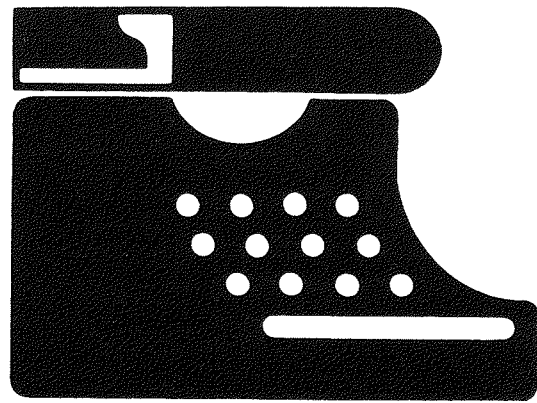


Teachers & Writers



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TEACHING POETRY On the River of No Return

by Sheryl Noethe

In the fall of 1987, T&W sent poet Sheryl Noethe to Salmon, Idaho, population 3,000, for an extended residency sponsored by the Steele-Reese Foundation. Sheryl arrived in September for planning and orientation; beginning in November, she taught poetry writing to students at all levels for three months; in February she organized a big public reading; and in May she returned to distribute an anthology of her students' work. For a second residency in Salmon, she has been joined by poet Jack Collom. What follows are excerpts from Sheryl's letters and diaries from her first residency.

September 18, 1987

In the rearview mirror I see horses and riders along the tops of the mountains. The clouds are red blankets shaken out by the sky. Buffaloes step out from within the boulders. Deer step lightly from the side of the road and watch me, poised for flight. I enter the city of Salmon and find my motel. The man in the office greets me like an old friend he's been waiting for. He tells me he didn't expect such a pretty lady and gives me the key to my room. It's charming, warm, homey, and has a little kitchen in it. I settle in and look out my window. The mountains are a thin blue paper cut-out against the deepening sky. The ridges at the very top fly like cranes, a sign of hope.

SHERYL NOETHE's article derives from her many letters and diaries describing her experience as poet-in-residence in Salmon, Idaho. She is also poet-in-residence at the New York School for the Deaf.

I drive out to the Cowboy Poetry Gathering at the fairgrounds and order biscuits and eggs. The cook is Chris Brady, who will introduce me to the people that I will be working with. The cowboys recite long, memorized rhyming poetry. I meet the women from the State Arts Council and the Salmon Arts Council. Everyone is friendly and glad to hear about the writing workshops. I drift through the gathering, meeting people. I begin to form an idea about what kind of people live here. I am alone but do not feel lonely. There are too many interesting things going on here.

On Monday I meet the Superintendent of Schools, Jim Smith. He takes me to meet the principal of the junior high school, George Artemis, who welcomes me and is delighted that I speak some Greek. Mr. Artemis introduces me to his wife and they invite me to dinner. We go on a tour of the school—big, airy, bright, calm. The teachers in the English department are all eager to have me come to their classes. Their enthusiasm propels me.

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Tuesday at the Rotary Club the speaker doesn't show up, and they ask me to speak about Teachers & Writers in Idaho. I tell them about myself, the program, and the schools in New York. When I ask for questions, they ask me if I am married, and then if I am open to socializing. Not married, I reply, and glad to socialize. I get invited to go canoeing.

On Wednesday I meet the grade school teachers and all seven of them want me in their classrooms. Then Jim Smith takes me to the Chamber of Commerce meeting where we listen to a report on multiple road use, hunting and recreation versus conservation. This is an important topic here. I sit in on George Artemis' values class for eighth graders and then have dinner at his house. He sends me home with bags of apples, tomatoes, and plums from his garden.

Thursday I meet with the high school principal, Matt Weller. He describes how excellent his teachers are and says my major problem will be learning to say "no" due to time limits because every teacher will want each of their students to be in on the workshops. Then I go to the district potluck where I meet the teachers again and their families and eat heartily.

Friday I go canoeing and tip over in the glacial Salmon River. Survive.

Saturday I drive into Missoula, Montana, to shop and eat. Chris Brady and Holly Bevan, a local stringer for the newspaper, go too.

Monday I am on the radio. I talk for 45 minutes, read my poems and children's poems from the South Bronx, and talk about schools, poetry, children, and how I fell into the river on Friday. Then I go to the Hospice and the women who run it are delighted to have me do poetry workshops with the volunteers. I am interviewed by two newspapers.

Tuesday I pass out the Teachers & Writers books that have arrived. The teachers are very pleased with the books. I set up my schedule with the junior high teachers and attend the Rotary slide show on hunger in the Sudan.

That evening I buy a lovely jeep.

Wednesday I go to the high school to arrange my schedule. One teacher wants me for all three of his classes because he doesn't feel comfortable having me in one and then doing the poetry workshop himself with the other two. We decide that I will do all three classes for each teacher, running the workshop for a month at a time, with the teachers receiving the full 12-week workshop. On Thursday I meet with Jim Smith to make final plans. I will be in the junior high on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, working with three teachers each day, with an hour added where I will be in an office available to teachers and students. Mondays and Fridays I will work with seven teachers, four one day, three the next, at the Brooklyn grade school. On Thursdays I will see three teachers at the high school, doing a session of three classes a month, then switching to three different classes for the two following months. I will visit the Hospice in

November and continue to read poetry on the "Voice of the Valley" radio program. I will also schedule some workshops for the Bridgeview Alternative School and for the Seventh Day Adventist School. These times will be arranged once I am installed in Salmon. I have made myself available to the library and will arrange for a regular writers' club, which I have advertised in the newspaper and over the radio.

I am looking forward eagerly to my life in Salmon and the benefits to my writing from the beauty, privacy, and solitude, and the remarkable people that live there.

October 30

I return to Salmon to continue my residency. The Superintendent of Schools and his two young daughters drive to the Missoula airport to get me. It's unseasonably warm and this near Halloween the streets and MacDonald's are full of witches and clowns, crying and eating hamburgers. We drive for about three hours and over Lost Trail Pass, just through Montana and into Idaho, in the front seat with the sun beating through the windshield I fall asleep and awaken entering Salmon. It is elk hunting season and the super has shot an elk and its head is sitting on the front porch of his cabin. The dog has torn out the elk's tongue, and there is blood in puddles. I look at the dimmed eyes of the giant beast. Jim Smith's daughter says, "Yuck;" as she steps over a pool of blood to run upstairs and show me her two Cabbage Patch dolls. We drive into town with the want ads and look at a few apartments. Apartments, here, often mean mobile homes divided into two "studios" that rent at just over one hundred dollars. They are too tiny and bleak to spend a winter in. We drive to cabins and homes for rent and peek in the windows. I find one, an old stone house with lots of windows and a beautiful wood stove, that I imagine spending the winter in. The superintendent tells me if it was him he'd rent far from town, in an isolated cabin, and I tell him I desperately need an all-night grocery within walking distance to feel safe.

Then we go to an auction lot and talk to the men there about renting furniture while I'm here. They are agreeable. They invite me to the auction on Sunday. I begin to feel overwhelmed about things like dishes, sheets, blankets, pots and spoons and telephones and desks and Jim Smith drives me to my motel so I can fall down and sleep.

October 31

I go to the bakery for coffee and rolls. The people there are all in costume. Clowns, mummies, Donald Ducks. One clown remembers me from the newspaper article and asks how the program is going and says he hopes I like it here.

I go and look inside the house that I want to rent. It is lovely and warm and big and empty and costs less than my room in NYC. A whole house. A wood stove.

The woman who owns it offers to let me use her kitchenware and dining set and bed. It means a lot of work, hauling furniture and buying necessities, but after I examine more tiny mobile homes and an apartment complex I am more sure about the house. At the library one of the aides asks me how the poetry is going and says her daughter is in the fifth grade and will have me. I wonder how many people here know who I am. The man who showed me a tiny studio apartment heard me speak on the radio when I was here in September. We talk about the East. He shares the opinion of most of the people here: it's not a place to live.

