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Buried Treasure

Judith Michaels

"Hey, you know I don't think my kid likes me very much."

"Jean, I know your kid. He rides my bus. He's awful!"

The juniors and seniors in my poetry class have just met their Lower School "poem pal," for the first time. While some marvel at how cute the little girls are in their leggings and tunics or their Laura Ashley dresses—"Mine is such a doll!"—others are frankly terrified. How do you talk to an eight-year-old? And how do you write a poem for one?

Never having had children of my own or never having even done much babysitting except for my younger brothers, I share some of this bewilderment. Every time I walk into an elementary school classroom as a visiting poet, I feel like an explorer rummaging through her pack to find gifts that might impress a brave new world. What is it like to live in a room bursting with pet rabbits and fish, banners and dioramas, a popcorn maker, heaps of colored paper and crayolas, nine planets stuck on the ceiling, and every wall papered with gold-starred tests?

When my seniors and juniors panicked at writing poems for their third-grade partners, I understood how they felt since I too had worked with elementary students. I invited the younger students to write a second batch of letters to us, enclosing a few of their favorite poems and de-

scribing what they most enjoyed in a poem. I'd chosen this particular class because of their teacher, who loves poetry. With wonderful sensitivity and inventiveness, she had been familiarizing her students with it from the very beginning of the year. So I wasn't surprised to see that the children had developed some definite ideas of what they wanted to read. The seniors, who usually chose to plumb their own emotions in free verse, groaned at the thought of trying to create poems that would suit such specifications as these:

Dear Josh,

Some of the poems I read are ones that have funny words and titles. I like when they keep on saying the same word over and over again. I also like when they have a surprise at the ending. I like pictures too.

Jason

Hi Liz,

I like poems that are funny, and poems that are weird. Most poems are funny to me because they say weird stuff like peanut butter popcorn pineapple and plums altogether in a perky pie. Well that's all!

Lauren

The sample favorites which the third-graders sent along ranged from the rhymed, funny, sometimes grotesques tales of Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky to Paul Fleischman's *Poems for Two Voices* about birds and insects; from classic children's verse by Robert Louis Stevenson and A.A. Milne to "grown-up" poems by Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. But there was clearly a preference for rhyme, humor, and surprises; none of the usual features in the older students' own poems.

I thought perhaps each group could help expand the other's horizons. But most of all, I wanted the older students to rediscover their childhood. As we began to reminisce together, we took for inspiration this poem by a seven-year-old girl:

Sometimes I get caught
in a time breeze
and think about
when I was little.

What memories could such a breeze stir for us? The immediate response was, "I wish I were a kid again. It was so much fun, so much easier." Lindsey sat down right away and wrote a poem for her child, Blair, which was really addressed to herself:

Don't you wish you could remain a child?
Running around, being silly and wild
Playing all day without any worries
Taking your time never having to hurry
Getting away with things that you shouldn't
Doing kid stuff that when you're grown up you
couldn't
Eating the candy that you know is bad
Shrugging off things you know should be sad
Living each day in a world full of fun
and never wishing that it would be done
Then when the sun falls from that big old blue
sky
And the moon rises higher and higher and
high
You sit in your bed all tucked in and tight
As shadows creep in from your little night
light
And your mother comes in with a kiss and a
pat
Don't you wish life were as simple as that?

I pushed them to remember more, to put themselves into places that were scary, into situations where they'd felt helpless; to articulate worries they couldn't then have put into words, or questions that never got answered in ways they could understand; to recapture what it felt like being too small to reach something or suddenly losing control of one's body. It seemed important to resurrect a fuller, richer picture of childhood. I hoped it would become a powerful place to write from. Gradually Lindsey added a second stanza to her poem for Blair:

Isn't it hard to be a child?
Running around, being silly and wild
Having to finish all your homework
Sleeping where hairy monsters lurk
Always hearing that you're too young
Not big enough to reach the top rung
Having to eat the pate on your plate
Never being able to stay up late
Not understanding how things are or were
Asking questions that get no answer
But when the sun falls from that big old blue
sky
And the moon rises higher and higher and
high
And you sit in your bed all tucked in and tight
As shadows creep in from your little night
light
Your mother comes in with your big teddy
bear
Don't you wish you could remain little Blair?

