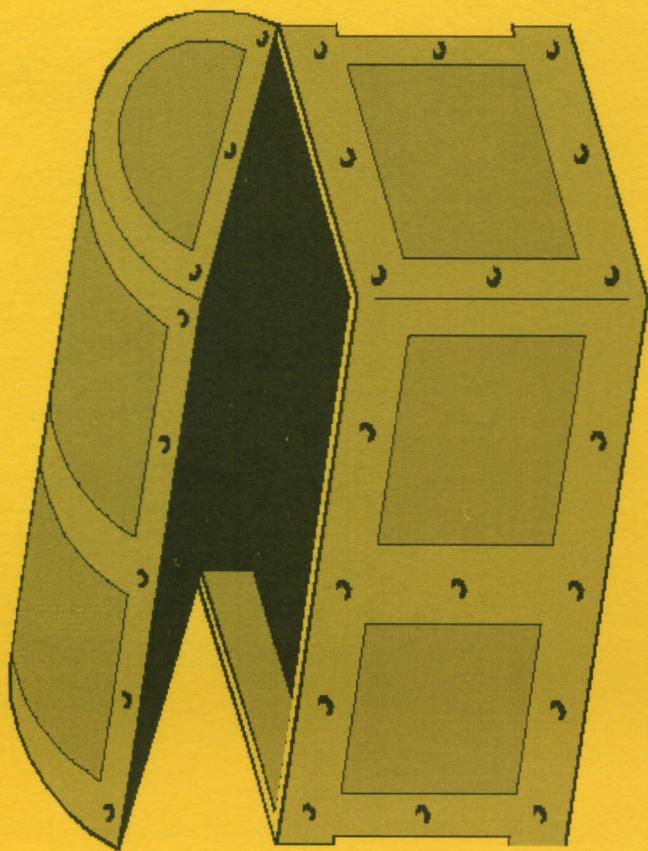


SUPRISES!



CONNECTICUT WRITING
PROJECT

SUMMER
FELLOWS
2003



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Surprises!

Connecticut Writing Project
2003 Summer Institute

Connecticut Writing Project
Storrs, CT
2003

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**All the Places We Shall Go
As We Transact with Rosenblatt**

Charlene Barbour

One is one,
As you can see.
When I meet you
We then are three.

You think my math
is truly poor?
But what if you
And I make four?

You look at me
And shake your head.
Let me explain
The things I've said.

Because what it is
I'd like to do
Is talk about
Rosenblatt with you.

No pomp or
Circumstance
From me.
No academic vocabul'ry.

Instead I'll speak
In verse and rhyme
So that you may
Have the time.

To explore
The things she said
About what goes on
When books are read.

Readers make meaning
in their own way.
By taking what
the authors say.

And applying
Experiences of their own
From school, from friends,
From heart and home.

And through this act
This interplay
Readers respond
In their own way.

A reader's response
Has everything to do
With the experiences
The reader has gone through

Readers "transact"
Louise would say
In either an aesthetic
Or efferent way.

Do not let
These words throw you.
It's merely
The reader's "stance" or "view"

An aesthetic reading
Would help to bring
An "emotional" interpretation
Of everything.

With an efferent stance
The reader would look
At the "objective," "public side"
Of the book.

Going back and forth
Between the two
Is what a lot
Of readers do.

Readers then decide
In their own head
What THEY believe
The author said.

Meaning is not
"Inside" the text
It takes place
In a "transactive context."

That place within
The reader's mind
Where words and past
Become combined.

Why do I
Speak of this to you?
What could it mean
To what you do?

It's got to do
With history.
The things that shape
Both you and me.

What we "know"
Determines what we see
It's our "transactive"
History!

And teaching is
A work of heart.
And each of us
Must do our part.

To ensure
That every day
We listen
To what our students say.

And do not
Then impose our voice,
When we have extended
Them the choice.

To share their thoughts
And words aloud.
To put themselves
"Before" the crowd.

Their words help them
To truly see
"Their" version
of reality.

And it's okay
If their view
Does not agree
With me and you.

When we "talk"
It's not a one-way street.
Communication
Makes worlds meet.

You shape me
And I shape you.
One plus one is never two!

SO, if I see blue
And you see green,
We can understand
What these differences mean.

I hope this poem
Speaks to you
In red, or white,
Or even blue.

Rosenblatt's theory
Can lead the way
To understanding
What your students say.

Her theory invites your students
To take an active role
Reader response
Requires less teacher "control."

My poem's done
It's in your head
You decide
What it said!

Untitled

Kristin Benjamin

They were both waiting out in the front lobby for me when I arrived. It already wasn't fair, two against one. My mom was so pleased to see me; it had been close to five months. It's funny how parents can use holidays as an excuse to come together as a family, even if the other 364 days we don't function as one. She called me and said it was tradition that she entertained for Christmas Eve; she was hoping that I would be able to attend. I am not sure that I would call ordering a deli platter and pizza entertaining for the Christmas holiday, but she seemed adamant about continuing the "tradition."

"Yeah, I guess I will be able to come."

"Good, why don't you come early so you can see the new place" she suggested.

She had put herself out on the line asking such a bold question; so I gave in.

"Oh, okay I will try to make it early."

On my way to the dreaded new apartment, I began to think about how I got myself in this position. My mother always took my sister and me out shopping for our Christmas presents because "You girls are always so hard to shop for." It also gave us time to hang out and talk. She would always take all of the presents home and wrap them in the downstairs bathroom with the card table set up next to the toilet and the door locked. We would always try to explain that we knew what we were getting, but she always insisted on wrapping the gifts and doing it in the sneaky but giddy way, prepping herself for the Christmas season. I guess it reminded her of the past Christmases when each gift was truly a surprise in each box.

Glancing down at the scribbled directions my mom enthusiastically sang out on the phone, I was also reminded of the drastic change in this shopping year. There was a reason why we were not speaking at this point. I was unwilling to accept the new terms put forward by my mother. She decided that our current family unit was not satisfying her needs anymore so she was going to move out. "Please don't take it personally because you are my daughter and I love you, but it is none of your business what I do as a woman." I remember these words very clearly because she felt her decision was best for her and gave not one iota of consideration to the remaining three in the family who were left completely dumbstruck by her comment. If I was unable to be a part of her decision making or discussion about the results of the decision, she would not be a part of any aspect of my life. That would be my decision as a woman, no explanation needed. Because of my bold decision, I didn't expect the phone to ring in the middle of November asking if we were on for our traditional shopping excursion. I told her I would have to think about it because it didn't seem right taking money from a woman I didn't want to have ties with and using it to extend my winter wardrobe. I called her back when I knew she would be at work and bravely explained that it wouldn't be right for me to take the money. My inner voice was screaming to say to her, YOU screwed this up, YOU were the one who made these choices, and YOUR money is useless to me. Rather than letting the inner voice become the outer voice, I abruptly hung up the phone wondering if I had even said goodbye.

The message on my machine the next day declared that this would not be the end of the shopping discussion.

"Well, your sister is going to go shopping with me and it wouldn't be fair to buy for one and not the other, so I will just send you the \$500 that I would have spent and you can do what you choose."

Her announcement left me feeling that if she was willing to give up \$500 to a daughter

who didn't speak to her then maybe I would take it. I could not be bought, but I would take it out of spite, to shut her up. After I decided that this would be my plan of attack, I called her and told her that I would indeed take the money. That was when the discussion of Christmas Eve began and the even more dreaded invitation was extended.

As I turned the corner to enter the apartment complex, my mind was concentrated on the present situation of seeing her after all of these phone conversations and how I would act around her. It was Christmas time and other family members would be present. I already knew she would be in denial and pretend that everything was perfect, so I would have to be prepared to smile and bite the hell out of my tongue the rest of the night. When I finally saw them in their matching Merry Christmas sweaters, I felt that maybe I had to do more biting than I originally thought. My mother spotted my car and began frantically waving as Bud flagged me in to a spot near the front door. He looked like an anorexic Santa in training with his white skin, spindly body, green Merry Christmas sweater, and his red Santa hat.

"I wanted to make sure I showed you how to press the button to get buzzed in. I also wanted to show you how to use the key I want to give you."

Again, the inner voice was screaming, "Damn it Mom, I'm 22, I know how to use a key." Instead, I extended my hand to take the key and quickly dropped it in my pocket showing her that there would be no demonstration or additional discussion on this matter. I knew this was an important Rite of Passage for her, but I also knew I wasn't giving in that easily.

My mom led me to the new apartment while Bud stayed behind as the observer, his natural role in their relationship. She was so excited to show me the Pat Loves Bud plaque that hung on the front door.

