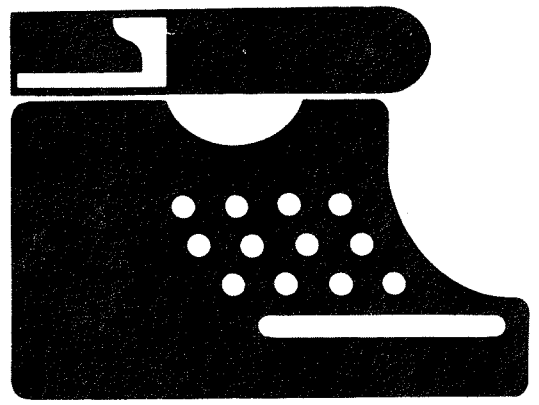


Teachers & Writers



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FANTASY HELMETS

by Larry Fagin

as told to Ron Padgett

RECENTLY I WORKED WITH A SMALL, PULLOUT group of talented third-fifth graders at P.S. 31 in the Bronx, selected by their teachers. We met nine times. Two terrific poems came out of four meetings toward the middle and end of the series: "The Beautiful Poem" took one and a half sessions, "Life on Earth" two.

All the children were bright, but one, Steven Figueroa, was particularly loquacious and imaginative—he had adult, sophisticated frames of reference, and he came up with a lot of urbane phrases and comments, not all of which we used.

The kids dictated the lines to me, but I orchestrated and edited the poems somewhat. Sometimes we disagreed about the direction of the poem, and sometimes I'd give in and let them have their way, partly because I was curious as to how far they would take a particular tack. It was all written spontaneously and quickly, and a lot was thrown out, by me or by the students, on the spot or later. For instance, both poems have "catalogue" sections that were originally much longer than they are in the final versions.

In the workshop in which "The Beautiful Poem" began, I didn't have any idea that we would be writing about beauty, or about any particular subject. I said to the kids, "Somebody, just begin. Poems can start anywhere."

One kid said, "We should say something beautiful."

"O.K. What's beautiful? What's the most beautiful thing in the world?"

"A dress."

"What dress?"

"The beautiful dresses that ladies wear in the spring" (line 1).

I wrote that down and asked, "What else is beautiful?"

No answers.

"O.K., let's stick with the dresses. What do they look like?"

"The ones with patterns, you know, with stripes and daisies."

"O.K. Now what else is beautiful?"

The kids were timid about getting started. One offered, "Music."

"What kind?"

"Songs."

"What kind of songs?"

"Beautiful songs."

"Where do they come from?"

"From the heart."

I wrote down line 3: "The beautiful songs that come from the heart," and asked for another kind of beautiful music, because by now I could see that the poem was organizing itself around the idea of beauty.

When "lovely" got into it (line 7), I asked, "What are some other words that mean *beautiful*?" We made a list, which we used later in the poem: gorgeous, lovely, extravagant, elegant, and so on.

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LARRY FAGIN is a poet who has taught in the schools since 1970. Full Court Press published his collection of poems, *I'll Be Seeing You*.

The first suggestion for line 10 began, “Beautiful rain falling down. . . .” I pointed out that rain *always* falls, so it’s boring to say. “What’s a different verb?” (These children have good vocabularies, and even if they hadn’t I would have used the word “verb” anyway; I call them verbs because that’s how the kids learn what verbs are. I don’t present a textbook definition of what a verb is.) “Falling” became “pouring.” I also asked for an adjective to describe the rain. Among the suggestions “white” seemed the most inspired.

As we went along, a couple of kids began to catch on to the fact that I wanted stronger verbs and more descriptive adjectives: “Glorious birds soaring. . . .” But this takes a lot of work. If teachers emphasized a more vivid vocabulary and used it every day in their lessons, the students would start picking it up on their own, and we’d see a dramatic improvement in their writing.

The “beautiful worms” (line 11) must have led to the ground and the flower bed (line 12). One student, Arnulfo Batista, a third-grader, came up with the next line (13), which introduced rhyme and a rhetorical inversion new to

the workshop writing. I thought that rhyme might then invade the poem, but it didn’t, although it did pop up nicely from time to time, as in lines 16-17. Steven Figueroa suggested, as line 17, “Mothers are happy after you’ve kissed them.” I took a hint from Arnulfo’s line (13) and supplied the inversion “Happy are mothers. . . .”

I’m not sure how we got the idea of line 19, “Going up in the elevator.” I think it happened this way: it started with the gold (line 20), a mountain of gold, a beautiful mountain of gold, and when I asked how we’d get to the top, someone said, “By going up in the elevator!” So we worked backwards from line 20 to line 19. Which at this point has the effect of a sudden acceleration. I think I moved line 18 up to its present position—originally it was just before “Stay in line” (line 20), which one of the kids kept repeating to me. Only later did I realize that he was referring to my handwriting, which was wandering all over the sheet. “Stay in line” suggested “Everybody stick together,” hall monitor talk, or maybe the advice of a nature guide in an adventure story.

