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It's Real for Me but Not for You So Now What?

by Mark Statman

I. The Problem: What We Know

I worry a lot about the world kids live in today and the world that my generation is making for them. I worry about the things kids know and the things they don't know. I'm not talking here about preserving innocence, or arguing that knowledge is wrong. But I am concerned that they don't always know the meaning of their knowledge. For example, they know AIDS kills, but conversations with young people about dying reveal what an abstraction it is to them: a fourth grader, comparing it to a video game, told me he'd just get up and live again. Their ideas about right and wrong also have a similar kind of abstraction. When I talked with a group of fifth graders about the emotional, intellectual, and physical violence of racism and sexism, they gave as examples some popular television shows, noting that they knew what was going on was wrong. But many of them felt that as long as the presentations of these kinds of behaviors were funny, it was all right for the characters to treat each other with intolerance and cruelty.

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The problem is that the images children are exposed to through all the various communications media—images that offer a model for what to want and how to act—are not always the images they see outside their windows. Too many times students have told me about the “fact” of time travel, the existence of intergalactic wars, and of superheroes, believing in these things simply because they've seen them on television. And even if the media don't necessarily tell us what to think, they do tell us what to think about. Television, movies, music, and magazines offer images of what's valuable, desirable, hip, or important. These images are not a description of how

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the world is; rather, they are a means for advertisers to encourage kids to participate in a consumer society. As such, the differences between the worlds kids live in and the worlds they're taught to desire create a serious communication problem that can cause a desperate confusion that children long to have resolved.

One of the things I hope to do with my students is to help them see how they can resolve this confusion. I do this by asking them to write about what they think they know and understand about their reality and to see how to make sense of it.

In My Perfect World

In my perfect world, God
is the head. There are many animals
in the world. They are playing
with each other.
Look at the lion dancing with the
cat. Another cat came over and
they are spinning me around.
In my perfect world, there are
butterflies and birds and animals
and the animals are friendly to
you.

—Romel Wilson, *second grade*

When I read this poem, I look at what Romel thinks perfection is: order, play, community, beauty. That is to say, a world he doesn't experience. I look at Daniel Cohen's poem below and I see what he does experience:

Reality—Something We Don't Even Want

Reality
is a sun shining day ruined
by a
thunderstorm
Reality
is three errors
in the
bottom of
the ninth
Reality
is
beginning
to mean nothing
Reality
is
milk with orange juice
Reality is a cupcake
with no icing
Reality
is oranges
I hate oranges
Why
do I hate
oranges

Because
of
the taste
Taste
is reality
Reality is
a hand
with no fingers
Reality
is
a hand
offering me oranges

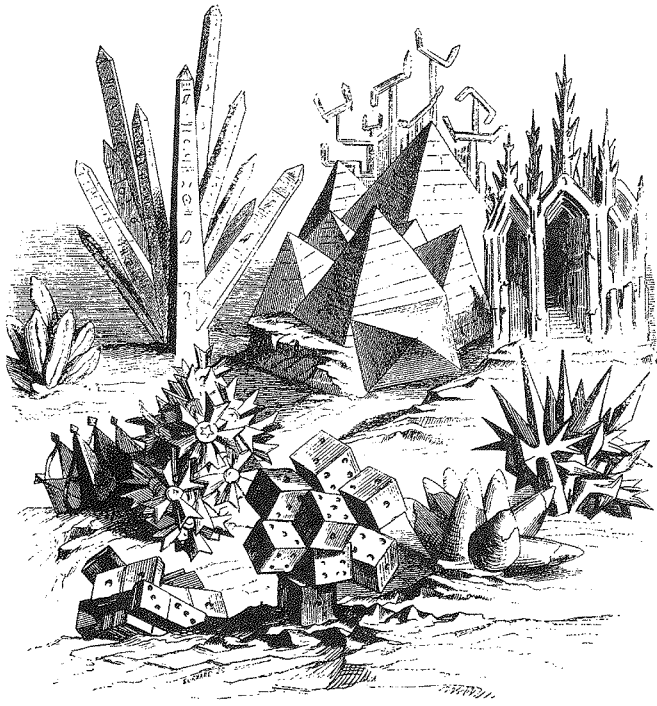
These poems were written by children who are very different. Romel is an African American living in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the United States, Mott Haven in the South Bronx. Daniel is a white sixth grader from suburban Long Island. But both write about a world that seems essentially hostile. Romel wants the intervention of God to create order. Daniel is constantly forced to face that what he doesn't want is what is happening.

I spend a lot of time asking kids to think about how they understand reality. It's something I've watched a lot of good teachers do—to assume that the classroom is not the starting point and ending point for how and where learning happens. These teachers know how to take the material of the classroom—history, science, literature, whatever—and compare and contrast it to the world (or worlds) their students live in and do or do not understand. And they do this at every level, from pre-K to college.