I also wanted my students to explore the positive aspects of childhood in more depth—not just, "We were so free, we never had College Boards or summer jobs." What did this freedom feel like in our bodies? How did we play? What were we free to invent? As we fantasized and remembered, without eyes closed, sometimes inspired by picture books we brought from home or from the Lower School library, more and more students began to scribble poems for their partners. Shara wrote:

for rory

you beat the rhythm of
the tom-tom drums
as four suns spin and trickle
down the painted sky

you free the bird from its wires
 and the yellow butterfly
 from the mesh of strings
 they shed their chains
 and swoop
 down and up
 cutting like penknives
 through the
 swirling nightclouds
 you dream the
 indian girls to dance
 for rain
 around your flame
 so that
 when the time is right
 you will find
 your own April
 that sleeps
 where the purple grass grows

Romi, a junior boy whose poems reflected a strong penchant for surrealism and political anarchy, was encouraged by our focus on childhood freedom to express his other side, the playful visionary. He wrote for Tommy:

As purple giraffes kiss the night sky,
 flying into the heavens,
 the rain falls gently on fields of violets,
 the grass grows like spaghetti in the air and
 dances with the smiling trees.
 We all see the monkey on the monkey bars,
 and the jungle gym is wild,
 the children are painting the teacher black so
 they
 won't see her in the dark.
 All I think about are eyeballs
 bouncing up and down like basketballs.
 I bang on the ground and don't hear any
 sounds.
 All I hear is me breathing
 and the fluttery wings of a peacock.
 In the cold, the clouds are a warm blanket
 for the world, in the heat
 the moon will illuminate us with its cold light,
 and there is no tomorrow.
 We can play forever and ever.

One girl, for whom our memory exercises had resurrected a beloved glass-eyed bear, wrote her child a poem about it. I liked the way she focused on the eyes in order to express her relationship with it:

I think they can see inside,
 those eyes,
 those shining clear glass eyes
 the only ones
 that were always on my side

....
 and after a nightmare
 their golden glints
 always scared the monsters away.

....
 And even if I tossed those eyes
 accidentally into the laundry hamper,
 they always forgave me
 and still wait for me on my bed.

I suggested that those students who were feeling lost might now go back to their partners' introductory letters and look for inspiration. What were each child's interests? What poems or drawings had they enclosed? Josh, a talented guitarist and singer, had written a stanza for Jason:

I'd like to climb on a music staff
 and ride on the back of a blue giraffe.
 I want to swim in a sea of whipped cream
 and fly like an eagle through the sky in a
 dream.

Jason's letter mentioned his love of pizza and a desire for a pet cougar. So a second stanza took shape:

I want to eat a pizza six inches wide,
 and look at the moon from the other side.
 I want to visit the future and see all the past
 and have a pet cougar that runs really fast.

Andy had written to Julie:

Hi! I hear you're going to be making a poem about me. I think that's really neat. I'll tell you some of the things I like, so it'll be a treat. I like to read. Yesterday I read about dolphins and the computer.

Julie had written back:

Dear Andy, Hi! We have so much in common. I love Macintosh computers and might go away this summer and work with dolphins. I'd swim with them and try to understand their squeaks and whistles. Sounds exciting,

doesn't it? You said you liked to read—so do I. I don't remember what I read in third grade. Do you like rhyme the most? Let me know so when I write your poem you'll like it. Can't wait to meet you.

Andy wrote back that he liked funny poems with tongue twisters and silly words and “poems that change the subject quickly.” Julie was getting worried. She sent him a couple of funny poems from an anthology and also Mary Ann Hoberman’s “Changing” which expresses the poet’s desire to understand and feel what the other person feels.