Rhyme came back in lines 21-22, with “line” and “shoeshine,” and the nicely polished shoes yielded the idea of

(Continued on page 4)

The Beautiful Poem

- The beautiful dresses that ladies wear in the spring
 With patterns of stripes and daisies
 The beautiful songs that come from the heart
 In church soft music blessing Jesus
 5 Beautiful toot from toy trumpet
 Music of beautiful party people
 Lovely sparkling punch
 Beautiful conversations in quiet tones of adorable friends and family
 Hot music of fast dancing
 10 Beautiful white rain pouring down on beautiful blue iron roofs
 Glorious birds soaring in the trees with pieces of fruit and beautiful worms
 Flowers wake up, get out of bed
 Yellow tulips, roses red
 Gorgeous rainbows looping over the clouds
 15 Cute toys—bright transformers click and squeak
 Hearts are so lovely I can’t resist them
 Happy are mothers after you’ve kissed them
 Everybody stick together
 Going up in the elevator
 20 Into the beautiful mountain of gold
 Stay in line
 Beautiful shoeshine, shoes reflect your image
 Small things are beautiful—hamsters, hamburgers
 Tinier still—jewelry and coins, butterflies, ladybugs, dominoes,
 string, clover and candy, erasers and baseballs
 25 Snowflakes vanishing in a twinkle
 Beautiful lipstick applied on lips
 Blush and shadow
 Powder and perfume
 Make women look like Egyptian princesses
 30 Make men flip like hot Mexican jumping beans
 Pretty sky
 Pretty plane
 Swans and flamingoes walking on water
 Long sticky legs stirring and paddling
 35 Dolls, angelfish, woodpeckers, tweetybirds
 The beauty of Barbie and her gigantic wardrobe
 She flies by in her Porsche with her lovely Ken
 Heartbreaking beauty of the death of innocent kittens
 Newborr beauty of sunny chicks
 40 Beauty of Paris—its bridges and pools
 The glory of Eiffel Tower shaped like a black A
 Delicate accents of French and Italian like bubbles and flutes
 Beautiful sleep
 Pleasant dreams
 45 Of marriage and kids and love and respect
 Beautiful basketball dunked through the hoop
 Beautiful school team, beautiful group
 Beautiful teacher who cares for us all
 Beautiful textbooks, beautiful fall
 50 The bell rings
 School is out
 I run to the candy store
 Glamorous licorice, Hersheys, and gum
 Extravagant Skittles, cherry and plum
 55 Delicious Starburst and 3 Musketeers
 Nestle’s Crunch and Baby Ruth
 Beautiful eyeballs
 Beauty of tooth
 Under my pillow
 60 The beautiful fairy leaves \$10
 My beautiful rich grandfather
 Who gave me an antique
 It’s one of a kind
 Uniquely designed
 65 An ancient green porcelain chinese flowerpot
 Its color is lime
 It’s cold to the fingers
 Beautiful time . . . running out for this poem
 Beautiful poem
 70 Beautiful afternoon—misty sky
 What’ll we do now
 The beautiful composition
 The beautiful end

—Rebecca Rosada, Ruben Bermudez, Arnulfo Batista, Michele LaSalle, Zulma Alicea, Marcus Guyton, Melissa Caldero, Jose Maldonado

