LANGUAGES OF ENGAGEMENT:
AN INVESTIGATION OF METAPHOR, PHYSICALITY, 
PLAY AND VISUALITY AS TOOLS FOR ENHANCING 
STUDENT LEARNING AND PERCEPTION

DISSERTATION

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By

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Robert Frost once speculated on the relationship between poetry and thought, conjecturing that all thinking was grounded in metaphor. Many people never took him seriously. Now, thanks to the work of many theorists in a number of diverse fields, from linguistics to philosophy to cognitive science, we can say with some certainty that he was right. Sentences build themselves around analogies; thought creates visual pictures in our brains; metaphors shape our ways of seeing the world. All of this appears to be done mostly unconsciously, as we filter messages, both verbal and visual, from our environment and shape those signs and clues into world-responses.

The work which hasn’t been done thoroughly enough yet is how to apply this central understanding to education. That means investigating metaphor as a means of linking the whole of learning. As one step toward to such a curricular move, this study first traces some of the key theorists involved with what might be called the metaphor revolution and connects them to some related studies in the area of the physicality (the body and its contact with its surrounding...
world shapes our perception); playfulness (play’s role in childhood, art, and society in general); and visuality (the role of visual imagery in the shaping of thought and consciousness).

Secondly, I follow the progress of two high school classes as I introduce them to some of the key concepts in poetry, emphasizing the above concepts. Through writing poems about literature, about their home town environment, about sports activities, elemental memory, and visual images, I trace some ways the above concepts influence their writing, their thinking and their perception by means of my own analysis of the text of their poems and their own analysis of their responses via interviews. By the close of the study, I propose a kind of working “generative cycle” revolving between each of the four categories, so that metaphoric thought breaks down into a four-tiered process, drawing on many sides of experience and contributing at the same time to the creation of that experience, all to the end of students attaining what I’ve called a “more engaged world view,” that is, a more conscious involvement with their own perceptive consciousness.
Dedicated to Leslie Beyer-Hermsen
who brings each day its stories
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I want to thank Mary Campbell Zopf, Vonnie Sanford, and Bob Fox from the Ohio Arts Council, who long supported my work in the Artists in Education program; as well as Marcia Dickson, Scott DeWitt, and Dominic Dottavio of the Ohio State University in Marion, who financially and logistically supported five years of outreach into surrounding county schools, including Mt. Gilead High School; and finally, Cindy Fidler, English teacher, Deb Claus, principal, and most, most especially, Jill Grubb, English teacher, at Mt. Gilead High School, who gave me insights into the students, supplied me with lots of time in her classroom to explore ideas, gave me honest and useful feedback, and helped plan and discuss each and every lesson, locating cameras, making calls, arranging field trips, and more than anything else, caring about poetry as an art for investigating the world, and letting that concern inspire her students.

Oh—none of this would have been possible without the love, moral support and time of my wife, Leslie Beyer-Hermsen, who arranged for me to have many weekends without vi
childcare in order to concentrate on this project. Much thanks is due to her parents, Carl and Roberta Beyer, who also frequently watched the children during the many months of researching, writing, and planning; as well as to those children themselves, Noel and Noah, for being their own kind of wild inspiring selves; and to my oldest daughter, Isa, who listened to my ideas as they unfolded, and who has always convinced me that poetry stretches way beyond its traditional boundaries and into the whole of our lives.

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Finally, immeasurable thanks are due to all of the students I worked with in the classes, whose names and faces
I believe I will remember always, and whose lives give back to mine, as I hope mine will for theirs. Thank you for trying all these ideas out with such enthusiasm, honesty, and care.
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PUBLICATIONS

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Major Field: Art Education
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1.1 Introduction: A Boy Named Philip

Let’s start with a boy named Philip. He’s the sort of child that drives teachers crazy, picking at the edges of their school days like a pesky mockingbird at the edge of the orchard, constantly provoking disorder in the room. The distinguishing feature about Philip is that he is never still, physically, mentally, or verbally. At least if left to his own devices.

He joined a group of six children who were meeting with me at an elementary school library in Columbus one afternoon in late April, 2001. After spending three days in their class during the winter as a guest writer, I was there to "get to know the kids better," asking them questions about their lives, wondering how their view of things connected to the world of art and poetry. I had brought bottles of water (it was already hot that spring) and cookies, to ease the flow of conversation. The first half of our time was spent talking about the things they feared, the places they loved, the games they played after school. Mostly, they told stories. The talk was jazzed, productive, interactive—and noisy. And Phillip was the source of much of the latter.
Whenever anyone said anything, Phillip had a joke to follow it. Sometimes humorous, sometimes cruel, always undercutting. When I mentioned we would get to something "in a minute," he jumped in: "Did you say 'Eminem'?" (I assume he meant the recent white rapper all the rage in those days.)

When Victoria asked me, "Do you remember my name?" He chimed in with the song lyrics, "Say my name, say my name..." His mental and conversational life seemed to be one rejoinder after another--he was the king of outside reference--to the point where we ALL got tired of it. When Julia spoke of her scariest time as being this whole year, when three people close to her had died, one in a freak accident when a bulldozer crashed over a hill where her cousin was playing, Philip had to undercut that too, faking false tears and making us all turn on him with disgust at his insensitivity.

Philip, it seems, knows no boundaries. His mind is always "at play," seldom "on task." Except when we turned to look at art. Listen to this exchange as we discussed Gustav Klimt's "Baby and Cradle":

Terry: What do you think this painting is "about"?
Philip: I think it's about... about... a bunch of... somebody made a quilt or something... and they put it all together... and they put it on the baby.
Zach: I think he's like in bed...
Chad: And that's the pillow...
Terry: What's the feeling? What's the painter getting at?
Terry: What do you think this painting is "about"?
Philip: I think it's about... about... a bunch of... somebody made a quilt or something... and they put it all together... and they put it on the baby.
Zach: I think he's like in bed...
Chad: And that's the pillow...
Terry: What's the feeling? What's the painter getting at?
Chad: He's sleeping and he's trying to go to bed...
Zach: He looks like he's really sad.
Terry: Why do you say that?
Zach (inexplicably reversing): He looks really happy.
Terry: OK, why do you say happy?
Zach: Because from this angle he looks like he's smiling.
Terry: This is weird... I mean... there's this huge amount of clothes with just this little tiny baby...
Philip: I think - I think - that the baby - that it's
cause I don't know if it's a he or a she)... looks like she's dreaming... she has all those covers and this is the clouds - and she's floating on air...

Terry: Cool, so it's this baby's dream of all this wealth and stuff...
Philip: Ya...
Terry: That's pretty neat...
Philip: Like a... like a... princess...

