Becky. In August 1981 Ruben, who is Argentinian, married her—"How's that for integration?" he cracks—and they bought a house, for which their monthly payment is exactly $246.

"Guys on Long Island spend a hundred thousand and they still got to wait 20 years for a tree. I got two of them in my front yard at least 50, 60 years old," he boasts. *I saw yellows as yellow as a golden date tree in the fall.*

Guns are as common in Mountain Home as loose joints are in Central Park, Ruben says, but he's lost his desire to own one. "I don't know if it's that I'm getting old, but mentally I'm different out here," he says. "Idaho mellows you out. You lose all your violence. In the city you're always looking for something. Wake up at three in the morning, you go for a walk, go down to the all-night newsstand on 8th Street. I wouldn't have done it if I was a girl but as a guy, well, the young male is the baddest animal in the jungle, right? Out here you can't prowl around. I wake up late at night now, I just go out in the backyard and look up at the stars. It's so clear you get a beautiful light show every night."

So had he wanted to get away from the city as far back as 1968, when he was at P.S. 61? Ruben denies it. "I didn't know there was anywhere to get away to," he laughs. *I saw browns as brown as a little squirrel running up a tree,* his poem ended. Poetry had taken him to Idaho long before that Greyhound did.

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It might be of only passing interest to Ruben today, but the book that he helped write has had a pervasive and deep influence that extends to Idaho and far beyond. Still in print after 13 years, *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* has sold more than 28,000 copies. (By way of comparison, Robert Penn Warren's *Collected Poems* has sold 6,300 copies since 1976.) It has inspired the writing of poetry in grade schools and high schools across the country. Teachers & Writers Collaborative, which sponsored Koch's early visits to P.S. 61, now places about 40 poets in New York City schools every year. Formal poets-in-the schools programs, of which there were exactly none in 1969, are now funded in all 50 states. Koch has traveled all over the United States, as well as to France, Haiti, and Italy, to teach poetry to kids. He wrote a book about the poetry of French kids called *Les Couleurs des voyelles.* The French Ministry of Education noticed the book last fall and wrote to Koch asking how they might best inspire poetry in their *étudiants.*

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I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be a person or a bird or something else in my tree, but on my first day of writing poetry that kind of uncertainty didn't even slow me down. I continued *It is very crowded/I am stacked up right against a bird/But I won't leave my tree.* I did know that this bird was either a big parrot or a vulture; I knew I wanted to keep the lies coming and I knew I wanted to stay in the tree.

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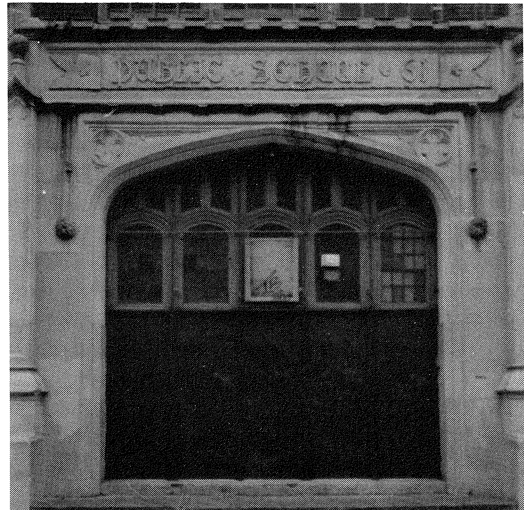
In another corner of the world, the Eisenhower Elementary School in Boulder, Colorado, one fourth-grade class had its poetry-writing class last spring. It was based on the assignments Koch devised for *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams.* Eliza Bailey, the student teacher from the University of Colorado who taught the lesson, recalls the scene.



P.S. 61 on East 12th St. in New York

"When the kids were done, they were all shouting, 'Come here, come here,' and 'Read this,' and 'Is this good?' Some kids would run up to the desk after every line. Others covered up their papers until they were completely done. Some would hand theirs in all embarrassed saying, 'This is no good. Don't read it,' and they'd slip it at the bottom of the pile."

Eliza admits she got "all choked up" sitting at the teacher's desk that day. In third and fourth grades she had been in Kenneth Koch's classes at P.S. 61, and now her own students were "doing exactly the same things we did." Back then she had written a poem that began *I have a pocketful of laughs/I have a dog of dreams*, but today she believes that the poems her fourth graders wrote were better than anything she did.