Life on Earth

- Upsidedown chemical bottles
Projects for fairy tales
Shoemaker and elves
The rabbit's bride
- 5 Good and bad characters
Princess Pandora
Hitler with a big army
Slave owners
Jesse James
- 10 Inhumane pet owners
Poisoners of Tylenol
Godzilla
Wonderful heroines like Harriet Tubman, Martha Washington,
Blondie, Firestar
Madonna
- 15 Courageous heroes such as King Tut, Iceman, Spiderman,
Bobby Kennedy
All great actors and freedom fighters
Tibet where Mr. Tut lived who ruled the Egyptians with his
jewelry and power
Lyons, France, where some people go to school and eat french
fries
Ethiopia—skinny children suffer
- 20 Please help them
Give canned food, flour, equipment, sheets, doctors, money
Help these poor souls, pray for them
Hawaii, where the luau is happening—big table of people eating
like pigs on Love Boat
Beautiful hula hula dreams
- 25 Coconuts bounce off your head
Smooth sand, bare feet
Hot volcano
Look out! It's erupting!
Lava pours out, flowing down the mountain
- 30 People run and scream
Their skin is burning
Hard to breathe
Let's get out of here!
Tokyo
- 35 People with pop-out eyeballs make vases, plates, dolls,
transformers, jewelry boxes, watches, electric appliances,
long silk robes
Haiti—poor people wearing rags and scraps—not enough to cover
their backs—no roofs over their heads—pacing and praying in
little shacks—dying from hunger every day—all because of one
greedy man—Baby Doc who is fat and rich and splurges on
fancy food and clothes—all for him
But now the people have kicked him out
And he goes to Red Lobster under heavy guard
Too clumsy to even wash dishes
- 40 Canberra, New South Wales, Australia—koalas chewing
eucalyptus leaves—nobody bothers them
I love these cute bears
We should import them
Zambia—hot—doubletime summertime all the time—men in
bikinis—bongos and congas—papaya jungle—pirhanas mutilate
toes—ancient moondancing around bonfires—white stripes on
your forehead—poison arrows zip through the leaves—old
tombs with booby traps—gold and ivory under a pyramid—you
walk down a secret passage with a torch—the wind blows it out
—it's pitch black—all of a sudden a slimy finger touches your
ankle
Fun with slimy fingers
- 45 Each player gets one finger
Soap & water
Blob of jelly
Instructions: . . . (unreadable)
Life on earth
- 50 Adam & Eve step into the mud
Earth developed from small to big
Stars exploded and cooled down
The Big Guy shaped them like Play-Doh
He blew life into animals
- 55 Light into night
Put down the animals and organic bushes
Made jelly brains pumping in your skull
Meat, water, blood, skin, bones, clay, liver, vessels, kidneys,
tissues, cells, germs, antibodies, static, tubes, wires
Jesus taught respect, love, care, patience, kindness, intelligence
- 60 Ideas
Moses came down the mountain and smashed the great tomb-
stones
Ten Commandments
1. Thou shalt not kill
2. Thou shalt not steal
3. Thou shalt not take God's name in vain
4. Respect your parents
5. Thou shalt not invade another's privacy
6. Never tell a lie
7. Commit no sins
8. Don't make fun of handicapped people or mental sickness
9. Don't rub your help in anybody's face
10. Try not to spread colds
Who follows these rules?
Dr. King, Mrs. Emma Merced, and Carmen Fernandez
- 75 That's all
Everybody else needs to work on this
The Pope of St. Peter's prays to St. Patrick to guide Arnulfo
Batista in spiritual behavior and math
Years ago dinosaurs fought for fun
Now some people don't even care about their families
- 80 In Chicago, who cares?
Who cares about life anyway?
We are all going to die
BUT
While we're alive
- 85 We'll keep writing poems like these
About how things are and could be
In life on earth
Poems that are truthful and beautiful
Poems that come straight from the spirit
\$1.75 per poem
Special offer
Mail today
Last chance
Life goes on
- 95 We go on
You go on
This poem goes on
A beautiful girl
9 years old
- 100 Red sweater
Red ribbon
Reflected in her glasses: my tiny face
I look like a frog with blue skin
The United States of Orangutan
- 105 Each orangutan has a license to eat bananas
The young orangutans slide in the peels on snow days
Down the mountain
Into the valley
Over the bridge
- 110 Through the village
The villagers come out and say
"Get those orangutans out of here!"
The baby orangutans go to jail for stealing bananas and dis-
turbing the peace
This does not take place in Mexico

115 Where there's a landslide
 Land is sliding into the ocean
 Out on the ocean the captain of Love Boat screams
 "Get that land out of here!"
 The land goes to jail for disturbing the peace

120 Love Boat passengers go back to their kissing
 When they kiss
 Nothing happens
 They are boring
 Disturbed

125 Lipless
 Loveless, brainless, alcoholic, no personalities
 Stowaways on welfare
 Meanwhile the land and the baby orangutans plan their escape
 But Bruce Lee is hot on their tail

130 Their tail is on fire
 "Fire!" screams Bruce Lee
 He drops the land back into the ocean and the Love Boat sinks
 to the bottom
 And meets the Titanic
 Where there's a party going on

135 Skeletons in fur coats doing the body hustle
 Everybody drinking salt water
 Eating taffy
 All the taffy comes together to make Gumby
 Who can't swim

140 So he drowns
 But Bruce Lee comes to save him in a water taxi
 Which is not in the dictionary
 Other words are there
 Like water tank, waterbaby, waterbed, waterballoon, tapwater,
 sweetwater, slopwater, club soda

145 The orangutans open their dictionaries
 When they find the word banana they eat it
 In Wyoming scientists discover a cure for being boring
 It's a fantasy helmet
 Put it on and you become exciting

150 Like every time you want to eat you drive a motorcycle through
 a restaurant, grab a meal, and do a wheelie over the head of
 the head waiter
 By the way, how long does the earth have to go?
 As long as the Russians and Americans feel like it
 Why can't they get along?
 Because they are retarded

155 These government bums need special help
 Psychiatrists
 Something . . .
 And now, Arnulfo, it's time for your nap

—Rebecca Rosado, Steven Figueroa, Melissa Caldero, Arnulfo
 Batista, Ruben Bermudez, Michele LaSalle

(Continued from page 2)

something reflected in them. (The idea of a small, reflected image recurs in the poem we wrote a few sessions later, "Life on Earth.") The tininess of the image suggested other small things (lines 23-25).

Somehow this led to things that women use to beautify themselves, and to the sky and birds. The kids saw now that any common thing, like a Barbie doll, could be seen as beautiful, as long as you described it well.

The poem turned out to be a catalogue poem about beauty, with brief digressions and narrative moments, all among beautiful things. The result is fast, free, and full of gorgeous surprises.

Working with pullout groups is different from working with full classes. The pullout groups are special, and the kids are aware of it. (I worked with the same students in their regular classes as well.) The pullout group size—in this case about eight kids—affects what you can and can't do. For instance, with a small group you can move very quickly in collaborative poems, and the poems reflect this agility. You can also focus on bringing out each individual student, especially the shyer ones. The kids become more involved because each one has immediate and direct access to how the poem is taking shape. They don't have to raise their hands and, too often, compete with their 30 classmates for attention.