The man who sold me my jeep calls and asks if I want to go flying in his single-engine four seater airplane. Do I. It is at once the most exciting and scariest thing I have done in many years and we seem to hang on the cloudbanks, glide and float over the craggy Tetons. We see the forests burning and cannot land on Moose Creek like we planned.

November 2

I started at the grade school today. When I walked into my first class the children intoned in a breath, "She's here!" I had been afraid the children would be timid, shy, or too "nice," but instead they began asking me questions and wanting to hear my own poetry and telling me who the good writers are. They pulled out paper and sat poised over it waiting for me to stop talking and let them write. I assigned descriptive name acrostics and they busily and noisily set to. They wanted me to read their work and then wanted to read their own. Class response was wonderful. It was consistently good in each of the four classes that I saw. I told the kids about buying a stick shift jeep that I can't really drive. Their poems included jokes about my being a hazard on the streets.

Shawn is a good trapper
He traps muskrats
And he traps coyotes, bobcat, fox and beaver.
When I reach down to get them they bite me
Now I know to shoot them before I reach down
to get them out of the trap.

•
Being dumb isn't very smart
and sometimes you can get hurt
run and hide here she comes
beautiful and weird
awesome and cool! eek! she's
running me over by her
acrostic jeep! Bye!

•
Military Mike was a war kind of boy
I held an automatic gun
Killed his poster killed his thumb
Everything in his room every
Thing except his gun

Sick that night
Hyperventilating
Every single morning
Riding to school in a camouflage jeep
Motor broke down
A temper tantrum grows
Now he is dead on the
Mighty playground

November 3

Today was my first day at the junior high school. The children had been waiting anxiously for me for weeks because their teachers had gotten them excited. They were warm and friendly and curious and I read them a prose poem about boxing in the living room and they agreed humor is a great emotion to explore through poetry. I asked them to write name acrostics and use humor and honesty. They all wrote, and when I read the finished poems aloud they were delighted to hear each other's voices and jokes about themselves. The teachers were happy with what happened in class and said they couldn't wait until next week and neither could the kids. I wish there were more hours in the day.

My friend has
A dog
That acts like a
Table has fallen on him

You have to watch out
Even though this dog looks
Neat, you might get
Damp in the shoe.
Everytime you see this dog it would be wise to run!

•
Kicking guns
Excite everyone and aren't
Very fun when they knock you down
It isn't personal that it happens to me but
Nobody likes it.

Amber skies
Move like a calm wind so
Always watch when they come by.
Run to see it.

•
Just since I'm small I'm
Under everybody
So they all
Tap me on the head
It makes me very mad so I punch them in the
Nose
Bodily harm to
One person makes him too
Ornerly
To
Stand!

- My favorite things are soft, or pretty, or challenging
I love school and when I try, I
Can do quite well. I really like to be
Hugged or smiled at. I don't do many sports
Except I do enjoy cheerleading, volleyball, softball.
Laughter is contagious and I
Love to giggle and gossip.
Everyone teases me because I do well in school, and I
often get upset.

Never before has acceptance meant so much
I have some really great friends
Could you ever believe the fun we
Have?
Older sistering is my specialty and I
Love my one brother a lot.
Sisters I am missing
Out on, but I really don't mind.
No one knows how sensitive I really am.

- My name is Mykel if
You know me you will get a
Kick out of my jokes, but they are
Electrifying, you can't help
Liking them.

High above the sea
I see all the
Lovely sea
Leaning against the sky

November 11

The sixth graders are writing poems about my "colorful clothes" and "funny shoes" and all the junior high kids are doing double takes in the hallways at nearly whatever I wear. However, the children in my classes are loyal and they never are snide or mocking. They are quiet about their opinions of my attire.

This morning I was out in my nightgown with a heavy coat on over it trying to wrestle a paper bag down out of a tree on my driveway because I had no paper and was having no luck whatsoever with starting a fire and a 6th grader came by on his bike. He said, "Hi" and I said, "Hi." He told me he had asked his parents if he could come over after school and chop wood for me. They said okay. I said, "Great. How about today after school?"

Sure enough, after school there he was on his bike. While he worked he instructed me about splitting wood.

- Don't even try to split a knot (where a branch grew).
- Split the grey logs with no bark, they're older and brittle.
- Never split logs drunk or you could hit your leg.
- Always have a full woodbox in the dead of winter.

He also told me which sixth grade boys already smoked cigarettes. We went inside and had club soda/orange juice drinks and he gave me a photograph of himself for my wallet. He told me that until I came to his class he

didn't like poetry at all, but now he could see how it could be really fun. He said he didn't mind chopping wood with me because although it's hard work I was a pretty nice person. Then he grinned and became silent. I paid him five dollars, while he protested that he meant to do it free, and he promised me it would not go for candy. He said, "I'll spend all of it on school supplies!" I said, "Well, what do you need?" He replied, "Paper." I asked him if he ate much candy. He said, "Oh, no!"

Later that day I saw him circling my block on his bike. He had his little sister on the back. He invited me to dinner with his family and I gave him my phone number and said to have his mother call me. We agreed to chop together again when my woodbox got too low.

November 29

This week I and two new friends went up Panther Creek and climbed way up a mountain very slowly, encountering some drunk mountain men who joined us, and we found a natural hot spring, rumored to be the best one around, and one of the last ones left, and came over the mountain ridge to an area of running boiling water and a basin full of foggy sulphurous smoke rising, and then a pool of dark boiling water with billowing clouds of stinking steam seemingly straight from hell that obscured all sight and we had to wahoo to each other not to get lost. Then beneath a winter sky we stripped off our down jackets boots wool socks holofil liners hats scarves and dived into that murky pit of what appeared to be boiling rotten eggs BUT which turned out to be the grandest experience of my life. You lie and watch the frozen sky and snowfall while your body reddens like a lobster, and the sulphur makes you young again. The mountain men had jars of what is called Idaho tea and we sat in the water growing young and getting drunk and couldn't see each other and it was like out of Dante (etchings by Doré). I was with a nurse who drove out from Minneapolis and a military policewoman who grew up in these rough hills and knows the mountain men and everybody and every place.

The next day she took me up on Freeman Peak and taught me how to use a rifle. It turns out I am a dead-eye and in some eighteen shots was entirely in the "kill zone" (the inner circle of the target) the whole time. I am not lying, only bragging. I would not shoot or eat meat but am now ready to protect free verse in every way. I have a roaring fire going in my woodstove that attests to my adaptability and fear of the Idaho night and its cold cold blackness. When the fire burns low, I pop awake in my bed and start grabbing long underwear and mukluks and run for the front room where I toss logs into the stove in such a way that they do not suffocate the remaining embers but flare up and blaze fiercely until dawn, when I once again leap up from sleep and bank the fire.

At Thanksgiving dinner with a reclusive sharpshooter who teaches fifth grade, I got to listen to yet another heated discussion of wilderness and multiple road use

and environmentalists (referred to as “wafflestompers” for their shoes) and managed again mostly to listen to all sides and not start volunteering the Absolute Truth on the spot. It’s a touchy subject. Many people here would live much better if they logged the wilderness. As for the next generations of human beings and animals and forest... There you are. They want to feed their families *now*. Anyway, I have also met some people from the Idaho Conservation League, which is frowned upon by most people here, and I am learning about things of which I formerly had no inkling. Yesterday I went to the Cheerleader’s Bazaar at the high school and I ran into my fourth and fifth graders who rubbed their heads against my sleeve like deer and dragged their parents over to meet me and I ate fudge bars and drank coffee and purchased cowboy scarves and homemade goods. I live like a king. I am getting a little eccentric, but long hours of solitude beneath the awesome mountain ranges with my jeep parked outside the window have contributed to my dream life and peace of mind and heart. It is indeed the wild west. I have also met a fireman (whom I am taking home for Christmas) who pulls people out of the river and from burning houses and from weariness. But he’s another story that will take much longer to tell.