As a teacher of writing, I know that asking students to think about all the different ways of thinking about reality is another way to get them writing. It presents them with new ways of thinking about perspective—their own and those of others—and opens them up to the question of what's real for whom and why. Writing about reality, how they understand it, and then listening to what others have to say about it gives them a sense of the importance of accepting difference, just as it shows them what's common in those experiences. As Neal Postman notes in *The End of Education*, one of the most important things we need to do in teaching children is not only to improve their self-respect, but to teach them to respect the selves of those around them. Letting the kids do their own exploring lets them see that their realities, their ideas of order (and disorder) are neither abstract nor arbitrary. It lets them face themselves, as well as others, and in so doing, they are able to identify the experiences they have that are unique and the experiences that they have that are common, a vision not only of the self but the community.

II. The Lesson: Be Quiet

When beginning any discussion of reality, I usually ask the students to talk about how they know that something



is true, how, when presented with information, they can be sure that what they're hearing is accurate. For this discussion, we talk about direct experience as well as indirect experience. If I tell them a story and someone contradicts it, how would they figure out who was telling the truth?

I tell them about the time my friend Joe and I went mountain biking and when we came to a fork in the road that was the beginning and end of a trail loop, Joe decided to go one way and I decided to go another. I tell the students that when we passed each other he warned me about a rattlesnake he'd seen on the trail. But when I got to the place where he'd seen the snake, I saw a long stick that, in fact, did look like a rattlesnake. So, I ask my students, what was it, a snake or a stick? A stick, they say. But what does Joe think, I ask. Well, they argue, he thinks it's a snake but he's wrong. Here, we're getting at the difference between truth and reality, I tell them. For Joe, the truth is that he saw a snake. He wouldn't be lying to anyone if he told them he'd seen a rattler. This bothers the students a little bit because they think that since they know what really happened, Joe can't possibly believe otherwise. Except, I remind them, the only reason they think they know what happened is because they trust me. How, in fact, do they know that I'm not lying? Or how do they know that there wasn't, in fact, both a snake and a stick there and that the snake left before I got there?

Now the students understand the point of our discussion: by not having directly experienced what happened, their version of it came from an indirect experience of it, through me. They could accept that version as "real" or not, depending on how much they'd decided to trust me.

In some classes, I've asked them what they'd think if they found out I'd made the whole story up for the sake of the lesson. And would it make a difference if I had made it up? This question sometimes confuses them, the idea of the truth in the made-up story, but eventually they see the point: their sense of reality is a combination of direct and indirect experiences, and how much they trust those two will determine their sense of reality.

We talk about other ways to think about reality. I ask them to think about the difference between the reality of science versus the reality of religion. We talk about how even though we perceive the world with our senses (for example, they can tell what they will have for lunch by the smells from the cafeteria), how we interpret our sensory perceptions is often determined by prior interpretations and values (that they know what they're having for lunch doesn't mean they'll want to eat it). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire tells of showing a photo to some tenement residents in Santiago, Chile. The photo shows a group of men standing on a street corner with another man off to the side getting drunk. The photo is supposed to be about the evils of drinking. But the men Freire shows it to see it quite differently. Their interpretation is that the men on the corner are lazy and unemployed, while the drunk man is a real worker who, with money to spare, is taking a deserved break from his labor.

La Realidad es ahí donde el silencio...

La realidad es ahí donde el silencio
propicia el nacimiento del lenguaje.
Porque antes que el oído están los ruidos
y antes que la vista lo creado
y antes que las palabras están las cosas.
Callar para poder mirar oír y hablar
en una lenta floración olvidada.

—Juan Liscano

Reality is there where the silence...

Reality is there where the silence
means the birth of language.
Because before something is heard, there is noise
and before something is seen, it's created
and before there are words, there are things.
Be quiet, so you can see, hear, and speak
in a slow flowering of forgetfulness.

When reading this poem by Venezuelan poet Juan Liscano, the students and I talk about how, for Liscano, having an experience and then being able to name that experience is how the poet understands reality. We talk about his idea, too, that something has to have happened before we can name it. Some students have said you can imagine something that isn't real and describe it, but

others have countered that that doesn't necessarily make what you've imagined real.

The last two lines are often a real puzzler for the students, in part because of their abstractness. I try to explain the lines in the context of what Liscano is asking. He wants us to be quiet, to notice. But he doesn't want us to notice what we already know. He wants us to see and hear and say what we normally wouldn't, to look at a world that always has been there but that we have forgotten to pay attention to.

Finally, as they read the poem, I ask the kids to pay attention to how Liscano has written it. I ask them to note the repetitions, in particular, the way in which the repetition of the word *before* creates a tight rhythmic build-up that contrasts strongly with the relaxed flow of the closing lines.