Eliza received her education degree last summer. One hundred and fifty résumés later she still hadn't found a gradeschool teaching job so she moved back to her parents'

home in East Meredith, New York, and took a job teaching kindergarten in nearby Oneonta. Now even her four year olds write poetry.

"I sit them in a circle and read them some poems from *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams,*" she says. "Then I go around and they each give me a line that I write down. Sometimes they get completely off the track. But four year olds are so lyrical. One of them said to me, 'I finally figured out how the moon moves without feet. It just blows along in the wind.' "

Teaching, Eliza says, is what she's wanted to do all her life, at P.S. 61 and later, after her family moved from East 7th Street to East Meredith in 1971. In college she felt certain that Koch had been right, "that there had to be a better way to teach." She remembers P.S. 61 as "a prison and when Mr. Koch came it was like getting out" into a world where she could say *I have a hat made of checkers/I have a schoolbag made of crayons.* But Eliza found out things weren't as simple as they had looked in 1968.

"I always thought I was going to be a really 'groovy' teacher," she says. "You know, relate to my kids. I learned it just doesn't work that way." She points out how easy Koch had it. "He could just come in, and the atmosphere of the room would change in one second. But when you're teaching the class all the time, it's harder than that. You want all that craziness and excitement and energy but you can't have it all the time. You have to say, 'When we write poetry you're allowed to do that; when we're not writing poetry you have to stop and salute.' When I first wrote poetry with my kids in Boulder like that, I realized how much I had changed. *I was given a dress of shoes/I have a sailboat of sinking water.*

Even so, teaching poetry still matters to Eliza because it is her link to poetry now. The faith that Koch instilled—that even as a kid she could write poetry—has been replaced by a resigned suspicion that she could write poetry *only* as a kid. The carefree voice that finished the poem declaring *I have a house of candy/I was given a piece of paper made of roses/I have a red, blue, and white striped rose* is gone. Eliza says she still writes poetry, "mostly when I'm depressed."

"As you get older you lose spontaneity, freedom," she laments. "At P.S. 61 I felt confident that anything I was doing was going to be good. Now I worry more about what someone will say when they read it than about what I am writing."

She singles out the line "a sailboat of sinking water," and tries to explain why that line has always stuck with her. "It's a feeling in the pit of my stomach. It's a pulling feeling, going in a lot of different directions. It's turbulent but it's peaceful at the same time. I wrote that in third grade. I don't think I've written a line like that since."

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Going back to the old neighborhood, it isn't hard to see why Ruben and Eliza and so many other P.S. 61 kids can no longer be found there. In 1970 the area between avenues A and D and 9th and 14th streets was mostly working-class Puerto Rican, and P.S. 61's enrollment reflected it. Mixed in were Jewish and Irish kids from solidly middle-class Stuyvesant Town, a few blacks, a handful of children of second-generation Italians and Ukrainians who never followed their relatives to Jersey or Long Island, and a few whites with parents like mine who were foolish or idealistic enough to believe that living in a "bad" neighborhood didn't have to be a bad thing.

In the 1970s the middle-class and working-class people began moving out, and the neighborhood was torn apart by the invisible hand of the economy and the desperate hands of the people left behind. The Charles movie theater on Avenue B closed; the lumberyard at 12th and C was torched—for the insurance, everyone said. The Avenue B bus line was discontinued. Enrollment at P.S. 61 dropped 45 percent. Each year from 1970 to 1980 an average of 290 people left the 10-block census tract around P.S. 61; each year an average of 109 housing units were abandoned. Of every 100 area residents in 1970, 36 were gone by 1980.

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I closed my eyes to concentrate. I thought of being blind, which certainly wasn't true, so I wrote *Everything is dark/No light!/I hear the bird sing/I wish I could sing.* I never wanted to sing as a kid but since I was living in the tree I figured I probably would've wanted to. Thinking about it now, I wonder why it didn't occur to me that parrots and vultures can't sing, and I realize that it was questions like that that ended my poetry career.