That moment changed my life in terms of thinking about what art can do for kids. Ironically it was only later, listening to the tape and hearing how quiet things got at this point, that I realized something quite significant had happened. (At the time, I was mostly frustrated with his constant interrupting.) For in that quiet I began to see Philip's mind as a playful mind, one so thoroughly engaged with an active, interchangeable world of ideas and words that he can never stop--until given a reason to. If we had been dancing, he may likely have been the one to keep us all in motion, if we had been acting, he may well have played any character... But we weren't. We were, as in so much of school, sitting STILL. How does a child like Philip learn to channel, as they say, all that energy? Does he simply, as many might prescribe, need more Ritalin? I don't want to minimize the very serious problems students like Philip come up against every day in school. But if we squelch that energy, make it sit still and learn mostly how to take tests, etc. how do we make sure that we don't drum metaphor
and playful thought out of him as well, or crush the child
dreaming on top of that huge quilt?

This study is for the Philip in each of us, asking: how
might we bring the metaphoric, playful, physical and visual
sides of the mind and the child, so richly a part of what
the arts teach and what human consciousness is based in,
into more productive functioning within the school environ-
ment? It wants to be part of a nationwide effort to make
schools more physically engaging, more playful, more visual-
lee rewarding--and at the same time more deeply engaged with
thought. In other words, more filled and engaged with art.

1.2 Statement of the Problem: The Four Disengagements

The problem I am addressing is one of four interlocking
disengagements, each of which I believe undermines our
abilities to make the arts a meaningful part of education:

- **a disconnection from the metaphorical processes** that
  shape our deepest thought;

- **a disconnection from the physical/visual world** upon
  which all such thought is based;

- **a disconnection between the natural playfulness** of
  children and the "sit still" world of classrooms;

- **A disconnection between language and perception,** so
  that thought often is reduced to a shuffling of
  received, stereotypical images, and representation in
  many ways separates us from, rather than enhancing, a
  more direct experience of the world.

Clearly these four disengagements are themselves
interrelated. For example, it's possible that a
disconnection between language and basic perception may actually feed the growing literacy problem in our children, effecting a greater emphasis on testing literacy skills, to the (misguided, I would claim) loss of time spent investigating metaphor and the natural, physical and visual world. And the arts? With such immediate crises to manage, how can we afford to take time for what is often seen as the frivolity of art? This study attempts to build a case, theoretically at first and then via a case study, for involving the arts more directly in education. It wants to be a contribution toward finding a complex, genuine and applicable reason for teaching the arts. It begins with the premise that unless that significant WHY is found, the arts will continue to be cut in times of financial and performance crisis--and only cursorily re-instated during times of plenty.

I begin with poetry--the art I know best--hoping however that through a thorough investigation of the whys of teaching one art a more convincing case for teaching all the arts might emerge. More importantly, because of its unique stature as an art form grounded in language, poetry may well form a bridge between different sides of learning, bringing language and visualization into more dynamic interplay. If I am right in positing a certain disconnection for many students, particularly as they grow older, this study as a
whole is asking: **How can we help students, through the arts, develop a more engaged experience of all that is around them?**

### 1.3 Expanding the Artists-in-the-Schools Residency: Toward a Deeper Collaboration

I bring an experimenter's background to this study. For 25 years I have taught children, at various levels, to write poetry via the Ohio Arts Council's Artists in the Schools program, similar to the nation-wide poets-in-the-schools program (PITS) that began at the Huntting Inn Conference in East Hampton, New York, in the mid-1960's. The idea then was that English teachers were singularly unprepared to teach poetry as an active, living thing (see Lopate, 29-34) and needed a kind of refresher course in what the art of experiencing poetry was all about. Much good experimentation happened under this program, with writers as diverse as Anne Sexton, Natalie Goldberg, Sandra Cisneros, Philip Lopate, Ron Padgett, Daniel Lusk and others involving themselves in students' and teachers' lives. And some now-standard ideas, such as the writing workshop, emphasizing a sequence of steps in the writing process, have grown out of that earlier fusion of writers into the education process.

There have been some critics, such as Laura Chapman (1992), who claimed that the Artists in Education program has had limited results, promoted by the NEA to bolster its
standing in Congress, but not spurring major change in the way the arts are taught in the schools (126). On many counts, I tend to agree with her. We could not then and cannot now send in enough artists to cover every school in the country (122). For over thirty years we've been "dancing in the dark," pretending that something significant has been achieved nationally, when the results have been scattered and very piecemeal, limited to those tiny miracles that happen when an artist affects a kid's life in some personal way, and to those relatively few teachers who have welcomed the arts into their entire curriculum. But in the schools as a whole? It remains questionable whether any deep effect has been achieved.

As a result, the arts continue to be undervalued and under-taught. Poetry, to take my field as an example, remains something of a "wild card" in American education, just as Lewis MacAdams referred to it in those early days of poetry-in-the-schools (Hermsen, 1). Sure, it finds its way into the curriculum, at rather predictable points, from time to time. Elementary students are entertained through hearing the work of Dr. Seuss, Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky, glorying in their playful rhymes and often irreverent attitudes. While I have no problem with that "fun" introduction to poems, it remains true that the students themselves are unable to replicate such styles in their own writing. They are, instead, often handed the formulas of
cinquain, haiku, and diamantes to give them the feel of working in form, while missing the other essential aspects of poetry—including metaphor, persona and line-play. By late middle school and high school, they are on the way toward literary analysis and the personal experience of poetry often falls into the gap between Silverstein and Matthew Arnold. In the best places, from my observation, they do learn to closely analyze poems. And some may learn to write sestinas, sonnets and villanelles—oddly enough, the most challenging of all forms. But the heart of what poetry does? That seems to be left out, with some exceptions, much of the time.

On my own, along with hundreds of other poets across the country (see Fox, 1986), I began to experiment. I brought poems I loved into classrooms, I took classes on walks around the block, or out to a local factory or farm (and a cave or two), going on my own observation that so many poems I loved came from looking at things. Many lessons would fail, or turn out so much differently than I had planned. I wrote them off as experimentations. We'd try out ideas and some of them would hit home. Usually four or five strong poems would come from it. At times, nine or ten. I'd read them back to the kids the next day—and we'd plunge on. We'd try out writing persona poems in the voices of objects and creatures—what a blackboard would dream, what it would feel like to wake up one morning and find oneself slowly
turning into a whale or into snow, etc. I found that if I could locate just the "right" poem to stimulate the writing, and "just the right" introduction and activities (bringing in tapes of whales' voices, or having students walk around the room blindfolded in order to more closely value their senses), magic could happen, in the form of quirky, original, challenging and often meaningful poems.

