

Teachers & Writers

Magazine

Volume 9, No. 2



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Exchanges

Dear Teachers & Writers,

Motivation and innovation have always, in my opinion, seemed to be two sides of the same coin. No teacher can do the same thing day in and day out and expect enthusiasm and interest on the part of her students. The difficult thing is to find a project which will sustain interest over a long period of time, and be educationally advantageous.

It seems that the best ideas are come upon accidentally, and so it happened with me. One of my good friends is retired and devotes all of her time as a volunteer in the "Meals on Wheels" program. In case you are unfamiliar with this program, it entails delivering lunches and dinners to elderly people who are not independent enough to do for themselves. My friend, Amelia Arthur, explained to me how lonely and friendless were so many of these people and I suggested that each of my fourth graders adopt a Sr. Citizen in the "Meals on Wheels" program as a pen pal. I would get the names from Amelia, the children would write letters in English class with proper instruction from me, the letters would be mailed to Amelia, she would put each letter in the appropriate lunchbag and the end result was that each elderly person got a letter with his lunch. We did this once a month. If the person was unable to read it, the volunteer who delivered his meals also read the letter.

This was our original plan, and we followed it for the whole school year. The experience was a rewarding one for everyone involved. My class

developed a deep concern for their pen pals, and for the aged in general. Their handwriting improved tremendously as I pointed out that older people have a difficult time seeing. Proper use of English came about naturally. The letters, with the permission of their writers, would be read aloud in class. Then everyone would join in to point out its assets and suggest any changes. Many children drew pictures to liven the script and used colored pens. One child sent a lucky penny and when I complimented him on the idea the inevitable happened. Six others enclosed lucky pennies in their letters and one generous soul wanted to send \$10. Of course, I discouraged this, but a ticklish problem arose when some of the Sr. Citizens began sending dollar bills as rewards to my students. My class and I decided we would donate the money back to "Meals on Wheels" and I promised to match each donated dollar with one of my own. This resolved our dilemma nicely, but the next one I had to solve alone.

Some of the Sr. Citizens died and the decision to tell the children involved lay entirely with me. I decided not to and told them that they would be getting new Sr. Citizens' names, because theirs had to go into a nursing home. This explanation was readily accepted.

The whole project was a positive one. Especially when Mrs. G., Douglas Denzik's Sr. Citizen, decided to send special cupcakes to the whole class the day before Easter vacation. I asked Douglas to tell the class how

the cupcakes came about, and he, in his usual forthright manner stood up and said, "Listen, you guys, if it weren't for me, none of you would be getting these cupcakes today." He then went on to explain the other details.

Many of the children and Sr. Citizens exchanged telephone numbers. Although the elderly people live on the other side of the city from my students, one of my students is planning to visit her correspondent this summer. Incidentally, the fact that the correspondents lived in another section of the city from my students fit in very nicely with my Social Studies lesson. I got a large, detailed map of the city of Pittsburgh, showing wards and names of streets. A toy car was then used to show how one would travel in order to reach that part of the city.

A great deal of enthusiasm was generated when we were able to have the children tape their letters and broadcast them over the local Community Radio station. Adults in our building served as a substitute for the Sr. Citizens and read their letters on the tapes. From what Amelia tells me, it made the "Meals on Wheels" participants feel very important. There were innumerable benefits derived by my students: practice in reading aloud with a real purpose, self-esteem and self-confidence, and a notoriety throughout the school.

Next year I would like to plan a social so that the young and old correspondents could meet and see one another.

Three little girls in my room made

rosary beads for all the elderly participants. They were beautifully made in many different colored beads. It seemed a fitting culmination to the years' activities. They were done strictly on their own time and initiative.

This project was the most worthwhile one I have ever been involved in. It was most gratifying to me and all who were involved. Let's hope that it will spur other teachers to do likewise.

—Shirley Shratter

Dear Mr. Barry,

I am so happy that school has started. I like all the subjects and my teachers are nice. I do not get very much homework at night. But when I do get it, I do it right after school so I can go outside and play.

Yesterday, I went to a Steeler football game. At halftime the score was 16-0 in favor of the Steelers. At the end of the game the score was 30-0. Steelers had one and are undefeated. Their record is 7 wins and 0 defeats. I thought the best play of the game was when the player on the other team tipped the ball in the air and Steelers intercepted. The game was very good.

Your friend
Ronald Ecoff

Swimming Pool

Dear Miss Green,

We are going on a picnic in June with our class. The place where we

are going is Monroeville Swim Club. There is a tennis court, a swimming pool, a trail to hike on, and other activities. It will be our last trip of the year.

Boat Trip

About two weeks ago, our class went on a boat ride. In third grade, we were supposed to, but it rained. When we first started, we were on the upper deck. On the boat we went through the locks also. The refreshment stand was on the first deck. I had two hot dogs, two cokes, two candy bars, and one souvenir. My mother said "If you drink another coke you will look like one."

Your friend,
Ronald Ecoff

Tambwitzans

Dear Miss Green,

On Monday, April 14 our class went to see the Tambwitzans. They played a line of music while they introduced each instrument to help us understand better. They showed us a wedding ceremony. They sort of put on a play from the Middle East.

Iran

Mrs. Stark showed us some great slides of Iran. She came to a beautiful place filled with fantastic designs. She says they say your halfway around the world. I wish I could have seen more.

Health-O-Rama

My family and I went to a Health-O-Rama to take the tests. They were free. The people that knew about this and didn't go were dumb. You can find out if you have something wrong with your blood, or if your pulse is normal.

See you later.

Your friend
Ronald Ecoff

P.S. Here is a piece of paper from Iran.

Dear Miss Green,

Did you know that we are going to the Phipps Conservatory and the Nature Museum. It will be so much fun. First we are going to the Conservatory and then to the Nature Museum. We will see some beautiful flowers which have many different colors.

On Saturday I built a snow-castle with my friend. At first it didn't look so good but then it started to shape up. We were just ready to put the last brick on when some of it fell off. Then my friend got so mad that he kicked a hole through it. Then we gave up.

I also went to my girlfriend's birthday and I had a lot of fun. We played some games, and I won 30¢ and 2 prizes.

In Science I am growing an avocado. It's name is Mike. I water it, talk to it, and even bathe it.

Well, I have to go now.

from
Ronald Ecoff

Books

INSTEAD OF EDUCATION

by John Holt

E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc.,
New York 1976

Review by Miguel A. Ortiz

School reform movements, John Holt points out, never last long. They hardly ever catch on, even for a little while. Moreover, they are nothing new. For example, as superintendent of schools in Quincy, Massachusetts, Francis Parker, in 1875, attempted the very things we today call revolutionary and experimental education. Such innovations are quickly discarded and forgotten, so that the next wave of reformers always thinks it is breaking new ground.

Experiments in education are generally not given a chance to prove themselves, but even when they do prove successful their demise is just as sure. In the late thirties and early forties the Carnegie Foundation conducted an extensive study, over an eight year span to see whether the traditional rote memorizing way of instruction or the more open, flexible, interest-oriented method was more effective. The study showed that students taught using the latter method proved more successful in school and college. This study was soon forgotten. Few if any teachers, according to Holt, have heard of it.

After every round of reform the long term failures of the traditional schools are blamed on the reformers. Holt cites a *Newsweek* article entitled "Back to Basics in the Schools." I was particularly interested in the mention of this article

because at the time it appeared I myself was incensed by it. The article was grossly misleading. It implied (without presenting any hard facts) that during the sixties a wave of reform had swept the schools and that a large number of students was exposed to experimental and open education. The thrust of the article was that the reform movement was responsible for a general decline in academic performance. Having been myself involved in the open school movement in New York, I knew that the reality was far different from what the *Newsweek* article presented. In fact the number of schools attempting experiments of any significance was very small. Holt estimates that in the most liberal districts the number of children participating in such educational experiments never exceeded ten percent and was usually far less. Extrapolating from a Minnesota study by Gregg Carlson, Holt concludes that only about one percent of the children in that state attended open schools, notwithstanding the fact that Minnesota is one of the most politically and educationally progressive states of the union. Monetarily the picture is the same. The total amount spent on educational innovation over the past ten years was 1.4 billion or approximately one-third of one percent of the total spent on education as a whole. Of that amount only a fraction, one would guess, was spent on significant educational change, a great part of it going to meaningless bureaucratic set ups. These facts do not add up to widespread educational change and experimentation.

The schools are failing to produce literate well educated people, yet nothing effective is done to change that. The schools must be doing something right. What are schools for? What is their real function? First, schools babysit, keep children out of the way. If both parents work this service becomes invaluable. Schools also keep children off the streets where they might interfere with everyday commerce. Schools keep young people out of the labor market where they would compete with their elders and drive wages down. (Education is also a large industry. Directly and indirectly schools generate countless jobs.)

More importantly schools have the social function of labelling and tracking children. Schools determine who are to be the winners and who the losers. In order to remain stable society must convince the losers that that is the way things are supposed to be, that they deserve to be losers, that if they had applied themselves, studied harder, or had been smarter they would be winners. In general schools manage to make the children of winners come out winners and the children of losers come out losers. That way the social status quo is maintained. The schools supply the military-industrial complex with a resigned and docile work force which believes that it is better off trying to make do with things as they are than by trying to change them.

The above is a general outline of John Holt's analysis of the educational system. He provides graphic and convincing evidence for his as-

sertions. I cannot find fault with this analysis, and I was glad to find it put clearly and succinctly in one place. This, however, occupies the last seven chapters of an eighteen chapter book. The other eleven chapters deal with the way things ought to be—some alternatives that have so far been developed. This arrangement of the book created a problem for me.

It is simple enough to see what is wrong with school, simple, and enough to see the evils that plague our society. There is no dearth of ideas and projects that would make life idyllic if we would only institute them. The problem is how to get from where we are to where we want to be. The book is written around the problem, begging the question throughout but never coming to grips with it in a serious manner. Holt does say that it is basically a legislative problem. But that is not enough. The implication is that if we write letters to our elected representatives the schools will change. I am sure that John Holt is too intelligent a man to believe that. The fact is that the overwhelming number of adults do not want to, or do not believe that they can, change the structure of our society. Even if there was a sizeable number of people desirous of change, it would be foolish to begin with the educational system. That, as Holt clearly recognizes, has been tried again and again to no avail. The place to begin a change would be in the economic system. If every worker was insured economic justice then the prime function of the present day school system would be eliminated. Without the need to

differentiate between the winners and the losers the schools would transform themselves.

Changing the economic system, however, is a different kettle of fish from altering the educational establishment. When you talk about changing education you are only considered a fuzzy-headed thinker. At best you're someone to be listened to earnestly and ignored. At worst you're someone to laugh at. But once you begin to talk about changing the economic system you are a dangerous radical to be squashed at any cost. We can point at any number of educational experiments to which, at least, lip service is paid. But where is any attempt at an equitable redistribution of wealth? The power of capital is so entrenched that there is no way at the present time to challenge it without dire consequences. We have seen in Chile how capital deals with any threat to it that may arise by peaceful means. Taking this into consideration how is one to react to a book such as *Instead of Education*? The book asks that we do more than try to make the present system better. It asks that the system be junked altogether, but it does not deal with the basic problems that would accompany any such attempt. It does not deal with the economics and the politics of the situation. It does not even deal with most of the inherent social complexities. In this sense it is an evasive book, or rather a premature book. Holt has become progressively more radical in his writing about education, and this book represents a stage in his development which

the public may well have been spared. It is altogether probable that he will realize that he must deal with the problems he avoided in this book. At that point he will have to write the book that should have preceded *Instead of Education*.

Because he has not dealt with the basic problems of social change, there is no way to evaluate fairly a great many of the programs that Holt describes in the first part of the book. Most of what he says makes a great deal of sense given certain conditions, but those conditions do not now exist. For instance, he mentions the Beacon Hill Free School in Boston, where anyone can offer to teach a course and anyone can sign up for it. If the teacher can attract and hold students that's all that's necessary. The school has no fixed location. Classes meet wherever an available space can be obtained. The instructors are not paid and students don't have to pay to attend. Can this really work on a large scale? Can such a set-up be substituted for our present-day schools? I think that we would be hard put to find a sufficient number of automechanics, not to mention doctors, who would devote even part of their time to training others for free. After all these people have to make a living. Their time is valuable. There are some people in these professions who like to teach, who are altruistic at heart, and who would devote some time to it without monetary compensation, but are there enough of them to satisfy the demand, and will they be able to put in the necessary number of hours? I think

not. Let us suppose for an instant that there was a group of doctors or lawyers or architects who were willing to train people outside the educational establishment of these professions. Would their students be able to get licensed and practice? Well, the law pertaining to licensing would have to be changed, you say. But would not most of the practicing members of these professions fight such changes tooth and nail? We are no longer dealing with education. We are dealing with economic and political power.

Who are these students to be? Workers who hold down a job during the day and go to school at night? How many people who put in a full day on an assembly line have the energy to pursue an education in their spare hours? Or are these students to be of the same class as those who under the present system manage to get through graduate school? If so what would this new educational arrangement have achieved?

In fact the kind of school Holt is describing is one based on dilettantism. This is not necessarily bad for what it is, but let us not forget what it is not. It is not a means of providing upward mobility for the poor, which is what universal education is touted to be. Its failure in this respect is a major part of why it is being called to account by Holt and other reformers. But the educational solutions being offered as substitutes would also fail to perform this task, because the solution at bottom is not a matter of education.

Carried away by his enthusiasm at the apparent inexpensiveness of providing education through a barter system, where the participants would trade skills and knowledge, Holt suggests that underdeveloped countries explore that possibility instead of initiating large expenditures for traditional type schools. This sort of suggestion strikes me as rather assinine and totally insensitive to the conditions and problems existing in the underdeveloped nations. Such countries are not underdeveloped because they lack educational systems; they lack educational systems because they are underdeveloped. The literacy campaign in Cuba, which is the closest I can come to an example of what he might have in mind, was by no means inexpensive. The whole nation was mobilized and strove for that achievement. It was an effort in keeping with the ideology and politics of the Cuban government.

In short, John Holt presents wonderful ideas about education. Who can argue with the assertion that children should be treated humanely, with respect and dignity; that education should not be conducted under the pressure of bribe, threat, greed and fear; that one learns by doing; that facilities should be provided for everyone to actively participate in sports; that compulsion is detrimental to learning and to natural authority? All this and more John Holt proclaims in *Instead of Education*, but alas it takes more than a proclamation of what should be to make the world a better place.

We must deal with certain unpleasant realities before we can move on to the next step. I wondered as I read the book whether John Holt had given any thought to those parents who, when school attendance was no longer compulsory, would put their children to work at home at tasks as unrewarding as the ones adults are forced to perform at their own work places. □

Roots of Open Education in America*

Edited by

Ruth Dropkin and Arthur Tobier

Review by Phillip Lopate

This book has left such a lastingly warm impression on me that I am finally moved to share my enthusiasm for it. Perhaps, having read so many pertinent critiques of today's schools, and first person present-tense reports from the firing line, we are uniquely prepared at this particular moment for a collection such as this, which helps put our educational struggles into an historical perspective that somehow feels more benevolent. Those of us who identify with what has been loosely called open education can feel less alone, less peculiar, knowing that many of the same principles we are fighting for were proven valid at times in a long history which has had its successes, as well as its larger failure ever to become the dominant practice in American classrooms.

*Obtainable by sending \$5.00 to the City College Workshop Center for Open Education, Room 6, Shepard Hall, City College, New York, New York 10031.

Roots of Open Education in America naturally pays homage to the theoretical founding figures such as Froebel, Pestalozzi, Francis Parker and Dewey, but it is most refreshing (and much more systematic) in its attention to "people's institutions" which grew up out of specific community needs. There are articles, as often as possible by first-hand participants (some quite old) about the Iroquois Confederacy and the Mohawk Way school, schools for slaves and emancipated blacks, workmen's circles, settlement houses, the Yiddish *Schules*, one-room schoolhouses, the Highlander (Appalachia) Folk School, the W. P. A. experience, early progressive schools, the first day care program, and so on. The selection rightly emphasizes that the roots of open education in this country are inter-generational, and include adult education as well as kindergartens; in fact, one comes away from the book with a vision of whole community learning (rather than anything so narrow as how to "manage" open classrooms in public schools).

The book, by the way, issues from the City College Workshop Center for Open Education, under the direction of Lillian Weber, which has been a force for the good over the last decade, and responsible for a disproportionate share of the impressive work done in the field of training open classroom teachers and sustaining them in their situations; the broadness of its perspectives is reflected in these pages. The collection was edited by Ruth Dropkin and Arthur Tobier, and their skill in preparing this lovely book is nothing short of miraculous when you realize

that it was transcribed, edited and pulled together from papers, discussions and speeches at a one-day conference. No record of a conference has the right to be this readable and glowing. Those who attended the April 12, 1975 Conference of The Roots of Open Education at CCNY have testified that it was a stirring experience; but that is still a long way from producing a satisfying literary document. Tobier and Dropkin did an impeccable job of presenting the participants' views with a maximum of clarity, and a minimum of loss of personal flavor. No doubt they were helped by the high calibre and articulateness of the participants, who included David Hawkins, Joseph Featherstone, Claudia Lewis, Lillian Weber, Sakakohe Cook, Louis Cohen, Myles Horton, Marian Brooks, and many others. What seems to come through is the general friendliness and mutual respect in the gathering, from people who have had a fair amount of political and educational commitment but do not seem to have to rub it in each other's faces.

Besides the experiential accounts there are several "thinkpieces," including an excellent article by Joseph Featherstone on Dewey's attempted synthesis of science and feeling, which makes the case for viewing Dewey as an evolving philosopher who should not be judged by any one period, and a somewhat harder look at Dewey by David Hawkins in "Developing A New Educational Agenda" and a summing-up piece called "A View of School Reform" by Vito Perrone which I found fascinating. Perrone, in going back over the pages of *Progressive Educa-*

tion and other journals of the 1920s and 1930s, remarks that "the literature seems far too defensive. There were attacks on traditional forms of education long past the point where such rhetoric was useful." He draws other parallels between the two reformist periods, but goes on to say: "There are clearly some differences in the present open education movement in comparison to past progressive efforts. Let me enumerate some. A theoretical base is now more solid. Piaget, in particular, has been responsible for much of this. Open education is more rooted in public education than was progressive education. A higher degree of self-conscious documentation is beginning to occur—practitioners are beginning to explicate what they are about. Their language is growing in specificity. 'Community' as a geographic and social construct is being affirmed. It hardly got off the ground in earlier years."

Whether one wants to agree with all of those conclusions or not, much of what this book points to is encouraging. It helps to free us from a myth of the golden age and that whole untrue guilty complex that schools have somehow gone downhill since "the old days," at the same time as it locates some healthy tendencies and achievements in the past with which it is a pleasure to identify. And it sees signs for continuing hope in a movement which many glib educational fashion-watchers have already counted out. *The Roots of Open Education in America* suggests that there is a great deal of good work that has been done, and that is left to be done. □

Picking Seeds in the South Bronx

by Bob Sievert

On a cold, wet November afternoon I walked around the block with a class of fifth graders from P.S. 152 in the South East Bronx. We had been drawing and talking about plant cycles and seeds for several weeks, and now we were out to gather seeds from as many different plants as we could find growing around the school.

The school itself is a brand new lane expressway where cars and huge trucks barrel past at high speed. The school is on the service road and falls within the morning shadows of this elevated highway. Adjacent to the school are several vacant lots and then an expanse of swampy fields filled with used-car lots, construction dumps, garages, body shops and junk piles all down to the edge of the Bronx River, a dank, dismal stream.