For some of my students, though, Liscano's faith in language and experience are not enough. In part, it's because their age has given them neither enough language nor enough experience to gauge how they understand the world. They're forced to rely on the experiences of others, what their parents tell them, what they learn in school, what they get from the media. But with so many different sources, the reality they receive is a fragmented one. And the received realities are ones they don't have the maturity or the experience to assess analytically. And so, the students don't question the validity of what they've experienced; what they do question is the conflict between their experiences and the experiences of others: this is real for me for now, but it isn't for someone else, so what is it? As they begin their writing, I suggest that they think about that question. I ask them to think about how they understand how the question of different experiences and interpretations appears in their own lives, reminding them of how it happened for me and my friend Joe. I reread Liscano's poem to them, asking them to think about how for this poet language is at the heart of reality. Finally, I urge them to try to follow his final instructions: to be quiet, so they can see, hear, speak.

Did It Really Happen?

Wind, you can feel it, but you don't
You can sing, but you don't
You can read a great book, but you don't
You can have a conversation, but you don't
You can walk, but you don't
You can know someone, but you don't
You can do all these things
but if you don't remember them
You never really did them

—Gayle Wayne, *fifth grade*

Reality

You need silence to make reality
Reality can be a clock
Reality can't be a time machine
The start of a clock is silence
Then you build it
A time machine does not need silence
It is not reality
You can find reality wherever you go
Go ahead
Sit on a rock in the woods
Reality is the long, thin, green grass
Reality is the rustling leaves on the
tall, brown trees
Reality is the small, white, furry bunnies
Reality is people
and Reality is you

—Desiree Raffi, *fifth grade*

I was walking in the
street I saw this ugly tree with
no leaves and green branches

I saw this car riding
with no wheels and no windows
no doors and also no chair

—Rodrigo Murillo, *sixth grade*

What is Reality?
Life formed on Earth
Does it exist with the energy of space?
Yes, no, maybe so
No one will ever know

Why are flowers used as a person's name?
Is it because they're beautiful and
have attraction
Do you think it's because they feel like it?

What is up in space?
Gases and features only?
They work in a special way
The sun as a light bulb, the stars as
fireflies, and the sky as blueberry juice

Does it exist at all?

—Rose Garcia, *sixth grade*

Is Reality Stone?

New York, dark, gloomy buildings
Connecticut, light grassy houses
New York Reality, Connecticut
fantasy. Which is Reality? We don't know. It's
just a building or a house to us. Where do we come
from, Connecticut or New York, fantasy or reality?

We're trapped in buildings every day, not knowing.
Is reality stone? Is reality stone? Is Reality
like Medusa, inside dark and gloomy, and then
outside, just a block of stone?

Who knows? Do you?

Is Reality stone?

—Jerry Medina, Jr., sixth grade

What is air?

What are people?

You can see evil, speak evil, or hear evil if
we don't have language, eyes, or ears.

What is the meaning of love? Is it blind?

Is there life after death?

Why do I write this poem?

Do I have a life?

Do I have a love?

Am I something in a big blue ball that spins
in a big black place?

—Joshua Nuñez, sixth grade

The City of New York

In the city I see

many people getting hurt in many ways
seeing people mugging others' valuables

Homeless people on the streets
looking around for little scraps of food
Singing the song "Akuna Matata"

Words which mean no worries
I hear many different sounds in NY
such as many gunshots everywhere

Going from drugs to heads
sniffing up the drugs to their noses
No, not afraid to die

—Jason Petrone, sixth grade

What Is Reality?

Is reality round?

Or is it things that have
been seen, heard, and spoken
about?

Why is Rose a person and
has not just been kept
as the name of the flower?

Why do I sit next to
Rose and not a flower?

Why are roses red and not
green or blue, the colors I like?

Now tell me, if what I just
wrote is reality
is it?

—Zoraida Jasmin Rivera, sixth grade

I Don't Believe in Complete Reality

I don't believe in complete reality
After everything dies, it is reborn
but not completely

But with the partial reality there is
too much taken for granted

The trees that I climb in the backyard
what comes between the seasons
how people's clothes fit
how you will never ever see the same cloud twice

and where does it go...

why does it leave

why is so much taken for granted

and would it be better

if we knew

and why don't we realize how much this world
has to offer

do we even notice, or care

—Sari Zeidler, fifth grade

The variety of the resulting poems is extraordinary. For some of the students, like Gayle Wayne, reality is connected to memory. If two people share an experience and only one person remembers it, then the experience was real only for the one person. For the other, it's as though it never happened. Other students—Rose Garcia, Jerry Medina, Jr. and Zoraida Jasmin Rivera, for example—think about reality as an issue of trust, and their poems reflect this as they question the world around them. Desiree Raffi sees reality as something we actively look for. It's as though we perceive reality by acting through it, or creating it; the world is there only because we notice it, what we don't notice doesn't count. Sari Zeidler and Rodrigo Murillo have much grimmer perspectives on reality; they look at it passively, wondering why anyone bothers to think experiencing this world makes any difference at all.