With a group like this I become quite excited myself. As editor/orchestrator I am right in the thick of it with them. We write the poem together. I'm not the impassive scribe who accepts it all, good and bad. Teacher participation lends intensity to the whole process, and it puts a premium on performance, because no one can hide in such a small group. Of course not everyone performs well under these circumstances, and some kids are less spontaneous than others. The tactful editor/orchestrator will see to it that no one suffers from the experience.

Had I been in the school longer, I would have broken the group up into, say, pairs, and had them work on such poems on their own, without my direction or interference. Gradually I would have eased the kids into writing alone silently at

their desks back in their regular classrooms. You can't expect them to internalize immediately everything they've experienced in a couple of quick workshop sessions.

The first draft of "Life on Earth," also dictated to me, was visually a mess, written all over the paper and other scraps. Because of the briefness of my residency, I didn't type it all up and give it back to them for written revision. As with "The Beautiful Poem," we did it all pretty much on the spot. For example, at several points in the writing, someone objected by saying, "But that doesn't make sense." So we talked about what did or didn't make sense, and what that meant, "to make sense." I welcomed criticism as we wrote, but I didn't let the talk degenerate into a gab-session that would turn the kids away from their energy for writing. After maybe a minute I'd get everyone back to the poem. If I'd had more time I'd have typed up the poems and given the kids written copies for us to revise.

Like "The Beautiful Poem," this one started naturally. One of the kids asked, "What are we going to write about today?" I said, "I don't know." One of the other kids said, "Let's write about everything!" And I said, "Good idea, why not. What is 'everything'?"

I got inspired by this question. I talked about trying to think of everything, from the greatest to the smallest, from the most distant to the nearest. The things that were closest were the things in the room, so that's where we started: some chemical bottles turned upside down for a science demonstration and some *papier-mâché* puppet and theater displays. That accounts for the first few lines of "Life on Earth." After line 5, I asked, "What are other good and bad characters?" and one kid asked, "Do you mean fictional or real?" "Anything: characters from history or legends or stories." This would send the kids off on a burst of energy that would roll for a while, then things would calm down and we'd have another quick little discussion, which would send them off again.

I should say here that there was a globe on our table, the

perfect focal point—or prop—for a poem about life on earth. That’s how various countries got into the poem, beginning with Tibet (line 17). Anytime we wanted to go somewhere else, we’d just spin the globe. It’s a little like Apollinaire’s poem “Zone,” in which the speaker has a bird’s-eye view of the whole world.

At the end of the long line about Zambia (line 43) a “slimy finger” entered the poem. That was a reference to a soap bubble kit one of the kids had, but I can’t remember how it got into the poem here. I decided to follow it (and later to keep it in the poem, unlike some other tangents we dropped, such as one on William “The Refrigerator” Perry, because the kids got hung up on him too much and it got boring). The soap bubble kit tangent led to a point where the energy subsided, so I looked at the globe and, instead of spinning it again, asked “How did all this begin? How did life begin?” The kids contributed various creation theories, with Biblical references (lines 50-62).

A funny thing happened here. One kid said, “Moses came down the mountain and smashed the tombstones,” and another kid said, “It wasn’t tombstones, it was. . . . What was it, Mr. Fagin?”

“You mean the tablets?”

“Tablets, that’s aspirin. He didn’t smash *aspirins*.”

I was tempted here to write down “Moses came down the mountain and smashed the great aspirin,” but I didn’t want to manipulate *that* much, so I stuck with “tombstones” because that sounded good to me and the tablets *do* look like tombstones.

Then (line 62) I asked them to name the Ten Commandments. When we got to the end, one girl asked, “Who is able to follow these rules?”

Another answered, “Dr. Martin Luther King.”

“Who else?” I asked.

And they named their next-door neighbors, Mrs. Emma Merced and Carmen Fernandez, as exemplary people.

“Anybody else?”

Silence.

Steven Figueroa commented, “Everybody else needs to work on this” (line 76).

There’s a lurch in line 78, back to the dinosaurs. I didn’t know how it came up but I put it in, just for fun—like the dinosaurs fighting.

The poem now gets into social criticism (lines 79-82). The children are aware of the various kinds of poor behavior unearthed by the media, in shows like *60 Minutes*.

At this point the poem starts to end; in fact I said to them, “O.K., let’s wind this up.” And so we did. The last line was “Life goes on” (line 94). The whole session took 45 minutes.

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When I got home and read what we had, I was pleased. But I also had the feeling that the poem could go on. So at the next session I walked right in and said, “Guys, let’s revive this poem! Let’s give it new life.”

The kids shouted, “Hurray!” They really *liked* the poem.

And so we started again: “We go on” (line 95), which in the poem means “human life continues,” but in the context of the workshop meant simply that we’re continuing the poem. And I had the kids go back to what was right in front of us, in this case the “beautiful girl” (line 98).

One of the boys noticed his reflection in her glasses. I asked him what he looked like there. He said, “I look like a frog—”

“—with blue skin,” added another.

Then, as I recall, we noticed the American flag in the room. So we did a parody of the Pledge of Allegiance, beginning, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of Orangutan” (line 104). Later I cut it, leaving only “The United States of Orangutan.”