The school itself is a bland new brick and glass building, elegant and well-planned. It sits at the meeting of these fields and the old Bronx, small row houses and once-elegant six-story apartment houses with art deco entranceways. On the other side of the expressway are several very modern coops and housing projects, twenty to thirty floors high with terraces, reflecting a new Bronx. It is from here that most of the students come.

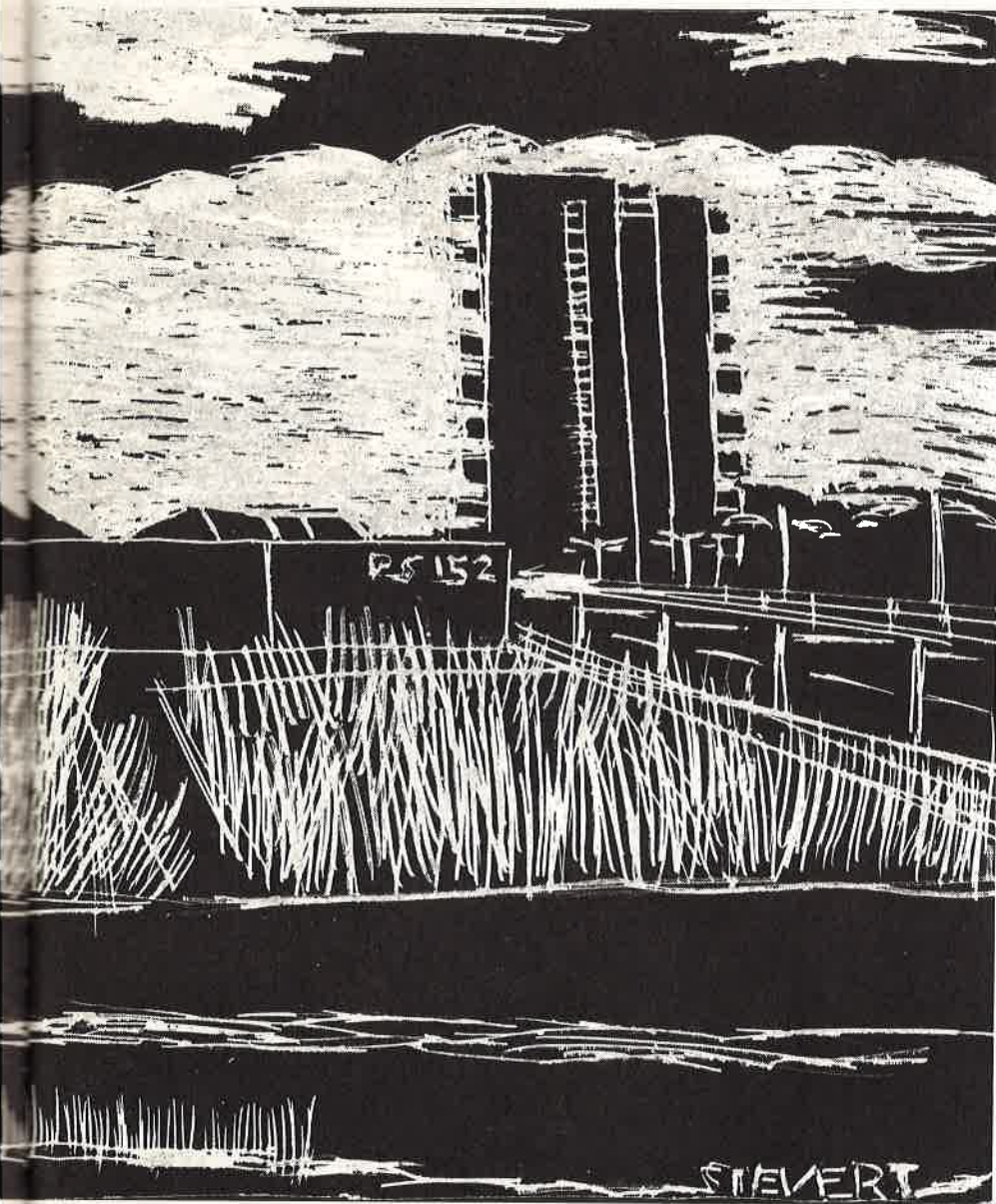
It was my intention to impress upon the class that the plant cycles we had been talking about were not abstract ideas but actually taking place around us at that very time. We left the school and walked along the service road. This seemed civilized enough. But just thirty yards beyond the school, the sidewalk began to disintegrate and an ocean of ragweed began. On closer inspection we found a great variety of plants. I recognized yarrow, timothy, field astors and sorrel, along with other plants I had seen before but did not know by name.

I started showing a small group



how to find the seeds in the dying autumn plants. The class teacher, Carlyn Sanders, and writers Chris Smith and Jim Finney from Teachers & Writers had come along for the walk, and they helped me make sure each student was shown how to find the seeds on the various plants we encountered.

We had traveled the service road as



far as the first corner. We rounded the corner, and as I looked down the long block ahead I shuddered. The road seemed extremely long, the sidewalks had crumbled ten years ago, and the road itself was a lattice of mud and puddles of gray-brown water. The junkyard on the side of the road had a ten-foot cyclone fence that dipped and waved with age. Behind the zigzag wires mean dogs

sarled at us. Amid weeds and stunted alanthas trees were piles of trash and rotting cardboard. A vague stench of rot floated through the crisp autumn air. It was the ultimate image of urban decay.

The children were now making bouquets of the various plants we were passing. Several boys held completely uprooted plants above their heads. Two girls poked at a heap of

waterlogged carpet with a stick. Out of an old crate a pathetic sick dog pulled itself to its feet. The girls started poking at it with the stick and yelling. It was too sick to be vicious but it tried in every way to appear that way to us. It growled and snarled. It was the stick that it was afraid of. I told the girls to move down the street and waited for the entire class to pass. The dog limped its retreat, slouching its head beneath its shoulders. You could see its ribs and I'm sure it was dying.

I was grateful to reach the end of that block and turn the next corner, into a residential neighborhood. Here and there were small flower patches, and maple seed pods and sycamore spurs lay on the walk.

Around the next corner the neighborhood took on a Mediterranean flavor with gardens in front of the small attached houses and plants growing out of the ornamental cement urns on the porches.

When we got back to the school, Tev Sumner, P.S. 152 Principal, was on the sidewalk supervising dismissal. He was noticeably dressed up and said he was on the way to the ballet. Ms. Sanders dismissed her class from the sidewalk. Everyone handed Christine and me their bouquets, which we stuffed into paper shopping bags and took upstairs. Later we all made drawings and collages of the material we had gathered and exhibited it as "local nature."

I can't help going back over that street again and again in my mind. That walk was the best we could do in an afternoon. While the children were able to discover the different plants and widen their perception of nature, it was a far cry from what I had in mind. Plants growing between cracks in buildings and sidewalks, dying, mean animals—what did it all really mean to a young mind? □

THE BALLET LESSON

Flora J. Arnstein

The first time I saw Miss La Veille she was walking up the stairs of St. Mary's Mission School in Chinatown. It was on one of those early fall evenings when the air is still warm in the afterglow of sun, but already in the offing the foghorns could be heard off the Golden Gate, growling their intermittent warning. From any hill-top could be seen the grey swath of fog that would later shred in patches throughout the city.

I was standing at the foot of the Mission stairs enjoying the delicate change from warmth to coolness, as only a native San Franciscan can, who has remembered in childhood lying in bed counting the throaty fog-horns, now deep and menacing, now high pitched in gentler tones. My dreaming was cut short by a small woman who passed me on the stairs but stood tentatively waiting on the landing. I started up the stairs, and seeing her so undecided, asked whether I could be of any help. I must have startled her, for her black cotton gloved hands flew to her lips, but she recovered herself with, "Could you tell me, please, where I can find the principal of the school?" "Of course," I said, and walking at her side led her down the hall to Sister Theresa's office.

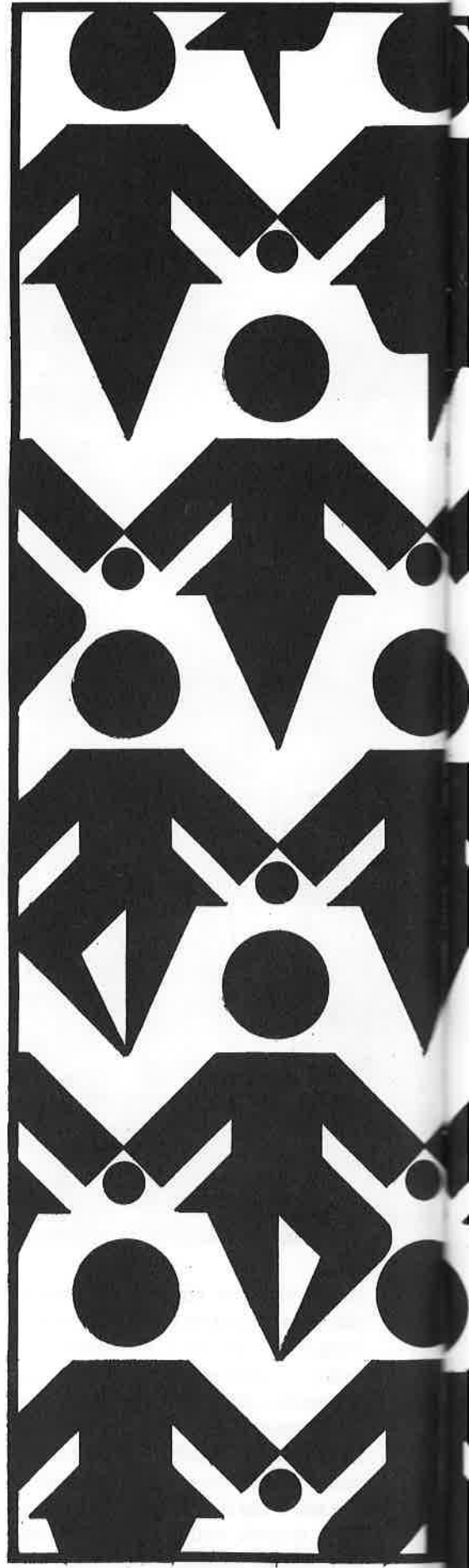
She was such an odd looking little person that I couldn't help wondering what in the world would be bringing her to Sister Theresa. Dressed in a faded purple coat, a red tam-o'shanter set above wispy grey hair, and a skirt that hung to her ankles, she looked like some drawing out of an old magazine.

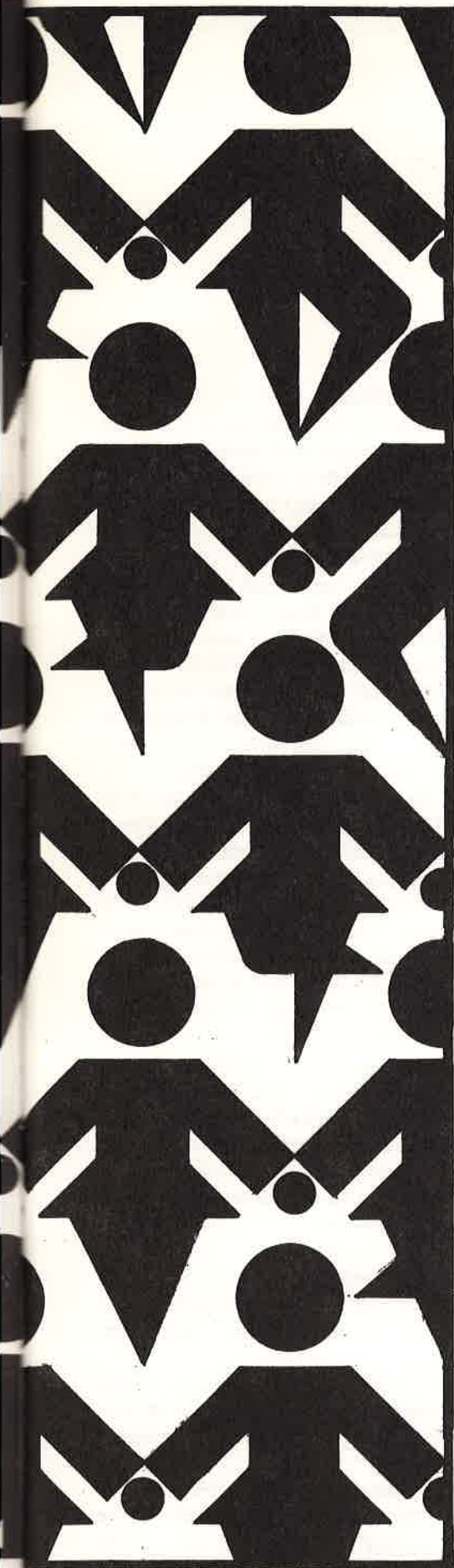
I had intended having a little chat with Sister, but with this new arrival I had to change my plans, so I walked away, leaving her tapping timidly on the office door.

My own status with Sister Theresa was that of a privileged visitor to the school. This had come about because of my befriending one of her children who had fallen and cut her forehead on the curb. Any kindness to her children drew an excess of gratitude from Sister Theresa, so from then on I was assured of a welcome and invited to drop in whenever I liked. I found myself doing this rather frequently. For one thing the little Chinese children fascinated me—there was that matter of the Catholic ritual. I never did get used to seeing these Chinese children dipping fingers in the holy water and crossing themselves. And not the least was Sister Theresa herself.

At first glimpse she was a rather forbidding figure, with her face of an emperor on an old Roman coin. Her stiff coif did nothing to soften the severity of her features, nor did the voluminous habit disguise the boniness of her large frame. Her way of taking a pose and then seeming to congeal into it was not calculated, either, to put one at ease. But I had seen her with her defences down, when she had taken the child from my arms to administer first-aid—from then on she had seemed to assume we had a mutual bond.

With Miss La Veille deposited at her door, my visit would have to be postponed. I wandered around the halls





trying to decide which class I should look in on, but finally made up my mind to return to the Sister's office in the hope that her caller had gone. She had—the door was open and Sister Theresa beckoned me in.

"So you're free now," I said, settling myself in the chair across from her desk. "Unless, of course, there's something you want to do."

"No," she said, "nothing for the moment." She pushed her chair back from the desk and rose to close the door, as though to give sanction to my intrusion. "Oh, I could have done that," I said, as she passed me but she brushed my protest aside, and seated herself again.

"Did you happen," she began, "to see a little woman who came into the school a short while ago?"

"Yes, I did—actually I directed her to your office. I was intrigued with what she could possibly want with you."

"You'd never guess in a hundred years."

"Well, then, I won't try."

"She offered to teach a class in ballet dancing."

"No!" I said, "you're joking."

"Seriously," Sister Theresa nodded, "she really did. It's hard to believe but it seems she had actually once been a member of some ballet group, and, as she put it, she would like to bring some culture of the West into the lives of these *backward* Chinese people!"

"No!" was all I could find to say. Even from this odd little creature such a remark seemed too fantastic.

"Yes," Sister countered, and as though to dismiss the uncharitable smile from her lips, she drew her hand across them saying soberly, "She really was dedicated to the idea."

"And what did you say?" I imagined a gentle but unmistakable refusal.

"I told her she could have a class."

"You didn't!"

Sister Theresa held up an admonitory finger. "Wait a minute," she said. "You know how I worry about these youngsters. With their mothers working in the sweat-shops, they roam the streets till all hours of the night."

"Isn't there any place they can be taken care of?"

"Well, the playgrounds are closed nights, and there isn't any other recreation group hereabouts. We're the only place open. We invite the children but we can't make them come, and even if we could, there are too many to take in."

"But that's awful," I said, and for the first time realized what I had noticed earlier—how the night-time streets of Chinatown were always swarming with children.

"So you see why I told Miss La Veille she could have a class. I had nothing for the children on Wednesday nights, and that will take care of that." Sister Theresa hesitated for a moment, preoccupied with schedules. Then, "There's one thing," she said. "I wonder if I could ask a favor of you?"

"Why, of course, you know you can."

"Could you possibly arrange to be here next Wednesday and sit in on her first class. I would, but I'm afraid I'd paralyze her if I did. She was so terrified of me, she could hardly bring out a word."

"I'll be glad to come," I said, "but how do you know I wouldn't frighten her too—though I admit I'm not as formidable as you."

"Oh, you!" She thrust a finger at me in mock attack, "you'll be all right. Bring a book and erase yourself as much as you can. I wouldn't ask this of you but I have to know a little more about her, if I'm to trust her with the children."

"Sure," I said, "I understand."

Sister Theresa assumed her customary rigid pose. She had relaxed a little during our talk but this resumption of her usual posture indicated that now more important matters were claiming her.

I started for the door, but she called after me, "Look, if you see Jimmy on the way out tell him I want to see him."

"You know Jimmy," she said with a touch of impatience, "the janitor's boy."

"Oh, him," I said. I did know Jimmy. He was a gawky teen-ager whom I had seen grudgingly helping his father paint some chairs—unattractive at best, he hadn't helped matters by getting himself up like a movie gang-

ster, leather jacket and all. He was forever combing his long hair back from his forehead, and patting the sideburns which flanked his pimply cheeks. His manner was at once brash and cringing.

"It's about his playing the piano for Miss La Veille," Sister said. "He's quite a musician, you know."

"Really!"

"It seems so—anyway his father came to see me last week, worried that Jimmy's gotten in with a bad crowd, and would I speak to him. I did, but didn't get anywhere. He was all, 'Yes, Sister, No, Sister.' I did find out though he likes music and is all set on getting into a jazz band. So I made an application for him at the jazz school."

"That ought to help," I said, and from the door, "I'll hunt him out and send him to you."

Wednesday night, as I had promised, I was in the assembly at seven o'clock sitting in one corner making a stab at reading. I had greeted Miss La Veille as she came in and asked was it all right with her if I sat here. She said yes, but I noticed that she was already so flustered that my being there would make little difference.

A group of small girls stood huddled together in the middle of the floor, clustered close as if for mutual reassurance. As Miss La Veille approached them they backed away, eyeing her from under their brows—she must have looked odd enough to them to make them wary. Dressed in an accordion-pleated skirt, a lingerie blouse with a black velvet ribbon around the high collar, she was to me, only too plainly a relic of the nineties. What she must have represented to the children, I could not even imagine. She looked

for all the world like an aging pullet, with her half-lidded eyes, sharply bridged nose, and her lips puckered into the semblance of a little beak. Planted on her spindly legs, diminutive and tentative, she stood for a moment, her lips moving but no sound coming from them. Presently she cleared her throat and was about to speak, when her face went suddenly frozen. Sister Theresa stood at the door. She walked briskly up to Miss La Veille, extended a welcoming hand, and turning to the children said, "Girls, this is Miss La Veille. She has kindly offered to teach you ballet dancing."

The children bobbed their heads.

"Yes, Sister," prompted Sister Theresa.

"Yes, Sister," echoed the girls in unison, their soft voices slurring the consonants.

"Be good girls," she said, raising her finger for emphasis, "and remember no talking in Chinese. It's not polite to talk so that other people can't understand."

"Yes, Sister," the children answered.

Sister Theresa paused long enough for silence and a meaningful glance to reinforce her order, then, turning she glided level-footed through the door.

Alone with the children, Miss La Veille drew a freer breath. But she seemed unable to make a start. She clasped and unclasped her hands, her lidded eyes flitted uneasily toward the door then back to the room. There was little here to offer reassurance: a bare hall, flanked with folding chairs, and, at the far end, hardly visible in the light of a single hanging bulb, a print of the Madonna, hung high on the wall—the Madonna floating white upon a plat-

form of clouds.