I have collected sizeable amounts of kids’ writing and it generally provokes the reader into delighted laughter. I’m developing a program for troubled junior high kids which involves word processing their writing and printing it out and having a bulletin board that highlights certain kids every week. I am learning word processing with the sixth graders! I am also attending the Hospice classes for volunteers on death and dying. I don’t know when I’ll do poetry with them, but I’m learning a lot from these women. I have rounded up about six women to take part in a writing group. The men are shy. Time however is going too fast. I may need years here.

January 15, 1988

Today I asked the class if they thought it would be better if poetry workshops were run on a voluntary, sign-up basis. They said yes, because that way the kids that wanted to write and concentrate would not be bothered or distracted by kids that were messing around. Then one boy raised his hand and said that he would never have signed up for poetry class, but now had come to look forward to it. If there had been a choice, he would not have taken poetry, but now knows how much he enjoys it. The class should be available to everyone so that they can learn to love writing. I asked them to raise their hands if they would not have taken poetry voluntarily, but now have learned how much they like to write. Most of the class raised their hands.

The principal, George Artemis, said that if he could change anything it would be that every student in his junior high would have poetry. He wants all eleven English slots to be involved in the workshop.

Jim Casterson, the junior high teacher who probably has done the most poetry work in his own classes, said

that he thought the best legacy of T&W in Salmon would be the creation of a literary curriculum that all the teachers would use, one that would be mandatory along with grammar, etc. That curriculum would consist of a really great collection of poetry and other writing. He also suggested a resource person, a teacher in the school, to work at designing and implementing the poetry curriculum, and to visit the classrooms to see that it was being taught effectively. The other teachers at the high school agreed that an established book list for teaching writing would be a big help, that they are pretty much on their own to find examples of style and great poems to use.

One of the teacher’s sons broke his arm during school and had to go to the hospital. Later he told me the boy was upset while he waited to go into surgery because he was due to have the poetry workshop after lunch and would miss it because of the arm.

I got a love letter from a sixth grader who said that he is going to be a poet and just like me. Can I take him home? Can I keep him?

January 28

The fourth and fifth grade poetry reading approaches. We are making history. The young poets and I are floored by the idea. Mel Skeen, Brooklyn principal, has offered to provide refreshments to everyone who attends and we have made and placed signs all over town, signs that emphasize the word FREE and have imaginative illustrations. We are some 112 readers and promised in the newspaper not to go over 1½ hours. Hah, we may go into the dawn... Five fifth graders will be on the radio Monday reading their poems as publicity for the reading. I can hear one poem right now, in a squeaky voice floating over the still valley, “I say JUMP and he sits. I say SIT and he jumps. I say OUT and he cries in plea...” (our dog poems). There is also a whole series of haiku about my being scared in my house and quite a few acrostics where the acrostic word for the letter J just has to be JEEP, and then remarks about my eccentric rig. A close-knit and personal group. They are giving me these braided friendship bracelets and I am accumulating quite a scraggly armload of braided string. They count them tirelessly. They stop me in halls to show their friends the one they gave me.

A lady at the library told me her fourth grade boy, who likes trucks and sports and noise, comes home and talks about poetry to her. I told her boys that age are very tender and natural poets. I’m using Auden, Blake, and D.H. Lawrence. The high schoolers have finally warmed up to me: this week two different seniors dropped by with poems to give me. I accepted them at the door and sent them off. God, fourth graders are so easy. They drop by, have a glass of o.j. at my giant table in chairs that go way over their heads, and swing their legs and talk shop. They leave their bikes propped on the front step. Cute as all get-out. I am getting to know their little brothers and sisters that they tote around, too. I must know 600 kids here. I am endlessly greeting

children, who hiss to parents, "IT'S THE POET," and the parents always smile.

February 4

Last night was the poetry reading. We held it in the City Center. I showed up at 6:30, half an hour early, to prepare. I set up the borrowed PA system and counted chairs. Kids started arriving in fancy clothes with slicked-down hair, holding poems and folding and unfolding them. We went into an adjoining room to plan while the parents drifted in. The teachers came too and stood with their classes. I showed them how to talk into a microphone. I told them not to rustle papers. Mel Skeen, the principal of the Brooklyn grade school, walked into the room where I and the teachers milled about with one hundred some students. He looked at me and his eyes were round and his face rather pale. I wondered why he suddenly seemed so worried. He looked out into the gathering room where we would read. There were people standing in the aisles and along the walls and peeping in from the halls. Every chair taken, people holding babies, families, grandparents. We counted between 250 and 300 people. It was the biggest gathering I've ever seen or heard of in Salmon. Some parents, when they saw me coming in at the head of a line of one hundred young writers, began muttering about being there all night. I assured them nervousness makes for faster reading. There were eight classes in all, four fourth grades and four fifth. The readers stood on the slightly raised platform and took turns at the mike. The other kids sat on the floor around the platform. On we went. They read about puppies, bunnies, love, their parents, broccoli; they read haiku and acrostics and other poems; they were splashed with red blushes in patterns over their faces and necks, they trembled, they shook, but they each got up bravely and read like pros, introducing each poem as to name and technique. ("See," holding up the page, "this spells my name.") They called the principal a punk-rocker. They wrote about When Sheryl Got Scared. Then they'd shuffle down and the next class would fight their way to the mike and begin.

begin. People laughed, clapped, sweated, it got hotter and hotter. But we all knew we were a part of a grand design so we marched boldly forwards. Amanda, who has brain injury and cannot get out her brilliance in words, read her poems and people listened and could not understand, but finally at the end of the third poem we heard "and my teacher Mrs. Riggan, there she goes with a blue face, and Mrs. Crosby who is as weird as the poet" and they loved Amanda. The kids acted like kings. Sometimes they gesticulated or held out their arms. Sometimes they pronounced the last words very mysteriously. It was like a Roman procession in its formality and dignity. The young poets were serious about their poetry and said, "Here's another for ya," and, "I wrote this poem." Susanna Edgar recited

To walk in the woods
is a gift to my father
Oh! How he loves the wilderness

HAIKU
sort of.

So at 8:36 I shout, "Thanks for making history in Salmon!" and the principal runs up to me and says, "Hey, great, you made it!" (referring to the proposed 1½ hours length of reading: IMPOSSIBLE they'd all said) and some lady took an instant photo and gave it to me: it's me and Virgil Bosworth and Mr. Skeen and he's in a silver jogging suit and saying You made it and I'm pointing at my wrist and looking triumphant and my hair looks ridiculous.

Anyway, the reading was news, so I got to go back on the radio again today and say, yeah you couldn't have squeezed another person in there with a shoehorn it was the place to be. So I am on the radio now a lot and they play it again at noon and at five, I get to listen to my whispery old voice or else kids reading their wacky ideas with feeling, and I think about all those old guys grumping around in the barber shop listening to these kids or me.

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A Kind of Wary Attention Teaching Poetry in Small-Town Ohio

by Terry Hermsen

On March 21, 1988, Bob Fox, Writer-in-Residence for the Ohio Arts Council, and I visited Millersport High School, in rural Ohio, where poet John Druska was conducting a residency. The following report is intended as a small testament to the fine things that can happen when artists find their own ways to meet with students.

Millersport is the kind of town I've always thought writing residencies were made for: a town small enough to have a border where it *stops*. Right at the edge of town there is a field planted with what looks like spring wheat, and we can see the school complex on a small hill to the left—elementary hooked on to junior high, leading to the high school—something like a factory complex, which at first we mistake it for.

But there's a personality to this town, as well as smallness, something the townspeople would like to protect from Columbusites (doesn't *that* sound like a disease) and too much development around the lake at Buckeye Lake State Park, just a mile or so from the school. Many of the students probably live in the housing developments along its shores. In its early years the town was a "port" on the canal system planned across Ohio. (All these facts we learn later.)