Silence

by Mark Statman

IN OAXACA, MEXICO, THE ORANGE FLOWER city, and in the ruins outside it at Yagul and Dainzu, I consciously began to hear silence for the first time. It's not that there wasn't sound, but there were moments, late at night, early morning, when the background of silence became the most practical and exotic way to hear sound. It was every sharp clop of a burro's hooves on cobblestone, every radio voice, soft sweet guitar strums lingering and wavering through the air. It was sitting on a hill where a Zapotec temple once had been, site of human sacrifice, and looking out over the green valley, hearing the lowing of cows and the bleating of sheep, the voices of the herders and of farmers with machetes cutting corn. And this listening, it wasn't the case of one sound layering over another sound. It was a sound heard clearly against what at first thought seemed like nothing at all. Only silence, I was beginning to understand, isn't nothing. It only seems to be when compared with the idea of listening and hearing as the distinguishing, labelling, and ordering of various sounds, some fully allowed, others partly filtered, others blocked by the brain.

Since that time in Oaxaca, I've found myself able to notice silence everywhere, from summer nights on a stoop in Brooklyn to late evening fishing on the Cow Pasture River in western Virginia, wading through the slow, cool water. I've heard it on beaches and subway platforms, in snow, in rain, in wind. When you hear silence, it has a remarkable presence, a way of leading the listener beyond noise and language. It leads to a kind of listening that *seems* passive because it is neither critical nor interpretive. Hearing silence is about letting the sounds of the world come to you. It is about stopping and not doing, giving yourself a chance to hear things not only as you want them to be or assume them to be or think they may be. It is about learning to eliminate the identity of the "listener" from the equation and to hear things as they are.

II. Silence as Presence

Hay silencio en la lluvia

hay silencio en la lluvia que cae estripitosamente sobre
el techo de lámina
en nuestro pensamiento hay silencio
en medio del ruido externo a veces estamos sumergidos en
el más profundo silencio y cuando de pronto un sonido

nos arranca de nuestra quietud se nos hace insoportable
toda voz y todo lo que nos llama nos rompe
sin embargo a veces rodeados de silencio parecemos estar
llenos de ruido los pensamientos suenan las manos suenan
al aire crepita y el más dulce rostro es altisonante

el espacio se vuelve una enorme caja de resonancia
donde golpea sin cesar el tiempo, pero también ocurre
que al hablar la voz no suena aunque lo pensado
parece arañar los vidrios

—Homero Aridjis

There's Silence in the Rain

there's silence in the rain that falls crashing on
the tin roof
in our thoughts, there's silence
in the middle of all the noise around us, sometimes we're
submerged in
the deepest silence and when suddenly a sound
drags us from our quiet every voice
becomes unbearable and everything that calls us breaks us
sometimes, surrounded by silence, we seem to be
filled with noise, our thoughts sound, our hands sound
the air crackles and the sweetest face sings too high
space becomes a huge box of sound
where time beats without stopping, where, at the same time
the voice talking makes no sound though what's thought
seems to scratch at the windows

Al Silencio

Oh voz, única voz: todo el hueco del mar,
todo el hueco del mar no bastaría
todo el hueco del cielo,
todo la cavidad de la hermosura
no bastaría para contenerte,
y aunque el hombre callara y este mundo se hundiera
oh majestad, tú nunca,
tú nunca cesarías de estar en todas partes,
porque te sobra el tiempo y el ser, única voz,
porque estás y no estás, y casi eres mi Dios,
y casi eres mi padre cuando estoy más oscuro.

—Gonzalo Rojas

To Silence

Oh voice, only voice: not all of the ocean's emptiness,
not all of the ocean's emptiness is enough
not all of the sky's emptiness,
nor the hollowness of beauty
is enough to hold you,



and even though a man becomes quiet and this world
disappears
oh power, you never
you never will stop being everywhere
because you are greater than time and existence, only
voice,
because you are and you aren't, and you're almost my God,
and you're almost my father when I'm at my darkest.

In Juan Liscano's poem (in chapter 3), silence becomes the moment before reality begins. Here, for Gonzalo Rojas, silence is not a moment before; rather, it is the source of his voice, as a poet and as a human being. Silence is the space in which the universe resides. In Homero Aridjis's experience, as well as my own, silence is inherent in all things that make sound; sound and silence exist because of each other.

The value of being aware of the presence of silence amidst the noise of our lives is one that seems to be disappearing from my life, and I wonder if this isn't true for a lot of people. Living in a city should not make it harder to do that kind of listening. That there are noises should, in fact, call attention to our need for silence, for taking moments to stop and rest and hear the world.

But often what I've observed is that what people do to get away from the noises of the city is to add more noises to it. They speak over others (who cares what they're saying?). They lean hard on their car horns (who cares if the light has only just changed?). They make it so loud that the next person has to become louder in an exponential explosion of useless volume.

Sometimes, and I wonder if this isn't worse, I've dealt with noise by cutting myself off from it, the way a few seconds ago I closed the window, not because of the cold but because there was someone shouting as he walked down the street. I didn't take the time to find out why, nor did it occur to me that I wouldn't hear it anymore once he moved off the block. I closed the window. I stopped trying to hear and understand what is out there, both in its sound and in its silence. And this can happen anytime, anywhere. At that moment, I've actively, willingly, *willfully* given up something valuable. Losing the silence of the world also means losing something of the sounds of the world because of how much avoidance goes into my listening. It's harder to walk down the street the way Whitman does in *Leaves of Grass* and to notice the sounds of that street, the voices, music, traffic, the urban energy. I've practiced not noticing so much that I have to remind myself to stop, to follow Liscano's admonition to be quiet and to hear the old, familiar sounds or the new and resonant ones.