Miss La Veille brushed a thin hand across her forehead, as her gaze travelled from child to child. One could see her girding herself to begin. The children watched her silently, fixing her with their eyes.

"You've never had ballet lessons before?" she began in a high reedy voice that trailed off into a nervous tremolo. She seemed unbelievably frightened. Of these little children! I asked myself as I saw her struggle for a more controlled tone. "You haven't danced before?" she asked again.

No child answered. One giggled explosively, then embarrassed, covered her mouth with her hand. Another, more courageous than the rest said, "No, Ma'am," at which the others exchanged glances followed by smothered smiles.

Miss La Veille looked from one to the other. Whatever were they laughing at? She turned to me for explanation, but I had foreseen this and buried my head in my book. When I looked up again, Miss La Veille had managed to square her shoulders and produce what might pass for a smile. "Well," she said, "we may as well start from the beginning. Take your places, please."

The children remained rooted.

"Oh, of course," she said with an apologetic laugh, "you don't know what to do. You, over there," she pointed to a little girl whose tightly curled hair assorted oddly with her Chinese features, "What is your name, my dear?"

"Veronica," said the girl.

"Veronica?" Miss La Veille's tone suggested she could not have heard right.

The child nodded. Miss La Veille looked at her, brows puckered in puzzlement. Then remembering business in hand, she said, "Well, Veronica," she stumbled over the name, "you stand over there." She turned to the next child, "And your name?" she asked.

"Magdalen," came the whispered reply.

Miss La Veille's eyes widened. Was she being made fun of? Magdalen's crow-black hair, the slanted eyes... she could be nothing but Chinese. "Did you say 'Magdalen?'"

There was no answer.

"Well," Miss La Veille drew a long breath—she couldn't bring herself to repeat the name. "You stand over there." She took the child's hand and conducted her to the designated place.

"And now, you," Miss La Veille leaned indulgently toward the smallest child, "What is your name?"

By this time I felt I couldn't bear to see more of Miss La Veille's discomfiture. Poor Miss La Veille! How could she be expected to know that the good sisters of the Mission had christened their pupils with names radiating the aura of sanctity? With my eyes on my book, I awaited the child's answer. When none came, I looked up. The youngster stood sideways, shuffling her feet, overcome by shyness. She pressed close to her neighbor.

"Her name's Cecily," this one offered.

Miss La Veille gasped, but hastened to cover the slip with, "her whole name I mean."

"Cecily Wong," the older child said.

By now, though, Miss La Veille was proof against surprises. She had only a moment's hesitation before she went

about placing the children in checkerboard formation. I remembered Sister Theresa's telling me that the little lady had never taught before—that would account for the procedure, interminably time-consuming of escorting each child to its place. The children all the while behaved like so many automata. When finally they were in position, Miss La Veille addressed herself to the teaching.

She drew her heels together, shod in their shabby ballet slippers, and said, "First Position."

The children stood motionless.

"Do as I do," she directed. "Now, all together, First Position."

The children with one accord drew their heels together and stood quiet again.

"Good," Miss La Veille approved, her glance travelling along the line. "Now ready for Second Position."

Twelve small feet in perfect imitation followed her step.

"That's fine!" Miss La Veille made a gesture of applause with the tips of her fingers. "Now, then, Third Position. Draw the heel of one foot to the arch of the other."

Soberly, in complete docility the children followed the instructions. Neatly dressed in conventional convent outfits, plaid skirts, sweaters, white bobby socks and sneakers, they might have been any group of Caucasian children except for the Oriental eyes, the invariable black hair, and a precision of bodily control that I marveled at, but that Miss La Veille apparently failed to notice.

"Now the left foot," she began, when her attention was directed toward the door, where the silhouette of Sister Theresa was gliding past.

"Oh, excuse me, Sister," Miss La Veille intercepted her, "didn't you say we could have some music?"

"Why, of course." Sister Theresa retraced her steps to make a quick survey of the piano. "Hasn't Jimmy come yet?"

"Nobody's come," Miss La Veille said. "I've managed all right so far, but..." her voice trailed off quavering.

"Of course you'll have music." Sister Theresa brooked no slur on her competence. "It's all been arranged. Where is that boy, anyway? He should be taught some sense of responsibility."

She started down the corridor, but at that moment a door from the far end banged and Jimmy appeared, panting heavily as though he had been running.

Sister Theresa swung around. "So there you are!" she said sternly. "Why weren't you here on time?"

Jimmy flushed hotly, ducked one shoulder as though to ward off a blow, "I...I..." he stammered. "The bus broke down..."

Sister Theresa cut him short. "Well, get to work now."

Jimmy edged through the door, slid past me to the piano stool, then spun quarter-round and grinned at Miss La Veille. "Where's the music?" he asked.

Miss La Veille's hand shot to her mouth. "Oh, I forgot," she said. "Do you think you could..." she broke off.

"Sure," Jimmy said with a cocky air. "I can play anything. You name it."

Miss La Veille stood, finger to brow, considering, then brightened

up with sudden inspiration. "Could you play *Narcissus*?"

"This?" With one hand Jimmy spelled out the hackneyed melody.

"Yes," Miss La Veille smiled, "that's it."

Jimmy circled back to the piano. His bony hands jiggled up and down the keyboard in syncopated rhythm. Under his fingers the saccharine *Narcissus* took on the rakish air of jazz.

Miss La Veille threw up her hands as though affronted by a sacrilege. "Oh, no," she protested. "Do it just plain, like this." In a wavering soprano, she began, "La-la, La-la."

Jimmy produced an elaborate sigh, and raised his eyebrows at me in mock resignation. "O.K., if you want it that way."

Miss La Veille nodded. "Now could you start over so we can begin with you," and turning to the children, "Ready now."

The music recommenced. "A-First Position, A-Second Position," Miss La Veille chanted, her motions reproduced in exact mimicry by the children. Presently Miss La Veille clapped her hands.

Instantly the children clapped theirs. Jimmy looked over his shoulder, "What?" he said.

"I just meant 'stop'," Miss La Veille explained. "I wanted to do something else. Now, children, we will learn how to use our hands." She extended her arms, and like some awkward bird in clumsy effort to rise, executed a flapping up-and-down motion. I marveled that any gesture could be so devoid of meaning.

The little girls began waving their arms limply.

"No, no!" Miss La Veille cried, "all together, like this, one, two, one two."

Immediately the little arms took up the rhythm, and now it was as though a miracle were happening. As if from some inner inspiration, the children transmuted their teacher's meaningless gesture into one of subtle and elusive significance. I turned to Miss La Veille to share my appreciation, but no awareness reflected from her pale eyes. Up, down, up, down went the arms until Miss La Veille clapped again. "Look," she said, "hold your hands this way." With lean forefingers and thumbs she inscribed two clawlike arcs.

The girls again transmuted the gesture. All the inner truth of the dance seemed to take possession of them, affirmed itself in the grace and suppleness of their motions.

Jimmy, glancing sideways from the piano, must have felt stirred. In muted tones he began to improvise a light waltz melody, and the children, caught in the rhythm, responded, their arms floating as though synchronized by a vagrant breeze. Veronica smiled at Magdalen, and began to sway gently from side to side. Magdalen followed suit, and presently all the children were swaying, blending their separate rhythms into one unbroken, flowing cadence.

Once again Miss La Veille clapped. "You have good rhythm," she said in a matter of fact tone. Jimmy gave me a sidelong glance, with a wicked little grin of complicity, which of course I ignored.

Miss La Veille stood for a moment, apparently lost in thought. She looked vaguely around the room till her eyes fastened on something at the far end. I followed her gaze to see what had arrested her. It was the print of the Madonna in billowing

white draperies, arms clasped to her breast, her eyes aloft. Something in the general whiteness must have nudged Miss La Veille's memory, for, turning back to the children, she suddenly exclaimed, "I shall teach you the Swan Dance."

Their little faces showed no recognition.

"The Swan Dance," she repeated. "You shall have dresses all of white feathers."

The little girls looked at one another with puzzled eyes.

"Yes, of white feathers." Miss La Veille's face took on a rapt expression as though some beautiful vision had floated into her mind.

What in the world has come over her! I said to myself.

But Miss La Veille was plunging on. "Yes, and you'll have stockings of sheerest silk, and slippers like mine, only white."

"Oh, Oh!" the little girls whispered.

"The great Pavlova," Miss La Veille paused in reverent tones for the name to produce its effect. But nothing was registered on the blank little faces. "You know who Pavlova was?" The children shook their heads. "Well, never mind. She was a great dancer, my dears, perhaps the greatest. *She* created the Swan Dance."

Miss La Veille rose to the tips of her toes and executed a few stiff-legged ballet paces. The children watched open-mouthed. What were they making of this, I wondered. Miss La Veille blushed and waited for some response, but when none came, she hurried on. "I shall teach you the dance of the Dying Swan."

The children exchanged bewildered glances: A swan, a dying swan, what

was that? their eyes seemed to be asking.

"In dresses of white feathers," Miss La Veille reminded them.

"Oh, yes," Cecily clapped her hands softly.

"That will be nice, don't you think?" Miss La Veille's gaze focused somewhere over their heads, as though lost in the enchanting choreography of twelve little languishing swans. Her face took on a beatific expression as her thoughts played about the vision.

A sudden chord on the piano brought her to. "Lady," Jimmy said, in his tone of scarcely veiled impudence, "look. Do you want me any longer? Because if you don't ..."

All apology Miss La Veille fluttered, "Thank you so much. Yes, I guess that will be all for tonight; but you'll come next Wednesday, won't you?"

"Sure," Jimmy said, lowering the piano lid and making for the door. Miss La Veille started forward with a conciliatory hand, then stopped short as though she had run headlong into a wall. I looked toward the door. There, planted with the permanence of a statue on a pedestal, stood Sister Theresa. How long had she been there? How much of the talk about Pavlova had she heard? And if she had, I didn't need to be told what she would be thinking. I could hardly bear to look at Miss La Veille. When I did, I saw her standing white and trembling, hugging her little body as though against a gale. I thought of the swan dresses, the satin slippers; where had she imagined these were coming from?

The children stared at Sister Theresa in silence, transfixed by the power they sensed behind the granite immobility. Then a tremor went

through them as Sister Theresa stepped over the threshold.

"That will be all for tonight, girls," Sister Theresa motioned them away. Released from tension, the children made a dash for the chairs.

Miss La Veille watched them, unable to make up her mind whether to follow and lend a hand, holding a coat or assembling their scattered belongings. But the children retrieved their things speedily, and tiptoeing hurriedly past Sister Theresa edged out the door. From far down the hall I could hear their voices—chatter, chatter, as though the lids were popping on a hundred little kettles. I could make nothing of it—it was all in Chinese.

Sister Theresa took a further step into the room. I foresaw what was coming and wanted desperately not to have to hear it. But I would have had to pass between her and Miss La Veille, so there was nothing for it but to remain. Miss La Veille made a motion toward the chair where her purple coat and slipper-bag lay under an open window—she was too stricken to move.

"I think," Sister Theresa began, speaking deliberately, as though to a foreigner, "this will be all."

Miss La Veille's lidded eyes opened wide. Was she being dismissed? She put one hand over her heart, and her breath came out in short rushes, like a moth fluttering against a lighted window.

"I mean," Sister Theresa would leave nothing equivocal, "the ballet seemed to me inappropriate for these children. You understand, of course."

Miss La Veille understood. How could she help but know that after hearing what she had said, Sister

Theresa could not act otherwise. I remembered the figure of judgment standing in the doorway. Even I had been frightened. "Yes, Sister," she said in a voice hardly audible.

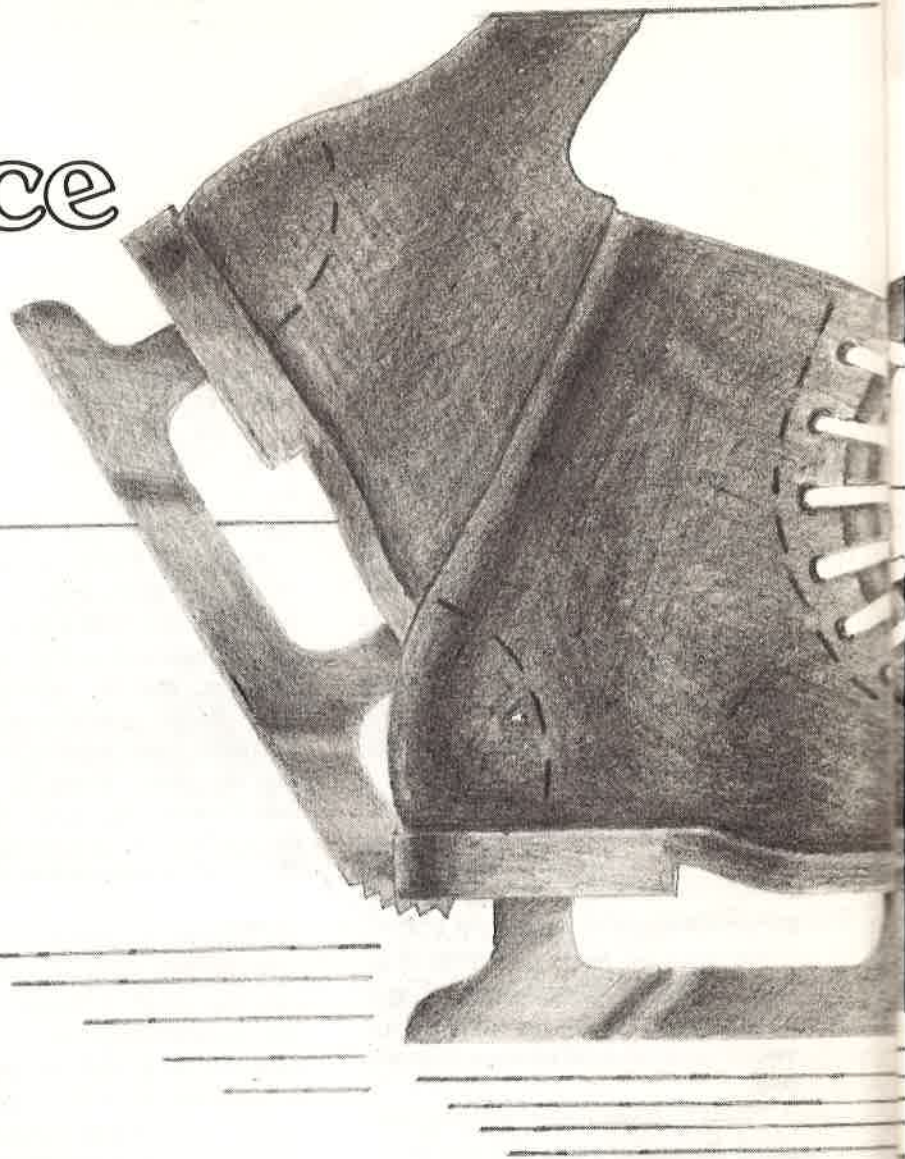
Sister Theresa advanced her hand. "Thank you for tonight," she said in a gentler tone. "It was good of you to come." Miss La Veille extended a trembling hand, then withdrew it. She brushed the back of it over her eyes.

As she passed me, Sister Theresa lifted her palms in a gesture of compassion. I walked over to Miss La Veille, wanting to offer her some word of friendliness, though I wondered whether it wouldn't be easier for her if I seemed not to have understood. She had stepped toward the chair, and was stooping to untie a slipper. From the open window a stream of fog-laden air flowed into the room. Miss La Veille straightened up and leaned against the sill—she seemed grateful for the coolness, and stood for a moment breathing deeply. Then turning to me, "It wasn't for myself," she said, her voice breaking and tears flooding her eyes, "really it wasn't. It's for them I feel bad. I had hoped to bring something to these children...culture...beauty." The tears now overmastered her and she turned again to the window.

The street lights shone like frosty puff-balls, and in their dim glow I could see the stairs of the Mission, a shimmering white mirage. Then down the steps, like a swarm of butterflies, floated the little girls, so buoyant, so light-footed they seemed to brush only the tips of the stairs in their flight. Skipping, arms intertwined, they passed under the open window, and I could hear again their light voices babbling the clip-syllabled staccato of their native Chinese. □

Writing Face to Face

by Alan Feldman



I.

My mother used to say that she could teach anything. I still remember how she “taught” me to ice skate. I must have been about eight or nine. Mother was not at all athletic and would not have dared to get on skates herself. She hired two of the rink guards to skate me around the rink, each one holding me up under an armpit as my feet flopped out from under me. I remember my embarrassment at being dragged over the ice by two big men in blue and red bellhop uniforms. The next time I tried it I developed a technique for getting around on my own—rapid little running steps followed by one long glide—while my mother tried to smooth out my style by standing on

the sidelines shouting: “PUSH!! GLIDE!! PUSH!! GLIDE!”

The way she taught writing was another matter. When I finally expressed a desire to learn to write (many years after I learned to skate) my mother gave me much encouragement but she was also a more demanding critic.

Mother knew more about writing. An article she wrote on taking children to Europe—based on our three-month trip in 1952—was published by the New York Times in the Sunday travel section. But this witty and sensible article was the beginning and end of her professional writing career. I remember feeling as a child that my mother should have “done more” with her writing, and I

was tempted to disparage her because she herself seemed to dismiss her success as a fluke. She could teach writing, she told me, but she couldn’t do it easily herself. Only close-to-home subjects inspired her, and even then writing was a struggle. She didn’t feel she had much of an individual style. I, she said, would do better.

But I too am haunted by the fear of turning into a writing teacher who does not write. From time to time I’ll hear a line in my head and have a soaring, nerve-racking, dead-certain feeling that the line is the first line of a poem, a poem which is all down in there somewhere, complete, ready to heave up and out if I have the courage (the time? the privacy?) to let it flow. But this flow comes once a month,



maybe less. Like a kind of period. And not all of these poems turn out to be nearly as good as they seem to promise. Maybe six. Maybe three! That's not a lot of poems to feel proud of in a year.

Sometimes when I overhear myself telling my creative writing students some kind of simple formula ("Use imagery! Dramatize! Fresher diction!") it reminds me of my mother standing on the side of the rink shouting "PUSH! GLIDE!" It's not that the advice isn't accurate—after all, "PUSH! GLIDE!" is the essence of skating—it's the *tone* of the advice that worries me. It sounds too much like advice directed at someone in a terrible fix by an uninvolved bystander.

When I decided to offer a poetry workshop for teachers in the Framingham school system, I had in mind the type of course that would encourage teachers to become more interested in their *own* writing for a change. I thought that after getting in the habit of writing in our class every week, they would become more self-confident, more interested in writing as an art form, and ultimately better and more enthusiastic teachers of writing themselves.

For many it worked out in just this way. But what I had not expected was the change that the workshop would bring about in me, both as a teacher and a writer.

Odd that I had never seen myself as being in very much the same situation as the teachers I had planned the workshop for. I, after all, taught at the college level, was a publishing writer, saw myself as having more confidence and experience. But I too, like all writer-teachers, had spent most of my working life devoting myself to the writing of others, not my own. And in this class—where my message was primarily to be: get into yourself and your own writing—I found myself heeding my own advice for once.

The first of our weekly, after-school classes in the fall turned out to be fairly typical of the way we went about things for the rest of the year. I had been too occupied setting up a reading for Michigan poet Judith Minty to think much about this first class. But Minty's "Making Music," where she contrasts her mother calmly feeding laundry through her mangle with herself driving hard and fast with rock music blaring down a Michigan highway, seemed ideal for a starting assignment. I asked the teachers to write a poem in which, as in Minty's poem, they are contrasting somebody doing something—a characteristic activity—with themselves. It could be a parent or grandparent or anyone. I pointed out to them that I was trying to make it easier for them to set right to work by suggesting not only a (very general) subject they could write about, but also a rhetorical form, that of contrast or comparison, and by giving them

someone else's poem as an example. The poem would suggest to them all kinds of approaches they could use in their own work, but didn't have to.