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Fontessa Moore is rocking her two-month-old son in her spacious, dark apartment on the 22nd floor of an East New York co-op. The curtains are drawn on a gray afternoon; her husband, a systems analyst at Shearson American Express, is at work. Her voice is soft, matter of fact, rising and falling on little swells of amused observation of the world. On the dinner table in front of her sits a thick stack of crumpled, torn, or folded sheets of paper, testimony that she has been writing poetry all her life. It is, she says, her peace of mind.

As a kid she was a joyful, crazy poet, reveling in the sheer life of words. *I have a hat/Full of laughs/A book of kisses/A coke came out/like Mr. Coke* began the poem that she read to David Frost and millions of TV viewers.

"If you put restrictions on a person, you cut out part of their feelings, they hold back something, and you won't get the true meaning on paper," she says. "If you leave well enough alone you can really do something to a piece of paper. You really can. When Mr. Koch showed the class an apple and said, 'Make a poem about it,' we made it come to life. We made that apple jump on top of the table."

And jump her poems did: *A monkey jumped out/As a hatful of money came out/Somebody gave me a red/White and blue flag/As it hit the tank/A pig jumped out.* But as Fontessa grew older her poems lost some of their brightness. A sheet from the pile rages at an unfaithful boyfriend; another tells of loneliness, lying on the beach *No one to hold me/but the wind/and the air to ask for help.* The time after her graduation from Washington Irving High School was especially difficult. Fontessa majored in chemistry at New York University and worked as a clerk-typist and secretary. But the jobs and the classes weren't the problem. "It just wasn't enough for me," she says. While working as a deposit cashier at a brokerage house, she met her future husband; they were married within two months.

"I thought marriage was for me," she says. "But then again I wanted more. Then the children came and all, but it's still not enough for me. It's like I got married for someone. I had my children for my husband but it wasn't for me. Maybe that is enough for some people but it wasn't enough for me. I need more than a marriage, the kids, the motherhood, because I know there's more to me than just this stage of what I am. There is just much more for me to do. Writing is more for me to do because that's a lifetime thing. When I sign my name to the end of the paper, I know it's mine. I'm still Fontessa Moore."

She makes time to write "even when I don't have time," she says. She wrote a poem, for example, when she was in labor with her son. The nurses thought she was crazy, but Fontessa took time out from her pain to tell God sardonically that she danced the African, Latin, merenge, hustle, busstop, salsa, two-step, rumba, even the blues *but dear GOD/I never/dance/to you.* She even extended her poetic license to inventing the names of her children: Jacquai for her daughter, Wesley Jhontaine (pronounced Zhawn-taw-nay) for her son. The sassiness that had said *A camel jumped out/As he was a scout/A horse jumped out/An old lady jumped out/With a seesaw hat* has not withered but ripened.

Still on maternity leave from her office, she is contemplating opening a boutique in Brooklyn Heights or downtown Brooklyn featuring African, Asian, and European clothes. Her husband opposes the idea, but she is determined, saying, "I'm the kind of person who takes chances." Store rents are high, though, and she hasn't found the right partners, so she waits. Poetry balances the risks of striking out on her own and the security of her family. When the hatful of laughs was almost empty Fontessa herself popped out: *Out comes a rat/Out comes a sack/Out comes me/Out comes you.* She puts the poems away and bundles up Wesley Jhontaine. It is time to go over to her parents' but before she leaves she says again of poetry, "It's my peace of mind."

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I opened my eyes and dropped the idea of being blind, because a scene was now vivid in my mind: an island the size of a pitcher's mound (I was a baseball fanatic back then) supporting my lone tree. This I had to describe: *My eyes they open/and all around my house/The Sea.* I decided this qualified as a lie because I had never been to such a sunny, breezy, tropical place. I thought of otters sliding down bluffs.

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"This is me, this is my world," 23-year-old Marion Mackles explains, referring not to the jammed 17th Street coffee shop where she's eating lunch but to the book on the table and the poem she wrote when she was 10. It begins *I saw a fancy dancy dress/hanging on a fancy dancy window/of red roses you could call it a red/rose window I put it on...*

Marion is an actress/ice cream scooper/carpenter, sharing a West Side apartment with a girlfriend and hoping to land a role that will pay the rent. She's short and energetic, with green eyes as shrewd as they are friendly. You get the feeling that if she cross-dressed she could pull off a young Dustin Hoffman.

"I really believed that the world was flowery then, that it was a fancy dancy dress, that I could dance in the streets. I was writing out of total ignorance and naiveté," she says. But that same naiveté led her to believe that the real world around her did not have to be so cruel.