"This way you'll always know it's our door."

Her mouth opened to a wide smile while she gazed into Bud's eyes. I couldn't tell what the wanna be Santa was doing behind me and frankly I had no interest in looking back.

"Good God" I mumbled under my breath, half hoping that she would hear me.

As she grasped the door handle, I was transported to the times when she would be on the other end of the door opening it for the guests that came to our house for the traditional deli platter and pizza dinner. She would have already programmed the record player to have all Christmas albums play the whole night while my Dad would be putting the final touches on the buffet table and bar. My sister and I would be running around the house singing along with Johnny Mathis waiting for the first guests to arrive. Our family would come pouring into the house, laughing, drinking, and opening gifts. It seemed as though no one even cared that they were being served the deli platter and pizza because the conversation and spirit of the season would fulfill all of us. This was the traditional Benjamin family Christmas in all of its glory and love. As the handle of my Mom's new apartment turned and the door slowly opened, I wondered what would become of the Benjamin tradition now that the Benjamins were gone.

that Nick was an eight-pound preemie? Come on!"

My mother confessed. "O.K. We like to pretend that Grandma doesn't know. You know how she pretends she doesn't know Daddy smokes, and every time he picks up a cigar she says, 'Frankie, when did you start smoking?' It's like that. We just let it lie."

"Does Nick know?" I wondered aloud looking for any reason to torture my older brother.

"You'd figure he did, but he's never brought it up."

"No way. I've got to be the one to tell him," I begged my mom.

"Kate, there is a time and a place. Just leave it alone for tonight, please?" my mother pleaded.

I agreed to keep this privy information to myself, but I had something special in mind for my brother.

We left the confines of the bathroom and walked casually back to the kitchen table as if nothing had transpired between us. The conversation continued to swirl around the room.

I slid silently into the seat next to my brother at the table and leaned over to him.

"Bastard," I whispered into his ear just loud enough for my poor mother to hear. I winked at my mom and watched in amusement as her hands flew to cover her scarlet face.

The Lesson

Paul Catuccio

Heading for the catskills to bond, fish, and find ourselves is a tradition. There are times in our lives when we need to escape. It is nice to get away from the everyday stresses that make up our days. We leave the "real world" behind as we begin our journey.

Our days begin by talking about the fishing adventures we may experience. We set out on our journey not knowing what we will encounter. I am looking for something very specific, however. We all walk down and study the river to find the perfect spot. We make sure to give each other space which fly fishing requires.

We all observe our surroundings, each person a little different than the next. What would you expect with six unique individuals? Even though we are all products of the same two people, we are all very different. As I watch the water roll over the rocks with such ease, I notice my brother not fishing but watching a blue heron come in for a landing. The fishing is secondary for the most part; at least it is for me. Spending time with family and nurturing a bond is much more important.

Fly-fishing is one of the most demanding types of fishing. The constant casting and swapping of flies to imitate the perfect hatch can be strenuous. As I decide to take a break and retreat to the banks of the river, I notice my father is also heading in. We take a seat on a large rock and start to talk. It is not superficial or forced; it comes naturally as one might expect between a father and son.

As I teach my father the importance about the proper presentation of the fly, I reflect on a certain childhood memory that sticks out in my mind.

Dad was coach for many of our athletic teams growing up. He made sure we all had the fundamentals that we needed in order to succeed. He took the time to make sure we understood everything. He always made sure we had a chance to play. I have never forgotten that sixth grade baseball season. Only two sixth graders made the team that year, and I was so proud to be one of them. I probably made the team because my dad was the coach, but I never questioned it. Sixth graders never made the team, but I was lucky enough to play for my dad that year.

The season progressed with me having a few chances to prove myself in the field and at the plate. I could not expect too much playing time being a sixth grader. Just being out there with my dad was reward in and of itself. The season came to an end with a championship win. It was so thrilling to celebrate that victory with my dad, but the season seemed to fly by and I did not want it to end. My father said many times, as unfortunate as it was, "All good things must come to an end."

The banquet that year was unforgettable. One player was being called up to receive his trophy for having the best batting average on the team. Dad continued to talk about how hard working and dedicated this player was, on and off the field. He talked about how he loved working with this young man and how he had a great future. With all of that said, I knew my dad was talking about Eddie or Mike; they were the best players on the team. He then proceeded to call a name,

"Paul, come on up here." I could not believe it; I was so happy. I don't think my feet even touched the ground as I made my way to the front of the hall. Dad gave me a giant hug when I reached him. The way my dad spoke about me that day will be etched in my mind forever.

I think about all the times dad taught me something. Whether it was baseball, math, or how to deal with friends, dad was always there. He has molded and shaped me into the man that

I have become. It was now my turn to teach my dad a thing or two.

I make sure dad understands that he needs to present his fly in the ripples upstream, allowing the fly to float through the strike zone.

"If you cast right on top of him, the fish won't take it."

As dad heads back up into the rapids, I watch him tenderly walk over the slippery rocks trying to maintain his balance. He reaches a spot where he feels comfortable, settles in, and starts fishing again. He looks back for approval with his location and technique. I give him a nod just as he had done so many times throughout my life.

Neighborhood Watch

Melinda Clemmons

He places the old straw broom in the corner of the faded stone stoop as the glistening dust settles. He eases his body into the weathered folding chair and sips his iced tea. The quiet city street will soon awaken and the everyday hustle will begin. The click of the lock draws his aged eyes to the door of the coffee shop. The stout, middle-aged man leans out into the morning sun and waves to him as he lifts the stack of newspapers that lay in front of his shop. The aroma of bagels and cinnamon bread escapes the bakery four doors down waving in the early morning risers and passers-by. The squeaking of the flower cart pulls his attention to the young Asian woman creating her sidewalk garden. Soon, the taxi driver will begin his morning route with a stop at Uncle Jon's Diner to get his coffee and newspaper. Miss Sandra, still in her house shoes and accompanied by her fluffy, white, mini-pup will pass by and greet him. The city hall clock will clang and the day will begin.

Watch knows. He's been observing it for decades. The mellow-toned saxophone hums through the back alley on to the avenue. "Startin' early today" he admires. The tapping of the snare and beating of the bass drum add heart. Foot tapping lightly in his old white tennis shoes, ears connecting to the music, his hawk eyes zone in on the bakery door. The clean, brown-skinned young man stands on the sidewalk waiting for the taxi to pass. Chomping on a cream cheese-sesame seed bagel, he crosses the street as he gorges himself with his warm, oozing delight. Paying attention to nothing but his breakfast, he does not notice Watch who is slightly hidden by the tulip tree that grows on his small plot of land. "Good Morning" he says. Startled by the reverberating voice that calls out from the stoop, the young man jumps, releasing his half-eaten glory which then succumbs to gravity and becomes one with the freshly swept sidewalk. Like a child who has just dropped his favorite ice cream pop, he stands staring at his misfortune. "It started off good" he replies in a disheartened tone. He bends to remove the melting mass from the pavement. "That's considerate" Watch thinks and without the hint of a thank you he scolds, "That's why we tell you folks to slow down. Besides, you should sit when you eat." Perturbed, the young man shoots his eyes towards Watch and replies as he begins to step away. "Yeah. Sure. Thanks." He continues his heavy-footed stride down the street turning at the corner of the alley.

"Hey, Ol'Timer" a gentle voice calls from the second-floor apartment next door.

"Mornin', Settie" he replies looking up at the white framed window her cinnamon face peers out from.

"You goin' to the park?"

"Nah. I gotta go meet the new keyboard player today. Johnny's been workin' with him for a few weeks, says he's ready for rehearsal now." She pulls the shade half closed and moments later she is on the stoop next door to Watch.

"I hope he can jam like Nick" Watch says in a questioning tone.

"Probably not, he's irreplaceable" she contends.

"To you or the band?" questions Watch.

With just a soft smirk and a half-cocked eyebrow she answers him without words. Honey Lemon tea in one hand and a handcrafted bag over her shoulder, she heads down the street pausing here and there to say good morning to her neighborhood family until she reaches the back entrance of the night club.

As she enters the dim sunlit room she catches the end of a conversation between the three men.

"Man, I didn't mean to be disrespectful, I was just hungry," Sirius complained. His voice carried

her miles across rivers, mountains, oceans. Why does it do that?

"Don' even worry 'bout it, Si." Johnny shrugs as he turns to see her half daydreaming in the doorway.