A sophisticated, aggressive honors student, well-travelled, knowledgeable about art and politics, a winner of the state poetry contest, Julie struggled hard to please her third-grade correspondent. Rhyme didn’t come easily, however.

Once there was a baby dolphin
who liked to swim much more than golfin.’
He’d dive to the bottom of the ocean
and there he’d drink a magic potion.
This potion gave him special powers
to walk and talk and see the towers
of the world that was above the sea
the world that the grown-ups called the city.

It didn’t get any easier with stanza two. But the computer graphics were superb. I think Julie developed a new appreciation for the grace and polish of good light verse. And I was impressed with her humility and her eagerness to please Andy. Some of her teachers, who found her barrage of sharp questions and challenges a trial and felt she had an “attitude,” would have been very surprised. Another Julie in the class, with a different temperament and a lighter touch, was inspired by her child’s focus on food—“I like to eat pizza and cheese, cookies, chips, and peanut butter and jelly”—and had fun rhyming her way through two contrasting grocery lists. (This was the girl whose response to reading “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” was to draw and cut out an albatross and wear it round her neck on a string.)

For afternoon snacks
I’d have a few crackerjacks,
four chocolate eclairs,
nine creamsicle pops.
Then mother declared

The sweets were to stop.
So in came the peas,
the broccoli trees,
two celery sticks
and vegetable mix,
zucchini in slices
with multi-grain rices,
romaine lettuce head
on a slice of wheat bread,
some freshly baked trout
topped with cold sauerkraut,
hot oatmeal in season
and bran without reason.
My plate was infested
just as mom planned,
but to say I digested,
well, the dog had a hand.

When the poems were done, I delivered them all to the third graders, who read them aloud to their classmates but were eager to hear the authors read them. By now we had visited their classroom to get acquainted, and the children had read their own poems aloud to us and recited by heart poems by their favorite poets. Going into that classroom was clearly a thrill for my students—so many memories, so much that appealed to the senses, unlike the typical Upper School room with its bare walls and rolled up maps. Suddenly they were struck by the idea that school could be fun!

I had already begun transforming the walls of our own classroom, though the suggestion that we acquire a pet rabbit stopped me cold. I brought in some toys of my own—my *Winnie the Pooh* animals, a box of marbles, a singing top, a wire sculpture that could be pushed into different shapes, and a long, green, plastic trumpet from the Central Park Zoo, which we blew to herald special events or just to work off tension. I invited each of my students to contribute to the room an object they considered poetic. I introduced more physical activity and scheduled more changes of venue—the school wood shop and greenhouse with their wonderful smells and textures, the playground to observe children’s games.

My students were also impressed with the children’s unselfconscious eagerness to read aloud and recite. The eight-year-olds had gotten very excited about coming to visit us, too. Many ran up to our bulletin boards to look for poems and

collages by their partners. As the pairs found one another, they settled down together on the floor.

I had written a poem for their teacher, thinking the two of us could set the tone by my reading it aloud to her and listening to her reaction. Maybe this process would remind the older students about the need for expressiveness and pacing and eye contact; maybe the younger ones would be emboldened to tell their partners what they liked, specifically, about these poems.

For Bev
Did you prop your dolls
on invisible chairs, pass out pencils,
prim your mouth and dictate
the hardest words you knew,
not cat, mat, rat, but hard
secret words like
umbrella,
repeating it twice, yes,
you may take three umbrella steps?
I loved the teaching game.
My dolls minded me.
They stared straight ahead
and learned nothing.
I gave out gold stars.

In your class now a man spills
jewels from a white bag.
There are gasps.
You were all reading about jewels,
and here they are. Magic enough,
but something in you knows
there are sixteen hearts waiting to spill
secrets—emerald, emerald, umbrella.

The room was very quiet. Everyone wanted to hear what Ms. Gallagher would say. I think that seeing two adults admiring one another was an important experience. "I'm really overwhelmed. You guessed so much. I actually did play teacher, though not with dolls but with the neighborhood kids." Then the two of us had to explain about umbrella steps. Gathering their courage, the older students began to read their poems to the younger ones.