As a kid she gave money to beggars on the streets. She laid a bag of cookies at the feet of a sleeping bum. She made sandwiches for a couple of homeless people who lived in her neighborhood. "I knew they wouldn't take food if I just gave it to them so I'd put the sandwiches in Glad bags and bury them in the garbage nearby where I knew they would find them," she says.

After attending the High School of Performing Arts and graduating "totally neurotic," she went to Ohio University "to be with normal people again." *I fell asleep and I had a dream/of a blue sky of roses/and a house of daisies.* She majored in drama (starring, coincidentally, in a production of a Kenneth Koch play) and earned her degree in three years.

Back in New York in 1981 Marion accepted a friend's invitation to see a sign-language performance of the play *Evangelist* at the Circle Rep. Her fascination with the separate world of deaf people reached back to her childhood, when she had watched the kids outside the School of the Deaf at 23rd Street and First Avenue near her home. Even though she had seen the show before, the signed interpretation was a thrill, a revelation, a poem. *And I awoke and it was true/I saw everything I saw/sky of roses house of daisies a tree/of orange a book of apple.*

She immediately enrolled in a sign language course, and says her deaf friends can now understand her sign language fairly well. She aims to do interpretive performances herself someday.

"We can talk around things," she says of people who can hear. "We're spoiled by words. But the deaf, they can't lie, at least not very often or very well. They have their depression and their lovers' quarrels and their killers like everyone else. But they're not too interested in lying because it takes all they've got just to communicate. They don't have our luxury of dancing around words. They can't talk at all without looking the other person in the eye."

Marion recognizes that in the world of the deaf that she wants to reach, there is something very much like the world of her girlhood, a place where the truth is practical and people work to understand and help one another. That, she says, is her confirmation that her poem wasn't just a hopeless dream: *I loved it all and lived with it for/the rest of my life.*

"That was the root," she says of the fancy dancy dress spirit. "It's still there. It's just that different branches have also grown up. A branch that's bitter that the world isn't like that, a branch that believes it was a mistake to ever think it was, a branch that is content."

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Other poets who paraded around the classrooms of P.S. 61 have spun off in myriad directions. Ana Gomes, according to her mother, is an astrophysicist living in the Midwest. Eddy Diaz is a naval airman stationed on the U.S.S. *Coral Sea*, currently docked in Alameda, California. Michael Carlton I could not locate; the Newark nightclub his mother used to operate is now closed.

Tommie Torres (*Everything flows away ready for a new day*), who sat next to me, now works for Texaco in Bayamon, Puerto Rico. Ruben Luyando (*A noisy owl goes woo-woo with its small hair tail on its head*) supervises the night shift of telephone operators at the Waldorf-Astoria. Mercedes Mesen (*Being in school at midnight I can see the wind*) is visiting her grandmother in San Jose, Costa Rica, and looking for a job there. Chuck Conroy (*Oh green, yellow, orange, pink, red, black, brown/What shall I chartreuse today?*) is an energy conservation engineer for Con Ed. Mayra Morales (*the saddest color I know is orange because it is so/bright that it makes you cry*) works at a telex company on 36th Street. Vivian Tuft (*But best of all Spring is a part of nature like the baby next door/She's grown so big*) works in the finance department of a big Park Avenue advertising agency.

Kenneth Koch is still professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. *Days & Nights*, his eighth book of poetry, was published last year. He says the point of his poetry classes was never to train future poets any more than the point of gym class is to produce future Reggie Jacksons.

"Most people would think it criminal not to let kids run and play or draw and paint," he says. "I think poetry's just as natural in kids: it's a talent they have. If a kid has a good teacher maybe he'll continue writing. More likely, he'll be able to go on reading and enjoying poetry. But so much teaching of poetry just encourages the idea that a poem is a lot of onomatopoeia with a symbol hidden in it, that it's no wonder people feel estranged from poetry. At P.S. 61 I just wanted to say, 'This is something in your life that you can enjoy.' "

One P.S. 61 poet (*I wish I could leap high in the air and land softly on my toes*) can't muster much interest in her former classmates or what they wrote long ago. She tells me, "I think if you took a group of kids from a private school who had something behind them—something like money—then I think you'd see some good stories. But I can't see it from P.S. 61. They weren't too interesting a bunch when I went to school with them. I don't think they'd be too interesting now."