Now, the school nickname is "Lakers," as we soon find out from signs in the halls and the big purple anchor outside the main doors. From the first step in, it hits you: Sports Matter Here. But there is also a large bulletin board announcing the March Arts Festival, of which the poetry residency by John Druska, whom we have come to visit, is the focal point.

The first class is extremely attentive. From the first moments, you can tell: John is in charge. He gives clear, concise directions, and the kids seem to get them. These are juniors, and they are not about to act as if they could actually like poetry, but they are with him, and get right into the plan.

John says he would like to split the class up, as they did on Friday, with one group going over to an adjacent room to work on one set of ideas, and the other remaining in this room to try something different. This arrangement is partly in response to an evaluation the

class did last Friday in which some of them indicated they'd rather work more with fiction and prose, and others were quite happy to continue with the poetry. It is exciting to watch how well John knows this group of kids already, often by name, and how well he is reading, in his low-key way, their personalities.

By John's admission, and the comments of one or two of the teachers, the first week of the residency began slowly. It took both John and the kids some time to get to know each other. John was somewhat amazed by the students' lack of knowledge about, or feeling for, what poetry *is*, and they didn't know what to make of his soft manner. But by this second week, something has changed. The students are listening, they are catching his small jokes, they are patient with his responses. He isn't flashy—he doesn't try to talk them into things. He asks: would you be willing to read this one aloud? What do you think of that poem? How come? (A favorite phrase, which allows the students to probe more deeply into their own opinions.) If they weren't *with* him, they wouldn't read their poems aloud—in front of their peers!—without any prodding. But they don't pull back—they read—they are there.

So one group is to take a look at some poems written by their class last week and write a quick response to one they liked. In addition, they are to take one of the poems, their own or someone else's, and re-write it, perhaps shuffling the lines around, ending it in a different place, breaking the lines differently, or changing the meaning. It's a good idea, and one that is seldom tried, in a short-term residency. It forces them to take another look at what they have done, and to get another sense of what they think about it. (This group, composed of the students more interested in going into fiction, is also to write down, as well as they can remember it, a conversation they had over the weekend.)

The other group, remaining in the room, is given an exercise in looking at some paintings. They brainstorm in small groups what is happening in the picture. Then they are to take one person's point of view and write what he or she is thinking. (This is the group that had expressed interest in continuing with the poetry.) The teacher ranges from room to room, as do John, Bob, and I. There is a friendly, talkative, honest atmosphere. Few kids are pretending they think of themselves as poets now, but most are anxious to find out what the others think of what they have done, flip-flopping on the point of caring about it all or not. There are all sorts of digs ("Oh, nice one, R.J.") and the inevitable "Oh, I really don't like mine—it's dumb." And the look of quizzicalness when someone (especially an adult) says he does.

TERRY HERMSEN is a poet who has worked for many years in the Ohio Poets-in-the-Schools program. "A Kind of Wary Attention" is an excerpt from his MFA thesis (Goddard College) of the same name.

Poetry is strange stuff to them. John has stressed “the small” side of it—paying attention to the little events of life. He knows this is not the only thing that matters in poetry, but he wants to renew in them the sense of the physical in language. Too many students in his college classes, he says, are way off into generalities. Generalities about generalities, backed up and followed by other generalities. Maybe this is his chance, I conjecture, to reach the kids before they get to that stage, while their lives are still touched, and surrounded by, say, the big hay mound just outside of town that looks, he tells them, like a giant loaf of bread, with three white cows munching away at it. There may be an element of the elementary to this approach, and perhaps the students are aware of that. This is not the “deep stuff” poetry is supposed to be about. Not war, not love, not death. These are poems that they themselves have written—about a teacher passing out tests, about “Locker #37,” about running track, about looking at toes.

Back together as a full class for the last 25 minutes, they read poems aloud, and read their responses. John doesn’t wait for volunteers; he just calls on people and asks if they’d be willing to read, and they do. Several kids ask for Troy’s poem about basketball:

Daytime,
Nighttime,
Anytime,
Basketball

They say it is their favorite. “How come?” John asks one of them, who says, “Because he didn’t push the poetry part. He just says it.” John accepts this with “You like the straightforwardness.” “Yes.” Opinions are okay.

Another kid likes his own poem:

birds fly by
the Led Zeppelin that
seems to be
crashing down
to the lonely earth

He reads it, and some others ask him why the earth is lonely. He says it’s because this Zeppelin, which wanted to be like the birds, can’t stay up there, and so the earth seems lonely to it. And why not. There are good poems here, but they don’t exactly seem as if they were written by eleventh graders. One girl reads her poem “Toes”:

Feet in General
Ugly as ever
Sometimes scary
Never smell good
Cold at night
One big toe
One small toe
And then three more.
Look like french fries
Or little piggies

Good to run on
Something to put socks on
There they are!
Then it happened.
My toes talked. . .

—Stephanie Lowe

It’s hard to find any observation in this poem that couldn’t have been made by any 3rd or 4th grade student. Even the short, specific lines are nothing beyond what any beginning writer could do. Yet, she is willing to read, and though she knows the poem is a joke, she is not ashamed of it. Nor do her classmates think it is stupid. John has (sneakily, perhaps) returned them to an acceptance of this childish side of themselves. I think they don’t quite know what to make of it, or whether they like being here, or whether it matters. But they are here, they have been allowed to be inconclusive.

Bob and I can’t help getting involved. We read over the poems, find lines of our own that we like, and talk about why. It’s good to be there together, to have another “observer” to bounce observations off. Singly, we’d be isolate intruders. Together, we are part of the party, as one student called it. (There was also a reporter from the newspaper there.)

I choose one student’s poem and begin to play around with possibilities for revision. This intrigues me, the process John has set up, for so often I see potential in student work, and wonder how to draw it out more strongly. I don’t know how to show them, but it is good that they are getting the chance to try. So the original (below left) becomes more choppy in my version (below right), but I begin to see connections between the stanzas that I somehow feel must have been there in the author’s mind.

One day I was driving
on the
Creepy Canal Road
and I
didn’t run into the
Canal.

One day—driving
the creepy Canal Road—

wrong turn—dead end
at the water

One night I was in
Stonewall
I stepped on a grave
the ground sunk.
It was a
Mole Hill.

One night—in Stonewall—
step on a grave

the ground sinks
(moleholes)

Cinders are black.
When you run hurdles
you wipe out
and they stick in your knees
for LIFE!

Run hurdles—black cinders
stick in your knees for life

Fascia is the connective tissue
that connects muscles.
I rip it daily.
It looks like a spider web.

Fascia between
the tissues,
muscles
rip it daily—
like a web

—Susan Slater

Revising this poem, I begin to feel I know the student, even though I don't know which one she is. It pleases me that she has put in the Canal, as it gives me a small part of the town to keep in my brain. And the track, the physical sensation of falling in cinders. And the town of Stonewall, which I've never heard of, but which I imagine was named after Stonewall Jackson. And I imagine she's just learned about fascia (just as I'd forgotten about it), and that she sees this last image as a way to tie the odd pieces of her life, which she has put down here, together.

So, with just minutes remaining in the class, and no other hands up, I ask to hear Susan's poem. It turns out that she is the girl who had said earlier she didn't like her own, that it was "dumb." But she reads, and I ask her if she had intended the sections to fit together as a whole, and of course she had not. It's good news to her that they do.

•

After class, Bob, John, the teacher, and I talk a bit. The teacher shows us some books the kids had done for projects early in the year. Hand-bound by various methods, with beautiful covers, and vacuous insides. She wishes they could do more with that part, she says. She says John has given her a lot of ideas for carrying the poetry further. There is one nice book using a song lyric for its base, an indication that somewhere there are some thoughts floating around.