Where did that magic go after I left the school? Like so many visiting artists, I had little idea. Sometimes, yes, I'd meet students years later and hear that they still had the booklet of poems we'd put together at the end of our time. That they sometimes even read them again, years later. But what sort of thinking, what sort of perception, what new insights into using language or experiencing life did our time together foster? And what about the students who weren't one of the four or five, the nine or ten, whose poems worked that day? What did they learn?

Along with seeking to add to our ongoing, if sometimes silent, national debate on "why teach the arts?" I undertook this study to find my own answers to the questions referred to above: What DOES poetry--or any art--teach? Who does it reach besides the few "stars" who show themselves to have a flourish for it--or whom the idea happens to hit that day? What does poetry--or any art--have to say to the whole of learning? How could we genuinely move forward from all that
experimentation begun in 1965? Most importantly, how could we bring a similar--and perhaps deeper--experimentation into the whole of learning, via the arts? I began to feel that, for my part, I would have to study more closely my own teaching practices, as much as any theory of prosody and aesthetics, linking that practice more thoroughly into the students' whole lives, in school and otherwise, to even begin to speak of answers.

1.4 Teaching Poetry as a Visual Art

I chose to conduct this study not in an English department but in the field of Art Education. Such a choice might not be as odd as it might at first seem. Consider, for example, what W.J.T. Mitchell says about the complex interplay between verbal texts and visual images. "The redemption of the imagination," he claims, "lies in accepting the fact that we create much of the world out of the dialogue between verbal and pictorial representation" (Iconology, 46). Or what art historian Mieke Bal maintains: "'Verbality' or word-ness is as indispensable in visual art as visuality or image-ness is in verbal art" (212). Both she and Mitchell seem to be saying that the arts have much to learn from each other and can hardly stand alone if we are to figure out what art as a whole does in shaping culture. Maybe that's why Jan Mukarovsky contends that "every art ... sometimes strives to attain through its own means the same effect" of another art ("Visual Art" 208), not blending
with, but approaching that possibility, if only to find out more about what it means to write a poem, to move through a dance, to blend paint or mold a sculpture. My own most common metaphors for what a poem does, through these 25 years of teaching poetry-in-the-schools, have been to compare the page to a blank canvas, or a dance floor, or a block of clay, with the pen being the way we feel the words as they shift from line to line, like a painter, a choreographer, or a sculptor.

Poetry is about seeing as much as it is about the shaping of sound and words. It's the kind of seeing that reaches beyond the quick glance, but rather down into the body, to the kind of perceiving Henri Bergson talks about when, according to Martin Jay, he wants us to recognize an "experience of being in the world ... synesthetically ... prior to the differentiation of the senses" (Jay 194). It takes, as artist Margaret Maitland says below, a kind of risk. Frequently, especially with older grades, as we prepared for a poetry-writing field trip to a cave, a factory, a prairie, or a downtown area, I'd give them this quote from her short essay, "Choosing To See":

The choice is given to most people: how much do we allow ourselves to see? The desire to see more is in constant struggle to see less. There is a price to be paid for seeing. The artist is one who chooses to see more, and I believe this choice requires courage. (41)
A price to be paid for seeing? That in itself is an odd way of putting it. What price? When we make a choice to look closely, what does it cost us in terms of lost time, energy output, perhaps even a "loss of cool" in admitting there may be something we have missed? I'd ask the students why we might at times NOT want to see. Their most common answers surprised me. Not wanting to be hurt by something (so we stay blinded to it); becoming distracted (when our attention is required elsewhere); not wanting to be bothered (when we're really too lazy to pay attention to details). All of these are costs in their own way. Seldom, however, did they get to what I tend to think are the more likely costs: because it's inconvenient, because we're in too much of a hurry, because if we look too much to the side of the highway, we might crash the car. Poetry and the arts in general require, in a way, that we stop the car, that we slow down the often dismissive quickness of the way our eyes take in the world, that we come to see what is around us as if we'd never seen it before, with our whole selves, seeking metaphors for "what we know but cannot say." Such attention to the subtleties of being takes time. Sometimes we have to "tip our heads," turning things upside down (without crashing!) to find a re-connection. In some deeply necessary way, poetry and art combine the eye and the hand, the brain
and the body into a re-realization of what it means to experience the mystery (and the mysteries) of being alive.

Looking back on my strategies for getting students to write poetry (and in writing it myself), I can't help thinking that what I've been asking has been a kind of *embodiment* of sight. I've asked students for example to breathe a painting in, staring at it for five minutes or longer, saying nothing, just sensing their own bodies as their eyes trace their way around the canvas. (One group, recently, hardly moved when it was time to stop, they had grown so attentive to the work before them.) I've talked with them about the nature of our society frequently putting us behind glass--eyeglasses, windows, car windshields, television screens--and that the poet's or the artist's role is to step around the glass, coming to some fresh experience. With our lives on fast forward (even fourth graders seem to experience this), art lets us feel the words and color, shape and movement--and the whole wondrous passage of light across our senses--again, reconnecting us to our own perceptions. I've always gone on the belief that such slowing down is still possible--and necessary, that students of whatever age can re-enter the mysterious interplay of touch, vision, and language again, beginning, in my case, with the play of lines on a page.
In other words, I've long been teaching poetry as something akin to a visual art. It's the picture or the image a poet makes in our minds that counts first, not necessarily the hidden message. Indeed, we can't usually get to the latter without the former. I undertook this study as much as anything else to ponder the links between poetry and vision, between words and the body, between all the ways that imagery, both visual and verbal, can shape our connection with the world-at-hand. It's the interplay between the arts that interests me, more than one working alone.

1.5 A Framework for the Investigation

Gradually I began to see that the value of the poetry experiences I'd been offering students, and the quality of their poems, tended to revolve around four main factors:

- Their creative engagement with metaphor—not just in a generic way, but through an active participation with the environment around them and the world of memory inside them, with looking out the window, or picking up an object, or reaching back into their past to make a connection to the present;

- As implied under the above, a kinesthetic/physical engagement with language, connecting their thought processes (which especially in high school students and adults can become so abstracted and removed from actual experience) with the movement of the body and the interplay of the senses to guide our response to the world. This often involves "walking through a memory" (invented or actual), or else, paying close attention to the immediate environment--be it the woods, a city street, or a classroom;
A willingness to **play with language and perception**—to tip our usual responses around, shaking up our typical sentence structures through the breaking of lines or by combining words and their internal sounds (as in the use of half-rhyme, alliteration, and repetition); or else, shifting into "another reality" of fantasy, dream or surreality—a willingness to live for a while in the realm of myth and personification (as if everything in the world were invested with emotional qualities—and were part of a much larger story);

Finally, a very strong **visual sense** to the poems, so that they evoke mental pictures in the listener, in an ekphrastic sense, coming as close as possible (Mukarovsky, 1971) to what a painting might do—freezing moments and gestures in time, giving us visual spaces we can project ourselves into, never quite "finishing the story" but leaving us suspended in a mix of invented time and space, a satisfying and challenging ambiguity.