Keep in mind that throughout this whole process there was a tremendous amount of talking going on, some soft, some loud. At one point it got out of hand, with one kid shouting at the top of his lungs. I had to calm him down: I couldn’t hear the other kids. But that happens. It’s crazy to expect kids to become excited and energized and just sit quietly.

In the orangutan section (lines 104-146), things move easily from line to line: orangutan leads to banana, which leads to sliding, which leads to snow, which leads to “Down the mountain,” which leads to other prepositional phrases, which lead to villagers, and so on. The globe comes back briefly with “Mexico” (line 114), but generally the poem moves quite naturally to water and the Love Boat (line 117), from one association to another. This associative movement has become a standard (though still nameless) technique of modern poetry.

Throughout the workshop, I urged the kids to include action verbs. Such verbs tend to induce narrative, but I don’t do it for that reason. I do it because verbs are the weakest part of children’s writing, the part most in need of improvement.

The technique of one thing leading to another takes a new turn in lines 129-130: “But Bruce Lee is hot on their tail/ Their tail is on fire.” Here the correct and usual expression (“hot on their *trail*”) has been mislearned, and then taken literally, with interesting results: “hot” and “tail” lead to “Their tail is on fire.”

For lines 132-135 I asked, “What happened to the land?” It gets dropped back into the ocean. “What happened to the Love Boat?” It sinks and meets the Titanic. “What happens then?” There’s a party going on. “But the people on the Titanic are all dead.” Yes, they’re skeletons and they’re dancing. “What are they wearing?” Fur coats (the kids knew the Titanic victims were people with money). “What kind of dance?” The body hustle.

You see the question-and-answer method here. Every once in a while there’d be such clusters, especially at those points where I felt the poem to be foundering a bit, for lack of energy.

When the “water taxi” (line 141) appeared, I asked what that was. The dictionary got included because we had a dictionary on the table. That led to thinking of other words with “water” in them, and clustering them the way they might be in a dictionary. The globe, which comes back in with “Wyoming” (line 147), served the same purpose as my questions: to pick up the energy.

Steven Figueroa’s “fantasy helmet” (line 148) was one of my favorite phrases in the poem. It inspired a long list of things you can do with it, but the list turned out to be surprisingly predictable, so I cut that part out.

The last line of the poem was written in response to the bell ringing. The poem could have gone on, but this seemed like a good place to stop. It runs about seven pages typed. Had it been 25 pages it might have collapsed under its own weight. On the other hand, had it gone on for 100 pages it might have been a masterpiece.

•

How much of this is of use to the classroom teacher? A lot, provided that the teacher is fairly spontaneous. Unfortunately, some teachers come to school every day with their brains encased in lesson plans. They're firmly convinced that everything has to be based on a system backed by what is called solid academic research. This rigor usually translates into rigidity, so that these teachers recognize only one kind of system. They are unable to see other systems, such as those working naturally in human spontaneity.

For instance, in "Life on Earth" we used the globe as an organizing device. It just happened to be there in the room.

We could have used something else, accidentally or deliberately. In "The Beautiful Poem" it could have happened that the organizing device was the word "ugly," instead of "beautiful." In both poems we used the catalogue (or list) as an organizing system. In "The Beautiful Poem" rhyme popped up, another organizing system. Both poems use these various systems in a kind of mix-and-match variety. That such systems are not prescribed keeps them—and us—fresh for imaginative use. ●

Problems with Words

by Ron Padgett

ALTHOUGH THE GRAPEFRUIT LOOKS NOTHING like a grape and the pineapple has nothing to do with either the pine or the apple, I always knew perfectly well what those fruits were. I had grown up eating them at home. But at a certain point—in my early twenties, I think—I began having trouble discriminating between the words "pineapple" and "grapefruit."

When the actual fruits were before me, I had no trouble. But in conversation I was mysteriously unable to differentiate between them. "Honey, at the store why don't you pick up a fresh grapefruit, to go with the ham." Wife: "A grapefruit? You mean *pineapple*, don't you?" So I began simply to guess: the odds were that I would be right half the time. The other half I pretended was one of those perfectly ordinary slips of the tongue: "How silly of me, of course I meant *pineapple*." Eventually I began to dread using those two words at all. One day, after ten years of this confusion, my wife stated flatly, "You have trouble with those words, don't you?"

The simplest solution, which I used for a while, was to avoid using them. I would look up the road of a particular sentence and see one of those words approaching, then I would veer off onto a service road and go around it, using some clever circumlocution. This mental agility pleased me privately, but also caused me to wonder about my condition.

Now, seeing those words up ahead in a sentence, I no longer veer away. I arbitrarily pick one of them and call up a mental picture of it. After a moment the picture appears,

something like a dictionary illustration. Then I match the picture with the place the word is to occupy in the approaching syntactical slot: if it matches up, I go ahead and say it; if it doesn't, I automatically say the other word. As I say the word, a little smile comes to my lips and I laugh inwardly at what a strange person I am and how peculiar it is that someone supposedly so articulate should have to resort to such a clunky mechanism, just to say "grapefruit" or "pineapple." ●

I've always had trouble with the word "atavism." I can never remember what it means, no matter how often I look it up in the dictionary, and its context never seems to provide a clue to its meaning. Its Latin root was one I never came across, so I can't decipher it etymologically. Furthermore, I can never invent quite the right mnemonic device for it.