The next class is smaller—about eight or nine kids. They sit in a circle and John tells them this will be their last session together (they had two last week). Again, they look at some of their own poems, typed on a page. And although this class seems "slower," judging by the nature of their poems, they are even more willing to read. Last week they had talked about the sound of lines, how certain words or senses can be made to stand out. So they try reading Dana's poem about pizza so as to sound as if they are hungry:

Pizza with the cheese
and the sauce and the
big red pepperonis with
the spicy sausage and
green olives and black
ones I can taste
the pizza now!

Several can't put energy into each word, but finally one can, and everyone else sees. John is patient with the several attempts, he prods them a bit, asks a couple of times if they will try. Other poems are read by their authors. They are also about small and simple events: watching some little kids jump on a potato chip bag, finding a skunk along the road, getting scared by scary movies. Each emotion or event is dealt with slowly, as if a kind of wary attention is being built up. Nothing has to be big or over-blown. John just wants to know "how come"—why do you find that poem funny, and he listens to the teacher's story about a chicken farm she passes every day. There is attention to the lines

Time seems to pass so
slow,
actually it's faster than I'll
ever know.

and why Denise feels these two observations can be true at the same time. That odd juxtaposition bears a striking resemblance to the time that is taking place in the room—not a lot is happening, and yet no one seems bored. They are listening to each other's experiences, and it matters.

The lines are not expertly carved. There is not a lot of surprise in any of the poems (except maybe one about dreaming in class about playing a drumset on the moon), but there is enough to draw on, and John keeps pushing the idea that the minute ways a poem is constructed, the feeling of a line as it stretches out or cuts off short, has an effect on the reader. The attention is to language, as well as to event. To follow up on this, John brings up an exercise of looking at two short poems typed out in paragraph form. The idea is for each of us to play with possible transcriptions of each into poem form.

One is W.C. Williams' "The Term," about a bag blown down a highway, the other by Wendell Berry about sowing clover on a hillside in time of war. Both, even without their stanzas spelled out, are examples of the kind of close attention to small events, in the face of larger realities, that the discussion has been hovering around. The bag, "about the size and bulk of a man," is crushed to the ground by a passing car, yet "unlike a man," it rises again, "to be as it was before." I've read this poem many times, and used it in classes myself, but seeing it this way without Williams' playful lineation, makes the little event itself stand out anew. It resembles, oddly, the little poems by the students. And Berry's poem, which I had never seen, has the same effect, only stronger. Its title is diaristic: "February 2, 1968" and without its line-breaks it reads:

In the dark of the moon, in flying snow, in the dead of
winter, war spreading, families dying, the world in danger, I
walk the rocky hillside, sowing clover.

Small event, within larger ones. John doesn't mention this, but such contrast is present in nearly everything he says. So we and the kids rearrange the prose version, and we compare how different versions have their own effects. The class ends with a demonstration of how a writer might choose a variety of voices from which to speak, not sticking only to what others assume to be his character. John puts on a green cap with white dots, one that is too small for him, but which tends to change his exterior from a thoughtful poet to something like a comic house painter, then a false nose-glasses-mustache set, and asks what sort of poem he might write in that disguise. The class ends. On the way out, one girl turns her head, and above the bustle yells back, "Thanks, it was great!"

•

Lunch is next. The three of us eat alone in a small cafeteria, while the tables are collapsed and lined up against the wall. One teacher had hurried ahead and saved us lunches before the cooks pack up and head out to the elementaries. This *is* a small school, only 300 kids or so, John says, and that may explain some of the willingness to risk exposure in front of each other. There may be less of the trampling of personalities that takes place in other schools. There may be less sophistication also, though the kids seem wealthy enough, and dress well, and there may be less exposure to any of the arts. But this is over-simplification. Basically, this is a normal high school in a small Ohio town.

The athletic director passes us, with two new nets in his hand. John says there was a tournament all last week, an annual event in which the alumni from various years come back to play each other in a round-robin sequence. The championship was Saturday, and things were going on in the school from noon to nine P.M. All this says something about the town: where else would the players from previous years still be in the area to attend such an event? We talk for over an hour, over the usual french fries and hamburgers and sliced peaches. I suspect that high school now is a tremendous waste for kids—that there is so much inside them, so much thought and readiness to be involved with life, and yet all there is to do is mainly sit in desks and figure out ways to distract the teacher. Isn't this why sports loom so large in the high schools: they are the only arena in which things *happen*. Why shouldn't all the learning come about this way? John says part of his problem the first two days last week had to do with getting used to the apathy he felt in the students: as if they had turned their minds into large vacuums to fit the space around them. Lots of politeness here; no discipline problems to speak of. But no engagement.

The residency seems to be only the slightest step in the direction of active learning: at least the words and the events they refer to are being put down on paper, are theirs. It's a small step toward filling in that "vital middle" that makes a life. Why should juniors in high school be "making books" like elementary students? Why aren't they learning publishing, acting, doing investigative journalism? Of course, things are happening here that we don't see—but from some vantage point (most notably, the students' own) this looks like dead time.

•

In the hall, I ask two girls waiting outside the restroom (this seems to be a big activity—dallying around the water fountain with a wooden pass) about the name of the town, and the source of "Lakers." They tell me about the canal system and the state park, and finally about a town that used to exist here before, in the 1820s—Montecello, it was called, and how it had been wiped out by an epidemic in a few months. "There's a gravestone for it out in that field on the other side of

the road," says one. "We used to go out there all the time and sit around?"

John has a booklet that confirms all this. Because of typhoid and cholera engendered by the swamps surrounding the town, a population of 2,000 had dropped to 200 in a few months. Now, the ghost of that town sits on the edge of what is here. This is the kind of thing that makes me think writing residencies are needed here: so much of what matters, of what is real in our places, is not seen, is found only with patient digging.

•

The last class is also small. Tenth grade. "Not advanced?" They look at some short poems by Basho—reading haiku aloud until they find one they like. They talk together about the oddities in each, the small parts that don't quite fit the smooth picture. "Hairy recesses" in the "sweet peony," the rose of sharon "perishing... in the mouth of the horse." John talks about Basho noticing these small details from a day—not making his poems grand statements but attentive presentations of the tiny.

I am awe-struck
To hear a cricket singing
Underneath the dark cavity
Of an old helmet.

We have to think a moment about why that would matter. Why would this most famous Japanese poet think it was worth our listening to? And then it occurs to us: the echo within the helmet. The small voice within the hollowness of war. Suddenly it hits me what I have half-known all day: I am beginning also to see these small things. And it's an odd feeling, as it must be for the kids—to be enclosed by high walls this way, and yet have the poetry digging at the smallest, vital details of life outside. The windows in the classroom wall are so high up (as they were in the walls of the Clark County Jail, where I once did a workshop) that we can't see out of them. At this point, John says, "When we write it's important to let in small details. What images stick in your mind, just come to you?" I have to think: nothing, here. What is here but white walls, the brown board, and some glossy pictures of kittens tacked to the walls with pop-philosophical sayings? ("Hang in there, baby.")

We try. We write small poems about any events that we can dig out of our brains from over the weekend, or this morning, or from lunch. One kid writes about the NCAA tournament he saw on TV. One writes about ice-skating, "the only thing visible is the sound of our skates slicing through the nice, soft, ice." Then we write our poems on the board. Bob's is about some crocuses in the snow. Mine is about some men I saw in the diner this morning, flipping coins to see who would pay for breakfast.

Then John collects the poems they did over the weekend, and reads one to us aloud—about a trip to the movies, and coming out of the dark of the theatre, not

knowing what to say to the man he and his friends meet near their car “wearing two different shoes.” He wanted to go on with the poem, the student says, but that was all he had time for. Somehow, it seems just the right ending.