This study will trace out theoretical bases for these four "moves" that poetry can teach, via a close connection with visual art. Reasons why, for instance, metaphor is so central to thought, as developed by Mark Johnson and George Lakoff (1987/1993), and for why the act of metaphor itself is so much grounded in our experience of the physical and bodily world. We don't think in a vacuum, but from all we've gone through, from infancy to old age, from interior realms to visionary realms that stretch out into space and around the planet. I consider the theories of Martin Heidegger (1936), who saw all of art as a mediator between the grand unknown of the physical Earth around us, and our interior, linguistic human worlds. I trace out the work of Josef Huizinga (1949), Gregory Bateson (1972), and more recent
sociologists who consider the centrality of play in human culture. And I look at the analysis of visual-verbal interplay framed most convincingly by W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) and Mieke Bal (1991). I want to see how these essential philosophies can be given room within a specific educational environment, bringing back the physical, symbolic, playful exploration of childhood into the everyday classroom.

I want to reach toward answers to the following questions, growing as they do from both my own experience teaching poetry-in-the-schools and my readings into the theorists briefly mentioned above. Each is tagged to the four insights mentioned at the beginning of this section:

1) How might a more thorough grounding in metaphoric play, via poetry and the arts, contribute to students shaping a more engaged worldview—that is, a more original, contact-based, inventive and personal connection with their own thinking, perceptual and writing processes?

2) What ways can we find to link metaphor, poetry and the visual arts more strongly with physicalized seeing, with the kind of kinesthetic perception Bergson and others have argued for (see Jay, 186-193)?

3) How might a deeper understanding of metaphor and engaged, physicalized perception help students work against cliched, stereotypical thinking? And what other methods of language-play and "creative distortion" (such as those investigated by the surrealists) can we make use of to re-involve students in their own perceptual processes?

4) How can we help students better negotiate the image-text interplay which Mitchell and others
have claimed is so central to our age and to the shaping of an engaged worldview?

1.6 Momentary Festivals: A Case Study in Integrating Metaphor, Physicality, Play and Visual Awareness into the High School Curriculum

Briefly, I spent a semester in two 10th grade English classrooms at Mt. Gilead High School in Mt. Gilead, Ohio. (For an expanded overview, see Chapter Six: Methodology.) After years of teaching poetry residencies, as described earlier, I wanted to know three things, as supplements to the four questions mentioned above:

a. What could poetry and art teach us about integrating the four qualities of metaphor, physicality, playfulness, and visuality into the every-day classroom--to the end of helping students achieve a more engaged experience of the world?

b. How might the poetry (and art in general) connect with the students' lives--to their sense of their own developing selves, to their memories of growing up here, to how they see this world now?

c. How would my own teaching practice influence the results we got? How might the small changes (in approach to the assignments or in the sequencing of assignments) and the chance occurrences that happened along the way surprise us with outcomes we hadn't expected?

The bulk of this study is an interweaving of those three strands, a multi-loge, if you will, at some points considering my own thinking as a lesson unfolded, at others looking at the students' response in the form of their poems, and at other points considering how their poems open
up new dimensions of their relationship to the world around them. As I reminded myself frequently throughout the time, I was not so much interested in "making them into poets" as giving them EXPERIENCES in poetry and art that they could apply to engaging the world. This was not a poetry seminar, which would have required a great deal more attention to in-depth revision and critical response. Instead, in a quite unapologetic way, we "celebrated first drafts," welcoming an ever-more-diverse sense of the possibilities of response to a given assignment. The full range of techniques in becoming a committed poet lay outside the time frame and focus of our time. Instead, MORE THAN ANYTHING, I WANTED TO KNOW HOW THEY SEE THE WORLD--IN ALL SENSES OF THAT TERM--AND WHAT CHANGES, IF ANY, OUR TIME TOGETHER MIGHT MAKE IN THAT SEEING. If there is a strong tendency to be "disengaged," due to any number of factors, in high school or elsewhere, how might poetry and art help us be less so? I would be changing (intervening in) their normal lives, for sure, but how might the techniques we studied help them value and reflect upon their own lives more?

Finally, though I was only half-aware of it at the time, I began to think of our time together as the creation of "momentary festivals":

- **the festival of a poem** as it celebrates and explores a "momentary" glimpse of time;
• **the festival of a particular lesson** as it weaves together various aspects of an aesthetic approach to experience, giving us TIME and fresh means to "engage" the world;

• **the festival of the classroom** itself as a community of very unique and interactive individuals, taking one lesson one way in a particular class and quite a different way in another;

• **the festival of art** as it gives us different ways of speaking, different ways of viewing and experiencing the world that might not be so readily available to us in our day-to-day mind-sets.

### 1.7 Significance of the Study to the Field

I will contend in this study that the whole of what the arts teach may be dynamically framed as the interaction between the four factors I have outlined in the previous sections:

- The arts manipulate symbols and metaphors as ways of understanding and framing experience, sometimes visually, sometimes sonorously, kinesthetically, or verbally.

- The arts draw insight and energy from contact with kinesthetic experience (the physical world and the body).

- The arts value the spirit of playfulness begun but then too often left behind in childhood--as a source for new ideas and perception.

- The arts thrive on an active interplay between visual and verbal realities--testing new images (through movement, color, form or sound) and processing, either internally or explicitly, the meanings that arise from such creation.