"Oh, yo Si. I'd like you to meet Ausette. She's the lyricist and vocalist. Sette, this is Sirius." She quickly snaps back to reality and approaches him extending a welcoming hand. She clears her throat and says, "Hello."

And not until she puts her hand between his face and the keyboard does he even acknowledge her. With the attitude of a Siamese cat, she ices him over with her eyes and turns to the drummer who is quickly trying to diffuse the situation.

"Hey, baby" the tall, mohogany drummer greets her with a hug.

"Mornin', Jackie." She melts into him for a brief second. He always feels so good, warm and strong and safe.

"Where ya been, sis?" They've been friends since childhood and he's always protected her, always cared for her as many of the neighborhood brothas did. They just loved her. "Oh, at the pond, mostly." Her down-to-earthness and smile made her likeable, even loveable in that sistafriend kinda way.

"So, let me hear what ya'll got goin' on" she inquired as she pulled her leather journal and pen from her bag. Curling into the salvaged, purple-velvet lazy chair, she is prepared to be inspired by the jam session. New themes, melodies, and beats that will dictate themselves into poetic prose spewed across a currently blank sheet of paper.

The piano man's melodies swarm about her and she becomes fixated on his fingers chasing each other up and down the keyboard. She holds her breath when there is a space between the notes, caught up in the whirlwind of creation. She writes and writes and writes as if it is an involuntary motion, a natural bodily rhythm. At times her heart pulses fast as if she, like Sirius's fingers on the keys, is racing her hand against her words. As the beat begins to ease Johnny gives her a nod. She puts her pen down and takes to the mic. For a while she hums and "ooos" until she can feel the pulsing beat in her feet. She scats, letting her voice release itself from the emotional cage within her. Soft and gentle to raspy and clouded to almost operatic.

"Mesmerize me" she sings, "Memorize me, I memorizing you. If our eyes meet, on sidewalk, on street, mesmerized I'll be, sweet memory."

It is then, for the first time, and unbeknownst to her, Sirius looks up from the keys. She be-bops and humms, he echoes her. They play mockingbird until Jackie signals the end of the session. Without a glance she speaks calmly into the mic, "That was refreshing; thanks guys." She picks up her belongings and exits the same way she came.

Jackie calls out, "Sette, same time, same place tomorrow?"

She puts her hand up in silent acknowledgement.

Oh! The nerve! How rude! She was sure she didn't want to work with this Sirius character, but since the big festival was in just a few months they had no choice. And he is a great musician.

She shakes it off as she treads up the block towards the pond. First stop, Watch.

She plops herself down on the stoop resting her face in her hands and pouting like a five-year old.

"What happened to you?" Watch asks, amused by her childlike behavior.

She whimpers, "He was rude! He didn't even acknowledge me!"

"Who?" he questions. "What are you talking about?"

"The keyboard player!" she snaps as if he should know.

"He musta' been one good musician if he got you all a mess like this." he chuckes.

Aware of his finding humor in the situation, she haphazardly smiles. He always had a way of

making her feel better. At least he could make her laugh at herself. She went on to tell Watch about the rehearsal.

"I don't know if I can work with someone like that! I mean I'm a lady! I should be treated like a lady! You wouldn't treat a lady like that, right?" she questions.

"Sounds to me like you were able to work just fine together" he notes. "Besides, these young boys around here, they ain't got the same understanding I got. I got years of experience, including my mistakes!"

"Yeah, well make no mistake about it, if he's gonna treat me like that, I'm gonna serve him a dish of Check-yo-self-pie!" she exclaims.

"O.K. baby, you do that. Show him your stuff!" he says supportively as he chuckles to himself.

"Hmm,mmm,mmm" he shakes his head. That is one fierce lady. It is almost unbelievable to him that she has this in her and is still so docile. The dish she serves him will be the sweetest this boy has ever tasted. Even though she won't say it, Watch knows that this keyboard player must have been attractive because Ausette is so offended by his inability to notice her. And this can only mean one thing; she noticed him.

Still a bit frustrated, she sighs and stands up. "I think I'm gonna walk to the park."

Just as she begins to step down the stairs, she sees Sirius coming towards her. She drops back down. "Oh! It's him! Do you see him? That guy with the leather bag" she exclaims in a whisper. Watch squints - his eyes aren't as good as they used to be. "Good. Tell him what you, aw, that's the bagel boy" he says.

"The who? she questions.

"Never mind" says Watch. "I'll tell you about it later. Go 'head to the park."

Watch perches in his chair ready to give Sirius a talkin' to. He is disappointed to see him cross the street and go into the record store. Watch decides to make lunch. He'll have to catch the bagel boy another day.

Ausette shuffles across the street without being noticed by Sirius and wanders to the park. She is going to the rock by the pond. It is her favorite hiding place. A granite sofa chair surrounded by cattails and a vibrant weeping willow. She's been known to fall asleep there. Today she is wisped away on the little waves she creates with her feet as she taps them on the surface of the water.

She listens to the wind whisper through the cattails and releases a heavy-hearted sigh as she leans back to look at the bright blue sky. Why didn't he notice her? Did she come off too high and mighty? Did it even matter? Was she overreacting placing blame on him for the behavior of others? Ausette contemplated the morning and finally concluded that maybe he was shy. Yes, that's it; he's shy. Vowing to be more positive in tomorrow morning's rehearsal, she pulls herself up from her hiding place and proceeds to walk through the park with her sandals in her hand. Feeling the grass mush under her feet makes her want to write. She loves to write when she is in the park. There are so many things to write about. She loves to sit and observe the people. She wonders about their stories. She likes to create stories about them. Sometimes, when it's quiet in the park, she writes about the animals or the wildflowers. One time she wrote a story for school. It was supposed to be autobiographical. She didn't really know many stories about herself so she asked Watch to help her tell a story. She was so proud of what he said. She felt so good about herself. When she turned it in the teacher wrote, "Lose the drama. Lose the lies" on the paper. She was so offended she cried. She didn't speak to Watch for three days after that. How could he lie to her? She was sure she would get an F for fabrication and it would be all Watch's fault! When she finally spoke to Watch she was still angry. All she could do was scream at him. "You liar!" she bellowed. "You old fool! You're just a senile old man!" She had been so cruel with her words. Tears formed in his honey-brown eyes and she slammed the

door in his face. She cried herself to sleep that night. Watch left a book by her door. Inside were pictures, letters, journal entries, poetry, and dried wildflowers pressed between pages. After revisiting the teacher with that book in her hand, her grade was changed and a sincere apology was given. She went to the park and picked wildflowers on her way home. Wrapped around the stems was her story which she left on Watch's chair. They didn't talk about the story or the book for a long time, but that night Watch cooked her favorite, slightly blackened catfish, cheese grits, kale, and sweet potato pie.

She sniffed the air as if she could smell the memory.

"Sette" she heard her name being yelled from across the park. "Sette!"

The two young women were sitting on the bench by the court. She could hear the dribble of the basketball and the grunting of men as she approached her friends. Shiny brown bodies etched into the sunny scenery she notes to her friends, "Sometimes I wish I were a photographer."

They pause and Carmen replies, "They sure are some fine speci-mens, if ya know what I mean." They laugh lightly at her word play and Keira asks, "Sette, you goin' to the club tonight? It's open-mic night. Ya gotta read. You need to read!"

"I don't need to do anything girl, but yeah, I'll go. What time?" Ausette inquires.

They all agree to meet at the stoop at 8:30 PM. Keira and Carmen start off across the park still gawking at the sweaty men on the court. Ausette waits until Jackie notices her standing on the edge of the court. She takes her water from her bag as he jogs over to her.

"Jackie, I hope you" he gulps the water and cuts her off. "Sette, don't explain. I told him he was wrong."

"But was I wrong?" she asked.

He looked at her, winked, and blew her a kiss, "Gotsta go, games on."

"Jack!" she yelled, "Answer me!"

"You be you, baby girl!" he hollered back as he re-entered the game.

She stood watching and thinking for a moment.

"Jackie?" she got his attention briefly, "I'm reading tonight."

She knows he'll be there.

The Henniker Yarn Shop

Joan K. Degen

Family is together. We have tossed aside the schedule and travel down the road to Fryburg, Maine. Every summer the big rock by the lake waits. There was a time when the kids begged to climb the rock, but I forbade it fearing for their safety. Now when my six-foot wonder stands by the rock, it is under his control. Soon it will again be time to enjoy timelessness by the lake. But before we get there, my sweet husband pulls off the well-worn path to help me gather the tools I need for my meanderings. We pull into a pebbled driveway and up to an old farmhouse. The one you picture in fairy tales. I get out of the car only to discover that the door is closed. As I start to retreat, a middle-aged woman appears at the door and welcomes us in.