Just as in high school or elementary school classes, there was some reticence when I asked people to read aloud what they had just done. Several didn't want to read at all, and the inevitable challenge came back: "Let's hear yours!"

So I read mine:

GARDENING

My grandfather works on his lawn
with the weeder.
Angry at the weeds, he pries them up
so their roots, filled with
brown dirt, frown at the sky.
My grandfather is red in the face.
So many weeds.
His trousers sag. His belt hangs low
beneath his stomach.
The blood comes to his head as if
he were addressing a meeting—
As if he were telling people off.
The pointed stick trembles around
the head of a dandelion.
"Your trouble," he told me, "is that
you just don't care, you're lazy.
Room a mess. Clothes disordered.
Socks sprouting mold under the
bed..."
The grass bushes upward like a
sore throat.
The mower fumes and quits.
I bend over it. My heat feels its heat.
We stay that way
As a garden, roses regular as
wallpaper,
Floats through the summer air.

Some of the students liked what I had written and commented on specific lines or images that had pleased them especially—a habit they had acquired as teachers?

Someone said, "The first part, about your grandfather out in the yard with the weeder is really clear and works beautifully." I could tell from this comment and others that the second part of my poem, the part referring to myself, had been less strong. But, though I generally considered anything I wrote in class as a mere exercise, I decided to stick this poem away in my files. After all, the part about Grandpa and the weeder might be as good as they said. Anyway, maybe there had been a fragment of a real poem in it. Something I

could use later. I left that evening feeling good about myself both as a teacher and a writer. My little impromptu in class had been well-received...at least they knew I knew my business.

But wait a minute! Hadn't I started the workshop to build up *their* self-confidence?

The first class turned out to be prophetic in several ways. The subject I had selected on the spur of the moment had been concerned with personal recollections, and, as it turned out for most of us in the class, recollections of family life. Though we by no means always wrote personal poetry together, we seemed to return again and again, many of us, to the family, no matter what the assignment. Even when the teachers started developing assignments of their own for us to try out, many of the poems produced were personal in subject.

Ron Trahan, a young high school teacher, brought in a suit of snappy man's clothes on a hanger one time and told us: imagine that your sister shows up for dinner one night with *this!* And though we were using a prop this time instead of a model poem to start us going, here we were back to the theme of the family once again:

They entered
amid the sounds of
barking dogs
and the televised football game
She—curled, freckled,
hazel and wide-eyed
He—satin-shirted, patent-leathered
a blur of black and white and red
slick
Dad's face was stiff-smiled
wooden
like a ventriloquist's dummy
And Mom giggled
and told of how much wine she's
swallowed
Adam was pink-cheeked
his braces gleaming
Alan, uninterested, departed
And I
tolerant and diplomatic
smiled
offered crackers and chopped liver
and hoped no one would whisper
"Is he Jewish?"
My husband
had never been an event
a sight to behold
But Jann—ah—
was unpredictable

her men—diverse
Blackjack dealers, airplane pilots
to be viewed and sized up and
exclaimed over
and put in cages
like lions and zebras and orangutans
They were not long-lasting
(always *her* choice)
so we weren't intimidated
and for the evening
we would touch glasses
and match eyes over the candlesticks
and perhaps never meet again

—Gale Levine

Gale and I had both stared at that modern-day zoot suit on a hanger, with a slightly dirty white hat perched on top, and imagined a creature in such a get-up coming for dinner at our staid Jewish homes. "I am exultant," I found myself writing. "A man as dirty as a men's room/ has walked into our dining room." I found myself touching on a feeling I had never quite articulated before—the opposition between my family's traditional Jewishness (with its prim and genteel ceremonies around the family dinner table decked out with white linen cloth) and the fascinating anarchy of sensuality that I associated with the non-Kosher world. And I always fancied myself such a liberal!

In writing these unpremeditated poems we were discovering things in ourselves we might have censored had we been writing with more deliberation. But the things that were coming out of us were somehow immediately made to seem acceptable and normal. At least Gale's poem allowed me to see mine in that light. It was like group therapy. But what made it more interesting was that we were in communication with each other through poetry, with its careful use of suggestion and innuendo, and not in the gut-spilling manner of people in actual therapy. I felt we were conveying our inner lives and feelings to each other without any reliance on the mere jargon of sincerity. For example, one of the intriguing moments in Gale's poem occurs in the final lines in which she says:

so we weren't intimidated
and for the evening
we would touch glasses

and match eyes over the candlesticks
and perhaps never meet again.

I think the suggestion in these last lines is that this stranger, of uncertain Jewishness, unpredictable, even animal-like ("to be viewed and sized up and exclaimed over/ and put in cages/ like lions and zebras and orangutans") presents Gale with a sexual temptation. Clearly the interloper is attractive by virtue of his very strangeness: "*My* husband/ had never been an event/ a sight to behold."

But what a cliché this whole idea is! If we had really been engaged in group therapy, if we had really bared our souls to each other, if we had really come right out and said, "Yes, I always was secretly sexually drawn to non-Jews" we would have been totally false to the space such thoughts occupied in our lives. They lived in us, if I'm guessing rightly, on the periphery of our self-understanding. It was never as bald, as blunt, as crude as an overt confession would make it seem. So that in getting to know each other through the poems we wrote together each week we were ushered discreetly into each other's lives and minds. We weren't forced into intimacy. And even better, without even talking about it—most of the discussions focused on the poems themselves—we were always noticing the common ground between ourselves, we could reaffirm the normality and, ultimately, the acceptability of our inner feelings. For this reason the workshop became, for many of us, an exhilarating, almost addictive experience.

And I think many of us needed the workshop to help us function that year. In the one year that our group met we had the following list of hardships: one teacher's husband died, another underwent a serious operation, another had a breast removed, and still another whose breast had been removed had a discouraging report at her semi-annual checkup, four were trying to recover from recent divorces. I became aware of these things not by probing but simply because they became the subjects for poems. And people began to feel

comfortable in confiding in me. Time after time, the teachers would come up to me after the class and tell me how much they looked forward to, and even depended upon our weekly sessions.

One example was Helen, an elementary school music teacher who, from the first, had struck me as one of the most enthusiastic members of the group. Mid-way through the fall term we had word that Helen had been hospitalized with what was beginning to seem like the class disease, breast cancer. But her case, apparently, was graver than most, and when she returned to the class after a month's absence she seemed subdued, did not seem to be feeling well, and seemed worried about herself. She told me that she had begun to attend the workshop again because she enjoyed it so much, even though she wasn't going to resume teaching again for several months. At the end of the term she gave me a short story she had written, in the form of an imagined telephone monologue to a close friend. Here is part of it:

She returned, the eyes spun, and she announced, "HE wants to examine you." That's when I stopped being quiet. I started to cry, and would have cut the ropes holding up his god-damned trapeze—yes—yes—that's better—removed the net—of course—much better. My tears were splashing my glasses and her uniform—drool? I don't think so. Come to think of it—probably yes. Probably there was drool and spit mixed with the tears and nose candles—why not—yes—and I shouted to her that no one else was going to check that cyst—NO ONE—no body—no—I'm leaving—now. Sometimes my crying can be very noisy, and this was one of those times. What a racket. She looked so alarmed. Her eyes spun once more. It was when I said, "HE isn't going to—" whatever it was I said. She asked if I thought I could find my car. I guess she meant through that curtain of water splashing all over us. I shouted a few more times, got dressed, shaking and splashing, and left that hospital—loudly.

I shook and splashed most of the way to class. About 20, miles I think. Maybe 17. By then I was late...

...So I walked into class... They were having a quiet discussion and

some teachers were writing. People sent friendly vibes my way. It's that kind of group. I love my poetry class—workshop. I didn't want to sit too near the poetry doctor because he's so strong in his weak way. Do you know what I mean? I think I'd be absorbed and disappear. Osmosis, possibly. Or maybe—do you remember paper dolls? You could stand them up. When you got sick of them which was quickly for me—I hated paper dolls—you would just tip them back into the page, close the book, and that was that.

...So I sat—and—are you ready—everyone continued the quiet talk—and—here goes—ready—they talked with me and treated me as if I were NORMAL—NORMAL—a normal person. It was devastatingly fantastically unimaginably—marvelous—terrific—just great—NORMAL—wow!

Helen saw me and the group as having a kind of quiet power to heal, exerting a pull so strong it threatened to obliterate her problems, even her personality. But the group exerted considerable force on me, as well.

I too had not been exempt from the workshop's general bad luck. In the early fall my mother died. I flew down to New York for the funeral. The teachers didn't know. I wasn't even absent for one session. I came right back—instead of spending the traditional seven days of mourning in my parents' house—because my wife and I had a second child on the way and the baby was due any day. In fact, my son was born a week to the day after my mother died. Nothing was quite as certain to plunge me into tears those first weeks as any mention of how my mother had not lived to see my child born. I had never realized to what extent one wants to present the new baby to one's parents, as if to say: see, how else can I repay you?

I don't think I mentioned what had happened to any of my classes. Of course, I told them about the baby, even wrote some poems featuring him, but I didn't want to get bogged down in receiving condolences. Without knowing it, the teachers in the workshop had helped me through that difficult autumn by simply allowing me to be one of them and, as with Helen, by treating me normally.

I tend to be somewhat stiff and un-

demonstrative with people. But I remember at the end of the term one of the teachers—Carolyn—told me for the second time in a few months that she not only loved the course but also—she had to say it—she loved *me!* "I love you too, Carolyn," I said, and since she was wearing a bulky, soft fur coat, I couldn't stop myself from taking her in my arms and giving her a bear hug. The image sticks with me. When they take monkeys away from their mothers, they can sometimes comfort them with a surrogate—but the surrogate can't be made of hard wire, it has to be covered with something soft and comforting. Like Carolyn's fur coat.

II.

The workshop began to have an effect on me as a writer as well. I remember particularly one day early in the second term. (After running for fifteen weekly two hour sessions, we continued at the teachers' request for another fifteen weeks in the spring.) I was going to give out D. H. Lawrence's "Peach" and ask for a poem based on a fruit or a vegetable. I had done it the day before in my college class—a good assignment, it had turned out. But I remember feeling there was still more preparation I wanted to do, some vegetable I had yet to buy, and I stopped at the supermarket to buy potatoes.

It was January, there had been snow on the ground for more than a month, and I thought there would inevitably be something suggestive in the soil-like skin of the potato. It would be like shoving the snow aside and uncovering the earth.

Sure enough, the teachers in my workshop snatched up all the peas, oranges, ears of corn, onions, and other items, but nobody wanted a potato. Marion, who'd been in the workshop last term, said this was because she thought it was impossible to out-do Richard Wilbur's often anthologized "Potatoes," and possibly this made the others avoid potatoes also. And here I had a 10 lb. sack! I opened it anyway, took out a potato, and found myself writing the first real poem I had been able to write about my mother's death:



POTATOES

In the middle of the coldest winter in
a hundred years

The supermarket is running a sale
on potatoes:

Sacks of potatoes, looking like sacks
of stones—

Stones that bore you in summer,
when you find them loose in
the road

Too fat to skim, too heavy to
throw far

Worth picking up only to be sure
they're not potatoes...

Each sack has a little window,
like the grating in a cell door
And pressed against the gratings
the potatoes look like faces—

Dirty people bunched up in darkness,
and not allowed in the supermarket.

This one seems pear-shaped, or
no-shaped.

Turn it over, it has a kind of
belly-button—some scars, a few
eyes.

Or it looks like a skull.

I bite its damp and grainy insides
And it tastes like nothing.

Like earth.

It's not potatoes I want, it's
my mother—

My mother who used to boil me
potatoes, roast me potatoes, stab
my potatoes with special aluminum
nails for faster cooking.

My mother, with all her theories
about potatoes, about eating,
about children, and about me

Is gone, snow covering her like
a sheet.

But in my dreams things grow
warmer—

And my mother comes back to make
me a meal again

Out of her new body.

After writing, we were going
around the room as we always did
reading what we wrote, and I could
feel the silence and emotion in me and
the class when I finished. It was their
presence that had called this poem
out of me and their reaction that told
me that it would ultimately be worth
working on. (I spent a couple of
weekends polishing my potato.) What
struck me was that for the first time—
or at least I felt it more clearly than

I'd ever previously felt it—I could draw energy *from* a writing class which I could use in my own work, and that all the writing we had been doing together had been leading towards such a moment when, inevitably, something deep in me would break out, but with restraint too, because of the presence of the class, the restraint so necessary to keeping the lid on poems on intensely personal issues.

Often I had experiences that seemed too important and too painful to write about. "Now's not the time," I'd say to myself each time it occurred to me to at least try to get out a poem about it. But writing in class could help such a poem come into being, partly because it forced me to simply do my best in the limited time I had—and, after all, it was partly the thought of the limitations of what I could ever do with such material that had been keeping me from tackling it before this.

Strange as it may seem, I began to look upon my creative writing classes—not just this one with the teachers, but my classes at Framingham State College as well—as occasions for me to get my writing done. It hardly seemed to matter whether I devised the assignment or the others did. I began to find that through continual practise (I was teaching four different creative writing classes that term!) I could almost inevitably take whatever was on my mind that week (or even something I had no suspicion I wanted to write about) and get it written while my students were writing.

What more perfect situation could a writer have?

I began to notice changes in my style, too. I found that I was able to type up the first drafts, written under intense pressure in half an hour or forty-five minutes, and not have to change the lining much at all. My poems were beginning to be written in

lines that reflected speech rhythms more accurately; after all, just a few minutes after completing the poem I was going to have to read it out-loud.

It got so that I would use the occasion of their settling down to write as a period in which I would "write ahead"—trying out a new idea for possible use in class later. Or I might write anything else I had in mind to write (some of this essay). Naturally, anything I wrote I was willing to read aloud to my class if there was time. After a few times when I was "caught cheating" like this some of the other members of the workshop who used to "rebel" and go off in their own direction began to make a regular practise of this too. This we referred to as the "perversity principle": good writing is often done in an effort to substitute for doing a writing assignment one doesn't really want to do.

I found myself on the verge of developing the crazy superstition that I wouldn't be able to write without a class around to help me. But I soon saw that a brief poem I might write in class would open up a subject that I would return to later that day when I was alone and had more time. So the writing I was doing in class was opening me up and freeing me to write in a deeper, more unrestrained way on my own.

Even at the College I found myself opening up to my students in ways I would never have considered before. In March, when my birthday came around, I found myself teaching my classes, saying hello to my colleagues, but not telling anyone it was my birthday. Though it was no different from any of the previous five birthdays I had had while teaching here, I felt particularly lonely because this year my mother would not be able to call me. This seemed to increase my need to tell *someone* it was my birthday, so I wrote a poem about it to read to my creative writing class.

I had never felt the teacher and the

inner person in me so close. Later, that evening, I found myself writing another poem about my birthday. This time it was quiet, I had all the time I wanted, and I found myself going even deeper. But it was the poem I had written earlier, for my students, that had enabled me to go further later on.

Stimulated by the catharsis of writing personal poems face to face with my students, I began to dare myself to go further, to bring up issues that I had never written or talked about before, and write about them in class. The height of this daredevil phase came, I think, when one day I was on my way to one of my creative writing classes at the College, and I made up my mind to write a poem in class about my first marriage. In the five years I had been at the College I had never mentioned this phase of my life to anyone. And here I was, on an ordinary day in April, heading to class with the kamikaze resolution in my head that I was going to write a poem about it and read it to my undergraduates. The assignment was to be to write a memory poem, but one addressed to someone in one's past. I gave the assignment, illustrated it with a poem beginning "Once, a long time ago, you remember," by Phillip Lopate, and plunged ahead:

SLUGGING IT OUT

All I remember
Is one sequence, like something in a
D. H. Lawrence movie
Your red hair in the rain,
a green grassy place in the center of
an island where we were camping.
The drenching rain. The animal in us
coming out.
I remember us standing there trading
punches.
You slugging me. Me slugging
you back.
Finally somebody must have quit.
It made no difference
We were both crying, we were both
so wet

Our half-set-up tent collecting
puddles in its folds
As it sagged into the grass.

What were we fighting over anyway?
I think it was over how to put up
the tent...

The woman I live with now gives in
to me
Or I give in to her, and we don't
think twice about it.
Somebody takes out the garbage.
Somebody gasses up the car.
Somebody holds the crying child
over the potty. Somebody
compliantly wakes up
Or else—also compliantly—
falls asleep.
I don't know how we arrange it.
But we do...

I remember a man on TV in a
documentary about the family
Trying to explain his divorce. After
reviewing the footage
His wife smiling and saying
she wished it had worked out—
Heaven knows the kids were always
begging them to get together
To go camping or hiking—but they
couldn't go camping or hiking
Or anywhere. And the guy saying
it was because
He liked to be dominant and his wife
liked to be dominant
And they both hated to be submissive
But if it hadn't been California,
if it hadn't been the divorce-prone
Seventies
Them both saying they could have
worked it out...

But we couldn't have.
Because there was, and is still,
no method.
And even now if you wrote to me
If you told me you were
thinking of remarrying
If you asked for my advice
I wouldn't know how to tell you
to make a go of it.

Suddenly, walking to class, that
almost dream-like image (out of
someone else's life?) of my first wife
and me hitting each other in the rain!
We were about twenty then, and poss-
ibly, a dozen years later, I felt I
could write about us best in the
presence of my class of twenty-year-
olds.

How did the students react? They
were interested, of course. Here, at

least, was one teacher who wasn't
going to be content with being treated
as though he were a television set.
And some of the students who were
looking for a closer contact with me
were grateful, I think, for my efforts
to give them something of my per-
sonal history.

At this point, though, I was teach-
ing according to a method I'm not
sure I could have justified. True, I no
longer felt like my mother shouting
"PUSH! GLIDE!" from the side-
lines. But instead I felt something like
a skating teacher who, instead of tak-
ing the pupil by the arm and guiding
him or her gently a few times around
the rink, leaps onto the ice himself
madly shouting, "SO! YOU WANT
TO SKATE? WHY THEN, WATCH
MEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!"

Everything that happened to me,
everything I thought about I felt I
could turn into a poem. I was begin-
ning to pile up more poems than I
knew what to do with. My wife was
getting sick of my coming home and
announcing: "Well, I wrote another
one today." Worst was that I was be-
coming oblivious to anyone else's
needs (both my students and my
family) and I began to wish that like
the girl in the fatal red shoes I could
just stop, stop, stop. I begged my
mind and heart to let me relax a little,
stop writing so much, be normal
again—the good father, the dedicated
teacher, instead of the self-centered
writer. But after years of teaching
writing full-time, didn't I deserve to
get this caught up in my own work,
even if only just once?

I think the teachers in my work-
shop felt this happening too. I
remember Carolyn writing an anecd-
ote poem about her elopement with
her first husband, and his suspicious-
ness and cruelty to her even in the
early days of her marriage, and
reading it to the workshop close to
tears (and sometimes laughing, too)
and letting out a great exhalation at
the end of the poem—"Who! I
finally *did* it!" —as though what she
had wanted to say in this poem was

something she had wanted to say for
the past twenty years.