If all this bears some resemblance to the actual processes artists go through, and that students engage in when working...
with the arts, as I believe it does, then it would seem that to leave the arts out of our classrooms, as we so often do, is to do a severe injustice to our students. The arts engage us in thinking processes that go deep into what human beings are ALWAYS doing when they process information and construct new understandings (Arnheim, 1969; Johnson, 1987; Walker, 2002; Efland, 2002). What I attempt to do in this dissertation is supply a specific case study for how these processes play out in the arts and how an immersion in these processes might help students more creatively engage their own perception of the world.
CHAPTER 2

THE METAPHORIC STRUCTURE OF PERCEPTION AND THOUGHT

ABSTRACT: This chapter details some of the key theories and theorists in late 20th century thought on the workings of metaphor. One might say that a huge new emphasis, growing out of semiotics, developed during that time. Among the central concepts are:

a) Mark Johnson and George Lakoff's notion that the whole of language and thought is bound up with a wide array of metaphorical structures based on bodily and physical experience.

b) Roman Jakobson's view (and that of semiotics in general) that metaphor and sign are at the heart of how societies structure themselves.

c) Additionally, Jakobson's idea that poetry is that side of language which brings the word to the forefront, taking apart old and worn-out phrases in order to re-energize them.

d) Other concepts, such as Phillip Wheelwright's emphasis on the "tensive" aspect of metaphor, I.A. Richards' concept of tenor and vehicle, and Cynthia Ozick's contention that the main function of metaphor is to bring memory back into present experience.

From these and several other theories, I try to make a case for the importance of understanding and investigating metaphor if we want to see how language and thought operate--and for poetry and art as vehicles for such exploration.
2.1 Metaphor as a Buried Thing

Watch, spend time with, and listen to any young child for long enough and one begins to see how much kids are involved in a metaphoric and imaginative investigation of the world. So much of their energy goes into making sense of things, visually, verbally and kinesthetically. Indeed, these three sides of their experience can at times seem nearly indistinguishable.

*Example:* Playing hide-and-go-seek, a one-year-old just at the beginning of forming sentences finds her father hiding in the closet of their old house, looks up at the tiny oblong dots in the yellowed wallpaper, points and says, "Rain." What is she doing besides making verbal metaphor out of her visual experience?

*Example:* A one-and-a-half-year-old boy takes a magnet off the refrigerator and tries to balance it on the cat. Although the boy cannot speak, one can only guess, from his persistence, that, like a young scientist, he's trying to figure out if it will stick to the gray fur. *(A small success: he balances it on the cat's back! But then the sly creature moves and the young Einstein sinks in disappointment.)*

*Example:* A girl of two, riding next to her father and only recently "recovered" from a severe fear of driving over hills, seeing another car rise up and over a ridge, asks: "Daddy, when we get to the top of that hill, are WE going to disappear?" *(Aha--perhaps her fear was indeed an ontological one--and is "cured" now in the saying of it?)*

*Example:* A deaf boy picks up a seed pod, long, brown, and hollow inside so that the seeds shake, holds it up to the sky and begins to make the sign for "balloon"--blowing into it and laughing. *(Does he know he's making a joke or does he really think, since it's shaped something like a balloon, that you can blow it up and make it float off into the clouds?)*
What else shall we call these tiny, early childhood events but instances of metaphoric play and of active imagination at work? That is: points where ideas, comparisons, speculation, noticing, and analysis meet up with the physicalities of the world. We often think of metaphors as "flights of fancy," flourishes on reality, the invention of worlds and images unrelated to what we experience every day. More often, I would contend, such flights-of-fancy—even if we want to use that nebulous term (which I would not) for the instances described above and hundreds of others like them—involve MAKING MEANING in the world; yes, there is often a "tipping things on their head" effect, a sense of strangeness and pure invention involved in the process, but that disorientation most often shakes its way down into realizations about where we live and how the world works, with a renewed sense of wonder. Says the psychologist/ecologist Edith Cobb, "Every child ... must integrate a world image with body image in order to know where and who he is. 'Privileged' or 'under-privileged,' every child tries to structure a world" (17). Stressing that each child must make something of an ecological connection with his or her immediate environment, she goes on, "The recognition of the value of ... metaphor would seem to be the key to the journey, leading as it does to ... the
understanding of our most precious tool, compassionate intelligence" (25).

With Cobb, I believe that there's a natural poetic or metaphoric imagination in children. Hughes Mearns found evidence for this in the 1920's, as he roved the country giving talks about poetry and literature to parents and teachers. Often mothers would come up to him afterwards and report instances of just such moments of clarity and insight in their toddlers. One example will do, though he reports numerous others. It's from a girl named Hilda. On her way to sleep one evening, she said to her mother:

I have a secret from everybody in the world-full-of-people
But I cannot always remember how it goes;
It's a song
For you, Mother,
With a curl of cloud and feather of blue
And a mist
Blowing along the sky...

These reportings gave him the idea that children "already have a language adequate for the purposes of their [young] lives, but we do not often discover it; nor do we always recognize it when it appears right before us" (66). Whether such naturalistic flourishes of what might be called the dream-side of childhood still exist in children might be questioned, given the onslaught of the media age, where such images are in many ways pre-packaged for them. But my contention is that it's still all there, once the world-at-
hand is re-engaged in moments that lend themselves to such perceptions and questioning.

Example: A four-year-old, much used to videos and the like, while sitting outside having dinner on the gazebo in her yard, asks a visitor, a close friend of her mother's: "Where does the dark go when the dark goes down?" Moments later, as her mother returns with dishes of ice cream, the girl can't recall the question she's asked at the edge of the dusk, but the wonder remains, with her oddly compelling phrasing of it.

According to Mark Johnson's framework, in his theory of image schemata to be discussed later in this chapter, her question is a visual metaphor, conceptualizing "dark" as an entity that shifts its place in the sky. It's a moment of magic when the "new eyes" of childhood link up, through language, to the elements of the unsayable, of what Martin Heidegger calls the "earth" as it protrudes into our own human world (to be discussed in Chapter Three). It is, from my point of view, the home of poetry, the essence of what we need to teach to keep wonder alive in education.

Such wonder can find its way into young children's writing and their use of poetry as well, given even the barest of experience with the tools of poetry. My oldest daughter memorized haiku from an early age, simple translations from the Japanese which she was able to hold in her head and recite at various moments:

\[
\text{Snow whispering down} \\
\text{all day long}
\]
Earth has vanished
Leaving only sky - Joso

The oak tree
Stands noble
On the hill
Even in cherry blossom time - Basho

A small hungry child
Told to grind rice
Instead gazes
On moonlight - Issa

After such elementary (and elemental) knowledge of what a poem does, at age four or so, she began--without prodding--to make up poems. Usually during moments exploring the natural world, she would announce: "Here's a poem I made up" and say it out loud:

Under the apple tree I stand,
Feeling like a mouse
For it is my giant.

Or walking across a farm field at dusk, looking off toward the small town to the west:

The sun sits
On top of the sunset.
The sunset slowly flows through the city.

Or sitting in the woods in autumn:

When the leaves fall
It seems to me
That the world
Shrinks down.

