

📅 40th Anniversary

Teaching Diary Excerpts, 1969–1970

RON PADGETT

WHAT FOLLOWS ARE LIGHTLY EDITED EXCERPTS from the diary I kept of my teaching poetry writing to children at P.S. 61, an elementary school on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, the one made famous by Kenneth Koch’s *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* and *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* When I began working there, at the age of twenty-seven, in January of 1969, at Kenneth’s insistence, I had no teaching experience. My residency was sponsored by Teachers & Writers Collaborative, an organization that gave me total leeway. In retrospect I see that the school was amazingly freewheeling as well, with the accommodating principal, Jacob Silverman, and a number of generous teachers who earned my respect and gratitude. The classes in these excerpts turned out well, which of course was not always the case.

Tuesday, May 6, 1969

Priscilla Weick’s Fifth-Grade Class

A class of angels. I came off a bad session with a previous group and this class picked me up. As I came through the door, Mrs. Weick didn’t see me because she was busy chewing out a boy (a very bright kid). When she did notice me, she was startled, saying, louder than usual, “Oh, hello!” with a trace of leftover admonition in it, and everybody cracked up. Even her. That’s the kind of class it is.

I decided to give the Love Poem assignment here, partly because I thought these kids would do something good with it. Today my preparatory talk was tops. As soon as I mentioned “love poems,” there were immediate giggles, so I asked the class why love seems to be an embarrassing emotion. “Because guys make fun of you when you have a girlfriend.” But why do they do that? Are they jealous? It’s odd, because love is supposed to be a good feeling, a positive and creative force. Hate never creates laughter. We “respect” hate and are not embarrassed by it the way we are by love. Strange.

Then I mentioned the long tradition of love poems, but I told the kids not to worry about that now, just to write their own. But what kind? I went through a list: patriotism is love of country; respect for your parents is a form of love; puppy love; love for a pet; and so on. Everyone seemed very interested, partly because I was so direct and honest, partly because they are ten years old. I could tell their heads were buzzing. Mine was too, but with clarity and ease of thought. Something was clicking.

We had our traditional brisk pre-writing stroll once around the room, then they set to writing. Here are the best pieces.

I'm to Be Alone

JEAN MORRISON

I'm to be alone walking in the forest
 Listening, listening to the crackle of branches at my feet
 Twittering wrens above me
 Flowers and club moss under me
 Squirrels to my right
 Chipmunks in the snapdragons, left
 Trees such as yew, oak, birch, and poisonous oleander all around me
 Brownie caps and liverworts all around
 Rocks everywhere and one cave
 I'm to be alone in this Paradise
 I'm to be alone

Jean is a boy with long blond curly hair who occasionally hands me sestinas he's written on his own. Here are two other poems, written at home, that he gave me today.

The Riddle of the Witch

Tragedy beneath the moon
 Pitch black the moonless skies

Night of the birthday of the king
 Blood red the dark earth dries

Near the king a ghost shall stand
 Far off the ghost does fly

Not on the birthday of the king
 A mighty king shall die

Plagiarized? Possibly, but he says no. And he does, time after time in class, come up with astonishing things that could not have been plagiarized. Here's another of his poems, which incorporates words from spelling lesson:

Description Poem

Dramatic description will explode leaving nothing but endurance
 Description of an oasis in an interview of "Pardon me I have a pain"
 Description of an invalid who made odd impressions on the wall in a humorous way
 Description of the glands in your mouth that saliva comes from when food is in your mouth (saliva wants to inspect your food) (which is very inconvenient)

Description of a magnet-repelled insult which is frisky to repel again
 Description of how to notify dramatic results by saying Hurrah
 Description of a napkin used by an invalid full of pain

This poem is uneven, but it is one of the most remarkable ones I've seen by a child—as if it had been written by a boy Raymond Roussel—and the last line is positively brilliant.

After the kids started writing, the bright boy who was being chastised when I came in approached me to say that he didn't dig the idea of love poems. I reached in my pocket and handed him a short poem by Blaise Cendrars in the original French and told him to "translate" it. He got the idea right away:

The conceited king of the Jeabus people
 Dance to my secret power that reigns throughout the world
 My knowledge outranks yours and your head beats the timber

Another flaming product of genius!