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I looked around the classroom and shielded my paper from would-be peekers. I knew these really weren't lies I was telling, and I wondered if I had messed up the assignment. But Mr. Koch had said write anything you want. And I wanted to get out of the cramped treehouse. So I went on, *Slowly I get down in the water/The cool blue-water/Oh and the space.* No hesitation now. I was writing faster, and in the excitement, getting a little grand.

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On December 16, 1980, just before noon, 23-year-old Candy Dipini left her two children with a babysitter in her second-floor apartment at 190 Avenue B. She bought a sandwich on 14th Street and went to her clinic on 24th Street for her dose of methadone. *When he was down in the yard/and I was in the window/with my father and mother and/him with his mother and father too*. . . At 12:15 a fire broke out in the living room of Candy's apartment and the artificial Christmas tree went up in flames. The babysitter ran out the back door with five-year-old Marcie. When the firemen arrived the flames were raging out both front windows, and the building was filled with thick black smoke; it took them 22 minutes to get the blaze under control. On the living room couch the firemen found the charred bodies of two little boys: four-year-old Tony Dipini and his best friend, three-year-old Junior Santiago. They had been hugging each other when they died.

"I've been through hell," Candy says simply when we first meet, and you can see in her face that the death of her son was the worst, but not the only, part of the passage. Her brown face is a frozen shallow pond: smooth, still, hurt. Her smile is a crack in the ice, full of life but receding even as it appears. She recounts her life since the day of the fire in a hurried, disbelieving voice.

At the coroner's office she saw the little pile of Tony's clothes on a stretcher and "went crazy because I thought that was all that was left of him." Relocated to a welfare hotel, she promptly moved out after an elderly woman living there was stabbed 37 times. No public housing project would accept her because the fire labeled her a risky tenant. In despair she abandoned the methadone treatment and went back to heroin. To support an $80-a-day habit, she squandered her welfare check, sold off her household items, borrowed from everyone in the neighborhood, begged for money in the street, shop-lifted.

"I was crazy. I was angry at myself because if I had been there Tony wouldn't have died. It's bad to wake up in the morning when you have two children and only find one. Everyday I used to cry, and if somebody looked at me funny I would want to hit them," she says.

Finally her brother, on leave from the army in Germany, came back to New York and told her the family was going to take Marcie away from her if she didn't straighten out *and my mother was staring at/me and my father said, "You ugly and little thing what are you/looking at?"*

"My daughter is everything to me. I'd do anything for her," Candy says. So in April 1982 she went back to the methadone treatment. And after sending a four-page letter to Mayor Koch "cursing him out," she obtained an apartment in the new housing project at 13th and C. From the front door of the building you can see the grated windows of P.S. 61, where Marcie attends second grade.

Like most P.S. 61 poets Candy looks sheepish but proud at the mention of one of her old poems. *And I said, "At/my only lover boy/and father said, "What is/his name?" I said "His name is Bobby Perez and I love him/a lot."*. . .

"I always used to like it when I was a little girl and we used to write poetry. It pushed you to say your true feelings, your inside feelings. It might make you sad inside, but even that, once you feel it, feels good. It's sad but you feel calm," she says. She and her boyfriend used to write poems, handing a piece of paper back and forth, each adding a line as they went. Those poems burned in the fire. She had also once taken *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* out of the library to show to a friend but she left it in a cab and lost it. She asks if she can borrow my copy of the book for the afternoon; she wants to show it to Marcie. She just won't give up on poetry.

I suggest instead that we go buy a copy for her and Marcie. As we walk back toward Avenue B from the book-store, Candy keeps flipping through the book. Compared with the loss of her little Tony I can't imagine that any poem anywhere can amount to much, but I catch myself. Fencing off tragedy from poetry, like patronizing "slum children" or succumbing to self-consciousness, is one of these restrictions that stifles poetry, that keeps Fontessa's apple from jumping on the table. Tony's death doesn't mean Candy's wishes, lies, and dreams are dead. It doesn't mean Marcie can't find a box holding all the colors of the rainbow or have a sailboat of sinking water or a hat full of laughs or a fancy dancy dress or, like Candy when she was 11, a secret lover boy. *And I was twenty-three years old/when I got married with my only lover boy/and he was twenty-four, just a/year more than me.* You can go through hell and still not lose any of those things.