The Henniker Yarn Shop has not changed during my long year absence. I can't wait to experience the smells and colors once more. My children walk the perimeter of the room once and announce "We'll wait for you in the car." My husband finds a park like bench near the entrance and takes up position with a magazine. He knows it is going to be a while before I'm ready to depart. I slowly walk into the room scanning every inch ceiling to floor careful not to miss anything. Peach, indigo, and teal fibers grace the corner by the window. Brown, black and tan yarns spill from the rafters. Huge billowy off white puffs of fiber hang from pegs and cascade softly around the room. Scattered cardboard boxes contain unexpected treasures of mohair and silk. I know that some fibers might easily transform and grow into beautiful creations almost without the touch of my hand. Others will require much more individual attention and patience before any pattern or design is discerned. I knit to balance the demands of my day. As I knit, my careful eye checks for flaws. I have learned not to ignore little snags or patterns gone astray. A snag not corrected will weaken a piece. An awkward pattern will scream louder every day for attention and correction until you are ready to throw the piece into a dark closet never to be seen again. Only a few of these wonderful textures can travel on with me. How do I choose when the calico cat sleeps amidst the piles of yarn so comfortable and content? I too, am content here. By this time next year, the fiber I now caress against my cheek could be a soft cashmere shawl for my daughter or a burly strong warm sweater for my son. With my purchase in hand I will leave the yarn shop knowing a difficult yet satisfying task waits for me. Progress will be slow, but there will be progress. Each little stitch brings me closer to success.

The Cottage

Tina Eisenbeis

The outside finds its way in as the air whistles through my weathered windows blowing the faded gingham drapes ever so slightly. The warped floorboards, smooth from the sands of time, tell the story of a generation that walked, danced, and paced the halls of my being. My weathered clapboards show signs of seasons past and life along the rocky seashore. The sway of the for sale sign recalls the memories of life like tiny glimpses into a mirror.

I have outlasted many who came before me, keeping watch of the Atlantic bay. The torrid hurricane of my youth blasted my windows and howled through my bones leaving behind an aged tree from my lawn in the heart of my living room. The death of the old soldier afforded my owner a sweeping view of the gold coast and all destinations beyond.

Many a winter I was left behind, missing my companions. Left unattended, my fragile arteries burst, leaving icy puddles in my wake. The remains of my skeletal frame were left damaged and in need of desperate repair.

I received a makeover that following summer. After a repair of my vital internal structure, lipstick and rouge were all I needed. I was now the painted lady of my block, admired by all those who stood steadfast around me.

At the first sign of spring, I would anticipate the return of my family, keeping a constant vigil. At first glimpse, I would straighten my spine, breathe in a sigh of relief, and welcome them home with a warm embrace. I was most content with my role in this family portrait.

But as time wore on, I could see my family outgrowing my quaint existence. Long gone were the giggles of all night sleepovers, games of truth or dare, and the nightly ritual of bonfires by the sea. I was once again showing my age, unable to keep up with the new children that were being built all around me.

Alas, I am left alone with hallowed halls, memories of days gone by, and only hope for a new relationship.

Hope comes to all of us at some time in our lives. Mine arrived on a crisp fall day. Pulling the crooked sign from my lawn, the jubilant young couple celebrated my rebirth with laughter, hugs, and tears. They left me for the winter, but not before giving me a gift. They raked my leaves, trimmed my trees, and planted tulip bulbs as we all looked forward to the promise of spring.

My Father Lived a Miserable Life

David M. Fortier

My father lived a miserable life.
Yet, even then at the end he did not want to let go.
After the first three coronaries, cardiac arrest,
and fluid filled lungs - heralding congestive heart failure -
he held on.

My mother found him smoking a cigarette
in the bathtub, shower curtain drawn, sitting
in a folding chair.
"I'm not dead yet," he wheezed.

The smoking, the congestive heart failure,
vapid lungs, flaccid heart muscles,
brought him back to the hospital.
He held on.

After the gangrene set in - a black black,
a black hole that began to suck him in -
it began in his toes and took
over his right foot -
"You can't imagine the pain he is in," the doctor told us -
my father held on.

Even after he lay in his hospital bed
for weeks on end and I whispered in his ear,
"Dad, it's okay. You can let go now,"
he held on.

He held on long enough
to sit up one day and call us to his side.
One at a time, we, his five sons,
bent over him, and he whispered in his raspy voice
a sentence or two.

He called to me.
I walked to his side and leaned in.
He told me that never once had he loved
any of his sons more.
I never knew I needed to hear that.
But I did.

Soon afterwards, he let go - quietly -
a single breath escaping his beat up lungs
and battered heart.

It was that simple.

I thought that would be it,
but I see him everywhere.
I find him in places that I never knew,
and see him again for the first time.

The construction worker in line at the DMV
with the same streaks of white in a mass of gray hair -
in our casual conversation, the one we strike up as we wait -
here is my father - in the conversation
I never had - he is here.

Did he think the city is going to hell, too?
That the city needs to mow the grass more often?
That the new playground for disabled kids
is too close to the street?

"Who the hell wants to take their kids
for a quiet time on the swings next to a busy street?
The cars go by fifty miles an hour.
You call that relaxing? Not me."

I hear the voice of my father
in this man's voice. I hear the words he told me on his death bed.
Did the words mean the same as I think they do?
How many more times do I need to hear from him
before things go back to the way they were?

Never enough, I suppose.
I didn't hear from him enough
before he let go. I intend to keep listening
as long as he keeps speaking - now that the misery is over -
speaking and sharing himself now and forever. Amen.

Frayed Rope

Kim Glover

a parched white skull
with pointed horns
hangs over the bar
a gaping pit swallows her

she feels as barren
and hollow
as the long-dead animal
returning her expression
the burlap curtains
tied back with frayed rope
collect dust in the window
the smoke shrouds her

she is at an impasse
weary from struggle
challenge nature or
fall in line with fate

the desiccated bones
with empty sockets
stare blankly from above
the tequila chokes her

Untitled

Amity Simons Goss

Writing is very easy; all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper
until the drops of blood form on your forehead.

~Gene Fowler

For me, this is true. Perhaps that is why I have such great empathy for those who sit in my third grade classroom and say, with conviction, "But I don't know what to write about," and, "I don't have anything to say." Though I have a sneaking suspicion that everyone who's tried to write has felt this way, I think some of us have felt it more deeply than others.

Being a successful author requires talent. As is the case with most talents, writing talent is usually innate. Sure, it can be nurtured and expanded - it may even be hiding in some people who haven't recognized it - but, essentially, you've got it or you don't.

This is not to say that untalented writers shouldn't write. It's virtually impossible to live in this society without writing. Success, or even survival, in most professions requires some quantity of quality writing. As teachers, we need to recognize this and help prepare literate citizens for the world.

Preparation for the future novelist and the future botanist should not necessarily be identical. As an educator, I would not want to limit any student's potential by deciding to take away essential curricular elements simply because of a lack of visible talent. What I am proposing is that exposure to a vast array of writing techniques is called for in any composition class.

While a talented writer may be able to tackle a topic in fiction or non-fiction creatively and develop a voice easily, the less talented writer may require an introduction to the basic design and structure of a narrative or expository essay. The five-paragraph essay, the narrative writing diamond, and the formulaic poem may make clear that which was previously elusive for the struggling student. Some writers may find these recipes for writing constraining. Those writers should not be forced to use them. Other writers may find freedom in the structure of the formula.

Formulaic writing is not apt to inspire genius. That point I will not contend. What formulaic writing does do, however, is open the door to writing for those who've found only a wall before. It is the beginning of writing, the invitation to commit words to paper, the safety net of non-risk takers.

Before deciding to exclude instruction in formulaic writing structures, consider your own feelings when challenged to do something for which you have little natural talent. Stress, anxiety, and helplessness are all associated with struggle. Would those feelings be somewhat alleviated if you were given explicit directions that would help you in completing your task? Once we offer students the chance to try writing - any writing - and feel the success of a finished piece, they are more likely to try writing again. As confidence builds, some writers will become more competent at this necessary life skill, other writers may discover a hidden talent. In either case, the student has made a major accomplishment: (s)he has become a writer.

Waiting for the Quack

Kristen Graham

The day we moved in, you laughed at the ducks in the bathroom. Small, yellow, plastic, innocent, they made me think of the beginnings of our life together.

"Ducks?" you said.