Notice how physical her poems are, how much they apply the basic categories of up/down, under/above, action/response, oppositions as we will see later which Mark Johnson claims
form the basis for the metaphoric structure of all thought. Without her being aware of the principles of poetry at work, her poems take on elements of personification, perspective, metaphor, and close-seeing so essential to all poetry. They are tiny sentences that hold her body in place within the moments of her experience. They reach back into what James Welsh will refer to as the "roots of lyric," proverb-like phrases that shed meaning on who she was and what her world looked like to her at that age.

Growing out of these personal reflections, a key question my research hovers around is: what's left of these small nuggets of imagination and metaphor as children get older, as our technological and media-dominated society evolves, and as schools become dominated by proficiency testing and a more rigid definition of learning? The types of metaphorical flourishes I've detailed above seem to disappear as students age and become more used to the world of normal school. Just as the work of Project Zero and Jessica Davis has shown a sort of "the U-curve," a substantial loss of spontaneity and freshness in children's visual art abilities as they move into the elementary years (47-51), there seems to be, from my experience, a parallel "dropping off" of poetic and metaphoric ability. Sometimes it seems that the lessons poetry has to teach go quite against the grain of much of current education. How much do
students have to "unlearn" in order to approach the world with the kind of openness young children so often display? Such re-learning would seem to require visual and physical stimulus, along with a re-entering of the body's ways of knowing, in order to spark fresh observation. Their best poems, in my experience, seem to come from just such close involvement with the senses, their worst from a spate of generality and lack of specific, concrete connection. Can we find ways to enhance the former and atrophy the latter? My guess--my hope--is: yes. But it will take a carefully laid out theory for how imagination, metaphor, physical noticing, personal connection, and visual-verbal play unite. That is, in a nutshell, the dream of this study.

2.2 The Role of Metaphor in Developing the Imagination: The Work of Mark Johnson and George Lakoff

All my reading, from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Mark Johnson, from Robert Frost to Roman Jakobson, points to one key thought: that metaphor is at the heart of what the imagination does--and further, is at the heart of thought and the whole way we use language to make sense of the world. Mark Johnson lays out the fullest groundwork here, tracing imagination to the workings of metaphor, and metaphor to the physical/kinesthetic structure of our pre-propositional experience of the world. Indeed, he says this pre-propositional realm of the body and its physical
environment is all we really have to think with, all our concepts and mental manoeuvrings harkening back to what-we-experience-before-thought (19). The body and its kinesthetic experience of balance, weight, dimension, relationship—all of which we can sense but not explain—stands in something like the relationship Norman Bryson makes to "the real" versus its representation (218), and is at least part of what Martin Heidegger refers to as "earth," (49). Just as we cannot fully touch "the real"—which might be called all that exists—we cannot step outside our bodies, or the mind within the body, to get some "objective" view. We are a "thrown projection," to use Heidegger's phrase (see Gadamer, Heidegger's Ways, 99). We find ourselves alive, with physical impulses and needs not of our own choosing, within physical and cultural environments which shape our frames of reference. To make sense of things, to find a "worldview," we build elaborate metaphorical structures, says Johnson, drawing on Kant, to interpret and investigate experience. We cannot see these structures, most of the time, because they are so close to us as to be nearly invisible. We speak of feeling "up," or "down in the dumps," little considering how these and other emotional metaphors are shaped by our body's experience. Here Johnson builds on earlier work he did with George Lakoff (to be discussed shortly). From our everyday, conversational metaphorizing, Johnson goes on to maintain that all conceptual thinking grows out of physical metaphor
as well. Consider my last sentence, for instance. I say that Johnson "goes on," implying a continuum to his thought, leading us from the simpler to the more complex, "growing out" of a simplistic insight into an entire system of thinking about how we think. We can find such physical implications in nearly any proposition. Indeed, he maintains, "It is not possible to grasp the logic of [a] speaker's argument without understanding the basic, irreducible metaphorical structure that holds it all together" (5).

How does the process work? Johnson's "image schemata" theory, as well as being Kantian at base, is very close to Coleridge's concept of Primary Imagination (to be discussed in Chapter Four). One might see it as a kind of sorting process the mind goes through to order experience. This sorting process is one of taking in experience and placing labels upon it in terms of words or categories. Much of this is done in an unconscious but nevertheless active way (Lakoff, 129). From the time we begin to use language--and perhaps before--we "map" our experience into frameworks that help us negotiate where and who we are, what is expected of us, how to survive, physically and psychologically, and what to do next. We do this linguistically, to the extent of our vocabulary; physically (in an internalized sense of bodily realities); and visually (in the form of mental pictures). As infants, for instance, "mother" or "father" come to
represent safety, or food (or, if conditions are not so pleasant, fear, or loss, or judgment). "Water," or "dirt" might represent "play" or the joys of touch. "Fire" might signify fascination, or fear. "Bedtime" might be "comfort," or "separation," the joys or fears of dreaming. According to Johnson (and Lakoff), all these basic realities—and even the simple physical properties of "up/down," "in/out," "far/near," "open/hidden"—become the unconscious mental frameworks into which we place our earliest thinking. And such thoughts don't "go away," or disappear into more sophisticated reasoning as we grow older. Rather, they remain as the internal structures (again: as image schemata) from which we construct more elaborate, gradually more complicated thoughts. Accordingly, on the most basic level, "up" becomes a natural way to express, for instance, growth; "in" becomes a schema by which to express, metaphorically, containment or involvement—as in being "in" a conversation, or being "in" love.