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A conventional little boy, I had my doubts about getting too carried away. But it was only a poem. And who was going to read it besides Mr. Koch? I decided to finish it exactly the way I wanted to: *I laugh swim and cry for joy/This is my home/For Ever.* I liked it. Poetry wasn't so tough, I thought for the first and last time. I chose to title the poem "The Dawn of Me." That was a little fancy too but. . . I just handed it in. Sure enough, I was embarrassed when it appeared in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams.* It no longer seemed so great, and I didn't go out of my way to point it out to anyone. But as I looked up my old classmates, I started liking "The Dawn of Me" as much as I had the day I wrote it, maybe even more. Writing poetry was the dawn of all of us; I like to think we're still living in its light.

●

The Beverly Boys' Summer Vacation

by Kenneth Koch

CHAPTER 1. THE BEVERLY BOYS AT TOWN HUT

One year, Bobby, Bill, Jim, and Aunt Bertha Beverly were all installed at Town Hut, where the Boys spent their vacation, on the shores of the lake, every summer. Then they received a letter from Mr. Beverly's lawyer in the city, telling them that Town Hut had been sold, and that the Boys could not spend the summer there. The letter said that there was another hut, Roundup Hut, in the interior of the woods, where they could go and stay instead, and where they would be sure to have a good time. Aunt Bertha Beverly read the letter to the boys. At first they were sad, but then they became very interested in the new hut. Aunt Bertha Beverly cooked a big steaming hot dinner, and after dinner everyone went to bed.

CHAPTER 2. A LAST WINK

The Beverly Boys knew it was their last night at Town Hut, where they had had so much fun in previous summers. In the morning Bobby didn't want to get up right away because it made him so sad to leave the summer home. Aunt Bertha let him stay in bed an extra five minutes, so as to have a last wink of sleep at Town Hut.

CHAPTER 3. JIM BEVERLY SEES A SNAKE

Just as the wagon was about to set off for the new hut, Jim Beverly saw something slithering in the leaves. "Look out, Bobby!" Jim called, and Bobby jumped away from the place where there was the slithering. When Aunt Bertha said, "What is it?" Bobby told her, and Aunt Bertha said that it was probably only a harmless garter snake, but that Jim was right to have called to Bobby about it because there are some snakes which distill a deadly poison.

CHAPTER 4. JIM BEVERLY'S STORY

While the wagon was heading for Roundup Hut, Jim Beverly told the other Beverly boys and Aunt Bertha a story. It was about a king and a queen who lived in a big castle. Everyone liked the story, and it made the trip a lot more fun. When the story was over, Bobby asked Jim to tell another story about a king and a queen, but Aunt Bertha began to sing a railroad song, and so the boys all joined in and sang as they went along.

This parody of children's book writing was written by KENNETH KOCH 25 years ago. Random House published his most recent books, *Days & Nights* and *Sleeping on the Wing*, the latter a guide to modern poetry, distributed by T&W.

CHAPTER 5. THE OLD TIMERS AT ROUNDUP HUT

The Beverly Boys felt like Old Timers in the woods by the time they got to Roundup Hut. They had come over so many trails, and seen so many different kinds of trees! Roundup Hut was not as fixed-up as Town Hut had been, and when the wagon came to rest outside it maybe there was a little disappointment. But not for long! "Here we are!" said Aunt Bertha, and all got out of the wagon and went inside.

CHAPTER 6. A SIMPLE COTTAGE

Jimmy and Bobby and Bill looked around at their new home. "I like it," said Bobby. "So do we," said Jim and Bill. "I do too," said Aunt Bertha, "though it is only a simple cottage. We like it because we are all here together and to us it is as wonderful as a castle. Now we must all get ready for dinner!"

CHAPTER 7. CRUEL WAVES

One day Aunt Bertha and Bobby were out searching for fuel. Dry sticks and leaves were very hard to find because it had been raining. While Bobby was looking for some sticks near the stream, he heard a tiny noise. He looked down and saw a baby robin on the ground at his feet. Across the stream was a tree with a nest in it. "The little fellow must have fallen out of its nest during the night," said Aunt Bertha when Bobby showed her the fallen bird, "and then the stream, which has been swollen by the rain, must have washed him away from his home. We will have to do something about that," said Aunt Bertha.