I thought they were adorable, and the bathroom always seemed serious enough without adding the traditional floral or monochromatic accents. I wanted whimsy, plus, they added one of my favorite colors - yellow. When I saw the blue shower curtain with the yellow ducks, I knew I had to invite them home. I hoped that you'd like them - that you'd understand that I bought them full of innocence and future. Future for our relationship, not the bathroom.

At first you laughed, and I was afraid you hadn't understood the meaning that I attempted to convey. You said it would take some getting used to, all those ducks. Was this the beginning of the quack already? I'd been waiting for it, anticipating the crackling quack of the insurmountable problem that would be our undoing. I knew it might come eventually, but I didn't expect it on the very day you moved in. Why couldn't you realize that I was making space for you, for us? Ducks are hopeful and accommodating.

They are also clear and to the point. The curtain labels each duck in clear letters underneath. D-U-C-K. Oh good, I thought, directions. Everyone needs directions now and then. This curtain would help us spell duck. What would help us spell living together, sharing space, making room? Is there a shower curtain for that? Or maybe a bathmat. At this point, I realized that I forgot the bathmat. In my zeal for ducklings, I had neglected the bigger picture - the larger function for the bathroom, the "getting clean" part. No wonder you didn't like the ducks. I had neglected the pond for the ducks. I felt like I was in that game, "duck, duck, goose," but I was the goose.

Maybe it's a warning, all those ducks, about the things we might throw at each other. Words, insults, kitchen utensils. Were we meant to understand that we should duck, avoid, react quickly? Were these the directions that the ducks were trying to show us, to spell it out clearly enough so that we would see it? But, you weren't seeing it. You didn't see anything in the ducks, no meaning, no context, and no big picture. I couldn't believe that I would let someone like you into my home. For you everything was so literal. "Oh look how cute she is, she puts ducks in the bathroom." I'm not a child and I wasn't behaving like one, right?

Just as quickly as you had come, you retreated. Walking out the door, I heard you say something that could be construed as "I'll be back," but I didn't choose to hear it that way. You were leaving already. I wasn't waiting for the quack; I had already caused the quack. Hell, maybe I was the quack - the crazy doctor who thought that I could inoculate the new stage of our relationship by bringing in my insane ducks. What had I been thinking? Ducks seem nuts to all normal, sane, together people. I was clearly losing my grip, my tenuous fingernail pulling at the edge of adult-relationship reality. And just as I was about to descend with my ducks into a morass of self-loathing and quacking insanity, you returned. Coming through the door like you owned the place, you entered bearing gifts. A brown paper bag from Bed, Bath and Beyond.

"You forgot something," you said matter-of-factly, as you pulled out a white bathmat with pictures of yellow ducks swimming in calm, clear, blue water.

The Lady at Eblens

Lenore Grunko

Even though I care about fashion, it does not motivate me to shop. At this age, how am I supposed to keep track and determine what drives fashion at the age of fifty anyway? How are we supposed to make those fashion distinctions? I don't read magazines, L.L. Bean hasn't changed their stock in thirty years, and the fashion Nazis only care about a size six and under.

At fifty, the decades of fashion are a blur. Recently I had to give in and crawl to the mall to get a new pair of jeans for the fall. They were on sale. There must be a law somewhere that says they have to be replaced at least every ten years whether you need them or not.

Are we doing short, relaxed, or slim? The word slim never defined me. Neither did the word relaxed for that matter. Remaining optimistic, I figured that before heading into the dressing room, I better grab a couple of sizes. I would spare this store the sight of me shuffling back out to the shelves of Levis clutching my clothes to shield my aging edges. But, this had been a good summer. One in which I felt I had regained control of food consumption. Oh-oh. Neither pair of jeans fit - a perfect defeat. I had forgotten how Levis has no consideration for drooping anything. I gently returned the goods to the shelf and was about to leave when I spotted an older woman looking through coats on a rack. I know I fit this definition of older to many, but she was old, even to me.

"What does an elderly woman shop for?" I thought as I surreptitiously watched her leaf through the merchandise. Her careful and slow consideration of each item made me wonder what kind of fashion statement I will be making at her age. I wondered, "Will I need a new pair of jeans?" and "How many times will I have to replace mine between now and then?" But suddenly, the most surprising thing happened. She spoke to me.

Holding up a bright blue rain coat she asked, "Do you think this would be a good raincoat for an old lady?" I was taken aback. Usually I'm alone with my thoughts in public since people aren't too talkative around here. Secondly, she actually called herself old!

"Huh?" I replied, contemplating a courteous response. I didn't know what to say. Maybe this was a trick question. I was thinking about my own raincoat that I was so excited to buy twenty years ago on sale for thirty dollars. I was sure I would own it for another twenty years. It never stopped me from getting drenched, but at least I felt fashionably wet.

"It looks like it could shed the rain reasonably well," I offered. "It doesn't rain very hard here in Connecticut."

"I do a lot of walking; I like this coat," the old lady asserted. I thought the conversation was over, but she hesitated a moment and then added, "Do you think my children will think I look foolish in it?" Here was the defining fashion dictum. Our children. Will the responsibility never end?

"Do you like it?" I inquired. "That's what's important." Here is the selling point that Ralph Lauren missed. "Try the new look of Polo - one that your thirteen-year old will be pleased to see you in." How could Manhattan have missed this one? Dressing to please your husband - hah! You tell me which you would rather avoid: a sideways glance from hubby or a tirade from your soccer queen blurring fear of public humiliation for wearing a piece of clothing of your own choosing.

"Your children?" I declared. "What could their ages be?" I thought. Thirty? Thirty-five? Forty? "I'm sure your children couldn't possibly care about what you are wearing," trying to foster the independence I was hoping would be my own by that age. "I'm sure they'd love to see you looking sharp and snappy. (Oops! That's an old word. My age is showing.) I'm sure

they just want to see you enjoying yourself. Isn't it wonderful to be over that phase of life?" I tried to appeal to the woman in her, the mother, the old lady. I too had reached the newly achieved status of becoming a child-free parent. My grown children were enjoying most of their time away at college or at least that's what the bills said. On a daily basis I was adjusting from one new freedom to another - being able to crank up the music and sing whatever I wanted, the freedom to sleep through the night without waking up, and the freedom to wear whatever I wanted without thinking how it would affect the high school swim team.

She chuckled and smiled deeply, "I suppose they won't care. Why, look at these lapels, they're big again. And it's that new fabric - what's it called?"

"I think it's microfiber," I muttered wondering how manufacturers come up with such names.

"I suppose they won't think anything of it. You're probably right." Great, her problem was solved. I had actually helped an old lady to enjoy style at any age and even recognize the freedom she could have. I contributed to the karma stream. I would now be able to wear what I wanted at her age, free from my children's judging eyes. But then she hesitated. She looked down and pondered her thoughts for a moment, looked up with every bit of sincerity, and added with no room for doubt, "What will the grandchildren think?"

The Second Person

Mary Hammerstein

First you have to get the board going real fast. Then, you need to get balanced and be ready to move quickly. Then you have to get your toe under the edge of the board and flip it up to spin the board. Then the good part comes. You have to jump up as high as you can then land back on the board without smashing up your face on the pavement.

Brendan, Grade 9

In this recent expository essay I was informed that it was necessary for me to go through a highly unnatural series of steps in order to successfully orchestrate a kick flip on a skateboard. I cannot accept that this student believes that I have the ability to get "going real fast" on a skateboard never mind to execute a kick flip. Me, I am his pressed and dressed English teacher with carefully coiffed hair, meticulously manicured nails, and a string of pearls. Me? Could he really be imagining me on a board made of wood attached to some sort of small, synthetic wheels? I ponder it, but soon decide that he could not possibly mean me. He must be addressed by me, really me, later during conferencing. I move on to the next essay.

This one instead of serving to lessen my dismay only adds to it. This time I am to receive instruction on how to get a prom date. The writer cannot be addressing this to me, at least I hope.

First you have to check out all of the ladies in the hallways. Once you find one that looks good to you, you find out who her friends are. Then you go and ask them if she's got a man.

Marcel, Grade 9

Me? Me? Yes, I am checking out the ladies in the halls, but to make sure they are adhering to the dress-code, or at least not blatantly violating it. Perhaps that is exactly what the writer is looking for. Not what I, but maybe you are looking for. I very well may be looking for her friends to ask them something, but not the same something that you should be asking according to this piece. Finally, I ponder if I would be asking a high school student anything about the "man" in her life. Some things I believe to be better left alone.