III. A Lesson in Silence

There are a number of different ways in which I've asked students to think about silence. With kindergartners and first graders I've done it by asking them to make sounds: the sound of a train, a truck, a car, a plane. What's the sound of the wind, the wind in the trees, the ocean? And then I ask them for the sound of silence. Not a movement in the class, not a sound. Is it completely silent? Of

course not. But by contrasting the sudden quiet with the sounds they've just been making, we get pretty close.

With older kids, I start by asking them to notice sound and silence away from the classroom. Anticipating that this is what we'll talk about in the following session together, I give them the assignment of taking some time over the following days to listen. Listen in the street. Listen at home at night in bed. Listen to the morning. Then, during our next time together I ask them to tell me the different things they noticed. We talk about why some things are more noticeable than others. One of the things they always seem to pick up on is how relative volume is: that a cat can seem louder than a truck if the cat is all that's there and all you want to do is sleep, whereas the truck in the middle of the day is something you can barely hear over the sound of the subway train—in fact, you might not notice it at all.

After talking all this through, I ask them now to be not as quiet as they can, but as *silent* as they can. We try it several times until we're all satisfied with our level of silence. Then I ask them to think about what happens when the silence happens. How does it make them feel? What does it make them think about? I ask them to think about how sound compares with silence—are they part of each other or separate? Does one contain the other? We think about how physical silence can feel, how essential it can be in our lives. Then, with all these ideas floating around, I ask them to write.

Stumped

Writing for Mark one sunny day
like this
It's hard to think of something to write
Ah ha!
I've thought and I finally have it
it's a beautiful
poem and a beautiful day for it too
I will read it to my
class
to make their eyes shine like golden suns
This is my poem for
Mark
Silence
Silence sweet silence
no trains no buses
no babies crying
no people arguing
no wars
Nothing but sweet silence and peace
—*Lauryn Bermudez, fifth grade*

Early in the Morning

Early in the morning
before the sun shall rise
a quietness, a stillness
shall come before your eyes
and the only sounds that can
be heard are the sounds the
stillness cries
The sound of water
of water silent rippling
to the bank
the sound of sea gulls calling
to each other from
a distance, the sound of
rushes rustling and
whistling in the wind
a quietness, a stillness

—*Edrid Sanabria, fourth grade*

De noche

De noche se oye el sonido
de las olas aullando
las estrellas brillan en el cielo
y las olas del mar chocan
contra las piedras
De repente
los arboles se remecia
asustado abri mis ojos
mire por todos lados
no
vi
nada
ni siquiera el mar

—*Luis Chavez, fifth grade*

At Night

At night one hears the sound
of the waves howling
the stars shine in the sky
and the waves of the ocean beat
against the stones
Suddenly
the trees sway
Frightened, I opened my eyes
looking all around
I saw
nothing
not even the ocean

Dreams of the Animals

by Mark Statman

WHEN TEACHING DREAM POEMS, I'VE FOUND it possible, in particular when working with older kids, to extend the discussion about dreaming and to have them think about dreams that have little to do with their own. Margaret Atwood's "Dreams of the Animals" is a good example of how one poet has done this.

Dreams of the Animals

Mostly the animals dream
of other animals each
according to its kind

(though certain mice and small rodents
have nightmares of a huge pink
shape with five claws descending)

: moles dream of darkness and delicate
mole smells

frogs dream of green and golden
frogs
sparkling like wet suns
among the lilies
red and black
striped fish, their eyes open
have red and black striped
dreams defense, attack, meaningful
patterns

birds dream of territories
enclosed by singing.

Sometimes the animals dream of evil
in the form of soap and metal
but mostly the animals dream
of other animals.

There are exceptions:

the silver fox in the roadside zoo
dreams of digging out
and of baby foxes, their necks bitten

the caged armadillo
near the train
station, which runs
all day in figure eights
its piglet feet pattering,
no longer dreams
but is insane when waking;

the iguana
in the petshop window on St Catherine Street

crested, royal-eyed, ruling
its kingdom of water-dish and sawdust

dreams of sawdust.

This poem has been a particular favorite with a number of the teachers with whom I've worked. Many have asked me specifically, year after year, to teach it in their classes. Others have been so drawn to the possibilities of the poem, though, that they've actually asked me not to teach it: they want to do it themselves.