CHAPTER 8. AUNT BERTHA BEVERLY TO THE RESCUE

Aunt Bertha Beverly picked up the little baby robin in her hand, stepped across the stream and gently placed it back in the nest with the other little robins and the eggs. "I hope its mother will come back soon," said Aunt Bertha. Then she and Bobby went back to the camp.

CHAPTER 9. THE PHANTOM WOODSMAN

That night there was a great thrashing of the trees. Aunt Bertha told the boys next morning that there had been a big storm in the forest, but a woodchopper who had stopped there then to get a drink of water said that the trees had been thrashing because the phantom woodsman was abroad in the forest, and that the trees made a great noise like that every year on that same night.

Chapter 10. Bill Beverly Sees a Lizard

One morning Bill Beverly was walking through the woods carrying water for Aunt Bertha. Suddenly he heard a loud splash! He looked down at the bucket he was carrying, and saw that a little green lizard had jumped into it. Bill set the bucket down and put a stick into the water so that the lizard would crawl on it. When it did Bill took the lizard out of the bucket and placed it on the ground. Then he watched it dart into the underbrush.

Chapter 11. Time for Lunch

"Time for lunch!" called Aunt Bertha Beverly. What a fine meal! There were tomatoes and sausages and bacon and baked potatoes and apples and oranges and walnuts, along with plenty of cold milk!

Chapter 12. The Missing Bread Basket

Everyone was very hungry. "I would like some bread," said Jim. "Where is the bread basket?" They all looked and looked, but they could not find it. Then Aunt Bertha remembered that she had covered it up with leaves to keep the biscuits warm. "Biscuits!" the boys exclaimed in unison. Aunt Bertha sent Bobby to fetch the bread basket where she had left it, and to shake the leaves off. Then the boys ate the biscuits greedily. "We have had such a good lunch that it makes me sad," said Bobby after they were done eating, "and I will now tell you why."

Chapter 13. Bobby Beverly's Tale

"When we were at the lake," Bobby Beverly began, "I met a boy there. He lived on a tugboat with his father. One night the tugboat crashed against a rock and the boy's father was killed. The boy did not have any money and did not have anything to eat. His name was Tugboat Ted, and he was as old as I am, with red hair."

Chapter 14. Tugboat Ted

Just as Bobby Beverly was finishing his story, everyone heard a loud CRASH! "Why, the top of the kettle has gone and fallen off!" exclaimed Aunt Bertha. "How did that ever happen?" "I am sorry, ma'am, it was I who knocked it off," said a clear, boyish voice, "while I was drawing nearer to hear the story about me." Everyone turned to see a sturdy, redhaired little boy dressed in rags, and with a piece of wood from a ship in his hand. "Why, it's Tugboat Ted himself!" exclaimed Bobby, and all gathered around to meet the new boy. Aunt Bertha invited him to stay at the camp, and that night cooked up a big hot meal to feed the hungry waif.

Chapter 15. A Carousing of Landlubbers

What good times the boys had with their new friend! They went everywhere in the wood and played many games. Ted called them "landlubbers," and they asked him what it meant. He said that it was a name given by people who live on the sea to those who live on the land. Then the boys called themselves "The Landlubbers," and played many games with this new name.

Chapter 16. Aunt Bertha's "Friends"

One day a raccoon, a badger and a chipmunk came and sat in the clearing where the boys were eating breakfast. Aunt Bertha saw them and gave them some little pieces of bread and bacon rind. The animals ate greedily. Then every day they would come and sit in the same place, and Aunt Bertha would give them something. Jim Beverly said that they were Aunt Bertha's "friends."

Chapter 17. Bobby Beverly At Top-Notch Peak

"Before our vacation is over," thought Bobby Beverly one fine morning, "I am going to see what is up on top of Top-Notch Peak." That day, at breakfast, Aunt Bertha announced that the wagon would leave at two o'clock in the afternoon. Bobby quickly packed all his things and put them in the wagon. Then he began to climb up to Top-Notch Peak. The sun was very hot. When he came down, Bill Beverly asked him where he had been. "I climbed up to Top-Notch Peak," Bobby answered. "But it was so hot that I did not want to stay there very long." Then Bobby climbed into the wagon.