I have been pondering the unnatural attachment that students have developed toward the pronoun you for quite some time. The indefinite you seems to have worked its way, in excess, into student writing. According to *The Little Brown Handbook*, it is permissible to assume that the you is the reader in informal writing and when the context is appropriate (Fowler and Aaron, 1989). A final draft, submitted for a grade, is indeed formal. The context is indeed not appropriate. It leads me to wonder. Do I want to be the you? Could I see myself on a skateboard or as an adolescent once again facing the combination of raging hormones and springtime? I consider it for half of a second and decide unequivocally: No.

My co-workers verify that they observe this phenomenon as well. It is a relief to know that it is my teaching causing it. It leads me to question our instruction in English. Perhaps the language is evolving as live languages do. Are we denying our students by pointing out these glaring errors? Or are we doing them a favor by discouraging habits that will only lead to poor scores on aptitude tests and college entrance essays? I want my students to learn and evolve, to think for themselves, and most of all to succeed. But what is success? Is it learning to live with conventions or being allowed to do it their own way? Is there a way to encourage novice writers to write formally and expressively while still adhering to archaic laws written long ago, but still

used for assessment?

According to Walter S. Ong in his essay "The Writer's Audience is Always Fiction," a writer is only truly proficient when he can not only develop an idea of audience, but can modify it to suit his needs. It is obvious to me by looking at the examples of student writing that my students have developed a single audience, an audience which I am not sure they are even aware of. I am also concerned about limiting fledgling writers too much. Some theorists point out the dangers of constraining a writer by limiting them to a single audience. I certainly do not want to limit beginning writers, or do I?

At this stage in their writing I am beginning to believe in the necessity of limitation. It is important for the young writer to realize that yes, writing is governed by rules as abundant and, at times as obscure, as local, state, and federal statutes. They must learn the conventions prior to breaking them. So for now I am destined to devise ways to convince my students to write formally, without the second person in tow. Though it is amusing to ponder my many roles as reader: downhill skier, hip-hop queen, home-run hitter, I will continue to do my job to eradicate the second person from the writing of my students.

Educators, Wake Up to the World

Julie Ann Maresca

It's time
To open
Your eyes
And

See the horizon of possibilities
Hear the various cultural voices
Touch the rough surface of the avenues to be explored
Taste the different philosophies
Say "I'm open to new approaches"

See the power in children
Listen to the collaboration
Sample some social action
Touch your inner voice
Say "I'm listening," instead of "I say"

See the culture of power shift
Set higher expectations
Listen to the world that is talking back
Be aware of the experiences of all people
Say, "I am part of the community, not the ruler of it"

See the transaction
Welcome the surprise
Invite the passionate engagement of human experience
Question and encourage your students to question
Say, "Here's where I stand"

See the landscape of ability is not a mountain
Participate in a dialogue
Respond to students' needs
Share responsibility for success
Say "The process is important"

See that the journey is always changing
Develop a tolerance for ambiguity
Accept that there may be more than one right answer
Open the door to conversation
Say "I'm waking up"

Beach Juice

Betsy Moakley

"Mom, she won't get out of the bathroom, and I have to comb my hair."
"Mom, where's my red and white bathing suit, the one with the little red flowers?"
"Mom, where's the towel with the big blue fish? You promised I could use it today."
"Mom, do we have any batteries? I need them for my transistor radio."
"Has anyone seen my radio?"
"Jimmy, I am gonna kill you; what are you doing with my stuff?"
"Mom, Jimmy took my radio, and he won't give it back."

My mother looked out the kitchen window making sandwiches and beach juice for our trip to TOBAY (pronounced TOE-bay) beach. She stood there packaging sandwiches, fruit, cookies, and the traditional family "Beach Juice." Beach juice was always created in the dark blue jug like thermos. It had a silverish spout near the bottom that looked very much like a miniature water faucet, the kind you would find in the garden. And inside the jug would be the secret formula: half grape juice and half lemonade, beach juice. We never called it grape lemon, we never called it fruit punch, we never called it anything but beach juice and everyone loved it. I wonder why we never had it at other times.

We fill the beach bags with towels, sunglasses, baby oil, and magazines, and bring it down to the car. We put everything into the trunk and squeeze into the back of our family sedan. Sweltering in the car, my mom honks the horn impatiently. My father, whose mood seems to have completely deteriorated checks the trunk and with disgust takes everything out. "Who put the chairs on the bottom? The chairs have to go on the top so that they can come out first," criticized my father to anyone who was listening. Windows rolled down longing for a breeze, angry faces, moody kids, we are off for our ritual weekend sojourn to the beach.

"Mom, her leg is touching mine."
"Mom, he is taking all the leg-room."
"It was his turn to sit in the middle, how come I always have to be squished?"
"Mom, did you bring my magazine?"

The answer to complaining in our family is he who gets angrier and louder wins. This was always my father.

"Shut up, one more word and we are turning around and going home."

We all knew this was an empty threat, but no one dared to really find out.

"How should we go? Should we take the Meadow Brook Parkway or the Wantaugh Expressway?" he asks rhetorically. "Damn, I told you there would be traffic. Why can't you kids just get up at a normal time like other human beings. I don't understand why that is such a big deal."

Silence was returned from the back seat where everyone is sulking for this is the pattern of our lives.

The air starts to change in quality, and the mood in the car seems to be getting lighter.

"Smell the air," directs my mother, "Ten more minutes and we'll be there." A thrill of excitement runs through me and then the visual. Straight ahead of us, it looks like the Washington Monument, but smaller. I secretly believe that it is Rapunzel's tower. It is even complete with the little window near the top for Rapunzel to survey the beach.

The smell, the tower are getting closer. Now if only we could find a parking space. We drive around and around and around and around the rows of cars.

"There has got to be a spot up front, let's just try the front row. I'm sure people have left by this time of the day," my father remarks. His point is not lost on any of us. However, there was no one else in the car that would have given up even five precious moments of sleep.

The inside of the car is getting smaller and smaller, and just as it squeezes out the last breath from everyone we find a parking space. We explode from the car carrying as little as we can get away with, leaving the rest for Dad. The family walks down the path and under the highway. We see the tunnel that goes under the highway and grants us access to the beach. We call out in the tunnel. It is so much fun to yell, "ECHOOoo," and hear our voices reverberate against the walls. Never mind that we are annoying every adult in the immediate area including my parents.

As we exit the tunnel, the sun is pushing down on us, the sand is glistening and we can't wait to ride the waves. First we have to find a place to lay the blanket and put down the stuff. Like the sea of cars in the parking lot, now we are faced with a sea of people, a sea of umbrellas, and a sea of blankets. There doesn't seem to be one space left for this family of five. Tiptoeing across the sizzling sand, praying for the reprieve of an umbrella's shade we find a little space and wedge our stuff between the other families and their territorial looks. Dad takes the umbrella and thrusts it into the sand. He moves it back and forth and back and forth insuring that it will never come out by an overly zealous wind or a tornado.

"OK kids, see the umbrella, mark the spot, now you know where we are. We are between the lifeguard and the fence, between the blue and green umbrellas, the one with the red hat hanging under it."

We lay the blanket out carefully, and God help the person that gets sand on the corner, cause we'll have to start all over again. That's it, that's the end of the tension. Now Dad becomes the perfect playmate. He races us to the water, careful dodging the people and blankets in our way. Dad dives in over the first wave and swims out a bit.

"Come on in, Come on in," he yells. I can see the water streaming over his face as he wipes it out of his eyes.

"The waves are terrific, come on," he invites us. And we run into the water eager to join Dad on his favorite roller coaster.

We crash through those first waves, anxious to get to that flat spot where we can wait for the perfect wave. We body surf in and swim out to catch wave after wave. My father our cheerleader, our coach, our friend at our sides and the last one to give up. Exhausted, we drag ourselves back to the blanket to wipe off the salt, cook in the sun, and drink beach juice.

Brooding

Cori Modisette

I. Wildlife Sanctuary

Camping is an all-American tradition. Do they do this in Europe or Asia? Maybe occasionally in tents, but this wooded camper subdivision in southeastern Connecticut could only exist in a country where transient vacationers flaunt their plumage in fifth wheel and pop-up temporary homes with a new audience every weekend. This particular Friday evening presents a veritable smorgasbord of literary possibility. I only need to wander within a small radius of inclusion to gather the fat and the seeds of what will eventually become a suet ball.