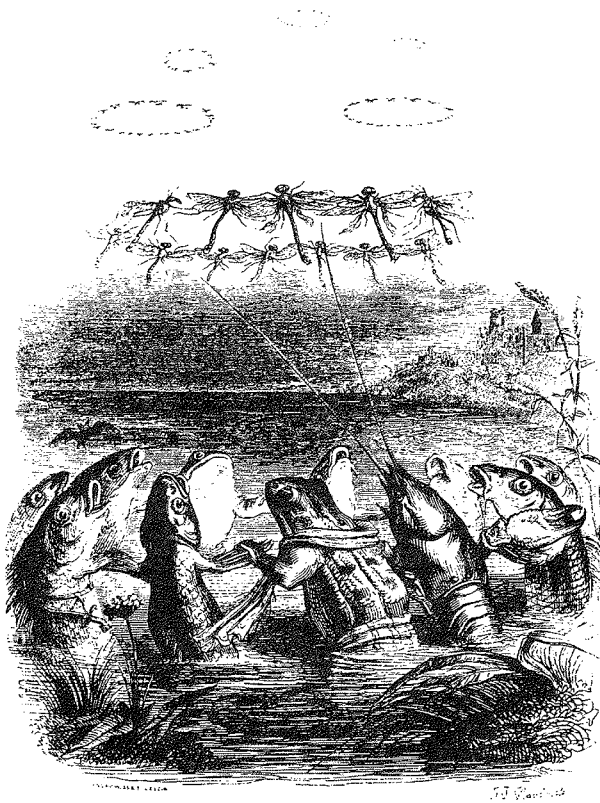
There's a lot going on in "Dreams of the Animals." I like Margaret Atwood's line breaks, the way the poem looks on the page, the way the poet's sense of space becomes part of the sense and meaning of the poem. Seeing the word *moles* under *moles* and *frogs* under *frogs* creates a kind of visual meter. Each individual line with its individual image gives us a single picture. But it combines with succeeding lines to create another, another, and another, giving us the experience of the whole poem, as well as its many parts: "green and golden / frogs / sparkling like wet suns / among the lilies." Here the sky is brought to the water. And in the form of a frog.

I enjoy Atwood's playfulness with perception. Contrary to what humans might think, frogs see frogs as beautiful. Moles (which smell pretty awful) think of their scents as "delicate."

The final dreams are riveting. The silver fox dreams of a freedom it will never have. Its future at best is as a fur coat or stole. The armadillo no longer has dreams, hopes, or desires. And, having lost the ability to dream, it has gone insane. Meanwhile, the iguana, an animal worshipped by some cultures, dreams of nothing more than sawdust.

A question I often ask the kids is, who has it the worst? Is it the one that dreams of a freedom it will never have? The one that can't dream at all but doesn't even know it can't? Or is it the one that, once considered a god, dreams of something almost valueless, and even sadder, only of what it already has? Of course, there are no right answers. But the ensuing discussion is always interesting.

Before the students write their own Dreams of the Animals poems, I ask them to think about the different kinds of animals that interest them and why (sometimes I ask them, before we read the Atwood poem, to write the names of these animals on a piece of paper; that way they



Giraffe

The young giraffe
 dreams
 of being able to
 reach the leaves on the
 tall acacia trees of
 the land
 The giraffe
 that has no mother
 must eat shrubs from
 the hot African floor
 He cannot reach the green
 moist leaves but must eat
 the dry brown shrubs
 in order to stay alive
 The young giraffe must
 run with
 no mother to protect him
 But soon the shrubs
 are gone and the
 giraffe is no longer
 short and able to reach
 the leaves he is free

—Matthew Guevara, sixth grade

Snake's Dream and Rat

The snake dreams about
 rats
 catching
 rats
 When a snake catches a rat it
 is
 happy
 But what about the rat it feels
 sad
 eaten
 chewed up
 Dead as a doornail
 But it is the snake's dream
 But when the rat dreams it
 probably is dreaming about being a giant
 and
 killing snakes
 scaring snakes
 wanting to do what the snake
 does to the rat. But then the snake
 feels
 sad
 eaten up
 chewed up
 dead as a doornail
 But this is the rat's dream
 And the rat is happy
 But when the snake is up
 and the rat is up
 Snatch!
 The snake has breakfast

—Jon Kappel, sixth grade

already have animals to think about, although I let them know they're not restricted to these animals and don't have to write about any of them if there are other animals that appeal to them more). I remind them that the point is to imagine and write down the dreams that the animals might really have. This means thinking about what the animal, if it could speak or write, would care about, as opposed to what a human, who might have been transformed into that animal, might care about. An eagle, for example, unaware of the existence of a hamburger, would surely not dream of flying to Burger King. But it might dream of trout in a stream on a summer day. If the students want to go beyond dreams and into nightmares for the animals, I let them know that this is all right.

There is a blue horse
 on a hill
 His owner didn't want him
 He misses the fields
 The chicken
 The barn
 and all the things in the farm
 He is on the trail to another farm
 He is in Colorado
 eating grass

—Omar Reyes, third grade



BOOK REVIEW

The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880 by D.G. Myers. Prentice Hall Studies in Writing and Culture (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1996). 224 pp. pbk. \$46.50.