Back in the teachers’ lounge, John gives us a sheet of his own poems. At lunch we had asked him about how he uses his own work with the kids, and he said he usually saved that till the end, not wanting to influence them too much, make them write in his style. Yet here it is, and he has to admit it, the style we have been seeing all day—it always comes through even without our knowing it, as if by osmosis.

Relax I Sd

“Dad, I’m not used to relaxing
when I’m awake”

I laugh. It’s another one of those moments, pulled out of the air.

Pink Feminists at Five

Someone mentions pink.

“I like pink,” my daughter says.

“I know pink is your favorite color.”

“But you don’t know *how* much
I like pink.”

Not “major” stuff here, nothing long and discursive, or detailed and narrative. Maybe it’s even a little “out of style,” but it adds resonance to the day, the resonance of things ordinarily passed over.

Night Tune

When you begin to sleep
your fingers play on my wrist
like dream eyelids.

We chat in the halls on the way out—I with a teacher who went to the same college where John teaches (Defiance); Bob with the principal, who tells him more about the town. We follow John out on the road to the lake, park alongside his car, looking out at the choppy, long, and narrow lake. The waves are hypnotic, driven across their flat expanse, and I follow them out with my eyes to the houses on the other shore, packed closely together, and close to the shore itself. We say goodbye and thanks for the good day, head back out onto 214, and north toward Columbus. We pass the hay-loaf with the three white cows gnawing away, and outside the pharmacy, a white plastic sign on wheels. One side says: Alumni Association Boosters Club. The other: Come Hear Our Writer-in-Residence/PTO Meeting/Monday 7 P.M.

BOOK



How to Write, Illustrate, and Design Children’s Books
by Frieda Gates

Lloyd-Simone Publishing Co., 1986

Distributed by Library Research Associates, Dunderberg

Road, RD 5, Box 41, Monroe, NY 10950

\$23.50 cloth, 156 pp.

It seems that every day there’s a new book purporting to teach us how to write novels, poems, screenplays, greeting cards, and children’s books and to *sell* them (such books usually include back-slapping advice on how to write a “snappy” cover letter that “editors can’t resist”). Thus it is an extra pleasure to come across a book such as Frieda Gates’.

How to Write, Illustrate, and Design Children’s Books is a clear, detailed, professional presentation of every aspect of its subject. What a blessing: Frieda Gates writes succinctly and clearly, and she knows what she’s talking about (she’s an experienced author, illustrator, designer, and teacher). Her book has ten main sections: the history of children’s books; markets, categories, and trends; creativity resources; writing; illustration; the dummy; submissions; upon acceptance; copyediting, copyfitting, and typesetting; and preparation for printing. The book’s many illustrations provide examples that illuminate the text nicely. The book is primarily for novices, but the more experienced writer or editor will find something new.

This valuable book has found a permanent home on the T&W reference shelf. It should prove very useful to writing and art teachers who want to work with their students on creating children’s books.

—Ron Padgett

Correction

In *Teachers & Writers* Vol. 20/No. 2, the “Drum” riddle on p. 11 was misattributed. Its author is Michael Brown.

FOUR DAYS

Teaching Junior High in Houston

by Marvin Hoffman

3/8

A few weeks ago Lyn gave me a draft of the short story she had chosen to do for her writing contract. Although she had been reading it to her writing group, she wanted my comments. It was an astonishingly well-written piece, full of rich complex sentences and good metaphor. But the story itself was straight out of the romance novels. Two girls, best of friends since one was adopted by the other's parents after a tragedy in her own family, are driven apart by a young man. Girl #1 falls in love with him. Girl #2, in jealousy, makes a play and steals him away. Girl #1 in despair destroys herself in a car wreck. Story ends with Girl #2 delivering guilt-ridden soliloquy at #1's graveside.

In my comments, I praised Lyn's writing and her story-telling ability, but I tried to explain that all this melodrama wasn't necessary to make a good story. Smaller, more subtle things could happen. Characters could change in more internal ways; they didn't have to wreck themselves in a flaming accident. Several times over the next few weeks, Lyn stopped me to tell me she was struggling with the revision, but that she was trying to respond to what I had suggested. The hardest thing to get across to kids at this stage in the writing process is that I am making *suggestions*. I am *not* instructing them about what they are to do. The story is theirs. They need to listen hard to what I and their other readers say, but they are the owners of what they create and must make the final decisions. This is a tricky reversal of authority and student-teacher power relations, one for which kids have no previous model. "I'm supposed to change the ending?" is the usual response.

Lyn is a very compliant young woman and that's the direction she was headed in too until the night before her conference with me. She was finishing up her independent reading requirement by reading *Death Be Not Proud*, John Gunther's chronicle of his son's death from a brain tumor. The book made her angry. He was dealing with the whole experience in such a measured, dispassionate way. Where was the grief, the sorrow? She

couldn't feel anything because Gunther didn't seem to be allowing himself to feel anything.

In one of those wonderful, unaccountable leaps, Lyn connected her own story with Gunther's. She decided that her story was cold also, when what she most wanted was to move the reader. Her story was told by a narrator, a distant third-person voice that kept the reader far from the characters. (I'm paraphrasing her words, but not much.) So she had sat down last night and tried an experiment. She had taken one of her girls and placed her in a mental institution. The character was now telling the story, all of the events that led her to break down. It felt altogether different in the mouth of this character. There was more feeling. But the problem was that her contract was up, and she needed to turn the story in.

I was awestruck. Lyn had made a literary discovery on her own that was beyond the reach of a lot of adult writers: the significance of voice and point of view in fiction and the ways in which the final product is shaped by the choice of who tells the story. I once heard an interview with a novelist (I think it was Ed McLanahan) who described laboring over a novel for many years before he realized the wrong person was telling the story. Contract? Who cares about that? Go home and pursue your discovery. These school requirements take on a reality of their own for the kids and teachers so that they obscure the true objective, which in this case is to stimulate the best possible writing. Lyn was actually grateful to be "liberated" to do all this extra work on her story. I'm the one who's grateful for the gift she gave both of us in this otherwise gloomy week (of which more later).

This week there were two other small gifts, in the form of reading journals that students produced for independent reading. Ta Shana had read *Siddhartha*, which I would have imagined to be the least appropriate book on the list for her, but it was skinny and I had assigned double credit to it as an inducement to students to read it. Ta Shana is so concrete and literal minded that this account of a philosophical quest was as appropriate as a rodeo rider drinking Perrier. And here comes Ta Shana with an eight-page journal full of insights about the parallels between Siddhartha's quest and her own aspirations for perfection and wholeness through her gymnastics; about parallels between her relationship with her mother and some of Siddhartha's relationships, etc. Only the week before, Ta Shana had turned in the third draft of a God-awful piece of writing about Freedom (with a capital F) which I had tried every way I know how to warn her off. "Write about what you know." But she had decided she wanted to write something "important," the result of which was a mishmash

"Four Days" is a selection from MARVIN HOFFMAN's book-length manuscript, *The Year of the Teacher*, which details an entire year of his teaching junior high school in Houston. Hoffman is a former director of T&W and the author of *Vermont Diary* (T&W).

of anti-communism and tirades against poverty, hijacking, and censorship. With the praise she got for the reading journal, the message finally came across: you really can address big issues—if you start from yourself. She's decided that for her next writing project she wants to write about her two gymnastics teachers and how their way of dealing with her elicited different performances from her.

Katie read *The Chosen* straight through, then decided to re-read it and produce her journal the second time around. Her journal is an extraordinary document tracing the intricacies of the friendship between the two protagonists and responses to their relationship. It was a piece of work so elaborate and ambitious that it was all out of proportion to the requirements of the assignment. Some kids overproduce in response to some internalized insistence on perfection, some do it as a manifestation of overcompliance. In Katie's case, I think she has a crush on her bald old teacher and is trying to win my attention and praise through her work. This is one of the undiscussed issues of teaching—the student-teacher “transferences” and all the sexual undercurrents that can swirl around it. It's not much of a threat in middle school, compared to high school and college, but even at this level I watched a gay colleague do noble battle with a mutual attraction involving a particularly mature and forward young man in his class. I am calculating enough to be able to exploit Katie's innocent mooning by transforming it into motivating energy to produce the best work she's capable of.