Instead, as soon as my eye hits the word, I freeze. Then I tell myself to relax and just think for a moment, just let my mind go: surely its meaning will come to me. I begin to free-associate. In my mind's eye I see a large jungle clearing, at night, with a group of primitive people hopping up and down in front of a bonfire dedicated to the carved image of their deity, a totem pole with pointed head and almond eyes that curve upwards at the outer points. The muffled guttural growl of their tribal chant goes out into the darkness around them. Their blood sacrifice is being delayed because they have no victim, *yet*. Will they see me?

I open my eyes. In my hands I am still holding the book. I reread the sentence in question, projecting my fantasy onto the word "atavistic." It never fits, so I look it up in the dictionary and then reread the sentence, which makes perfect sense. Within ten minutes its meaning begins to fade again. ●

Do you have problems with particular words or phrases? What linguistic *bête noire* claws at *your* window screen? Write to tell us. We'll publish the most interesting accounts. Write to *T & W Magazine*, 5 Union Square West, New York, N.Y. 10003, Attn. Ron Padgett.

RON PADGETT is writing a book about reading.

MARIA

By Walter Dean Myers

“Maria” is the opening chapter of *Sweet Illusions*, a young adult novel about teenage pregnancy, which T&W will publish in January. *Sweet Illusions* is reader-interactive: the reader has the option of writing an extension of each chapter. Each chapter is from the point of view of a different character, and the writing possibilities are various, too (dream, letter, song, list, dialogue, memory, persuasive argument, and so forth).

I have struggled so hard for this girl, so hard. How can I write to my mother in Ponce and tell her this thing? What kind of a father will she think I am? I cannot look at Maria without a pain in my heart. When I lay down at night I can't sleep. She lived in my house and is flesh of my flesh, but I don't know the girl. I don't know my own daughter.

—Hector Rojas, the father of Maria Rojas

MRS. ROBINSON, THE HEAD OF THE PIEDMONT Counseling Center, asked me to wait around until she was finished talking to the new girl and I said yes. I knew Bobby's band, The Sweet Illusions, was practicing and I wanted to hear their new song. I was hoping they didn't practice the new song first.

Actually, I wanted to meet the new girl. I wanted to see how she was handling things. It's like I wanted to see how other girls who were pregnant acted so I would know how to act myself. It's easy to see what's right or wrong with somebody else.

I remembered when I first came to Piedmont. I had seen a brochure about it on the wall of the guidance counselor's office at school. Sometime between the time I found out that I was pregnant and just after I had decided not to kill myself I went to the office and took down the address. Actually, I went to the office twice. I had to go twice because I was waiting for a time when the guidance counselor wasn't in her office. I didn't want her to know that I was pregnant, either.

The way the place looked helped a lot. The center was in a nice brownstone with trees in front of it. The offices had casual furniture that made it look friendly, more like a home than a place for the kinds of hard decisions the girls were making in it. The first floor was all offices in the front, and an examination room in the back. Two doctors came in on Wednesdays and you could talk to them if you had a medical problem.

One of the floors above had places girls could stay if they were put out of their own homes for some reason. There was also a lounge that we could just hang out in if we wanted to. It all helped. There were times when we needed hanging out.

Mrs. Robinson had spoken to me, too, the same way she was speaking to the new girl. It was two weeks after my eighteenth birthday and I was so scared I couldn't even see

straight. I hadn't told my father I was pregnant yet, either. Mrs. Robinson had helped me through that period, had shown me that I wasn't alone. So when she asked me to talk to the new girl, to help her, I was more than glad to.

“Maria, I'm glad you stayed.” Mrs. Robinson came out of her office with this girl that looked so white I thought she was dead or something. “I thought you and Jennifer could have tea.”

“Sure,” I said. I flashed my best smile at this chick Jennifer and she looks at me like I'm going to bite her or something.

“You going to be at the meeting tomorrow?” Mrs. Robinson was slipping into her coat.

“What meeting?”

“We're going to decide about a Christmas party.”

“Sure, I'll be there.”

Jennifer looked about eighteen, maybe even nineteen. She sat down on the couch and looked down at her hands. I watched the door close behind Mrs. Robinson and then I sat down.

“We have lousy instant coffee and pretty good tea,” I said. “And when the soda machine is working we have sodas. Right now the soda machine is working.”

“I'll have the tea,” Jennifer said. She was a little overweight but she had a nice face. Her eyes were a grey green and I thought she would look nice if she wore liner.

“I'm just starting my eighth month,” I said. I took some tea bags out of the can and put them into the cups.

“I'm four months. . . .” Jennifer kind of mumbled to herself.

“Let me tell you something about myself,” I said. “We're all different, but we're not that different. When I first came here I had the same talk with Mrs. Robinson that you had. Then I came out here and sat on that same couch. Only I went for the lousy instant coffee.”

Jennifer smiled.

“The whole thing is that Mrs. Robinson doesn't want us to feel alone,” I said. “You know, when you feel alone you can't think too well. I don't know how well I think anyway, but—”

“—Are you married?” she asked without looking up.