But wait! This is the class with two Chinese boys who, in February, did not speak a word of English. I had noticed that they had been making an effort to do my assignments, though they never understood anything beyond the fact that they were supposed to write poetry. Here is a piece from today by San Lum Wong:

The Funny Money

The world is funny. The earth is funny. The people is funny. Some body in funny life. Some body given a life changes the funny. The magic is funny. The funny is magic. Oh boy, a funny funny money happy.

I now realize that I have many of these kids writing better than I do!
 On a more mundane but very solid level:

IRIS TORRES

Daisy is a little dog. Brown and white. That's what color she is. In the morning she jumps into my bed panting her head off. In the night I say goodnight. I say goodnight to my Daisy doggy. Daisy wags her tail and goes to sleep. In the morning she wakes up. Then she wakes me up. I wash my face. I brush my teeth. I put my clothes on and take her down. I come back and eat breakfast and then go to school. Then I come back.

This is a terrific, unflashy response to the assignment of writing a love poem. The fact that the dog has something to do with Iris brushing her teeth is so touching and sincere, far from the usual "I love my doggy" gloop. (Of course there was some of that in this class, too.)

Here is a quiet, lovely poem about a cat:

Graymalkin

UNSIGNED (but by ERIN HAROLD, I think)

A quiet thump in the closet
 The creak as the closet door opens
 A large tabby cat comes out
 My friend, gray cat Graymalkin
 She jumps on the bed
 And sits at my feet
 My fat loving cat Graymalkin
 A tail nearly fourteen inches long
 May be disliked by a cat show
 But it is beautiful on Graymalkin
 A happy purr from a quiet cat
 My loved one, the cat Graymalkin

As for boy-meets-girl and vice versa:

When You're in Love

MICHAEL CARLTON

When you're talking on the phone and the operator won't leave you
 alone, tell her you're in love
 When the milkman comes and knocks on the door, take a bottle of milk
 and open it up and there is your love note
 When you're in love, when you're in love, oh boy, oh boy, are you in
 love (lucky you)
 With her it was love at first sight (but I took a second look)
 Wow was she ever ugly

I'm curious about that one.

Love

THE POET WRITER RUBY [JOHNSON]

I love Jerry. He is my secret boyfriend.
 He is cute, and he is very smart and
 He wears nice clothes like brown, yellow,
 Orange, green, blue, purple.
 His cap, pants, shirt, shoes, socks match the same color.

I like this poem because I think Ruby is telling us exactly what she thinks and feels. I seem to remember that life in my grade school was very much like this poem.

These are the best poems from this assignment today, though maybe a few more will surface when they're all mimeod. Speaking of mimeos, the kids are eager to see their Death Poems, which I'll hand out later this week. It's very nice teaching two days this week (instead of one); it provides more continuity and closeness.

Friday, January 16, 1970

Margaret Magnani's Fifth-Grade Class

I thought Margaret Magnani's class would be a good one for the Charades Poem because it is a lot of fun to do and they are inspired by fun. The assignment had gone well enough in other classes, but the results had been somewhat vitiated by a lack of form. Too often a student would write, in response to my gestures, "A bird flying, a spider crawling, wind," etc. without much cohesiveness and therefore without the interest that cohesiveness can bring.

So in class today I told them that they had to make their piece a story, and I started an example by flapping my arms. "A bird flying, of course. But make it a whole sentence, such as 'A bird was flying in the sky.'" Then I slammed my fist into my palm. "A car crashed." But wait, it has to go with the bird, remember? Students: "The bird crashed into an airplane." "Good." Then I made a third gesture, pointing out that it might refer to the bird or to the airplane. By this point the kids seemed to understand the idea of linking their sentences.

Then we got started—actually the paper was passed out from the beginning, which in general is a good policy, because the kids can begin writing as soon as their inspiration is hot; otherwise it is so dull and draining to wait for paper to be passed out.

While I was making various gestures—some of them rather cryptic—and they were looking up and then back down as they interpreted the gestures and wrote, some of them asked for correct spellings, which Mrs. Magnani helped with by writing them on the board. After a while the board was full, and I thought it would be a good idea to list them here, then later to consider the stories in light of this miscellaneous group of words, as if they formed a weird literary spin-off (something of an accidental list poem) of the individual stories. Here are the words:

count	strange	bubbles
mountain	tornado	frighten
shooting	crashed	tornados
gun	teeth	rain
pointing	blow	helicopter
daughter	up	murder
pokey	funeral	hand
gave	brushing	wave
operator	soldier	monster
kooky	dinner	close
machine	drowned	telephone
Lulu	painter	pushing
let	motor	face
care	a lot	taking

The stories turned out to be as pleasing to me as those of the more advanced classes, and in some cases the effects here are really surprising. What is especially nice about these is the overall good quality, something I had rarely seen with this group before (even though the class is quieter and more work-oriented than they were last year).