II. A Natural Thing

Not exactly lovebirds, they are walking up the hill in front of me, close, but not touching. I can tell they are together because they wear the same L L Bean khaki shorts and striped gross-grain belts. She picked them, probably from the catalogue, probably for this vacation since the shorts still have the shipping crease. I can tell from the way they tentatively give those fluttering sideways glances that they are aware of each other, but don't want to give away too much too soon. Their fragility reflects a certain uncertainty, as though too loud or too close might hurt. Is this a reconciliation, or a beginning? I walk a little faster to see if I can hear at the very moment they separate and walk in opposite directions, toward two different families, two different campsites, two different lives. It doesn't make sense until I feel the heat of the glance from their eyes across the road.

III. Migration

I think she's about twelve. A baby bird, too old to need a sitter, but with that look in her eyes, too young to be left alone in a place like this on a night like this. She sits on a lawn chair by the fire, poking at the coals, catching the eyes of the big boys sneaking down to the pond for a smoke or a drink. They motion to her, and for a split-second, she notices me noticing her. The beeping of the finches inside the camper stalls her escape, and then she is off, brushing off my glance as a fly, entirely trusting them, not entirely trusting herself.

IV. The Steadfast Wildflowers

At the edges of the crushed-shell steps,
between the salt-worn railroad ties,
wait the steadfast wildflowers.

Assertive points of color
(there is power in numbers),
tiny voices harmonize
with the red and bluebirds
becoming a subliminal
overall picture of quaint.

A Day to Remember

Leah Pittle

It was one of those special days. There was a gentle quiet surrounding me, interrupted only by the distant sound of waves crashing on the beach and the birds singing sweetly outside the window. Sunlight slipped through the curtains splashing on to the kitchen floor. The heat from the tiles warmed my toes. It was a beautiful late summer day. Everything felt right with the world.

My son Max is and probably will be my only child. He is the light of my life. I feel like my time with him is slipping by too quickly. It seems like only yesterday that I was cradling him in my arms. Now he's the little boy I'm chasing around the house, laughter spilling out of him as he suddenly stops to dive under the dining room table knowing I can not easily follow him there. On that special day he had awoken with a nasty cough. I thought for a moment about what to do and then decided to stay home, it would be just the two of us. There wouldn't be many more days like this, I thought to myself. I watched the light play in Max's curls, forming a halo around his head. A mischievous twinkle danced in his eyes as he asked for his favorite videotape, Elmo in Grouchland. I knew on this special day I would give in to his demands.

"It is such a beautiful day," I mused, "I think today we'll be lounge lizards." Max loved both books and music. "Today would be the perfect day for us to spend on my king-size bed basking in the sun, surrounded by books and serenaded by Raffi. It's a day for cuddles! But first, I need to do the dishes. Elmo will buy me a little time."

Max was sitting eagerly on the couch waiting for Elmo to appear on the television. I turned on the TV, impatiently searching for the special video channel. Was it on channel 3 or 4?

"Wow, it is hard to believe the violence on network TV these days," I pondered to myself, "Especially so early in the morning!" I didn't recognize this movie. It appeared as though a plane had crashed into a government building, was that the Pentagon?

"It must be one of those spy movies. They always have such great special effects." I flipped through more channels while Max sat patiently waiting for Elmo. Then I began to realize this awful movie was on every channel. Suddenly, the television showed another plane. This one was crashing and exploding into the World Trade Center. With horror and a rush of overwhelming sadness, I realized this was not a movie; it was the real thing! Little did Max and I know, but what we were watching would change the world we knew forever. It was 9:20 AM September 11, 2001.

House-Sitting

Patricia Shimchick

Have you ever slept under a quilt in New England in July? Unadorned windows are flung open to embrace the night air as the stillness sings you a lullaby. How strange, to be so comfortable in a foreign bed, in a foreign land. The alarm murmurs quietly at 5 AM. Outside, only a few birds call to each other. It's easy to silence the alarm and roll over comfortably into a soothing dream.

5:45. Sunlight spares no corner of the log cabin. It is an aggressive frontal attack. All of the windows on the pond side face east. The sun cunningly employs the still waters as a mirror, firing bold rays at the cabin, piercing the interior, conquering the last vestiges of slumber. Morning becomes electric.

Honest to God, there's no escaping it. The mist dances in long chorus lines over the pond. The sun's rays backlight the dappled tree trunks on the near shore. Long shadows stretch across the sparkling gems of last night's rain, scattered randomly across the grass. A trio of goldfinches perches on the middle birdfeeder. Two robins scurry across the dirt driveway.

The hopeful promise of morning. First cup of coffee. A morning dove coos to its partner. Thoughts gather. Daylight subdues last night's doubts and sadness, driving them back into her memory.

She bumps into Timbo, the tuxedo cat, on her way to the kitchen.

"Hello, Timbo," she greets him. "Did you bring me any furry critters last night?" She steps gingerly across the carpet, straining to see any bumps or contrasts in color that might warn her of a dead mole or a mouse carcass, fruits of the nocturnal hunt. Happily, the coast is clear.

She sat peacefully sipping her coffee, gazing out at the pastoral scene just outside the breakfast nook window. Suddenly a tiger-striped cat appeared at the screen door and meowed. Timbo pranced over to establish his presence, nose against the screen, fur slightly puffed in warning.

Oh no, she reacted. Does this mean he will invite the other cat in or, worse yet, defend his territory in a scrappy early morning brawl, suffering battle wounds, but emerging victoriously? Clearly, he would win, based on size alone. But how will she deal with blood, guts, and gore before leaving for the day?

She didn't realize she had been holding her breath until she released it a moment later when the tiger cat ran hastily across the deck and disappeared into the bushes. Apparently the feline tension had abated. What a relief!

After a few minutes, she first heard the thud of the cat door and then glimpsed Timbo re-entering the kitchen, proudly dangling a rabbit - NOT a bunny - from his jaws! Was it dead or alive? And which was worse, she asked herself. Timbo had to hold his head up high because the rabbit almost matched Timbo in size, much more than a mere mouthful. The cat marched majestically into the master bedroom. She followed, praising Timbo's hunting prowess.

"What a cunning cat! You are SUCH a good hunter!" This was automatic. She was really focused on what damage he might inflict on the wall-to-wall carpet and how she was going to clean it up. Inwardly, she revolted. A vegetarian definitely should not have to deal with this.

There they were. Timbo sat expectantly on the carpet with the spoils in front of him. The rabbit lay neatly on its side. No blood. So far, so good. She decided to run for the shovel that Bob had used when she had first arrived and there had been a dead mole on the stone sidewalk, leading to the front door. She had secretly prayed that she would never have to use it. No such

luck.

When she returned to the bedroom the rabbit was still intact. Neither the cat nor the rabbit had moved a muscle. Talking all the while in soothing tones to Timbo, she maneuvered herself and the shovel between the two animals, turning her back on the cat and facing the rabbit. The rabbit lay peacefully, its one eye staring straight at her. Was it dead?

She decided to treat it as dead, unfeeling, unaware of the indignity she was about to confer upon it. She gritted her teeth and made contact between the shovel point and the rabbit's hind quarters. Her plan was to scoop it up and run with it out to the compost to bury it, as Bob had already demonstrated with the unfortunate mole. She was surprised at how floppy, like a rag doll, the rabbit was. It evaded her repeated attempts to scoop it up.

Now what? She wasn't going to touch it with her hands. Glancing up, she spied a pair of scissors on the bookshelf in front of her. They would do. She reminded herself to wash them after performing the operation. Scissors gripped in her left hand, shovel in her right, she successfully nudged the body onto the shovel.

Depositing the scissors back on the shelf, she started for the door. Timbo followed her, meowing reproachfully, all the way to the compost pile on the opposite side of the dirt road. She gently deposited the body on top of the pile, dug down through the recognizable vegetable and fruit scraps until she reached soft black, almost earth. She quickly scooped up the furry body, easier to grasp in the forgiving compost, and placed it on top of the black decay. Lastly, she covered it with the lettuce leaves and melon rinds. Mission accomplished.

She ran back to the log cabin, glancing down and noticing that she was still in her night-shirt. She wondered what time it was. Would she be late this morning? Would she have to explain what had caused her tardiness? Would Timbo climb into the compost and reclaim his bounty while she was gone? What exactly would she find when she returned later that night? She sighed, no longer innocent, having been introduced so graphically to the complexity of nature.

Bless Us, Rudolfo

Sharon Snuffer

I threw another book on the pile in the corner. It was my first year to teach sophomore honors, and I couldn't decide what novel we'd read Spring Semester. I'd gone to an Advanced Placement conference where I'd gotten a reading list. I hadn't read most of the books, so I went to Barnes and Noble and bought them all. I spent my Christmas vacation reading. I'd read a book until I knew I didn't want to teach it and then throw it in the corner. I finally narrowed it down to *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya and Barbara Kingsolver's *Bean Trees*. The tiebreaker would be which author could come work with my students when they were done reading. Oh, and I forgot to say that I also wanted each student to have her own book.