“No. Only a few of the girls that come to Piedmont are married. Some of us wear wedding rings because the guys who hang around outside the place give us a hard time. We take care of ourselves, though.”

“I'm not married, either,” she said.

“How did you like Mrs. Robinson?” I asked, pouring the tea.

WALTER DEAN MYERS has written many young adult novels, among which *The Young Landlords* was named the ALA-YASD Best Book of the Year.

“She’s nice,” Jennifer said. “I don’t know if I can remember everything she said.”

“You don’t have to,” I said. “She’s got booklets and things all over the place. And most of the girls who’ve been here a while can tell you where to find out what you want to know.”

“You like this place?” she asked. She looked right at me like she was really going to see if I was telling the truth.

“Yeah, I like it,” I said. “Mostly because everything is right up front. They’ll give you all the information you want about everything dealing with having a kid or not having a kid. But you have to decide what’s best for you, nobody pushes you into anything.”

“Wish I had decided what was best for me about four months ago,” Jennifer said.

“I know what you mean,” I said. “But we got to live in the here and now, not four months or eight months ago. You live with your parents?”

“My mother,” Jennifer said. “They’re split up. She’s been okay about it, really.”

“My mother’s been okay, too,” I said. “She cried when I told her, and I knew she was hurt. But it was like she reached inside of herself and pulled it all together and said she was going to stick with me. You know what I mean?”

“My mother took it hard, too,” Jennifer said.

“My father had a fit. He’s from some other time or something. He keeps talking about being from Puerto Rico, as if that makes a difference. I think the real difference is what he thinks I should be, what’s in his mind. He’s got this thing, I don’t know. I think if I was married he would have hired a twenty-piece band and have me marching down Fifth Avenue. All my life, ever since I can remember, he’s always been talking about his grandsons, what he was going to do with them.”

“What’s he say now?” Jennifer twisted one hand in the other.

“Now is not so bad. Now he doesn’t say anything. Now he sits in front of the window and looks down into the street. He doesn’t even pull the curtains back.

“But when I first got pregnant—no, when I first told him—I thought he was going to have a stroke. He’s got this way of thinking that a girl is either a virgin or a whore. I know he was very hurt. He wanted to kill Bobby.”

“Bobby’s your boyfriend?”

“Yeah, he’s got a band. It’s a combo, really. Bobby plays trumpet, Jose Aviles plays *timbales*, Chico plays keyboards, and a guy named Carlos plays guitar.”

“Sounds nice,” she said.

“It’s okay,” I said. “Sometimes I think Bobby likes the band more than he likes me, though. You don’t use sugar in your tea? How can you drink it like that?”

“I’m just not thinking,” Jennifer said. “You know, Mrs. Robinson asked me what I wanted to do about the baby. I never thought about, you know, having a choice.”

“Sometimes it’s easier not thinking about it,” I said. “But Mrs. Robinson tries to make you come to some kind of decision. None of it’s easy.”

“When I first found out I was pregnant I was so . . . so messed around. I missed three periods, I had morning sickness, everything . . . before I even admitted to myself that I was pregnant. Can you believe that?”

“Can I believe it?” I looked at her. “When I started getting big I prayed it was a tumor. I figure, a tumor, at least

everybody’s going to say ‘poor Maria.’ You say you’re having a baby and everybody hits the ceiling.”

“When Mrs. Robinson asked me if I were going to keep the child I wanted to run out of the office but my legs didn’t move.” Jennifer was crying. She wiped at her face with her sleeve. I gave her some napkins. Sometimes a good cry helped.

The clock on the wall pointed at four-thirty. Bobby’s rehearsal started at four. Even if I had left right then I wouldn’t get uptown until five-thirty and the rehearsal would probably be over.

“Are you going to keep your baby?” Jennifer asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I have a dream about something happening with me and Bobby. Sometimes I think it will and sometimes I don’t think so. I used to always think that if you had a baby there were things you had to do. You had to get married, you had to get an apartment.”

“It doesn’t seem to work out that way,” Jennifer said.

“Are you tight with somebody?”

“This tea is awful,” she said.

“That’s because you haven’t tasted the coffee,” I said.

“You taste the coffee and you’re going to love the tea.”

“Does it sound stupid to say that I don’t have a guy even though I’m pregnant?” Jennifer seemed more relaxed.

“I talked to a lot of girls here at Piedmont, baby,” I said. “Nothing sounds stupid. You hang around here a while and you’re going to hear stories you wouldn’t believe, only you’ll know they’re true.”

“There’s a guy, his name is Harry. I met him once and one thing led to another and we ended up in bed. None of it made sense. It just didn’t make any sense at all. I keep thinking back on it, trying to put the pieces together, but it doesn’t help.”

“It makes sense,” I said. “You know all the biology, and all the ‘how comes’ and everything, so it makes sense. It just doesn’t make the kind of sense that makes your life any easier.”

“You want to know something else?” Jennifer had a twisted smile on her face. “I told you I only met the guy once? Well, I even forgot his name. I had to call my girl friend later on to find out what his name was.”