There is such a nice spirit in this class, almost one of kindness, which is rare in school, at least when I was a student. Now that I have followed several classes for the past year and seen them develop, I can predict the future, that this class, for instance, will write marvelous things.

and it ejects little pieces of metal that fly through the air and hit things like animals, people, and objects?”

“A gun!”

“Yes, but how about another kind of gun? I think that guns that shoot bullets time after time after time are boring—they always do exactly the same thing. How about some other kind of gun, like one that shoots pictures onto the wall?”

“That’s a movie projector!”

“Right. You have the idea. So now make up a magic gun that can do something incredible, something that no gun has ever done before.”

I had them set to work right away, since I felt that the idea could easily be talked out and exhausted, and because it’s such a direct idea that the kids grasped it almost immediately.

The poems turned out interesting, as they usually do with this class, though I think they show more of an interest in ideas than in words or language, so it isn’t the type of assignment I would give exclusively.

With this class, which was taught last year by the excellent Barbara Strasser, every assignment now works. The kids are almost professional! Which poses new problems. In what directions do you take such smarties? I think it is time for a new tack with them, but what it is I don’t yet know. As Kenneth told me, every class has its personality and history, and if you aren’t tuned into that you will misplace your efforts.

Barbara Strasser’s Fourth-Grade Class

The third class of the day, Barbara Strasser’s fourth-graders, are a very talented bunch and a delight to work with, if work is the word. There is such a nice spirit in this class, almost one of kindness, which is rare in school, at least when I was a student. Now that I have followed several classes for the past year and seen them develop, I can predict the future, that this class, for instance, will write marvelous things, and I think my knowing this puts me at ease with them, and this confidence carries back over to them. Not to be forgotten is the fact that Mrs. Strasser is a highly interested and sympathetic friend to the poetry program, and all these feelings are constantly communicated by the very way we do things in the class.

Last week’s Charade Poem had gotten nice results here, though they were fragmentary and disjointed. Remembering that this class is, after all, fairly new to poetry writing and that they have only a slight grasp of the shapeliness of poetry, I thought it


Jean Pitts’ Fifth-Grade Class

In Jean Pitts’ class I gave an assignment dreamed up by my colleague Dick Gallup, an assignment that I now christen Magic Guns. The idea is to tell the kids to invent a new kind of gun, to write a poem or story about it, and, if they want, to illustrate it.

I tried to put some magic into my presentation by beginning, “You know that there is a metal thing you hold in your hand

would be good to revert to an earlier assignment that subtly stressed form but left plenty of room for imaginative excitement: the I Used To / But Now poem, which Kenneth invented. (I was careful to steer clear of a similar but far more restrictive form, I Used to Be / But Now I Am.)

The poems they wrote are beautiful, of course! My favorites are by Maria Gutierrez, Eliza Bailey, Rosa Rosario, Markus Niebank, Myrna Diaz, and the incredible Oscar Marcilla. I can't wait to see what happens when I ask them to put more colors in their poems.

The class finished their drafts about 2:45—class halts sharply at 2:55 for room arranging and coats on and ready to go at 3. I collected the drafts and said that I would read a few before they got ready to go home. I read some, to the great delight of everyone, especially the mysteriously penile line by Maria, “I used to boil hot dogs, but now I squeak the juice out in the bathroom.” This line really brought down the house. I read others, until 2:55 came, and Mrs. Strasser, as I had asked her to do, said that time's up. I have never heard such a storm of protest. The children refused to have me stop, they refused to leave. I explained that it was Friday, they were children, and they should want to get out of school. “*Nooo!* Read more!” Genuinely stunned, I read the remaining poems to the riveted kids. They loved these poems incredibly. It was our finest hour. 

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Ron Padgett is the author of many books of poems, including Great Balls of Fire, You Never Know, and How to Be Perfect; and the biographies Joe and Oklahoma Tough. He was Teachers & Writers Collaborative publications director from 1980–2000.