Johnson makes the strong claim that imagination is no frill (the way so much of American education seems to feel), but rather THE central method by which we make sense of experience. By establishing categories, organizing patterns of representation, and mediating between our sensory experience and our mental reflection on that experience, imagination connects perception with reason (141). He says, "Our ordered world, and the possibility of understanding any
part of it, depends on the existence of this synthesizing," (151). The mind is continually dealing with "where we are now" and shaping "novel orderings" (157). Single experiences are not enough for making meaning. Imagination "reflects on a series of representations" (158). It is therefore not an isolated flourish, but the very grouping of experiences into working categories. Johnson refers to these categories as "image schemata," borrowing the concept from Kant. These are not "templates" to be stiffly placed over experiences to define them, but far more fluid structures within the brain, drawing inevitably on bodily experience via metaphor. Often the template sets up a kind of opposition: we are "in tune" with the times, or "out of whack" with what's going on around us. Johnson proposes all kinds of these oppositional frameworks, claiming they come from our often either-or experience of reality (we can stay or go, get warmer or colder, sleep or wake...). Metaphor then is our best means of grappling with those realities. We say things such as "I could see right through him," "That's a lot closer to the idea," or "We're way past that point in our relationship," or even "Literary metaphor occupies only a small corner of the whole realm of what metaphor entails." Ideas carry weight, they divide up choices or patterns in physical ways that refer back to our basic, kinesthetic world. Johnson says: it could not be otherwise. What other tools would we
think with? Understanding, then, is not an objective attempt to step out of the situation (to briefly reference Sartre and Bergson: there IS no place to step out to [see Jay. 291]), but it is for Johnson a function of "having a world" (83), of connecting bodily understandings with our mental ones. As our ubiquitous metaphors for balance indicate (throwing our weight behind a proposal, weighing the evidence, etc.), our thinking process is a matter of "righting" ourselves within our physical, emotional, social, and moral worlds. Reasoning--whether we know it or not--is not some abstract method of playing with concepts: it is "riding the metaphors" through which we seek equilibrium with forces that shape our environment. Lakoff carries this theory of basic metaphorizing further, claiming that societies engender fundamental and relatively unconscious life-metaphors that shape everyday speech and mental processes, internalized metaphors such as "life is a journey" or "people are like plants" that we use to interpret and express what happens to us (1-56). We say, for instance, that "I hit a dead end" or "I wasn't getting anywhere with her," making use of the journey schema; or we say "There was a great flourishing of Impressionist art in the mid-19th century" or "He just withered away," hardly recognizing that we are referring to human life as if we were plants (6). As we take in images from our daily experience, both visually and verbally, we shape versions of
what the world is like. Those versions of the world are, by the nature of our limited experience, incomplete, bent like the proverbial stick in the water by the angle of our position within the particular eras and cultural environments we find ourselves in. (A peasant in 11th century France or 21st century Afghanistan will likely have a different view of life, needless to say, than a member of the court of Louis XIV, or an aide in Richard Nixon's White House.) We carry these versions of the world around with us in the form of mental pictures and images (see Johnson, 65-100, and WJT Mitchell, *Iconology* 9-11), testing our mental images and conceptual beliefs against new circumstances and information. Images might in this formula be designated as fairly unformed "impressions," at least at first--impressions we "take in" but may not know quite what to do with. Then the metaphoric process I've been outlining can come into play, sorting those impressions according to past experience. As in, "Well, it seems like that other dangerous time..." Or: "I wonder if I could respond this way, as I did before..." This is the sorting-agent role that metaphor plays. Images become functioning metaphors, and gradually, through the force of repeated experience, metaphors become working schemata, signs, and symbols.

If all this is close to Dewey's idea of art as experience, of a "live creature" (18) coming to terms to where it is, what it needs, and what the situation at hands
means, so be it. What Johnson and Lakoff supply us with is an expansive philosophical stage from which to investigate the workings of the imagination as students engage with their own perception, applying it through poetry and indeed all the arts--and out into the world at large. The educational implications of their work is enormous. For if these conceptual metaphors are the fundamental building blocks of thought, thoroughly and inseparably bound up in visible, kinesthetic, physical experience--if, as Johnson claims, "Our ordered world, and the possibility of understanding any part of it, depends on the existence of [this synthesizing]" (151)--how can we avoid structuring educational experiences for students to tap into those three realms? How can we, for instance, avoid giving students an immersion in dance and theater, to exercise (beyond the usual phys ed class) the body's connection to learning? How can we avoid giving more emphasis to understanding and participating in visual culture of all kinds, from museums to movies, given the ways such culture taps--and has always tapped--into the kinesthetic understandings of its time? More to the point of my own project--how can we not integrate poetry more fully into their studies, particularly as regards the exploration of physical metaphors to open up thought?

Before linking Johnson and Lakoff's work to other key theorists, let me explore, from my own experience, two small
examples of kinesthetic metaphorizing" as a means of enhancing learning. The first comes from the winter of 2001, when I was teaching poetry in the art room of a lower middle class middle school on the south side of Columbus, spending a week with an ad hoc mix of 25 6th, 7th, and 8th graders who had been selected out for a special poetry and art project. The first three days were some of the most chaotic I'd ever spent with kids, with people stumbling over each other's words every minute. Hardly could we get an idea out before someone would be nudging the person next to him, involved in a distraction that soon led to a minor uproar on one side of the room or the other. Yet, as I learned from the teachers afterwards, it wasn't so much that the students weren't interested, it was that this was their style of communication. They were, the teachers thought, often talking about the idea we'd brought up, but their discussion was splintering into many tiny discussions that failed to contribute to our communication as a whole. So on the third day, I tried an experiment. I brought the front wheel off of my bicycle into class and placed it in the center of the table before us, and asked them what it was--that is, what it MIGHT be, if it weren't strictly a bicycle wheel. What it might be a metaphor for or a symbol of.

Suddenly, versus the words-on-paper and abstract concepts we'd been investigating in previous days, we had a physical presence to digest together. They came up with many
things: a pinwheel, a ferris wheel, an eye with many parts, a gods-eye, a roulette wheel, a creature with many hands. Each metaphor came from some bit of experience in their memories, for as Johnson points out, thinking comes from the manipulation of previous physical embodiments applied to new information. But I had in mind another image, one which I hoped would unite this diverse group into the facsimile of a whole for the next few days. I said to them, "What if this wheel represented US--this temporary class meeting in this room for one week?" Then they could see it: each of us would be a spoke, one said. And we would spin when all the spokes spun. For the first time that week, I saw sustained sparks begin to ignite in their eyes. Carrying the thought further, I said, "I am not the center, nor are your teachers here the center; the real center is whatever we create together. And that circle won't spin unless the spokes work together. Even one 'off kilter' spoke sends the wheel into gyrations." Of course, I didn't tell them Frost's idea that "all metaphor breaks down somewhere" (41), that you just have to know how far you can ride it (39). But I'm glad they did ride it far enough to make a little bit more unity out of our class for the remainder of the week. Poetry itself began to make more sense--and at the same time we began to open up lines-of-hearing between each other. A few minutes later, when I asked them to come up with a metaphor for what "memory" is like, Kristan wrote down: "Memories are like a
forest of the world, trees for each person, some more, some less, for the seasons of the world". And a day later, Juan, who had been struggling to concentrate all week, often volunteering insightful comments in discussion but rarely able to get a whole thought onto paper, wrote this poem while looking at Rene Magritte’s painting, “The Domain of Arnheim,” with its stone bird hovering far above a nest:

Trapped in a Shell

I'm in a shell moving around
I hear big bangs
Like avalanches falling from the mountain top
The shell starts to crack
I see light
It was like the moon in a big blue jar
I didn't know what to do
I was scared
It seemed that I have been reincarnated
Reincarnated as a bird
A bird with no fear

It's not so much that I consider this poem "great." That's not my point here. But for Juan, whom I was told later had a written vocabulary of a 3rd grader (although orally he was quite brilliant), it was an immense step forward into using metaphor to make sense both of visual experience and of his own sense of self, of building his own connection between Magritte's visual play and the ability to imagine being a creature without fear." All this would not have happened, I believe, without a beginning grasp of what metaphor does--or how an image of a wheel can open up the concept of a class
able to picture itself as accomplishing something worthwhile.