And when Ron, who had never
written any poetry before this work-
shop, began to share some of his
work with his own high school
students he found that he felt closer
to them, and that the students
developed a certain degree of admira-
tion for him:

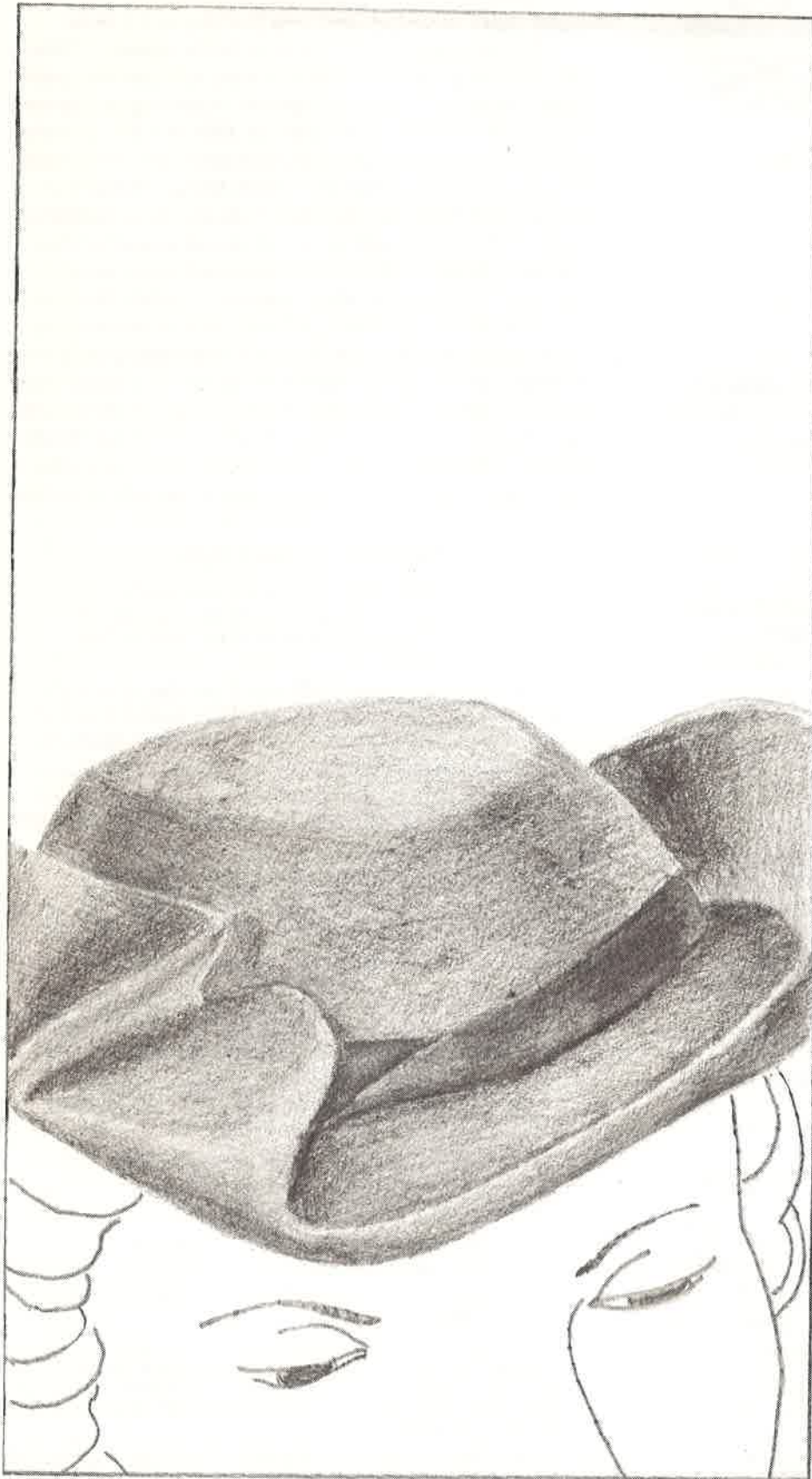
I felt that these [writing] sessions had
broken down many social barriers to
communication between the
students. At this point, I was also
convinced the students were seeing
me in a different light. After having
read my poetry and viewed my
photography, perhaps they suspected
that they were dealing with an actual
competent human being who knew as
much as they knew!

...I may be jumping to conclusions
in decreeing the project an unquali-
fied success...but the following has
resulted from this experience: 1) four
students of mine have, since my last
session with them one month ago,
submitted a total of twenty-one
poems for my "professional" opi-
nion; 2) three teachers, who heard
about the project from the students,
have asked me to organize a similar
experience for them and some of
their students; 3) a torrid love affair
has since developed between two of
the participants who heretofore had
not ever met.

...I had never written a single poem
in my life prior to this workshop. In
fact, I took it for granted that I had
no "talent" in this area. God knows
what this did to my teaching of
poetry, the fact that I believed I
couldn't do it. How did I expect them
to write poetry?

I know better now. In fact, as ama-
teurish as I am at this stage, I'm
already planning to put together a
book of my photographs coordinated
with particular poems of my own
creation. I have no wild dreams as yet
of getting them published; it's merely
for my own sense of aesthetics. But
that's all right, isn't it!

I had forgotten the contempt I used
to have, as an adolescent, for my
teachers. I used to regard them as
good-for-nothings who were
relegated to the unglamorous job of
teaching because they couldn't do



anything else. Certainly for years as a teacher I had bouts with such feelings myself. I was glad that Ron, and others, had found an opportunity to increase their own confidence in themselves as teachers and writers, even if I had had my mind so often on my *own* writing.

Near the end of the term, though, I found I couldn't always get interested in the assignments I was giving to the teachers in the workshop. While they were beginning to discover the joy of suddenly having access to their personal lives in their writing, I was beginning to feel tired out by it:

I am supposed to be writing
What I have asked my class to
write—

A poem about a person close to me
And something this person always
has about him:

Like my father and his mail-order
jackets from Sears
Or my mother with the spoon-shaped
green opaque glasses she
would put on to sunbathe
Or the little bottles my sister
always travels with
With fluids for her eyes and face.

But for the first time this year
We are writing outside
And the sun is falling on my arms
Bare to the elbows in short sleeves
Making the hair of my forearms glow
As if I am turning into gold—
So why should I think about the past?

Is it because
Beneath the shadow of my hand
This page is lifting at the corner
Like a woman's linen hat?

Mother's hat, undoubtedly. It had been her death that had made writing more necessary than it had been before. But now I could let that subject rest for a while. I had made a discovery in the process—a discovery my mother might have been interested in: writing and teaching need not be at odds. Sometimes jumping onto the ice and, forgetting the consequences, just showing the way it might be done is the right way after all. But then, of course, my mother knew that. □

Sharing the Blues

Team-teaching A Collaborative Poem

by Martin Steingesser

Everyone has a list of things he enjoys complaining about, which is one reason why the blues is excellent for writing with children in a class collaboration. Too often, though, such complaints become little more than whining and vituperation. This exploration demonstrates how form serves to rescue and give back to us such feelings, making them accessible to ourselves and others in new ways and involving others in our experience. It clearly shows there is a place in our writing for sadness and melancholy and encourages students to put themselves into their poems. The exploration also provides a refreshing way to develop appreciation of the rhythmic elements in poetry.

I start by reading a few blues lyrics, which I leave on the blackboard as models until the children have at least written one successful verse.

*Woke up this morning, blues all 'round my bed,
Woke up this morning, blues all 'round my bed,
Picked up my pillow, blues all under my head.*

—Lonnie Johnson¹

*On the side of the road I sat underneath the tree.
On the side of the road I sat underneath the tree.
Nobody knows the thoughts that come over me.*

—Bessie Smith²

*Today, today, today, been a long old lonesome day.
Today, today, today, been a long old lonesome day.
I been sitting here thinking, with my mind a million
miles away.*

—Hociel Thomas³

First, remind the children of the conventional connection between sadness and the color blue. (Do they ever say, "I've got the blues today?") Then point out the basic elements of the form: the first line is some kind of complaint, or lament; it repeats; the third line is an effect, or

response, to the condition expressed in the first two; all the lines rhyme. This sounds like it's going to be difficult, but one of the two rhymes (first and second line) is given; and the line lengths and rhythms will form naturally by literally singing them into the blues scale. Anyway, it is best not to worry about technical problems just yet and dive in.

The big question is what to write about. "What's bothering you today?" is all you need ask, and the groans begin—whether it's an adult poetry workshop or one with third-graders. True, you may at first get blank stares. Often, this is due to a distrust of the question. The thought behind such blank looks most likely being, "What does he really want?" All you need do is provide a little encouragement: "Do you like getting up for school every morning?" "What's the worst thing that's happened to you recently?" and you're off, with more material coming forth than you'll be able to use. The key to a good start on the poem is choosing a gripe all the children can immediately plug into, perhaps something they have even shared as a class, something recent and real in their lives. Sooner or later, as the class warms to the irresistible pleasure of voicing its complaints, someone will hit on *the* subject. For me, once it was report cards, while another time it was simply a rainy day.

REPORT CARD BLUES⁴

*I got that report card, and I've got nothing but U's.
I got that report card, and I've got nothing but U's.
When I bring home that card, I've got nothing but
baaaad news.*

*I looked at that report card, and I saw nothing but U's.
I looked at that report card, and I saw nothing but U's.
And out of the U's came those old black and blues.*

*I brought that red card home, and that was my cue—
I brought that red card home, and that was my cue—
"Child, go to your room!" and then I cried, "Boo-hoo-
hoo."*

*When I got home, I got a few whacks with the belt.
When I got home, I got a few whacks with the belt.
Then I ran to my room and started yelling for
help—"HELP!"*

RAINY BLUES⁵

*It's raining today, and I'm home lookin' out the window.
It's raining today, and I'm home lookin' out the window.
Wasting my life away, and my heart just feels so low.*

*The rain is falling, falling, falling, falling like applause.
The rain is falling, falling, falling, falling like applause.
I'm thinking that it ain't never ever gonna pause.*

*Rain and cars going by, people all soaking wet.
Rain and cars going by, people all soaking wet.
Blue feelings swimming into air like a jet.*

*Umbrellas passing by—rojo, verde, amarillo.
Umbrellas passing by—rojo, verde, amarillo.
Looking out the window, and I'm wishing I could see
a rainbow.*

1. Samuel Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues* (New York: Oak Publications, 1963), p. 28.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

3. Samuel Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues* (New York: Oak Publications, 1963), p. 40.

4. "Report Card Blues" was written by three classes of the fourth, fifth and sixth grades of the East Harlem Performing Arts School, Manhattan, in a workshop conducted by jazz musician Sharon Freeman and myself.

5. "Rainy Blues" was written by four eighth grade classes of Junior High School 52 Manhattan in a workshop conducted by jazz musician Sharon Freeman and myself.

It's important to help the students see their complaint in objective terms. This is the real exploration of this poem: to discover the things and events that are the cause of feelings—not the complaint itself—and then to present these in a simple, straightforward manner so that the same feelings may be elicited in whomever reads the poem. Ask the students repeatedly what is actually happening to create their experience. That is, if they are having an unhappy one, what do they see, hear, smell, taste, touch that makes them unhappy. Does anyone say anything to them? Who? What? Where do they go? What do they do?

"Report Card Blues," for example, got its start when someone mentioned, "We got our report cards yesterday." I put the line down on the blackboard, changing only the "we" to "I" and adding "that"; so the line started, "I got that report card..." Be careful, too, not to let the poem proceed too quickly. Using a Socratic method, press the children for the very next essential detail: not, "I got in trouble," or even, "My father gave me a spanking." What is the very next thing that happens after receiving the report card? The answers at first seem too simple and the children will be wary. Yet the simple answers here are the most useful. After getting the report card, you have to look at it; and *then* you see the source of the anxiety—"U's!" Now you can ease more responsibility over to the children, asking them how they would write the line.

The final shape and rhythm of each line should be found by testing it against an improvised melody on the blues scale. The children should sing the lines, preferably with the help of a piano. This, of course, is where the team teaching comes in—unless you also happen to be a jazz pianist. The musician helps the class find a melody. If the line is too long, or too short, it just won't *sing*. It is then an easy task to either condense or fill out a line and to change the word order where necessary until it sings smoothly and sounds right. The children themselves should make all the decisions and—where substantial disagreement is evident—the whole process can be stopped for discussion and votes. This experience is more valuable than the poem; or, rather, the poem will be valuable to them because of it. So don't be reluctant to give up your preferences for the poem to let the children work through to their own. Even if it takes a whole writing session to compose one three-line verse, the experience (know-how), satisfaction and confidence gained from having themselves written well one such lyric will stay with the children. In fact, I have only once worked with a class that wrote more than a single verse during a class period. Both "Report Card Blues" and "Rainy Blues" were written by a sequence of three and four classes, respectively, during an entire school day. The subjects of both poems immediately appealed to each class, whose verse then served as the introduction to the blues for the next.

Well, after having gotten a first line down, you have two. The problem of composing a third—the "response" to go with the "lament" of the first two—will now seem less intimidating. After all, one more line, and you are home free. And while rhyming well is difficult, the class is

a tremendous resource. Working together, the students will do it.

Once the first verse is finished, it will shine encouragement to all the children. Whether you continue work on the poem with the same class or have other classes add verses to it, the children now know *they* can write the blues. Subsequent stanzas can either add a new perspective to the action, as they do in "Rainy Blues," or slightly advance the action, as they do in "Report Card Blues." When the second stanza is finished, you have the beginnings of a song to sing. By the third stanza, the children will enjoy gathering around the piano and singing it through. Four stanzas make a solid song. If there is a dance teacher available, a rhythm routine may even be worked out to present the song as a theatrical event, which we did with "Report Card Blues." It was a smashing success.

I have used this exploration with elementary school and junior high school students. Despite the apparently demanding requirements of the blues form, children collaboratively compose the verses with relative ease and enjoy them. The formal starting point, a brief introduction to the blues, is the same for all ages. Older children, as well as adults, may be more reluctant to sing and need encouragement. Further study of the blues would make a good music and/or literature study project. *The Blues People: The Negro Experience In White America And The Music That Developed From It* by LeRoi Jones (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963) can be used with junior high school and adult students for broader study.

One Hand Clapping

by Martin Steingesser

Most of us enjoy an occasional trip into the strange, the fantastic. Children have a penchant for it. Yet often in their writing children try too hard to cut their scenarios out of whole cloth. The burden on the imagination is usually too great, and they end by throwing in everything from earthquakes and atom bombs to Godzilla and Frankenstein in order to be scary and shocking.

In this exploration, note how strange ordinary experience becomes when only one of the senses is cut off or deprived of normal stimulation. It is, in fact, an exploration into modes of experiencing the world. Consider hearing, for example. Imagine someone at the dinner table has said something embarrassing. Suddenly no one knows what to say. Silence. Perhaps the class is taking a test. Or perhaps you are watching a movie with the sound turned off. (At the opening of the film "The Miracle Worker," about the life of Helen Keller, a Christmas ball falls from a

decorated tree. The ball hits the ground, smashes, and pieces fly slowly in all directions. There is no sound. It is very strange.) In many such instances, the silence, rather than being absolute, is accentuated and made more strange by ordinary sounds normally too minimal to be heard. At the dinner table the awkward silence is made more suspenseful by the clicking of knives and forks against plates. During a test suddenly you are distracted by the sound of others writing, or the ticking of a clock—or even a wrist-watch. Silence at night is accentuated by many sounds: dripping faucets, crickets, animals, the wind. *Listen*, for instance, to the way Wallace Stevens uses wind sounds to convey a sense of emptiness and stillness in the winter world of the snowman.

THE SNOWMAN*

One must have a mind of winter
 To regard the frost and the boughs
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;
 And have been cold a long time
 To behold the junipers shagged
 with ice,
 The spruces rough in the distant
 glitter
 Of the January sun; and not to think
 Of any misery in the sound of the
 wind,
 In the sound of a few leaves,
 Which is the sound of the land
 Full of the same wind
 That is blowing in the same
 bare place
 For the listener, who listens
 in the snow,
 And, nothing himself, beholds
 Nothing that is not there and
 the nothing that is.

Listen is what Wallace Stevens had to do to write this poem. What did he hear? Where? What kind of place is this? What does he see? Is there movement? He gives us clear images: “pine-trees crusted with snow”; “junipers shagged with ice”; “the sound of a few leaves” blowing in a bare place. And what color dominates? Is this a good color to stand for silence? What color similar to white can also stand for silence? Where would you usually see silver? (Mirrors, water, moon, jewelry...) Could black stand for silence? Red?

Describe an experience with silence that made you feel strange or in which you became keenly aware of something new or of sounds not usually noticed. Do you hear when you dream? Or is it like a silent movie? Were you ever alone at home or in the woods? What is it like when you swim underwater? Take your time and think yourself into the experience. Listen. If you can't think of an actual experience, make something up. Tell how the experience makes you feel, too. Use comparisons (similes) to help

describe things for which you have no words. Put a different image of what you hear or see—sound pictures—on each line. If you cannot think of a poem, write a list of comparisons about silence, each comparison on a new line.

I use this exploration with elementary school children and usually introduce it after explorations with similes and imagist poems. The children's writing has shown considerable diversity, although many poems are influenced by “The Snowman” and deal with various aspects of winter. Some of these may help give additional ideas to other children.

CHILDREN'S POEMS

SILENCE

*Silence is like a butterfly
 landing on the ground
 It is like a paper falling on the ground
 straight down
 not like a Big Mack truck
 falling on an atom bomb carrying atom bombs—
 No way!
 Silence is like a falling leaf.*

Marc A. Bynam, 3rd grade
 Lee Road School, Cornwall

SUMMER IS COMING

*Summer is coming.
 It is very quiet.
 All of a sudden the wind begins to blow
 and the trees begin to rattle like bells.
 I hear birds sing.
 It is quiet here now.
 All of a sudden everybody comes and has a party.
 The trees wear very green.*

Debbie Dulaney, 3d grade
 Lee Road School, Cornwall

*the
 wind
 is
 so
 quiet.
 and
 the
 trees
 are
 like
 the
 water.*

Shelly Johns, 3d grade
 Lee Road School, Cornwall

*Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 9.

SOUNDS BEYOND

*When I
daydream
the sounds
stay behind.
It's as if
I walk
away
and leave
my voice
behind.*

Lee Nuzzo, 4th grade
Lee Road School, Cornwall

A TEST PAPER

*In front of me
I see a sheet
the color of white.
There is not a sound
throughout the room,
for we are having a test.
You can hear a feather fall
or even a rabbit's whiskers twitch.*

Daune Whitfield, 4th grade
Lee Road School, Cornwall

*She ran swiftly
through the woods
as quiet as if there
were no one there,
her coat blending with the trees.*

Anonymous, 5th grade
Lee Road School, Cornwall

SILENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

*While the teacher speaks,
Everyone's mind creeps.
Suddenly our minds are put to work.
Not a noise perks.
We think and stare,
No one gives a care
about silence.
Everyone's face is white
As their minds try to fight off nothing.
Some people's faces are clear
Like they've seen a ghost in the mirror.
You look and see white flakes
Flooding down, down, down
To the ground.
But still there is silence
In the classroom.*

Allison Tracy, 5th grade
Lee Road School, Cornwall

*I turn on the television and watch an old movie.
But there is no sound.
I turn the sound up, but I find out it is a silent movie.
So I go outside to play.
I say hello to a girl, but she does not answer.
Again and again I say hello,
but still she does not answer.
A man says to me she is deaf, and then he walks away.
I feel like I am closed off from the world.
I feel clear like a glass window that is new.*

Tammie Goldstein, 5th grade
P.S. 119, Brooklyn

*I am in bed, and everyone is sleeping.
I feel the sun starting to creep into my window.
Our little glass figures seem as if they are alive and moving.
Slowly, the sun begins to rise, bringing sunshine
to the neighborhood.
And as everyone wakes up, I drift away to dreamland.*

Elizabeth Perez, 5th grade
P.S. 119, Brooklyn

A PICTURE

*Walking down the street,
I see still trees, no noise.
There is not a person around,
snow is falling without a sound.
No tracks in the snow,
Not even paw prints.
Every little thing is so perfect,
It is like a picture,
Sort of like the picture of wilderness
Hanging in my room.*

Anonymous, 5th grade
Lee Road School, Cornwall

SNOW

*I sit by the classroom window
and look at the snow coming down.
It melts in the grass and the road.
It will start to stick tomorrow.*

Billy Favre, 5th grade
Lee Road School, Cornwall

*I saw a man
and said to him, "Buenos dias."
He said nothing,
Because he was ceigo.
I tried to talk to him,
But he was sordo also.
It sure was gray!*

Cheryl Carrick, 5th grade
Lee Road School, Cornwall

More Films Kids Like

by Maureen Gaffney

More Films Kids Like (American Library Association, 1977) is a consumer's report, the result of two years of testing short films with children under thirteen. The book was produced by the Children's Film Theatre, a group established for the expressed purpose of giving children a say about films intended for their viewing.