Chapter 18. A Drink of Water

Just before the wagon was about to leave, Bobby Beverly became very thirsty. "Gee, I'd like a drink of water," he said. Tugboat Ted, who had not yet climbed on, went over to the well and brought Bobby back a cup of clear, sparkling water. Bobby thanked him. Then Ted climbed on, and the wagon began.

Chapter 19. Green Are the Trees

On the ride back everyone noticed how green the trees were. "It is September already," said Aunt Bertha smilingly, "and yet the leaves have not yet begun to turn. Maybe the trees are like us, and want to remember and enjoy as long as possible the fun they have had during the summer."

Chapter 20. The Beverly Boys Back Home

Jim couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the old brick chimney and the yellowish, dusty drive. ''We're back home!'' he gaily cried. ''Back home!'' After the brothers' excitement had calmed down a little, they all helped Aunt Bertha out of the wagon with her things. A big hot meal was waiting for the boys inside. They ate greedily. ''Oh, that was good!'' said Bobby. ''I'm sleepy,'' said Bill. The boys were very tired indeed, and all were soon asleep. And the most comfortable bed in the house was give to Tugboat Ted. ''The poor little motherless darling,'' said Aunt Bertha, as she looked at the sleeping boy. ''And now I must get on to bed myself, for I too am tired.''

Chapter 21. Memories of a Vacation

Next day at breakfast, Bobby Beverly turned to Tugboat Ted. His eyes were bright with enjoyment. ''We certainly had a good time at Roundup Hut, didn't we, Ted?'' Bobby asked. ''You bet we did!'' Bill Beverly added. ''And, just think, if it weren't for our vacation this summer we'd never have met Tugboat Ted!''

THE END

The First Time I Heard the Word "Voluptuous"

by Stephen Vincent

I WAS 16. THOUGH I WAS FROM CALIFORNIA, AN exchange student, I was up a tree in France—in Normandy. It was warm. It was July. The girl, the ''sister,'' with whom I lived, she and I were up this big tree, about 15 feet, a poplar, I think. It had white bark that shined a bit in the dark. It was after 9 o'clock, not far from the village. We had finished the dishes. The family was so impressed that I would do the dishes, they had fired the maid.

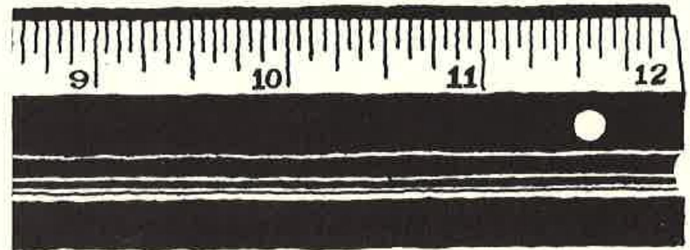
But this word *voluptuous*, I had never heard it before.

I forget exactly at what point this was during the summer, whether I had actually kissed her yet or not, but I sure had already been *jealous*. I knew that word.

But up in this tree, in the high branches, with us almost leaning into each other, she was trying to say something, or suggest something, and her English was pretty fractured, and my French was consistently shoddy and forced, and this was a big word, with so many syllables for her to say in English, it was actually sounding more French to me, the tangibility about the way it came through her lips, as she repeated it to see if I could understand, if she could only pronounce it right, and, in reality, all I could imagine was something like an octopus, something smooth and slippery that you could feel move in several directions at once, because she was actually asking whether or not I was *voluptuous*, or if I ever felt *voluptuous.*

It might have been the other way around. She was saying it was something women felt, and men did not. Whatever it was, rocking on the limb of that tree, sometimes holding on with one hand, and pushing on her sweatered shoulder with the other, it felt, at 16, dangerously intimate, I mean the excitement going up and down my body in this tree, up there among the leaves, in the night with her whom I really liked, and I was actually relieved that there was something to take my attention off the situation, as I tried as hard as I could to imagine what this big fat word *voluptuous* might ever mean to me.

STEPHEN VINCENT is a poet who has taught in the schools and who is editor and publisher of Momo's Press in San Francisco.



Teachers & Writers Magazine *would love to hear from readers about the first poem they wrote, the first story, the first word, the first love letter, the first epic, the first anything.*

Hats Off

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