I went to my principal and told him that I wanted a thousand dollars for books and the author to come with them. He was new to our building. He looked at me and said, "Who are you?" He said he'd give me the thousand dollars, but I had to be responsible for my own good idea as far as the author was concerned. He also said I could use his long-distance telephone line as often as I needed. He asked which author I wanted, and I said the one who'll come.

Barbara Kingsolver lived in Tuscon, so I thought I'd give her an opportunity. I called her publisher in New York and never spoke to a person. Undaunted, I called Rudolfo Anaya's publisher in San Francisco. He gave me his office number at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Someone else answered, and I couldn't believe it when he gave me Rudolfo's home number. Did he know what he'd done?

Rudolfo answered the phone.

I said, "Hi. How are you? I'm Sharon Snuffer, and I teach at a high school in Phoenix, Arizona. I'm calling to see if you'll be in the general vicinity around March or April. My students will be reading *Bless Me, Ultima*, and I'm wondering if you can come speak to them." I wanted to get it all out, hoping he wouldn't hang up.

Rudolfo said, "Well, I'm not sure about my schedule. *Bless Me* is being released in hard cover by Warner Books this spring, and I'm going on tour. I'll be in Phoenix sometime this spring, but I don't have the dates."

"That's great!"

He went on to say, "I've done phone conferences with classes."

"No, I want you to come to our school. This is really important."

"The students will have read the book?"

"Yes. They will have read the book like no one else ever has."

"I'll check with my agent. Give me a couple of days and call back."

"Great!" I said. "I just have one more thing. I don't have any money, but since you'll already be here on tour will it work?"

"Call me in a couple of days."

My principal was watching all of this. "So, is he going to come?"

"I'm sure he will. He's checking on the dates."

After a few more phone calls, we had everything set.

You'd think the most difficult part of my "big idea" would be getting the money for the books and the author to come, stay tuned.

I told my students about the big idea. They were excited about an author coming. We didn't have much time, so while we waited for the books to arrive we began our prereading activities. We broke into groups; each group was responsible for teaching the class background material for our novel. That was fine until some of my Mormon students found themselves in

the group that was going to research some Catholic terminology. They let me know right away that I couldn't teach religion in public school. A class discussion finally convinced them that I wasn't trying to convert anyone.

We were well into our presentations when our books arrived. We were excited. The room was filled with new book smell. They couldn't wait to start flipping through them. It didn't take long for my Mormon and other non-Mexican students to discover there were Spanish words in the novel. In fact, the chapter numbers were in Spanish, but I said, "Don't worry. I have a Spanish glossary for you. It's divided by chapters, so you can refer to it as you come across a Spanish word."

"That's it," they said. "This is English class, and we don't have to read anything that's in Spanish."

More class discussion. We all agreed to give the novel a chance.

We began reading. The plan we all agreed to was to have time at home and during class to read. They were keeping dialogue journals, and every few days we discussed our journals and asked and answered questions. They were getting into it, but hanging over their heads was the deadline for finishing the book. I told them that anyone who had not finished the book would not be allowed in the room with Rudolfo. The pressure was on. They were reading. If I could figure out how I'd made such believers of them, I'd give seminars.

We finished the book, discussed and wrote and discussed some more. The book was ours. They knew it by heart. Well, except for Roberto who said he'd be up all night, since Rudolfo was coming the next day. He believed.

We scrubbed the desks, picked up the room, and arranged the flowers. The table was set for the reception. We couldn't wait for the next day.

Rudolfo was in Los Angeles doing readings and book signings and said he would call the night before his visit to tell me what flight he'd be on. By 9:00 PM he hadn't called. I was in a panic, so I called his wife. She said she had talked with him, and he was definitely coming and not to worry. She was sure he'd call. I fell asleep on the sofa and just happened to wake up at 10:30. Being so sleepy, I almost forgot that I was waiting for his call. Then I realized it was late and he hadn't called. I sat straight up. What was I going to do? The kids would be so disappointed. How could he do this to me after all those phone calls and fighting the Mormon Church and the principal buying all those books. What else could I do but cry and call my principal. It was 10:30, but I had no choice.

"Hello."

Oh good. He doesn't sound sleepy. He must still be up.

Through sobs I said, "Hi. This is Sharon Snuffer. Rudolfo was supposed to call to let me know when his flight was coming in, but he didn't. His wife said he's coming, but he didn't call. I don't know what to do."

"Let me see what I can do. I'll call you back."

Then I remembered that he was flying Southwest.

"Hello? My name is Rudolfo Anaya and I'm calling to confirm my flight tomorrow morning from LA to Phoenix?"

"Yes, Sir. Which flight are you on?"

"I'm thinking it must be about 9:00?"

"Let me check that. Yes. We have you on the 9:00 AM due to arrive in Phoenix at 10:15."

Okay, so I knew he was coming. The phone rang, and it was my principal telling me that he had checked to see when the flights were due in. The original plan called for a driver to bring him to our school, but he said he'd go to the airport to make sure he had arrived and would bring

him to school. In retrospect, this all seems a little melodramatic. Did I overreact? I don't think so.

The next morning, just before lunch, the door of my classroom opened and my Ernest Hemmingway walked in. As hard as it was for people who know me to believe, I was speechless. Over lunch, he explained that the night before he had signed books until almost midnight and felt it was too late to call.

"Oh. No problem," I said. "I knew you'd come."

As we got back to my room, the bell had rung and students were coming in. Roberto, the boy who had to finish the book the night before looked bleary eyed. He said he had gotten up at 4:00 AM to finish it, and it was the only book he'd ever read. I wanted to kiss and hug him but I held off.

I had borrowed enough chairs so that both of my classes could come at the same time. There were sixty-four kids in there that had read the book and were excited about talking to the author. The only adults in the room were me, the principal, and Rudolfo. I had invited other members of my department to come, but I told them that they couldn't if they hadn't read the book. Just as I was about to introduce Rudolfo, a teacher knocked on the locked door. She wanted to hear him speak.

"Did you read the book?"

"No," she replied.

I said, "I have a reputation to uphold." and shut the door.

I don't mean to be dramatic or trite, but what happened then was nothing short of magical. It was magical. We had not discussed what he would talk about or the format his visit would take, but he had been a teacher in public school and at the University. He knew what he was doing. The principal and I became invisible. It was just Rudolfo and the kids.

"Who drew that map of New Mexico?"

"We did," answered the students who had drawn it. "It was our project."

"Well, it's wrong," he said as he walked over to the map.

And that's where he began. He talked about creation and the first people to come to New Mexico and *Bless Me, Ultima*. The kids were spellbound. Then came their questions.

"How did you decide to name Ultima, Ultima?"

"She came to me in a dream."

"You mean you had a vision?"

They asked all their questions. They asked all the questions they had written to him in their journals. When he was done, they all rushed up to get their books signed and the first in line were the girls who didn't want to read a book that had all that Spanish and Catholic stuff in it.

When it was over, and he was gone, I floated out to my car. I had to get home because there was only one person I knew who would truly understand what had happened that day.

"Mother, I just had to call to tell you about today! I just got to experience something some teachers never get to."

She listened to the whole story, and I knew she had gotten it. She cried.

"Well, I've got to go. I'm going to Houles Books tonight to listen to Rudolfo read. Some of my students and their parents were standing in the back. I was sitting three or four rows back, and he didn't know I was there. He began.

"I apologize for being so tired. I was with some students today. They were wonderful. They wore me out. I've never been with students who knew my book so well. But now I'll read for you and then answer some questions."

He read. Most of the questions were of a political nature. Then Monica, one of my

students raised her hand.

"Oh, it's one of the students from today!"

"Yes. Will you read our favorite part? It's towards the end of the book."

He said, "I shouldn't do that. It might ruin the book for someone who hasn't read."

Monica said, "We don't care. They should have read it. It's our favorite part. Our teacher read it aloud to us, and we cry. She cries. Please read it for us."

He smiled and said he would read it for us another time.

The next day, my students wrote their responses and letters to Rudolfo. There's one that will remain with me forever.

*I'm a Mexican, but I've always been
glad that my skin is so light. People
take me for Anglo. Until yesterday
I've not been proud to be Mexican.
Then Rudolfo Anaya came and
talked to us about his book that we
read. When I saw him and listened
to him, he made me proud to be
Mexican.*