The Children's Film Theatre (now incorporated as the Media Center for Children, Inc.) was founded in 1971 by the Center for Understanding Media, with the support of the New York State Council on the Arts. Under the direction of Susan Rice, it compiled *Films Kids Like* (American Library Association, 1973).

More Films Kids Like, annotating entirely different films, supplements the first book. Together they include over four hundred short 16mm children's films released for distribution from the late 1960's up to early 1976. *More Films Kids Like* contains an index and a section called "Activities Kids Like" which documents selected arts activities that followed the screenings.

The children involved in the project ranged in age from three to twelve. While there are often distinct differences in children from one year to another, establishing rigid age guidelines was both undesirable and impossible, since children of the same age can vary widely in their reactions to a film. The easiest way to accommodate these differences was to combine ages into practical groupings. In the annotations therefore we used three groupings: young (three to six), middle (six to nine), and older (nine to twelve). These are suggestions not absolute standards. They are reports of what worked with a particular group of children.

The following is a sampling of the films reviewed by the Children's Film Theatre. We recommend that you prescreen films in order to best plan how to make use of them. You cannot depend on distributors' descriptions or teacher guides. You cannot even rely completely on our annotations. You're the one who knows your audience's needs and outlook. Prescreening allows you to bring more of yourself to the experience and enables you to anticipate your group's reaction.

LA BALADE D'EMILE 3 min MFI
nonverbal monochrome animation 1967 France

Line drawings animate this charming and lyrical fantasy in which a little man leaves his house to take a stroll and changes into a snowman, the snowman changes into a St.

Bernard, the dog into a polar bear, the bear into a fish, and then—in reverse order—they all change back. The man returns home to find them all there for dinner. Young kids loved it, calling the man a robot, but they didn't know what the St. Bernard was. (3-8)

CANDY MACHINE 4 min FILM IMAGES
nonverbal color animation 1972 USA

A poignant city scene by George Griffin. While waiting in a subway station a man puts some change in a candy machine which does not produce any candy when he pulls the handles—and worse does not return his money. Still hopeful, the man attacks the machine but to no avail. Before succumbing to defeat, the man (in a fantasy sequence) gets inside the machine where his desires remain just out of reach. Although the point of view is sophisticated, older kids identified with the situation; they talked about similar incidents or brought up interesting analogies. Fine for discussions and acting out. (9-12)

THE CASE OF THE ELEVATOR DUCK 17 min LCA
color live-action 1974 USA

A film by Joan Silver based on the book by Polly Berrien Berends. An eleven-year-old black boy detective takes on the case of a homeless duck. Despite the fact that his housing project has a "no pets" rule and his mother, who is afraid of eviction, gives him an impossible time limit, he solves the case. Kids empathized with Gilbert's situation and said the film was very realistic. They enjoyed his casual humor and the clever way he solved (or worked around) his problems. Too dependent on narration for most kids under six, but older groups asked to see it again. Excellent filmmaking. A four star film for (6-12).

CECILY 7 min LCA
color animation 1973 Czechoslovakia

A wonderful fantasy about a young girl who loves to sing. Although she is not perfect (she occasionally sneaks a smoke in the garden), her grandmother punishes her so often by pulling her ears that they become elephantine. When Cecily can take no more, she flies away to Africa to live with the animals. A poignant story for kids over five, all is resolved in the unusual ending. A modern primitive art style adds an interesting dimension to this contemporary fairytale. Fine for non-sexist programming. There

was much discussion about justice and unfair punishment. A four star film for (6-12).

CHEETAH 11 min EBE

nonverbal color live-action 1972 USA

A superb essay on cheetahs of the Serengeti Plains in Tanzania. The film shows cheetahs on the hunt and when they finally bring down a gazelle we watch them eat and almost ritually wash afterwards. Most kids accepted the hunt scene as simply being the cheetah's way of life. It inspired serious animal research and discussion among older groups. Great for all ages—perhaps with a discussion of what these cats eat before screening it with young groups. The visuals carry the film so well that in discussions afterward no one mentioned the lack of narration. A four star film for (3-12).

COLTER'S HELL 14 min PHOENIX

nonverbal color live-action 1973 USA

Robin Lehman's arresting nature film takes a careful, quiet look at the Yellowstone geysers in Winter. Superb visuals and an unusually restrained sound track add to the tension as the geyser gets ready to blow. The experience was extremely tactile, albeit meditative, and kids talked constantly throughout, making associations with what they saw (calling it oatmeal, pudding, or excrement) and with what they heard (saying the earth was breathing). The film is structured in such a way that there is a sense of progress—almost of plot; but perhaps the film is best compared to a musical composition. An excellent stimulus for working in clay or plaster of paris. A great film to run again so kids can make their own sound track. We got mixed reactions with young and middle groups, although we found it worth showing to them. For over seven's it's a four-star film. (3-12)

THE CONCERT 12 min PYRAMID

nonverbal color live-action 1974 England

A hilarious spoof in which a concert pianist plays the street markings behind Albert Hall in London—with his feet. A mime masterpiece with wonderful slapstick routines, young kids missed some of the humor and did not understand the tuning episode, but everyone enjoyed it. Instead

of talking about this film get the kids involved in movement activities or form an unusual orchestra. A four star film for all ages. (3-12)

DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS 11 min FILMFAIR

color live-action 1970 USA

An old-fashioned style didactic film about water-fowl, with close-ups of their feet and bills. To our surprise, young kids loved it. They ignored the narration and talked a lot in the beginning, grew very still during the hatching scene (some actually encouraged the little bird to crack out of the egg by shouting "open it"), and were wild about the ducklings. (3-6)

GOOD GRIEF 5 min FILMS INC

color animation 1973 USA

A child goes to bed and one after the other experiences a series of night fears. Narrated in mock-serious verse, this film was an amazing success. Kids were intensely involved and/or laughed throughout. Older audiences said they liked the scary part (you have to see it to appreciate the humor of that comment) and related many stories of their fears. They asked to see it again. Okay with middle groups but best with 8-12.

**HANSEL AND GRETEL,
AN APPALACHIAN VERSION 17 min DAVENPORT**

color live-action 1975 USA

This no-frills version of the classic Grimm Brothers' folktale is set in Southern Appalachia during the Great Depression. Tom Davenport has managed to tap the sense of urgency that makes good folktales work: the rapid pace and basic story line maintain dramatic tension all the way through. Our audiences loved it. Kids hissed at the witch and shouted "do it" as Gretel hesitated before pushing her into the oven. This is an innovative film which some kids liked especially because "it looked like a regular motion picture"—that is, it wasn't animated. Some adults were reluctant to use it; they thought it would frighten kids, but it was one of our most successful films—most groups asked for it again and again (perhaps in part to tame it). It does require discussion, particularly with young and middle groups, and before we showed it to those ages we told

them it was a scary film and suggested they sit near someone they like or hold hands if they got scared. Excellent for talking about scary feelings and things. Great for mask-making, dramatizations, and mime. A four star film for all ages. (4-12)

MORNING ZOO 10 min FILMFAIR

color live-action 1972 USA

A relaxed look at a California zoo before the crowds arrive. Noteworthy because the young zoo worker/narrator is a girl. Kids identified the animals as they appeared and had a lot to say about the fact that a girl was taking care of them. On different levels, the film was successful with all ages. Fine for non-sexist programming. (3-12)

PENGUINS OF THE ANTARCTIC 13 min ACI

color live-action 1972 USA

A wonderful documentary with many great close-ups. The birds' unique adaptation to their harsh environment includes an unusual development: male Emperor penguins do the major parenting once the egg is laid. Kids loved watching the penguins swim and slide on the ice and were curious about what the scientists were doing. The low-key narration and lack of music is noteworthy. Our audiences were disappointed when it ended. A four star film for all ages. (3-12)

LE POULET (THE CHICKEN) 15 min McGRAW

French dialogue b&w live-action 1963 France

A young French boy becomes emotionally attached to the chicken his parents have bought. He doesn't want them to kill it for Sunday dinner, and his solution has wonderfully comic and increasingly bizarre results. A warm and earthy French farce with English subtitles, the story is largely carried by the visuals. Young groups will need an introduction, but middle and older kids told us they didn't have to read the subtitles to understand what was happening. The film works much the way a silent film does and requires lots of participation on the part of the audience. Kids were incredibly enthusiastic about this film by Claude Berri and asked to see it again. A four star film for all ages. (3-12)

RUSSIAN ROOSTER 4 min PERSPECTIVE

nonverbal color cameraless animation 1975 USA

A Steve Segal film, edited to Rimsky-Korsakov's "La Coq d'Or," in which a rooster runs along the ground and after seemingly endless attempts manages to become airborne. Immensely pleased with himself, he enjoys a brief time of triumph until hunters try to shoot him down, but the rooster cleverly reverses roles and catches the hunters. Kids commented that the music really fit the film. They applauded and asked to see it again. Excellent for programming. A four star film for all ages. (3-12)

TALEB AND HIS LAMB 16 min BARR

color live-action 1975 Israel/USA

A young Bedouin shepherd grows attached to a lamb and to prevent its being sold he runs away with it into the desert. When his stern father finds him the film offers two versions of what happens, each equally in keeping with the story, and the narrator invites the viewers to decide which would be more wise. Although the narrator uses stilted English, the strength of the story and the excellent photography carry the film. An outstanding folktale, an unusual values film—kids loved it and responded enthusiastically to choosing an ending. A four star film for (6-12).

TCHOU TCHOU 15 min EBE

nonverbal color block animation 1972 Canada

Two block children play happy childhood games until a block dragon threatens their carefree existence. To defend themselves, they build a fort but it doesn't stop the dragon. Finally they outwit the dragon, tame it, and make it part of their world by turning it into a train. An exquisite fantasy, dramatic and well resolved, young kids were charmed by this outstanding block animation and applauded when it was over. Older groups were most interested in the romance between the boy and girl; middle groups enjoyed expressing, and somewhat dramatizing, their fear of the dragon. A four star film for all ages, but most suitable with (3-9).

WARTY THE TOAD 13 min CORONET

color live-action 1973 USA

A fable about vanity with an unusual twist. Warty the toad is proud of being ugly, but he learns the hard way that there is more to life than how one looks: his animal neighbors teach Warty about social conscience and save him from becoming a snake's birthday dinner. Beautifully photographed, kids enjoyed identifying the different marshland animals to each other but they were very quiet when the snake was stalking Warty. The film is slow and an introductory discussion about vanity clarifies the point of the story; even so, the moral was anticlimactic. Possible with young kids who enjoyed the fine animal close-ups although they missed the irony and seemed to ignore the narrator; best with (5-8).

WHAZZAT? 10 min EBE

nonverbal color clay animation 1975 USA

Six lively clay creatures change from balls to various shapes as they explore their environment and go on a journey. The "slowpoke" is an effective and engaging characterization, and kids loved the sound track which clued them to what was happening. A cliffhanging sequence had young kids literally on their feet. The film breaks down into two parts and the second half is based on an Arab/Indian folktale about six blind men and an elephant, but don't introduce the film as a version of the story (as the literature that comes with the film does). It is so much more, and, besides, it is ridiculous to assume that the childlike, sexless clay creatures are men. More importantly, at least with our audiences, since the encounter with

the elephant comes at the end and recognition of what-it-is serves as the one-word punchline, such an introduction debased the kids' experience of the first part of the film and removed the mystery from the second. Some young kids completely missed the parable, but that didn't diminish their enthusiasm for the film. Young and middle groups asked to see it again and talked about it weeks later. Fantastic for clay activities, sensory experiments, and mime. A four star film for all ages. (3-12)

ZEBRAS 10 min TEXTURE

nonverbal color animation 1972 Sweden

A tender and lyrical fantasy about two zebras. When one zebra loses a stripe, food keeps slipping out the gap in its stripes. Other animals are concerned and cooperate in the quest to find the lost stripe which becomes dramatic as the zebra wastes away, getting thinner and thinner, until the stripe is found in an unlikely spot and all is happily resolved. An unusually warm and humorous story with a lilting jazz score, it was a tremendous success with young and middle groups who said "We loved that one!" A four star film for (3-8).

ZLATEH THE GOAT 20 min WESTON

color live-action 1973 Czechoslovakia

This film, set in 19th century Poland and based on a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer, has a wry and earthy sensibility. Aaron's father has had a bad year and decides to sell the family goat to get some money for Chanukah. With great sadness the boy walks the animal to the butcher, but on the way they are caught in a severe snowstorm. For three days, while his family mournfully gives him up for dead, they weather the storm in a haystack where Zlateh eats hay and Aaron drinks goat's milk. Older kids giggled during the womblike milking scene, and middle groups were restless at the slow beginning but once the quiet mood had been established and the snow started, almost everyone was involved. A lavishly produced period piece with all the qualities of what kids called "a real movie," the film brought up some interesting discussions about family life and pets. Many adults (as did we) had trouble with the film's melodramatic treatment, which gives it a self-indulgent tone not present in Singer's story, but middle and older audiences liked it. (6-12)

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PASSION AND ENERGY

by Heather MacAndrew

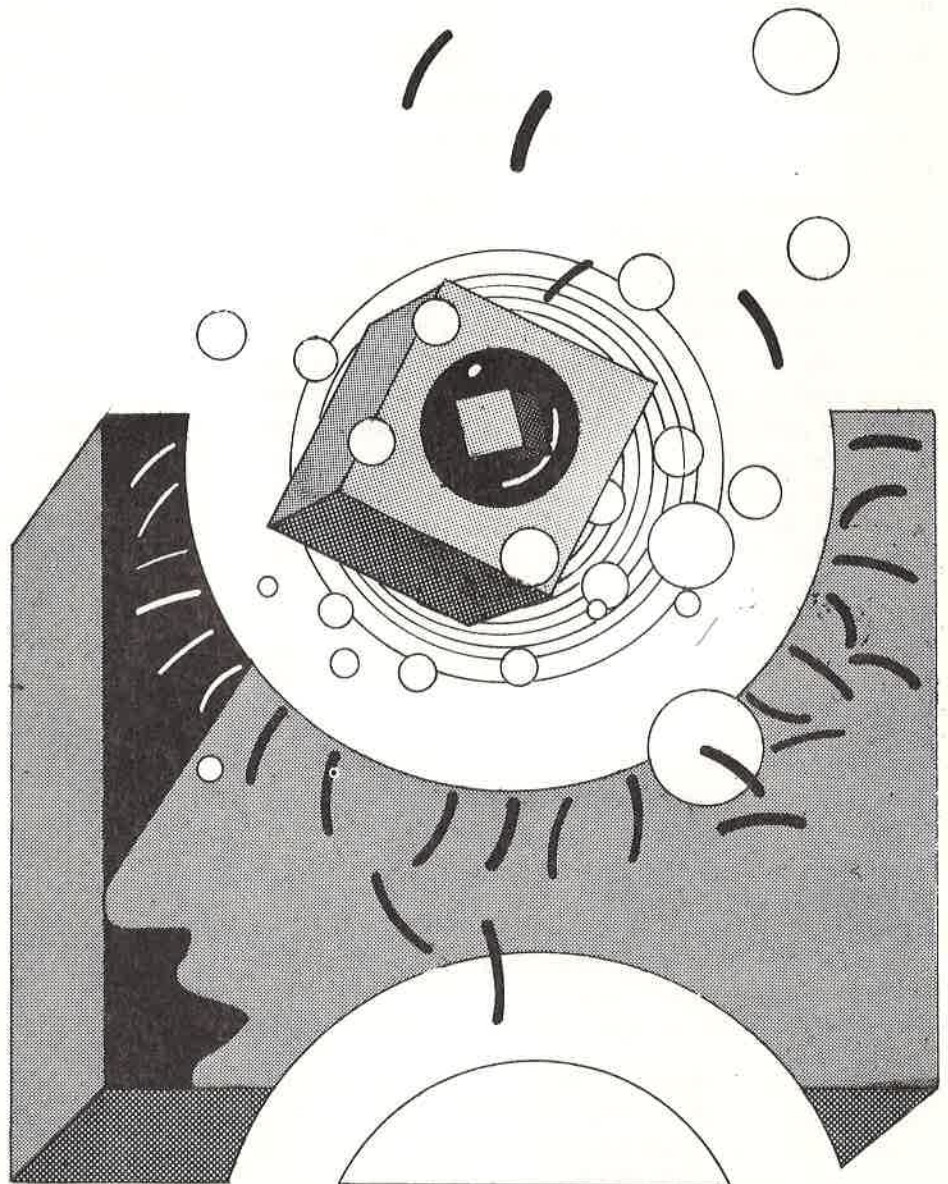
...children up to the age of 7 or 8 are of a different species from ourselves. We see children as creatures about to be trapped and corrupted by what trapped and corrupted ourselves...it should be enough to teach the young of a species to survive, to approximate the skills of its elders, to acquire current technical skills. Yet every generation seems to give out a bellow of anguish at some point, as if it had been betrayed, sold out, sold short... This is due to the strong but unacknowledged belief that something better than oneself is possible. Once adulthood is reached, the newly grown ones join with the older ones, their parents, as they turn about and look back into their own infancy. They watch the infancy of their own children with the same futile anguish.

Every person sitting there...felt as if his or her potential had been left unfulfilled. Something had gone wrong. Some painful and wrong process had been completed and left them... we were looking at our children... we thought of them almost as if they were the young of another species, a free, fearless species, full of potentiality, full of that quality which everyone recognizes, yet is never defined, the quality which all adults lose and know that they lose.

Education means only this—that the lively alert fearless curiosity of children must be fed, must be kept alive...

I read these passages from a Doris Lessing novel* in a restaurant near North Bay, in January, 1976. I had just come from addressing a meeting of Directors of Education for the Northeastern Region, in South River. I had come to explain what the Creative Artists in Schools Part Two pilot project was all about and how the regular CAIS program worked. It was a formal meeting and my talk was received mostly with polite, formal questions. My enthusiasm for the CAIS program was met with little interest.

On my way back to North Bay, I stopped to have lunch. A group of kids came into the restaurant, sat down and began criticizing a poster on the wall. They dismissed it because it didn't look like 'real life'. They were about eleven or twelve years old. Already it seemed they were looking



**Briefing for a Descent into Hell* (Knopf, 1971)

at things in a peculiarly narrow way. I was annoyed by their remarks and scribbled the following comments in my notebook: "What they say and see reflects how they are taught: it must conform to this or that authority or it's wrong. I wonder if they approach everything in this way? Why can't they see beyond—to other possibilities—other possibilities of what the picture might be saying, or what a piece of music might be saying or what a poem might be saying. What does 'real life' mean to them?"