There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion.—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar” (1837)

That the phrase “creative writing” came into the language accompanied by “creative reading” is just one of many provocative discoveries and reminders to be found in *The Elephants Teach*, a partisan history of how and why professional writers came to teach writing. D. G. Myers’s first premise is that self-expression in the classroom is a useful complement to the study of literature, but he also believes that the two approaches have never truly coincided in practice. Emphasizing this paradox he perceives, Myers comes close to skepticism as to whether creative writing can be taught at all. The title, borrowed from Roman Jakobson’s objection to Vladimir Nabokov teaching literature at Harvard (“Shall we appoint elephants to teach zoology?”), is a not very cryptic warning. Still, as the first book-length history of the American idea of creative writing as an academic subject, *The Elephants Teach* is amusingly contrary in a way that recalls Phillip Lopate’s curmudgeonly essays.

The book begins with the prehistory of writing instruction in America, when the company of writers who taught philology and rhetoric included Longfellow. (The poet complained of “Poetic dreams shaded by irregular French verbs.”) Student and instructor impatience in the late 1860s (and improved pens) brought on the decline of both philology’s interpretation-free study of the grammar and vocabulary of classical texts and rhetoric’s emphasis on correct speech, memorization, and persuasion. Essays in English replaced exercises in Latin, and some instructors had to correct as many as 1600 papers per semester. At Harvard in the 1880s, struggling writer Barrett Wendell accepted poems and stories for credit for his daily-theme assignment:

The only requisites are that the subject shall be a matter of observation during the day when it is written, that the expression of it shall not exceed a hundred words or so, and that the style shall be fluent and agreeable.

With Wendell the teacher of many future teachers, the daily-theme assignment found its way into many of the

country’s English departments. Myers suggests that the daily-theme’s constructivist philosophy of “Emersonian idealism and descriptive realism” became the ideology of creative writing teachers, and to some extent, the guiding aesthetic of mainstream American literature.

The Elephants Teach dates the beginning of creative writing as a secondary school subject to 1920, with the arrival of novelist Hughes Mearnes at the Lincoln School, a laboratory school affiliated with Teachers College in New York City. At Lincoln, Mearnes tried replacing the regular English curriculum with creative writing. Mearnes’s results drew national attention to his students’ writing, and spawned two full-length accounts of his work, *Creative Youth* and *Creative Power*. Myers is long on the progressive theory that informed Mearnes’ work (*Creative Youth* was dedicated to John Dewey), but short on details about day-to-day activities at Lincoln. When Myers finally does discuss Mearnes’s experiments, he ends up suggesting that the writers’ workshop format of contemporary graduate programs is actually an adaptation of these primary school poetry class methods from the 1920s. If this thesis is correct, the differences (and similarities) in how creative writing is taught to grown-up students and to schoolchildren might be worth exploring. But Myers does not follow up on this potential lead.

Subsequent chapters detail the development of undergraduate creative writing classes in the period between the two world wars, the rise of New Criticism, and the postwar development of the graduate creative writing program, paying specific attention to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and the post of creative writing professor (as opposed to English instructor). As with his two chapters on the history of university writers-in-residence and on writers’ colonies, Myers’s tone ranges from resentment to hostility. His angry criticisms make it difficult for the reader to puzzle out the ambitions and successes of the new cadre of academic creative writing teachers. Also, he neglects to mention a whole range of experiments in education, from Black Mountain College to the writers-in-the-schools movement to graduate programs that emphasize both writing and literature, such as those at NYU, Brooklyn College, and the University of Buffalo. *The Elephants Teach* is more a suspicious chronicle of the ways writers have pursued a living teaching than a history of the ideas and methods with which those writers tried to inspire their students.

—Jordan Davis

The Afro of García Lorca

by Elizabeth Gold

CHOOSING A POEM TO TEACH A CLASS CAN BE like taking a trip back to your own childhood, trying to remember what it was—animals, dreams, fears, resentment—that got you going once long ago. (If you're a poet, though, it's not that difficult, since most poets are inflated kids!) Even so, where kids will run with something is often a surprise. This is what makes teaching fun, and how it is akin to poetry. Take, for instance, what I think of as my weirdest class, the one I never could have predicted. I had come in to the fourth grade summer school class with Federico García Lorca's "Sleepwalking Ballad" ("Green, how much I want you green..."), all set to get the students writing poems about color. The poems they wrote were good, some of them, although I can't remember them now. Their poems were eclipsed by what happened next, when I was gathering my books together, getting ready to go.

"I met García Lorca once," Kevin, the natural comedian in the front row, suddenly said, with an air of airy adult nonchalance.

"Did you?" I asked. "That's pretty amazing. He died over thirty years ago."

Kevin pretended not to have heard me. "Oh yes. Oh yes. I met him—oh—about ten years ago."

The class began to snicker, but Kevin's face was perfectly deadpan.

"Really? What did he look like?"

"He had a great big afro. Like my grandfather," he said, and as the class cracked up, he added, inspired, "That's where he kept his money. He just picked it out of his hair."