Why, then, after these three tales of wonderful individual efforts and breakthroughs, do I look back at the week rather gloomily? First of all, it was the week of Iowa Tests, those ubiquitous achievement tests with which we assault our students every year. Our kids are superb test-takers, but the process takes its toll in anxiety and strain nevertheless. This year, for the first time, principal and administration are being evaluated on the basis of their school's test scores, a logical extension of certain aspects of accountability but one with potentially disastrous implications for education. First, it defines the goals of teaching and education in an unacceptably narrow way (i.e., the content of the test is what should be taught). Second, it opens up the possibility of abuse by overzealous administrators who will pressure the students to make them (the adults) look good. Our principal went around to all the classes to tell them how important these tests were and to encourage them to do their very best; she went at the sixth graders particularly hard on this one. Needless to say she didn't tell them what *she* had riding on the results and she was somewhat misleading with the eighth graders about how their performance would affect their high school admissions and placement. Not true. The results come back too late for all that. Watching the hyperactivity of the sixth graders all week makes me think again that the added pressure and emphasis on what's riding on this test may be counterproductive.

In any case, during yet another testing week, so much goes into a holding pattern. We're discouraged from doing anything too intense. Kids need to be rested and fit for the tests. We mustn't distract them unduly with school work. Read this travesty of a hand-out that was sent home with all the kids:

An Open Letter from Iowa

Hi there!

I'm the Basic Skills Test from the Corn State of Iowa. I go here and there every year to see just how much my friends have grown mentally. I make you a “V.I.P.” by comparing your performance with other students of the same age and grade throughout the country.

More about me, huh? Well, I'm divided in eleven separately timed tests which cover a wide range of skills—vocabulary, reading, mechanics of writing, methods of study, and mathematics. I'm different from the average test you might have met because only my correct answers count, and I don't hold the wrong ones against you.

Hold on there, now. . . Don't get uptight about me because you will not fail me. But on the other hand, do your very best for you can use my results as one measure of where you are going educationally and the best way to get there. I can help you make realistic educational and career plans. I can predict with some degree of accuracy those subject areas in which you will be weak or strong.

I come fully equipped with the latest in answer sheets for recording your responses. Although I'm considered a long test, I'm really worth your time. Get a good night's sleep the night before the test. Bring several sharpened pencils and an eraser to the test session. I'm looking forward to working with you real soon.

Basically yours,

Iowa Test of Basic Skills

Add to this the realization that it's March, that I'm tired, and that a string of interruptions and disruptions stretches out from here to June with little relief. The impulse is to drift into port from here with the engine barely turning over.

Yet it is precisely at these times that one must push against the inertia. Precisely because my energy is low, I need to hit upon a final major project that will help focus me and the kids productively. I don't yet know what the project will be, but I know that for the eighth graders it will center around either or both of the last two books, *Jane Pittman* and *Night: Black History and World War II*. I remember the wonderful principal in Peacham, Vermont, who dealt with this same problem of year-end slump by giving out report cards a month early, declaring the “formal” part of school over and plunging everyone into a school-wide town history, *Foxfire*-type project, at which most of the kids worked a lot harder than they did in their regular classes, but which they didn't define as work. It will come to me.

I think I have finally broken the camel's back in grammar. I've spoken of my deep skepticism about the efficacy of teaching grammar as a separate entity divorced from student writing. Nevertheless I've continued to do it. Last week we finished a chapter on

complex sentences and vast numbers of kids did terribly on the test. There was massive anxiety, frustration, and anger. I was irritated with myself for not getting the material across better and angry with the kids for being too obtuse to grasp the concepts. "Are you mad at me?" one perceptive student asked as we were going over the test. Embarrassed, I denied it, but the truth is I was angry at all of us, and ultimately at the need to do this at all.

Why *am* I doing this, I asked myself. My goal is to enable students to write correctly and comfortably. There's lots of evidence to show that these skills bear no relation to formal grammatical instruction. I have to conclude that I'm doing it for non-instructional reasons—to make my class look legitimate, to ward off parent criticism, etc. I can't do that any more.

I'm swearing off. The only grammar I'll teach from here on will have to bear some connection to writing. I'm swearing off and I'm going to tell the kids why, although I have to be careful not to do any grandstanding for student praise here, since the decision will clearly be a popular one.

3/15

A little anecdote to begin with. We were studying the first act of *Othello* on Tuesday. The discussion centered on Iago's pathological jealousy and paranoia. As evidence for this I focused on

And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
(Othello) has done my office. . . .

"Anybody understand that?" Blank. So I start taking it apart. What does 'twixt mean? If *office* is understood as duty or a job, what now?

"Oh, I get it," shouts Carol from the back of the room and starts cackling loudly. She explains to her tablemate the sexual connotations as she scribbles in her book the interpretation she has grasped.

"Hey, this stuff would be terrific," she says, "if it was in English."

I work harder on teaching Shakespeare than on just about anything I do all year. Because it's such a struggle for the kids, I have to meet them more than half way, not just with good teaching devices but with far more physical energy than is my normal style. I'm usually fairly low-key, calm, earnest, serious. Whatever response I elicit from the kids is less a reflection of showmanship than it is a product of a relaxed, supportive, clear, and well-organized environment in which kids are given work they like to do (compared to other school work), are treated respectfully, and know what's expected of them. It's not a flamboyant, high-energy performance. Much as I would like to provide that and much as I recognize the need for it with kids this age whose attention otherwise seems to migrate back into their mid-brains, it's just not my style. You play the instrument you're given and mine is mellow and muted. It appeals to certain

sensitive, introspective kids who are, in fact, very much like me, but not as much to the kids whose attention span is shorter. (I feel another extended metaphor about teaching coming on.) Teacher-student relationships are like marriages. Various sets of partners are compatible to varying degrees. When the pieces don't mesh well, it's not necessarily a reflection on either partner. They just have to keep looking for Mr. or Ms. Right. The neurotic need that some teachers have for every student to love them cannot be satisfied. I'm sure there are kids who, even if they like me, think I'm a dull teacher. That's the analogue of dating a girl whom you damn with faint praise by declaring her "nice."

The point is that the Shakespeare encourages me to reach down a little deeper toward some other source of vitality. Yesterday was one of the rare days when I had to drag myself off to school. I had slept badly the night before. In addition, a Mexican dinner was not sitting well in my stomach. I mention these details only because they're such rare occurrences for me. My morning mood has always been a measure of the rightness of my work life. I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of days when I've awakened dreading what lay ahead. Years ago, during the one brief period when my 7 A.M. body and psyche began sending out warning signals, I knew it was time for me to leave my job at Antioch. I acted on it quickly and all was calm again.

The day before, Norma Klein, old friend and well-known young adult writer, had been in to talk to my class. Among other things, she described her incredibly mechanical procedure of writing ten pages day in, day out, with little revision, until her book is done (a month for a juvenile book!). Much as this process makes me shudder, there is one important constructive message in it. Norma says, "I force myself to write those ten pages no matter what mood I'm in. I haven't noticed that there's any difference in the quality of what I write when I feel great and when I feel lousy."

Sure enough, puffy eyes, rebellious bowels and all, I did some of my best teaching yesterday. I led kids through acts 2 and 3 of *Othello*. I paced, I gesticulated, I discussed ideas and connections I hadn't noticed before. Suddenly I was expanding on the idea of Iago as a master chess player, capable of thinking, many steps ahead, of stratagems to ensnare and undo his unwitting victims. I searched out all the ribaldry—the anal and sexual humor. What adolescent can resist the idea that when Shakespeare's clown prattles on about wind instruments, he's referring to body functions as well as trumpets. By the time my fifth period class came in, they all knew that I had used the word *fart* in my earlier classes. A sure-fire Shakespeare advertisement!