It was a coincidence that I happened to be reading those particular pages from Lessing's novel at that oddly appropriate time. I started thinking.

Quite often I would comment to friends that when I went out to talk about the CAIS program, I felt like a Girl Guide selling cookies. What I meant was that I approached every situation with the totally sincere conviction of a Girl Guide hoping her enthusiasm and belief in a good thing would win over potential buyers.

Lessing goes on, describing one woman's response to the previously quoted comments.

And listening, we were lively and alert and fearless. Every one of us was soaked for that time with those qualities...and I thought: Don't let it go, don't forget it... And when I returned home...it stayed with me. What stayed? Not the words that you used. It was the feeling of the quality of what you said. It went with recognition, as if I had been reminded of something I knew very well..

From the start I thought the Creative Artists in Schools program was, by and large, good. Later I knew it was good because of what I saw and what I felt; I knew by the intensity of my reaction to some of the projects. I knew what *could* happen in a classroom with an artist, a group of kids, a teacher. The more projects I saw, the more I was able to discriminate and compare. And the more I saw, the more frequently I came away with the certainty that the CAIS program was often doing something very important. But for a long time, that certainty came from feelings or intuition

only. It was, as I said, a reaction, a personal response to what I saw, how I perceived what was going on. To paraphrase Lessing, it was the quality of the feeling of what I saw that stayed with me. Articulating those feelings, defining the *raison d'être* for the program and its continuation was and is another matter, a more difficult task.

Let me digress for a moment to relate two stories which appeared in the same issue of a magazine called *Westworld*. One concerns a Haida Indian artist called Pat McGuire. Pat began to draw and paint at a very early age, interpreting Haida legends in slate carvings and, later, in gold and silver. He became the first Haida artist to successfully paint in water colours—yet he always kept his art traditional. His work became legendary among collectors of Northwest Coast native art, even though he died in 1970 at the age of 27.

The other story tells about John Halfyard, born in 1880, in Jersey, England. He was deserted by his parents at an early age and never learned to read or write more than his signature. He made his way to Canada, homesteading in Kapuskasing, Ontario and later, in the Alberni Valley, B. C. In the 1940's he became ill and moved in with a weaver, Aileen Devereaux, and her family. At the age of 85 he began making dolls from scraps of materials and odds and ends that he found around the house. John's vision was limited to partial use of one eye and yet the detail of the tiny figures is astounding. Aileen encouraged him and gradually he began showing and selling his work. Sixty of his dolls were displayed at the World Crafts Council's "In Praise of Hands" exhibition in 1974. John Halfyard was eighty-five when he made his first doll. In nine years he had made over two hundred. He died in 1974, at the age of ninety-four, totally deaf and nearly blind. His threaded needle remains in his last doll.

What was going on in the mind of a nearly blind and deaf old man to produce over two hundred original figures—fantasies and memories turned into tangible forms? And what

drove Pat McGuire, from the time he could hold a pen or carving knife, to interpret his Indian heritage in carvings and paintings? Self-expression is a need in all of us. Creativity exists in each and every one of us. Some develop an outlet early on in life; with others, it comes later; sometimes it gets lost for a time. But it's always there, active or latent. What does it take to let it—this hard to define quality—emerge? And why does it too often get lost or buried?

What is it that lets painters and poets retain and express the visions, the stirrings of their imaginations? Some of us continue to grow and learn all through our lives. But sometimes we can only look back and see that there were possibilities, that there *are* possibilities—but we can no longer act on them. Most of us never discover how much we can really do because we can get along without truly stretching, pushing and questioning our boundaries. The fears, the training, the niches we too easily slide into, take over and dominate. The other part of us is still there, but buried, unwilling or unable to emerge.

And that's what I believe Lessing is getting at. Children cannot stay children. They must grow up. But what happens in the process? What is lost? We grow up—but at what expense? Why do adults wistfully look at children, rejoicing in how children see and mourning what they have lost? The tragedy is that the loss often occurs so early.

Colette Whiten is an artist, a sculptor. In the winter she hikes and camps in the wilderness. It's a matter of survival and a constant testing of one's endurance. She says, "I think of it in relation to my work as an artist and wonder if it is not the prime reason for people accomplishing anything."

Kenneth Koch, a poet, talks about teaching poetry writing to old people in a nursing home. He says, "Our students did accomplish things. I am not sure that helped them to adjust to life in the nursing home. Rather, I think it slightly changed the conditions of that life, which was better. I don't think I would like to adjust to a life without imagination or accomplishment, and I don't believe my

students wanted to either.”*

We cannot all become artists, nor should we. That isn't the point. We cannot grow into adulthood looking at the world in the same way children do. But that quality—of what?—of openness, curiosity, receptivity; the quality which goes hand in hand with, or gives rise to, a drive for self expression, is something which can and should be retained and nurtured all our lives. Imagination is an essential part of being human, or what makes human beings unique. When imagination dies, when ideas stop, when we begin to close doors, then a part of the life force stops too.

The Creative Artists in Schools program was created to bring artists and members of a community together within the educational system. But the wish was for a more intense contact with individual artists communicating in a direct and personal way with young people in schools. Many teachers provide interesting, well rounded, creative classroom experiences for their students. Many don't. But even with the best, there could always be more. And if more is within reach, then so much the better.

The artist in a classroom brings together the technique and the person. Technique comes alive through the person. As well as imparting knowledge of a particular craft, the artist brings different perceptions, a different perspective, a way of looking at the world, which may differ from that of the non-artist. It isn't a question of right or wrong; it's the

difference that counts (for what that may be worth). It may be worth a great deal.

The potential for what might happen in a classroom between artist and student is exciting—the potential for discovery; hearing new ideas; new ways of approaching and dealing with problems; becoming aware of other possibilities: of a piece of music, a painting, of moving one's body, of one's mind, of one's life. There are exciting possibilities in the ordinary: looking at sidewalks, sewer lids, bark on a tree; discovering colours in music, in feelings and putting them on paper or gymnasium walls. How many of us take time now to consider these things?

What happens in an artists in schools situation is up to the individuals concerned. Again, it's the possibilities that count: new ways of thinking about yourself, your environment, art and how they all relate to each other. What you are capable of doing and how you can do it is what's important, and also pushing and stretching and not closing doors, especially at age 7 or 8. This is certainly worth supporting.

So to get at the core of what a program like Artists in Schools can do, it's necessary to look at it in this much larger context. What happens in the best artists in schools situations is the stimulating and the nurturing of the creativity which is in everyone. It is one way of keeping the process alive and growing. It is the interaction of artist, students and teachers and the challenges which can occur therein. It is the dynamics of giving and getting: a truly reciprocal learn-

ing process. It is showing the relevance and relationship of an art form to you and me and life itself.

But the question begs: why is it necessary for a professional artist to visit a school to make this happen? Why can't this same process occur as a matter of course with the teachers within the existing system? Because artists are artists and teachers are teachers: they have chosen different vocations. Sometimes of course, the two are combined, but the balance is rarely even—one must outweigh the other.

Do artists “teach” in a classroom? In the best situations, it's not so much teaching *per se*, as the sharing of experience, a more casual exchange of information. The most interesting and revealing scenarios to watch are the dialogues which occur between artists and kids: the whys and wherefores, such as, “Why do you do it if you can't make a lot of money at it?” Often it's the first realization that someone has actually chosen to make his or her life's work painting or dancing or whatever it happens to be. And if you grow up in a town where everybody's father works for GM and everybody's mother stays at home to raise kids, the realization that it is possible to make a living from your passion, creates a new awareness of work—of what people do for a living and why. At the same time, *the Artist*, capital A, is often demystified. Whatever stereotyped mental picture a child (or teacher) might have is replaced by the recognition that this person is a human being too, with many of the same concerns and worries as you and me. □

*From *I Never Told Anybody* (Vintage, 1977)

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METAMORPHOSIS: A DRAWING PROJECT

by Barbara Siegel

In my art work I am involved in exploring the connections between the printed word and visual imagery, so I am interested in the ways in which my students, at P.S. 11 in Brooklyn, express these connections in their own work. How does one take the printed word, transform it into a mental image, and then objectify it in a drawing? I sometimes ask classes to illustrate stories that I read to them. In selecting material to read one might tend to use simple children's books, which often include beautiful illustrations. I prefer to make my selection from more complex and sophisticated literature, which the children find equally if not more engrossing; and in which imagery is more highly developed. I am careful, though, to choose stories that deal with basic themes, that have profound significance in the lives of children. I try to choose works with which the children are not already familiar to reduce their reliance on trite formulas.

Most recently I read my classes an episode from Apuleius' ancient Roman novel, *The Golden Ass* (book 3), in which the hero, Lucius, a man fascinated by magic, begs his girlfriend, Fotis, to change him temporarily into an owl. She confuses her potions, and he turns instead into a jackass and suffers the concomitant indignities of his new form. A tale of fantasy and magic gives the children great latitude for interpretation. The subject of the story, metamorphosis, or the process of changing form, is of special significance to children because they are perpetually caught between the longing to change completely, "grow up," and the anxiety of changing too fast and losing the

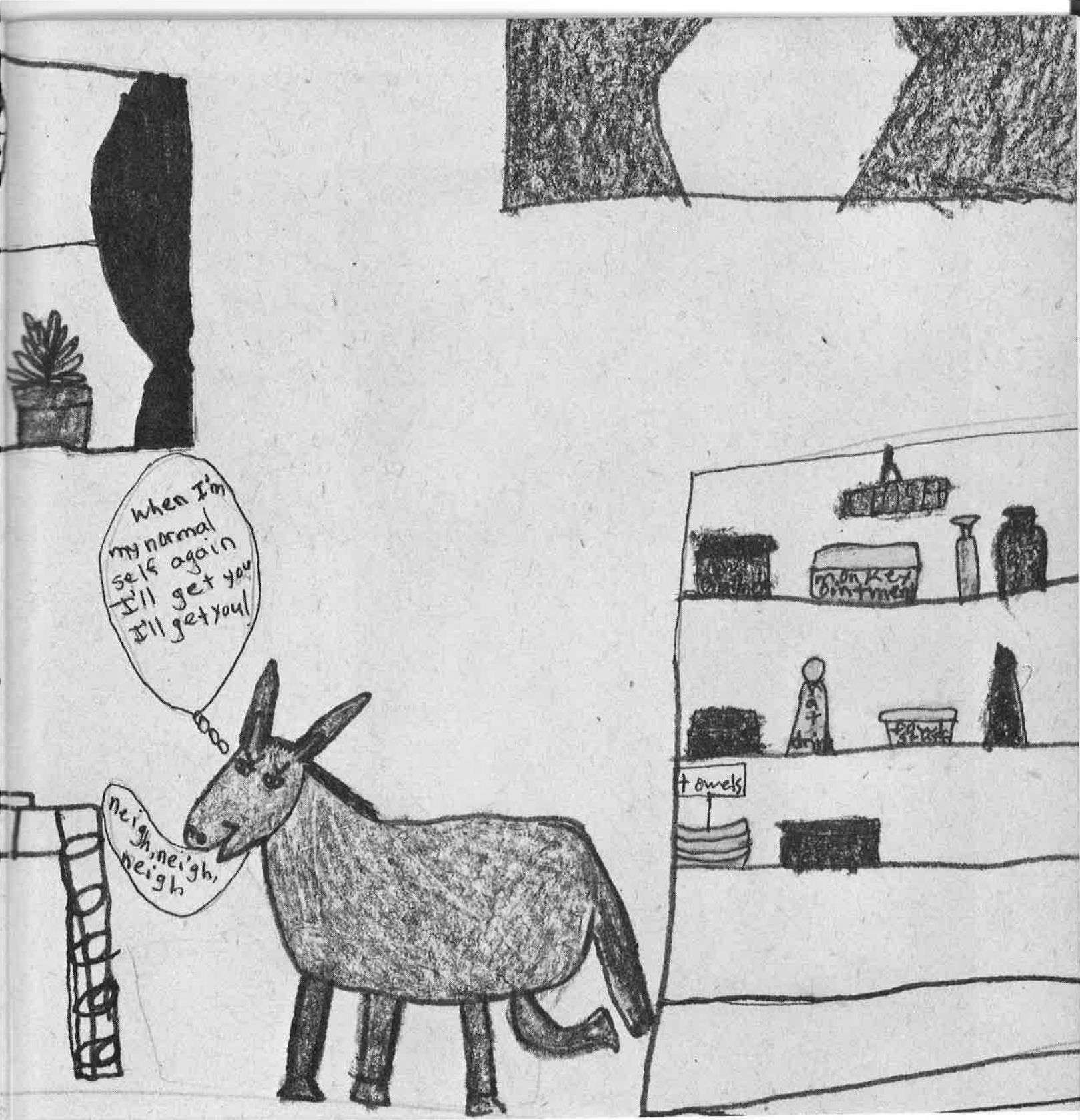


Fig. 1

comforts of dependency. What child might not dream of suddenly waking up one morning miraculously metamorphosed into a favorite omnipotent super-hero, or conversely fear actually turning into the "dirty little pig" his mother accuses him of being?

With this in mind I began the class

with a discussion of illustration. Why do books contain pictures or illustrations? Most children felt that their primary function was to make a story clearer. I suggested that perhaps a picture might give *new* insight into a story. Illustration might not merely describe the text but might elaborate on it and change one's perception of



it. My students generally believed that pictures in books were either drawn by the writer or carefully rendered to his or her specifications. They had not considered that the pictures accompanying a story might be the product of another creative mind, presenting an independent point of view. We discussed how more and

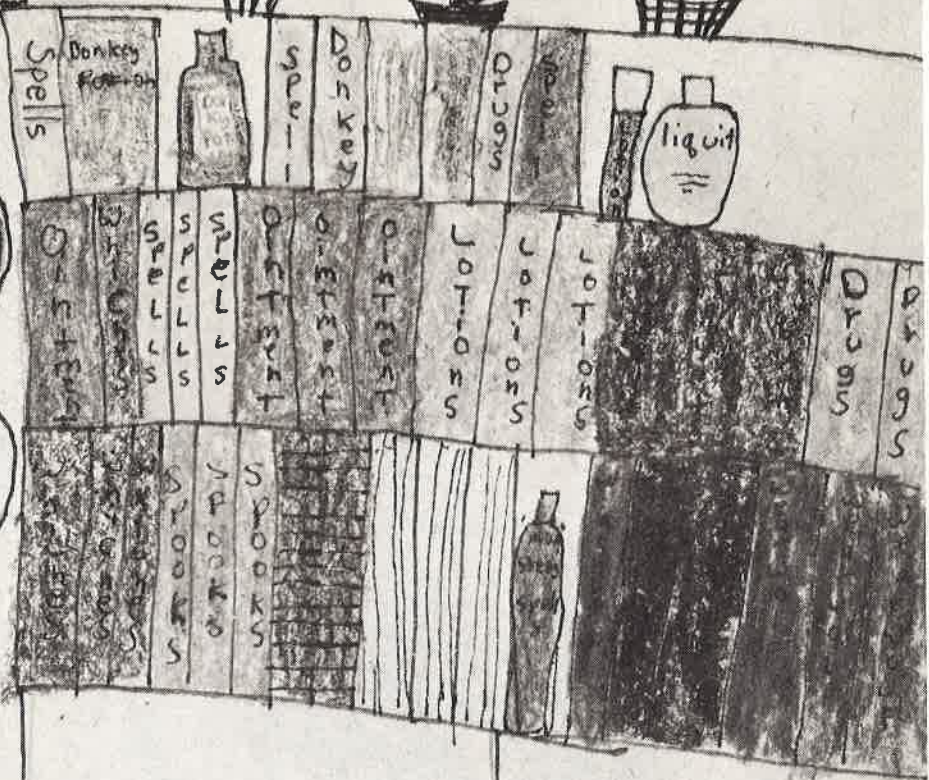
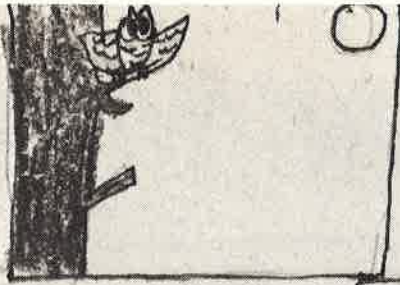
more artists today do art work in the form of books or incorporate words and texts into their art work.

Next we talked about the concept of metamorphosis. As I had expected, the subject was very intriguing to the children. We made a list of examples of metamorphoses in the literature with which they were

already familiar: e.g. Pinocchio turning into a real little boy, Lot's wife turning into a pillar of salt, the frog becoming a prince. In each instance of change, I asked the class to consider why the author had chosen the specific form into which his character was metamorphosized. Aside from being an unpleasantly slimy mate for