Jennifer and I talked for a while and I let her put her hand on my stomach when the baby kicked. When she felt it, she pulled her hand away real quick. She smiled, though, and I could tell she was more relaxed. She asked me was I nervous and I said yes, a little. I was nervous and I was excited. I just wished I was married to Bobby. Then I could have the rest of it, too.

“Piedmont helps,” I said. “Because what you need is a place that doesn’t dump on you. Mrs. Robinson never looks at us or says anything to us about ‘making a mistake’ or anything like that. She just keeps telling us that we have to make decisions, and take control over our own lives.”

“I think you’re okay,” Jennifer said. “I really appreciate you talking to me.”

It was five-thirty and I had to go home. I knew my father left home at five-fifteen. He’d be gone by the time I got home.

In a way he was gone even when he was there. He didn’t say anything to me, or even look at me. He hardly even spoke to my mother any more. It was as if she was responsible, too. She wasn’t, just me.

When me and Bobby were younger it didn’t matter about sex. We were supposed to be boyfriend and girlfriend and

everything was cool. We used to talk about going places together. I always wanted to go to Puerto Rico and he always wanted to go to California.

When we got older and he started The Sweet Illusions band and got a van, then the girls started coming around. I knew he was fooling around with some of them. I tried to make believe it didn't bother me, but I guess it did. Sometimes I used to hear girls talking about doing it, and it was like they were talking about having a slice of pizza or something. After a while I figured I was the weird one because I wasn't having sex with Bobby.

The first time it happened was at Bobby's house. I made believe that it wasn't going to happen. He was fooling around with my clothes but I took my mind off it. I told myself that we were just going to be kissing and hugging, the way we always did. I even asked him what he was doing when he started making love to me.

Afterwards I never went for birth control stuff because I kept telling myself that it wouldn't happen again. I told myself that, every time it happened.

"Hi, Mommy," I kissed my mother when I got home and she patted me on the shoulder the way she did sometimes.

"You want something to eat?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "Daddy went to work?"

She nodded. I knew he had been giving her a hard time again.

She fixed me a plate of chicken and rice with a side dish of black bean soup. I loved black bean soup, but with the baby it made me have too much gas. I ate it anyway.

"What did Daddy say?"

She didn't look at me. She started putting rice on a plate for herself and then scraped it back into the pot. "He wanted to know where you were going to live when the baby came," she said.

"I'll find a place," I said. I tried to smile but I couldn't get it out, so I just went in and sat on the couch.

How could I be so different? One day I was Maria Rojas that everybody loved and the next day I was something different. How could I be so different?

I didn't hate my father. I knew how he felt. I knew that he wanted good things for me and that he was disappointed, but I wasn't the first girl in the world to get pregnant. Why couldn't he just be my father again? That's all I wanted from him.

I was sixteen and I felt like I was a hundred years old already. How could I be so different?

The TV sports news was on and I curled up on the couch and fell asleep. When Mommy came in to tell me to get up and go to bed, the dream I was having was so real. I had to tell someone.

In the dream, there was a . . .

Pretend you are Maria. (It doesn't matter whether you are a boy or a girl.) Put yourself in her place. You have come back from the clinic, had a bite to eat, and fallen asleep. You have a lot on your mind. You have this dream. It can be a very strange dream or a very ordinary one. What happens in this dream? You decide. Write down your dream. ●

MEETING LOUIS UNTERMAYER

by Francelia Butler

WHEN I WAS ABOUT TEN, MY MOTHER AND father took me to Cleveland, Ohio, to see Louis Untermeyer, the anthologist and poet who was autographing books in Halle Brothers Department Store. Beaming, they brought me up to the celebrity, who was sitting at a small table with a stack of books beside him.

"My daughter writes poetry, too," my father announced proudly.

"Oh, she does!" Mr. Untermeyer exclaimed. "Then tell her to sit down and write me a poem."

I felt like the Miller's daughter must have felt in "Rumpelstiltskin," when her father boasted that she could weave straw into gold. I panicked.

"Do as you're told," Father said.

"Just a short one," Mother added. "Do it right now."

I wrote down something and I knew it was dreadful. My brain, my hands, and my heart were frozen.

"Now take it to Mr. Untermeyer," Mother commanded. I even had cold feet. I could barely shuffle across to his table and push the paper before him.

He took a look at the piece of paper. His face was expressionless.

Just then, Father came up with the book he had purchased. Mother and Father waited expectantly while Mr. Untermeyer autographed it.

"Just look what Mr. Untermeyer wrote," Mother exclaimed. "Now aren't you glad we made you write that poem he wanted?" She read the inscription out loud:

"To Francelia—

Sure that she will become the poet she deserves to be."

Louis Untermeyer

My parents thought it was a good omen of my poetic future. It was the last poem I ever wrote.

FRANCELIA BUTLER is editor-in-chief of *Children's Literature* magazine and the author of an adult novel, *The Lucky Piece* (Avon). She is a professor of English at the University of Connecticut and a leading authority on children's literature.

Did you ever write your last poem? Or last story? Or last anything? If so, what made it be the last? What made you stop writing? And did you ever start writing again? Send an account of your experience to *T&W Magazine*, 5 Union Square West, New York, N.Y. 10003, Attn. Ron Padgett.