"That's where he kept his *dog* leash," someone added. "When he wanted to walk his dog, he just reached into his afro."

"That's where he kept his chicken! When he was hungry he reached into his afro!"

By this time the whole class was shouting all the different things García Lorca kept in his afro, and I was writing them on the board as fast as I could. But I couldn't write much—I really did have to go. Yet over

the next couple of days, I kept thinking about the afro of García Lorca. When I returned to class, it seems the students had, too. "Can we talk some more about the afro of García Lorca?" someone asked.

"I have a better idea. Why don't we write poems about it instead?"

Which they did. I wrote the lines on the board from the last class, changing "I met..." to "We met...." Then they were off, describing that afro, which grew more and more enormous, sheltering an oven, a refrigerator, a jacuzzi, Grandma, God, and Big Ben. They also drew pictures: García Lorca in sideburns, a goatee, and a great mushroom cloud of an afro; a García Lorca who was nothing but a mound of afro; and—in a drawing which I think of as an extraordinary metaphor for a poet—García Lorca as a tiny, tiny man with a huge afro sprouting apples. One boy went even further, drawing García Lorca's alter ego, García Loco.

I had no idea why they found that afro so captivating—or why I did, too. But at one point this boy lifted his head and said with a look of serious dreaminess (and he was usually a wild boy, who found it almost impossible to keep still), "Is this what a poem is? Just making things up?"

"Yes," I said, "that's exactly what it is."

Just making things up. It sounds so easy, but the route to that place of inspired rightness is so mysterious that poets of other eras invented women with wings and togas to show themselves the way. Still, there are a few things that happened with that class beforehand to make those afros possible.

First, form. I had designed the classes around a very simple format. I would always come in and write the name of the poet for the day on the board. I would tell them where he or she was from, and the students would imagine that place a little. Then I would talk about the poet's life—again, just a little bit (and in the case of García Lorca, a very little bit!), but enough for them to think of the poet as a person. Then I would have a few students read the poem aloud from handouts I gave them. (With García Lorca, I had some read "Sleepwalking Ballad" in Spanish first, before others read translations in English.) Then I would give them a topic, a simple topic, and they would write. I always made sure there was time at the end of class for students to read their poems out

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loud. And that was it. It was easy, it worked, and it left space for those things that sometimes happen, and are always great when they do.

Which brings us to improvisation. I think teaching is an art, and like all art there should be space for what is supposed to happen as well as the unpredictable and unique—the riffs in jazz, or the moments when the pen takes over and leads the hand across the page. The thing about improvisation, the thing which gives it its thrill and tension, is how easily it might *not* happen. It is our job as writers, and as teachers, to make sure that it does. What do I mean? Consider what would have happened if I hadn't taken Kevin on, if I hadn't asked that simple gossipy question: "What did he look like?" I know what would have happened: nothing. A good question can open the door.

My good question, the question I'm asking myself, was: How did Kevin know? We read many poets that summer, poets I loved, but García Lorca was a little different. I had been reading his biography, and he—at least in this biography—was so lovable, and his ending so tragic, and that summer in New York so hot, the hottest on record, so perfectly—Andalucian—he had been much on my mind. I didn't tell Kevin about *Poet in New York* and García Lorca's fascination with Black American culture. I only showed that class a fragment of García Lorca's wild, surrealistic poems. But those afros they drew, and the poems they wrote: they *were* Lorcaesque. Okay, to be more exact, *Locoesque*. But still.

As the kids were becoming more and more obstreperous, packing that afro with all the splendor and dreck they

could think of, one of them began to worry that perhaps they were going too far—insulting the dead, or some such thing. He said: "Uh oh. García Lorca is going to get us.

I laughed at that. It seemed to me García Lorca already had.

Selections from *The Afro of García Lorca*:

1. His dog is lost in his afro for a month.
2. He has his own movie theater in his afro.
3. He has a building in his afro.
4. He has a jacuzzi and a swimming pool in his afro.
5. He has Macys in his afro.
6. His hair is so hard a bazooka can't cut it.
7. He has a graveyard in his afro.

1. He has Six Flags in his afro.
2. He has Big Ben in his afro.
3. He has Godzilla.
4. He has T Rex in his afro.
5. He has the Eiffel Tower in his afro.
6. He has the Manhattan Christmas Tree in his afro.

—Andres

He even kept himself in his big afro.
When García Lorca played Hide and Seek
he would even hide himself in his afro....

—Iliana

OH Afro OH Afro
Why are you so big
OH Afro OH Afro
you have a big land
OH Afro OH Afro
You gave me money
OH OH like this 1,001,
1 50,000 228,672
OH García Lorca you
made me lose my count!

—Ivan

...Then I said your breath smells
like train smoke. So then I said
are you ever going to cut
that big Afro of yours he said no
So then I said yes you are.
I took him to the barber.
The barber cut all of his hair off
García Lorca looked in the mirror
and he passed away

—Kevin