I'm sitting here looking down at the T-shirt I chose to wear today. It was a gift from my third-graders in Bennington, New Hampshire, when I left my teaching principal's job there. The teacher wrote MR. H. in big letters across the chest and had each kid sign his name somewhere on the shirt. In a few minutes I'll be going

off to do my shift at the Reading Marathon at T.H. Rogers. Any one of the kids whose name appears on the shirt could be there, since they're all seventh graders now. They would be amused to hear me being called "Dr. Hoffman" by my Houston students. I'm always fascinated by the protocol for referring to adults in general and teachers in particular. From the moment of my first interview with our principal when she discovered that I had a Ph.D., she was introducing me to everyone as "Dr. Hoffman." Except for my year and a half of college teaching at Tougaloo, I have never been called "Doctor." On the contrary! I toyed with the idea of having kids call me by my first name when I taught in Vermont, but had to abandon it when I realized how the parents would react. Titles carry all kinds of symbolic weight in their wake and here was one that smacked of authority, control, respect, etc. Since I was already fighting that battle on many other fronts, I decided to back away on titles.

I don't take well to the idea of people trafficking in assigned and ascribed respect and authority, qualities that I think need to be earned. Yet I never raised a fuss here about being called "Doctor." It was clear that the school was happy for PR reasons to exploit that "Dr." It's a feather in their cap. I think such titles go down more easily in the South with its more aristocratic history than they do in old egalitarian New England. In Bennington it would have been an encumbrance. In any case, I still have to do a double take when people ask for "Dr. Hoffman."

The Reading Marathon is an interesting phenomenon that's in its third year now. Fifty to sixty kids sign up to stay from school's end on Friday to Saturday afternoon. With breaks for eating, sleeping, and general head-clearing they're committed to reading all weekend long. I just came back from doing my stint at the Marathon—the final three hours from noon to 3 P.M. What a wonderful sight—kids sprawled all across the library floor on their sleeping bags. Half of them are plugged into their headphones, and *all* of them are reading—the wildest diversity of stuff: Stephen King, Lois Duncan, Hemingway, *Othello* (kids working in groups—reading it out loud, helping to interpret it), magazines, Ellen Conford, *Sweet Valley High*. The funniest piece of reading was a book one student passed over to me just so he could watch my face. It was (or appeared to be) *The Cat from Outer Space*, a novelization of a Disney film. But what was inside, as one soon discovered, was Xaviera Hollander's account of her life as a hooker. Pretty clever. If you can motivate kids to compete for places to read all weekend, you can do anything.

3/22

Yesterday during the break between sixth and seventh period Jan came into my room to ask if she could see me in her office. When we got down there and closed the door behind us, I asked what was up.

"I have no idea. The kids asked me to keep you busy for a while." Since it's not my birthday and I haven't

won any awards, I couldn't imagine what they had up their collective sleeves.

Jan went back to determine whether the coast was clear and reported that they were more than ready, and in fact had taken her to task for keeping me too long. When I opened the door, the lights were out and everyone burst forth from under the table shouting "Congratulations!" Adam appeared from the book room with a cake inscribed "Congradulations, Dr. Hoffman" ("Those people at Randall's can't even spell!" exclaims Adam, who's no great shakes with the consonants himself) and featuring a great big orange basketball. And therein lies the tale.

Two days earlier we had had our faculty-student basketball game during lunch period. That's a misnomer, since the basketball coach and I were the only official faculty members participating. The rest of the team was patched together from aides and janitorial and maintenance staff people. We had actually practiced together for two days after school. Although there was a good crowd of students in the stands, you knew what a low priority activity this was for the school as a whole when the fire drill bell rang during warmups and we were all forced to evacuate the building, thus cutting into our actual playing time.

The students beat us in this abbreviated game, 18-12. But I accounted for half our team's points with two baskets and one assist. It's such a minor event in the flow of school activities, but it raises some interesting issues to ponder.

The response I got from the students was amazing. In addition to this surprise party, I got a standing ovation when I returned to class, still sweaty and unshowered. Students stopped me in the hall for the next two days to comment on my prowess on court. Partly it's the sense of surprise that this bald old man could not only manage to run up and down the court without keeling over but could actually handle himself with some skill.

The important thing is that the kids got to see me in a role and context different from the one in which they encounter me every day. I think it's enormously important for everyone to be able to see people in many different roles. One of the prime virtues of small-town life resides in the fact that you meet up with everyone in multiple roles: your plumber is also your selectman and a parent of a kid in your class and a teammate in the local slow-pitch baseball league. Dealing with people in only one arena of their lives (usually the professional) discourages the kind of textured and compassionate interaction with them that grows out of a more complex recognition that standing before you is a mass of overlapping and virtually irreconcilable roles, all too human in his or her vulnerabilities and ambitions.

Nowhere are the pitfalls of this one-dimensional relationship more evident than in schools. Remember the old fantasy that kids have that their teachers live in the school and sleep on their desks at night, because they can't imagine them in any other role than teacher. I

think it's a tremendous boon for a teacher to be perceived also as a parent, a husband or wife, a sports fan, a weekend carpenter, etc. It makes the students more receptive to you, more forgiving of your foibles, and more understanding of your style.

Let's not forget that it's a two-way street too. After the basketball game, one of the teachers said about a student, "Alex was a whole different person out there on the basketball court than he is in class. I never dreamed he could do some of the things he did!" So often we see our kids only in their roles as student and forget what a small part of their lives that is and how many other dimensions to their behavior we're not seeing. Hoffman the basketball player/teacher and Alex the basketball player/student met in a different arena and I can't help thinking that their relationship in the classroom will be the better for it, particularly when I'm tossing some Shakespeare at him and he's asking himself what kind of person would be interested in this stuff.

My second train of thought about the basketball experience has to do with the fact that although my childhood and adolescent years were filled with fantasies of athletic glory, these fantasies were never fulfilled. I can't remember ever having scored even as many as four points in a basketball game. I was a bench-warmer, too short to go up against the big boys and too nervous and self-conscious in public situations to perform well physically. Test-taking was one thing, using your body another. One of the hidden benefits of being a teacher is that you get a second shot at certain aspects of your childhood. You can relive some of the triumphs and repair some of the failures. I've written before about the joys of teaching elementary school kids in an activity-centered classroom, where I was able to experiment with making and building things, learning through physical experiences after a childhood in which learning was

strictly verbal. The same kid who used to beg his mother to let him stay home on the days the teacher was going to do weaving during art period took great pleasure as an adult teacher in leaping through *Weaving without a Loom*, or mastering techniques of silk-screening, electrical wiring, plaster casting, furniture building, etc. It's the Second Coming!

4/26

My younger daughter, Elana, is preparing for a trip to Poland this summer to visit the remains of concentration camps and the Warsaw Ghetto, the sites of our collective tragedy. We have been skimming over our bookshelves looking for appropriate background reading material. Every time I engage in this kind of book hunt, I'm overcome with several emotions: first I get excited the way I did when I was a kid in the Eastern Parkway branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, poised to devour all the wisdom and beauty that was represented in those shelves. Then I think about which books the kids in my class might like, and I begin my mental list of possible reading for next year. This list-making gives way to an overwhelming sense of inadequacy, an awareness of all the things I don't know, have never read, have never been exposed to, have never had the imagination to bring before my kids. Of course I know that I'm better prepared than many teachers. I'm not playing with false humility here. But the more I work with kids and the more diverse the interests they reflect, the more insufficient my knowledge seems. I keep on thinking about the piece a newspaper reporter did about me and my classroom last year in which she described me as "overqualified" for my position. How can anyone ever possibly be overqualified to teach? ●

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