Fig. 2



Donkey ointment

Owl ointment

SUSAN 7

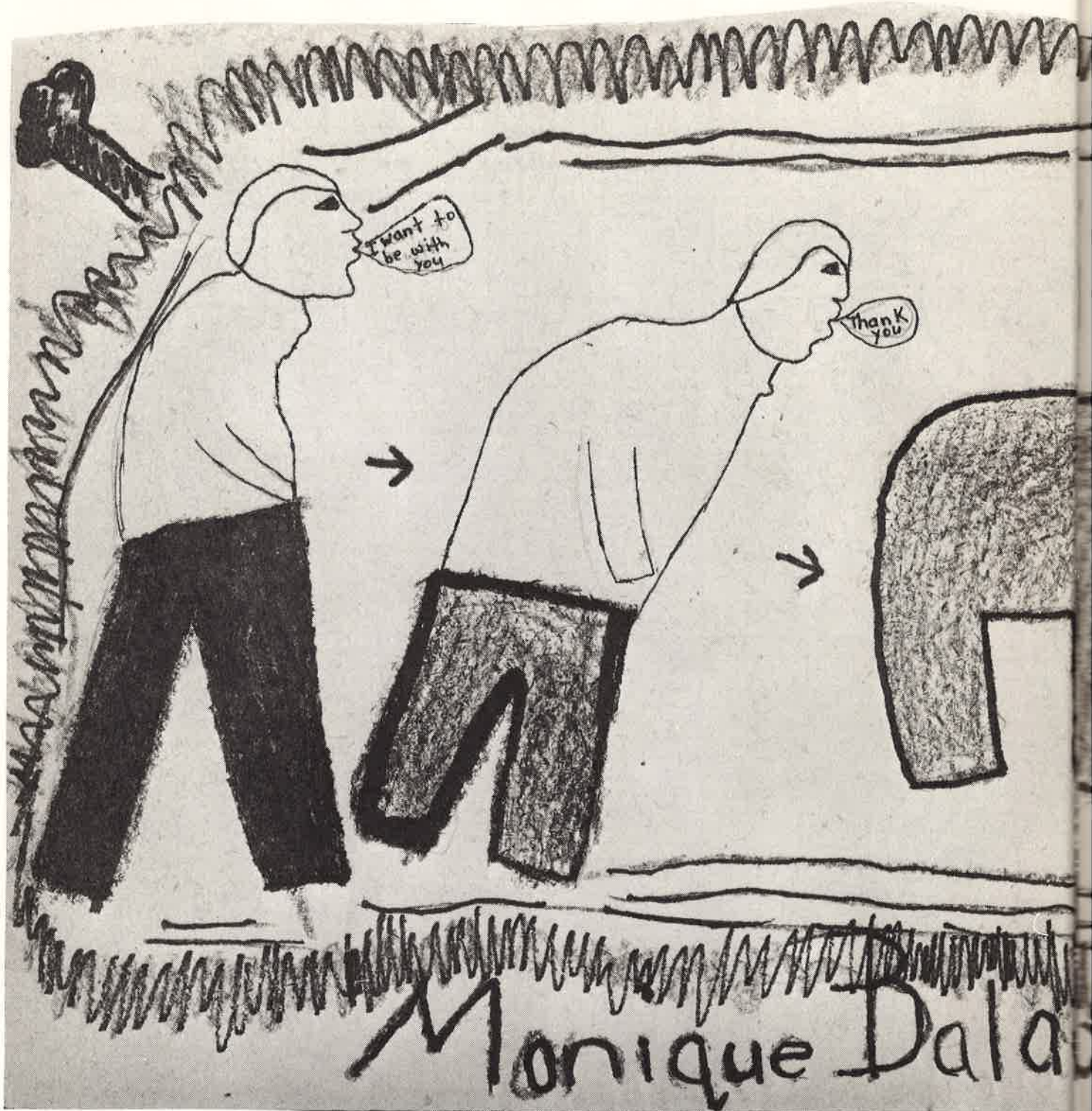
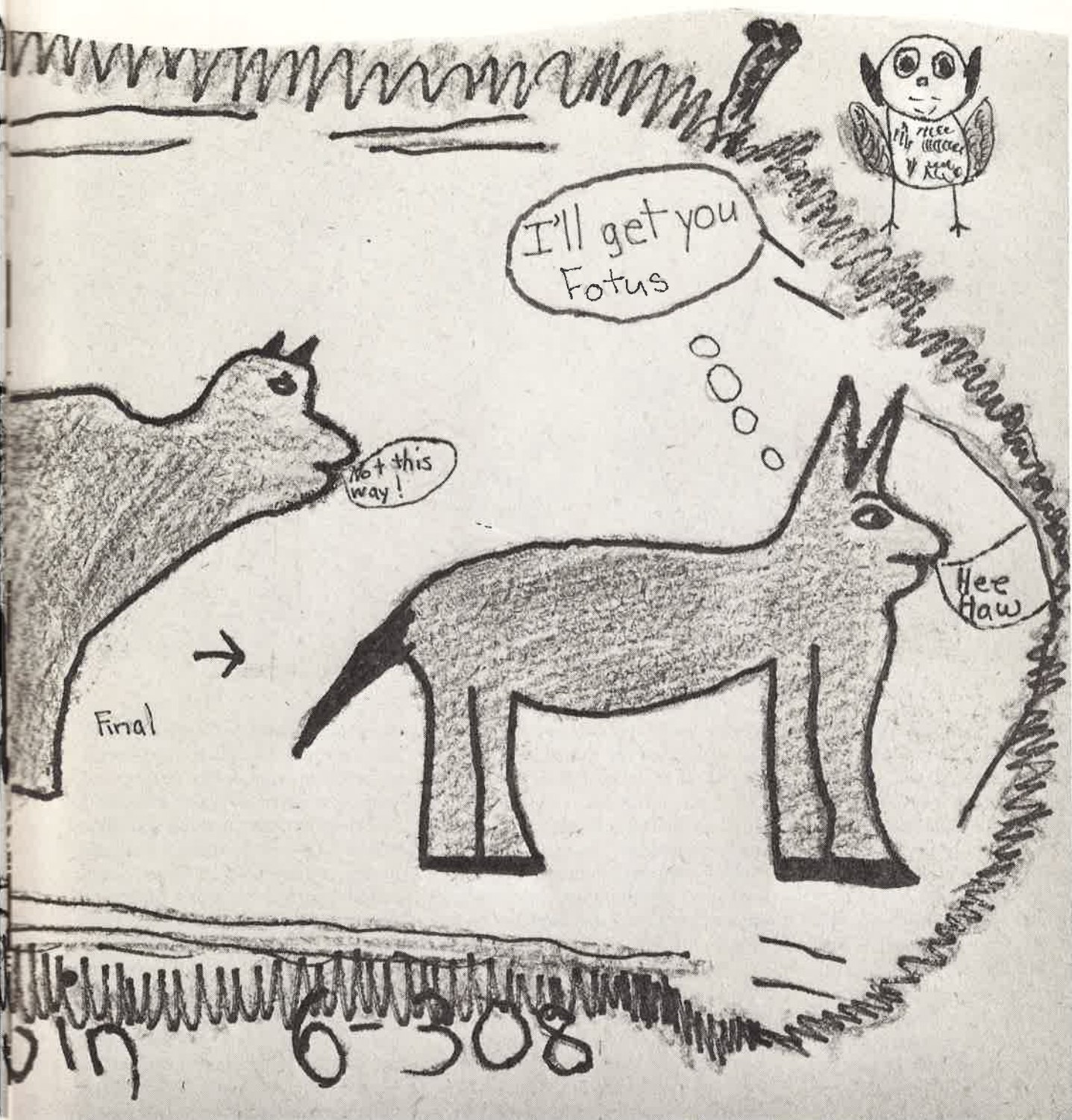


Fig. 3



I'll get you Fetus

Not this way!

Final

Hee Hlaw

bin

6-308

By Kevin

A man
man

Turning
Into a monster
hate man

Sparrock
monster

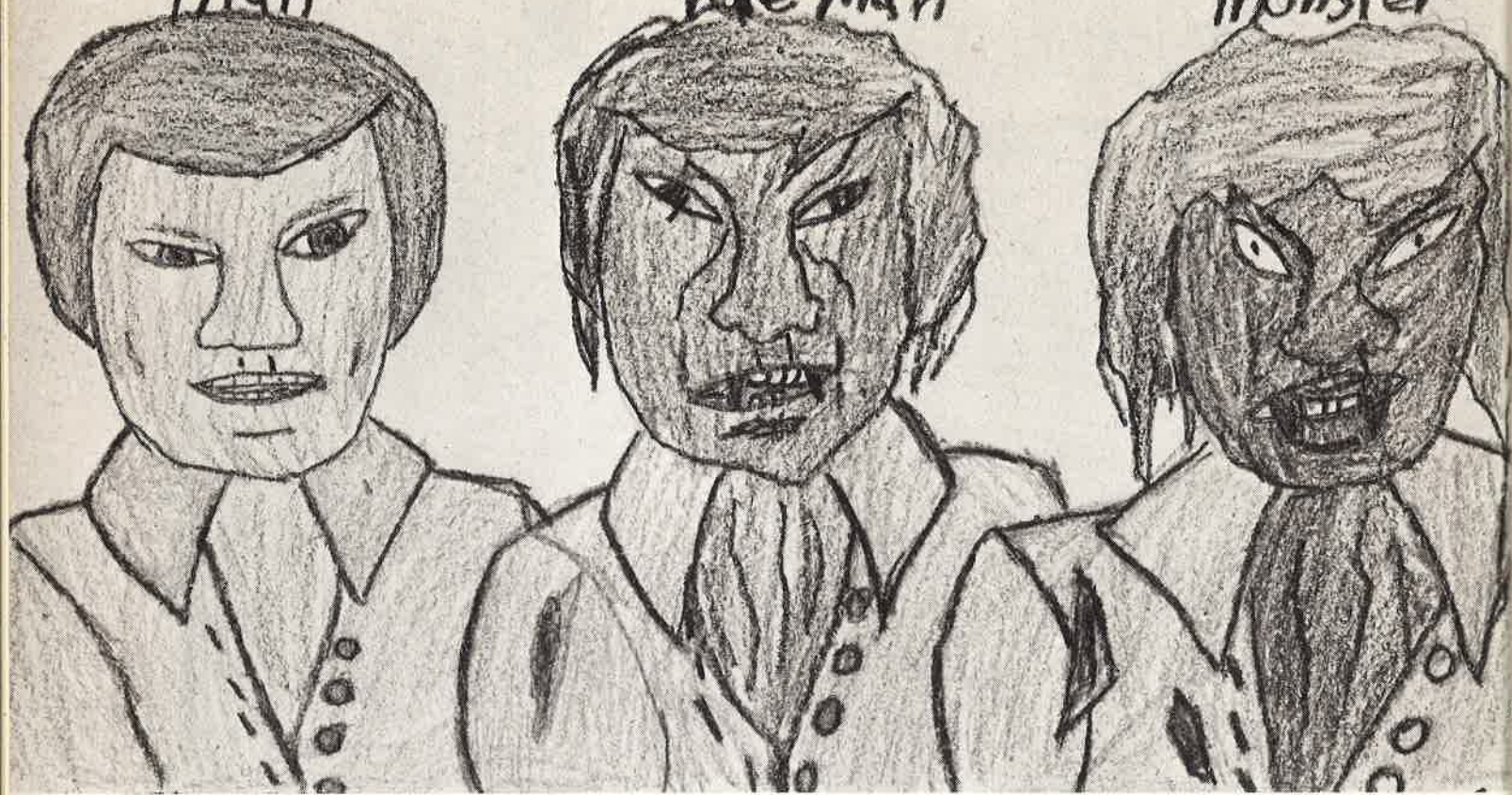


Fig. 4

a princess, a frog is an animal unusually well-suited for a tale of metamorphosis. In its natural life cycle it undergoes several very distinct changes in form and habitat, and as an amphibious adult it combines characteristics of two forms of life. Similarly, if Lot's wife becomes a pillar of salt as punishment, this peculiar form of punishment is probably not arbitrary. Symbolically salt might represent drying up or barrenness—the very opposite of being a mother. I pointed out to the class that in most cases the metamorphosis was not automatic but conditional. Thus Pinocchio had to learn to be truthful and good before he could become human, while Lot's wife was turned into salt only after she disobeyed God's command not to look back at Sodom and Gomorrah. A change in form, then, was rarely presented as something to be taken lightly.

Finally, we talked about how it would feel to be a human being trapped within something else's form. As an example I read the class a brief

episode from the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus' men are turned into swine by the witch Circe (Book 10; lines 210-275). Homer tells us that although the men's thoughts and feelings remain excruciatingly sophisticated and human, they are unable to communicate them with anyone since they are suddenly only capable of grunting like pigs. This contradiction contributes greatly to their anguish. The children responded strongly to this concept which again parallels the very frustrating predicament of childhood, when one often feels quite grown up but is perceived, therefore treated by adults, as a child. Like Circe's pigs, children are prisoners of their physical inferiority and particularly vulnerable to the whims of their keepers.

After giving the class some background information on *The Golden Ass* and waiting for them to stop roaring with laughter over its title (hardly anyone believed for a minute that a golden "ass" was merely a gilt donkey), I read them the

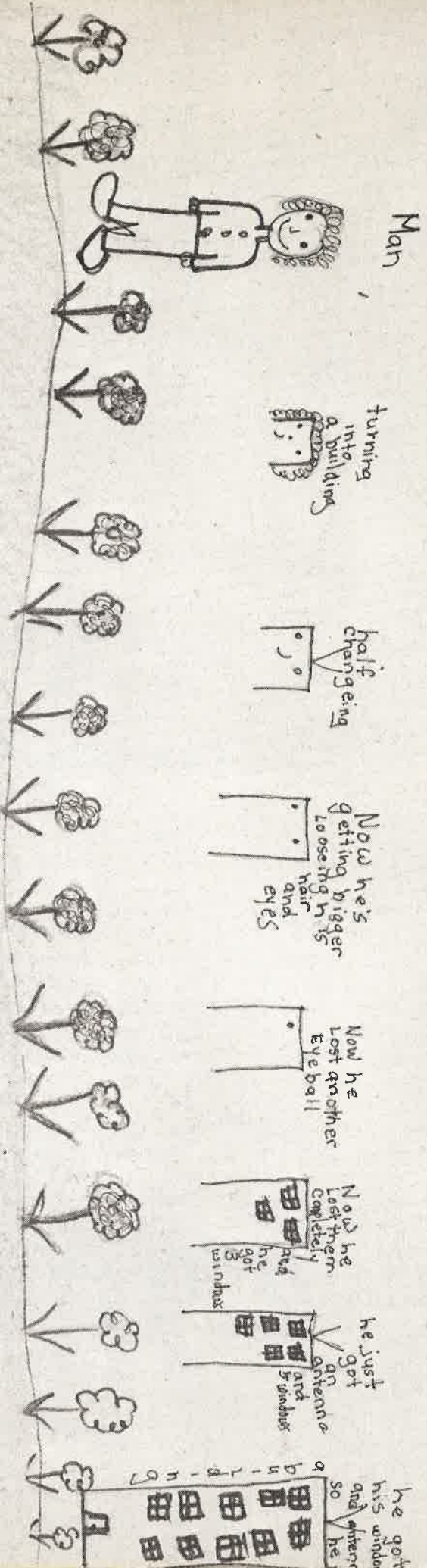
story and handed out drawing paper and crayons. All had seemed deeply absorbed in what I was reading and were now eager to begin drawing. I told them to draw anything that came to mind. One of the appealing aspects of this project is that although each child hears the same story, each must decide what elements of that story to illustrate. Assuming the process of selection is at least partially based on what each individual considers to be most important or compelling, the drawings may reflect very subtle and personal differences in viewpoint. Most of the children's drawings fell into one of three general categories: 1) Lucius as a donkey, 2) Lucius as an owl, and 3) Lucius with his girlfriend, Fotis, preparing to work the magic spell.

Kathy and Susan both did very interesting drawings of Fotis in the room with Lucius in the form of a donkey (figs. 1 & 2). On the shelves at the right of both pictures are rows of different colored magic potions including such evils as "monkey oint-

by *Sharon Allen* 5-212
THE MAN WHO ~~WAS~~ TURNED INTO A TIGER



Fig. 5



By Diana Sanchez

Fig. 6

ment," "mouse ointment," and a small jar of something called "fowl stuff." In their drawings the girls include dialogue between the two main characters which successfully conveys the idea we had discussed of being a person trapped within the body of a mute beast and therefore unable to communicate or defend oneself. In Kathy's drawing Fotis says aloud, "Now he can't visit other women, ha ha ha," indicating Kathy's concern with showing that jealousy or possessiveness played a key role in Fotis' unfortunate "error" in administering the wrong potion. Lucius, meanwhile, must be content to think silently to himself in a thought balloon, "When I'm my normal self again, I'll get you, I'll get you!" Because he is trapped in a donkey's body, the only sounds he can utter aloud are "neigh, neigh, neigh." In Susan's drawing, even the donkey's thoughts don't take the form of words but are conveyed as mental images of Lucius imagining himself as an owl visiting other women. What actually comes out of his mouth is "hee hee, ha ha,"—donkey sounds.

Although there were other successful drawings, many of the children had never seen a donkey or an owl and were frustrated by not knowing how to draw them. Everyone had also overlooked one of the most fascinating aspects of metamorphosis—the gradual *process* of the change. I planned to concentrate on this concept at our next meeting.

The following week I suggested that each child make a new drawing of a person or a thing metamorphosing into anything else at all—an animal, an airplane, or even a

hamburger. I asked them, though, to be sure the drawings illustrated the *gradual* process of the metamorphosis—the change occurring in stages rather than all at once. Thus, if a girl were to turn into a tree, what would happen first? Maybe her toes would slowly elongate and dig into the earth; perhaps next her torso would become covered with a tough and bumpy textured bark; at a later stage her eyes might become knots at the top of the tree trunk, and so on. As the class and I discussed this new way to think about changing form, I anticipated from the number and the diversity of suggestions the children were making, that the new drawings were likely to be much more detailed and specific. Everyone was anxious to begin drawing, and no one had much trouble thinking of something to draw.

Monique decided to try the "man into donkey" idea again, but this time her drawing was in four parts with arrows leading from one phase of change to the next (fig. 3). First the man's ears start to grow long, then his posture alters from standing erect to being finally on all fours. Even his speech balloons illustrate the sequential change from speaking aloud in English to thinking intelligibly while uttering mere donkey noises.

Kevin, a talented artist, made a beautiful three-part drawing of a man turning into a monster (fig. 4), and Sharon drew a very sophisticated series of a man becoming a tiger (fig. 5). In most cases the children's middle drawings, illustrating incomplete change, were most interesting. These involved making a choice of what they considered to be the most essential characteristics of both forms. In

Sharon's drawing, the half-man half-tiger has tiger skin, ears, and tail but retains a man's profile and beard. Cleverly, she has situated her man on a mountain top—a natural setting for either a man or a tiger—so this motif remains constant throughout the three parts of her drawing.

Several children drew a boy turning into a girl or *vice versa*—the transitional stage generally depicted as a lateral division with one sex on the left half and the other on the right, like the old circus side-show hermaphrodite. Sexual characteristics here included distinctions such as a bright yellow platform shoe on the right and a blue sneaker on the left.

Because the drawings were now sequential, many children spontaneously began adding narration to each picture. Diana's person becoming a building (fig. 6) is drawn in a sequence of eight changes with accompanying description: "now he's getting bigger, loosing his hair and eyes;" "now he lost another eyeball;" "now he just got an antenna and five windows."

We were all very excited by these new drawings. The extent of the project's success was clear to me the following week when I came back to the classroom and Julia Jones, the teacher, showed me a bulletin board bearing the large sign "METAMORPHOSIS" under which was a new group of drawings that children had done at home. She and I were both so impressed by the effect this theme had had on the children, (and its obvious potential for assuming many forms), that we planned to devise a series of projects, based on metamorphosis, and applicable to various areas of the curriculum. □

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

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This special issue of the *Newsletter* presents some of the experiences of writers working with film and video. These articles explore the connection between drama, as captured by these media, and the writing process with which we attempt to familiarize children. We hope to convey to the reader some sense of how film and video, major art forms of our time, can be used in the classroom to expand the understanding of arts in general.

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Contributors' Notes

FLORA ARNSTEIN is a poet and teacher. She was a pioneer in the field of teaching poetry writing to children. She is the author of *Children Write Poetry* (Dover) and *Poetry and the Child* (Dover). Her poetry has appeared in *The Nation*, *Poetry Northwestern*, *Prairie Schooner* and many other magazines.

ALAN FELDMAN's poems have appeared in various magazines—*Audit/Poetry*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Columbia Review* (which he edited), *Choomia*, *Chouateau Review*, *First Issue*, *New American Review* #13, *Panache*, *Sun*, and elsewhere—as well as in the Borestone Mountain Award Volume, *Best Poems of 1975*—and a book of his poems, *The Happy Genius*, is scheduled for publication by Sun Press next year.

MAUREEN GAFFNEY is the director of the Media Center for Children, an educational research group working to improve media for children. She is the author of *More Films Kids Like*. She has taught film and video here and abroad.

HEATHER MacANDREW worked for the Ontario Arts Council's Creative Artists in Schools program for two years. She travelled throughout Ontario observing projects and talking to educators and artists about the program. "Passion and Energy" is part of a report to the Ontario Arts Council. Ms. MacAndrew now works with her husband making documentary films.

BARBARA SIEGEL is an artist living and working in New York City. She recently had a show of paintings and drawings at Briarcliff College. Her work is in the permanent collection of Newark Museum. She teaches at P.S. 11 in Brooklyn.

BOB SIEVERT is currently working at P.S. 84 in Manhattan and at P.S. 152 in the Bronx. He regularly exhibits his paintings at the Green Mt. Gallery.

MARTIN STEINGESSER works in the New York Poets-in-the-Schools Program. His poems have been published widely in such publications as *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *The American Poetry Review* and *The Ohio Review* and appear in two anthologies, *The Ardis Anthology of New American Poetry* and *The Poetry Troupe*.

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