Gradually some pairs grew into foursomes as friends introduced their partners to one another. The third grade had brought the books they'd made for their own poems and proudly showed these off. Some pairs found a lot to talk about, but in a few cases my students were so uncomfortable

with children, or so shy or self-absorbed, that they didn't know how to draw their visitors out. I was interested to see several very bright, articulate seniors for once at a real loss. But I was shy with children, too, and still didn't always trust my instincts. "Are they getting bored yet, do you think?" I asked Bev. "Oh no, they're loving it. Even the silent ones are watching and absorbing. Let's pass out the carrot and celery sticks."

The next day, two of my students came to see me before class. "That was awful. I could tell my poem was really lame. He just had no reaction to it. I'm not any good with kids." The other said, "Why wouldn't my kid talk? Every question I asked, he just said yes or no, and I felt so dumb. W.C. Fields had the right idea!" I pointed out to the first student that this was the only poem he'd ever written with a specific audience in mind. (In fact, as I thought about his string of obscure poems full of private allusions, it was probably the first poem he's ever written with any audience in mind.) That in itself was a major breakthrough. It didn't have to be a wonderful poem; at least it was clear!

I explained that my poems were rejected all the time by various magazine editors—poems I'd worked on far longer than he usually worked on his. He was just experiencing "real life." Also, the child's silence didn't necessarily mean the poem was bad or even that he didn't like it; silence can be hard to interpret. I'd taught classes whose silence left me in despair, but the next day, or week, or year, I might discover that students had loved what we did in that class and still remembered it. Then, too, the child was under no obligation to respond to him or his poem. Adults, even sixteen-year-olds, may acquire a veneer of manners, but an eight-year-old boy feels no need to make conversation. Interacting with a child feels to me, I said, a lot like visiting a foreign country. We're not prepared for the honesty and spontaneity any more than we are for a classroom full of stars and fish.

"You all love going to new places," I said to my class a few days later. "Childhood isn't exactly new. Your roots are there. It just feels strange to some of us because we haven't gone back in a while. Maybe it's like buried treasure. You can't

remember exactly where you left the chest, so you need a map." As I talked, I was suddenly realizing that this chest was an image I'd used at least twice in my own poems—the final stanza of one to my mother,

Maybe if I braved the dark lord's bed
for a whole winter,
he'd show me the chest where he keeps
pain we cast away
and I could steal your tears
to hold on my tongue when I come back

and one to a friend, a man whose father had abandoned the family when Chris was still a child:

You distrust warm beds
and a lantern swaying in the night.
You keep returning to your runaway father—

an empty chest.
What prayers does it take to release a ghost
to a new history and weather?

In writing about the quest for your childhood, you almost inevitably wander into myth: roots of a magic tree, chests, swords, chalices, caves, closets, crossroads, river crossings, gardens, the music of birds and harps or of one's own pounding heart. The fear of darkness but the mysterious, tantalizing, even reassuring, sensation of having passed this way before. This experience is

like trying to reenter dreams you can't quite forget. Those are the dreams that haunt you till you write about them, a process which is a kind of quest.

There are things one can never know about oneself—roots that are untraceable, water whose depths can't be taken, but the act of creating art will sometimes bring up drowned or buried treasure. "Those are pearls that were his eyes." To live entirely in the present and immediate future, as many of my students seem to do, isn't possible; the past has a powerful hold on us. But to **try** to do this is impoverishing, deadening, soul-destroying. I had tried it for a time, in the name of common sense, practicality, survival.

Watching my juniors and seniors focus so single-mindedly on getting into college, I felt as though they were walling themselves into a very narrow, suffocating space. To look back can sometimes be painful, but how else can we see ourselves as organic, as growing? It's not a matter of studying our past in order to assign blame and praise and then file the memories away, but rather to sense, I think, that there has been movement and may be more—that we have this vital capacity to keep growing, for better or worse. By writing poetry for much younger children, my students not only had to get involved in the childhoods of the children they were writing for, they also had to get involved with their own childhoods and their own memories.