How big a leap is it from this disunified adhoc class of middle schoolers to the following college juniors interpreting Alison Saar's sculpture of the Underground Railroad, "Nocturne Navigator" at the Columbus Museum of Art? Not so far. Even for these more advanced students, with
far more years of schooling, there seemed to be metaphoric training to be done. For example, in preparation for the museum visit, wishing to tap into a beginning sense in them of "kinesthetic metaphorizing," the class period before I had led them through a small exercise in linking metaphors to the body by asking them to write a short poem visualizing a sports or everyday action in slow motion, using metaphors and similes to describe each tiny move of the body. Again, the particular quality of the "poetry" didn't so much matter here—-the point is that for most of them it was the first time they'd consciously made use of metaphor in a kinesthetic sense to capture an experience on paper. And, just as the middle schoolers did with the bicycle wheel, we began to speculate as a class on the power of metaphor to link to ideas, playing with Johnson's ideas of specific, physical noticings leading to metaphoric use of language to contain abstract ideas. When we visited the museum then, it was nearly second-nature to them to make use of such thought devices.

Asked to free-write about the sculpture for five minutes, with no other information than that Saar is a contemporary African American artist, the students made these scattered notations. I did not ask them to use metaphor to describe their responses, but to simply write about "what they saw and what it might mean," using
fragments and sentences, not lifting their pens from the paper. Yet notice how often the phrases they used move from simple, physical noticings into metaphoric meanings:

Freewrites to Alison Saar's "Nocturne Navigator"
(italics = my emphasis to show metaphor)

Dark color represents night. Stars & sporadic patterns.
_Dress represents space / a woman in control or moving through space. Head looking forward & up w/shoulders back. Drawn to waistline where woman appears to be merging w/ or forming herself w/ space. Hands out, but arms almost down by side. Almost as if she is harnessing the power of space to propel herself through like a comet. The size of the sculpture gives a sense of awe. As if a peaceful but powerful force is captured by this woman. The roughness of her skin is balanced by the smoothness of her skirt. The woman is made of the heavens, the largest entity we know, but she appears to be looking to something larger and more powerful._

- Daniel

***

There is a strong contrast between the top and the bottom. The top has a rough & crude texture about it and the bottom is very refined. This might _suggest something about the dual nature of the character. The top half of the sculpture is a woman's torso; the bottom half is some type of evening gown. Along with the roughness and refinement this could be interpreted as a _contrast between civilized world and savagery_. The sculpture seems to be praying - maybe for deliverance from one or the other._

- Mntambo
Figure 2.1 Alison Saar, "Nocturne Navigator"

Praising the sky
Nocturne in the dark - blind
*Woman lost in the dark of the world*
"Navigator" getting her way through with the help of the sky
*Her dress is very broad like the sky, sparkly like stars*
Questioning expression almost in pain - *palms turned up as if giving up*. Dress smooth - body battered - *Drowning - caught in a vast ocean - stars reflecting*
off
the water. Trying to find her way home.  

-Chris

***

From the waist up the torso is rigid, bumpy, almost melting.
Huge dress of lady in contrast to smooth, perfect, symmetrical
Dress seems to be made in different material

Looking up in pain maybe in cry for help or desperation
Hands outspread as if holding a burden, a lie, or a secret
Size is powerful, an intimidating presence
The shadow on the wall behind it appears spiritual
as if in was going to climb out of the wall and approach us
Looking at the sun as it melts her

-Kyle

***

Woman in a ballroom dress
Looking up to heaven perhaps in thanks or just taking in the rare experience
because she has never been in such a dress before or never felt beautiful.
Beams of light are coming out of the dress
like the light within her is shining out to the world.

-Jay

Do I need to point out how often (in EVERY case!) metaphor shapes the readings these students give to the sculpture?
Maybe the size of the piece encourages this. We can hardly help holding up our arms the way she does, or tipping our heads to the sky. And by nature we try to figure out why these gestures matter--what is shaping the force of her actions. But I'm stunned nevertheless by the variety and substance of their writing. Each freewrite makes me look at Saar's work anew. Jay gives us almost a religious
interpretation when he says that "the light within her is shining out to the world." Does he need to refer to the Harriet Tubman story that originally inspired Saar's work? Maybe it would have helped for him to have been told that background information. But instead, he's approached the work with his own sense of wonder and awe. And he's caught something of the "guiding light" that Tubman was to those she led to freedom. Other aspects of this "engineer" on the Underground Railroad come through in equally metaphorical, physical ways. She's "drowning," says Chris, "caught in a vast ocean." And wasn't this true of Tubman as well? A vast ocean of racial bondage from which she broke others free. By being free-ranging in their "readings," these students each come at some important aspects of the work, seemingly intuitively, from its power to its innocence. Daniel says, "she's made of the heavens," catching, perhaps without knowing it, the metaphor of the guiding North Star which Saar has hidden in her piece. And one can feel the fierce struggles Tubman went through, in Kyle's line about her outstretched hands "holding a burden, a lie, or a secret" and in his phrase that the sun seems to melt her. The "Navigator" is caught, like Tubman, "between the civilized world and savagery," says Mntambo. Given more time, and more information, the students might have constructed even more elaborate interpretations of the sculpture, dealing more
directly with its historical roots. But I doubt if they would ever capture more powerfully the multidimensional and emotional aspects of the work as they have with these kinesthetic metaphors. Before their writing as before Saar's sculpture, I stand amazed. But it all grew, as Johnson and Lakoff might have predicted, from their working knowledge of making metaphors to convey and interpret experience, in this case, of the visual kind.

2.3 Words, Proverbs, and Tensive Language: Frost, Ciardi, Welsh and Wheelwright

All that Johnson and Lakoff proposed was envisioned by Robert Frost far earlier in the last century. In essays such as "Education By Poetry," Frost made such statements as, "Unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you have had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at home with figurative values: you don't know the metaphor in its strengths and its weakness. You don't know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history" (39). He further made the claim that all thinking, outside of perhaps mathematical thinking, is metaphor, that it reaches deep into our psyche. "We still ask [students] to think," he said, "... but seldom tell them what thinking means; we seldom tell them that it is just putting this and that together; it is just saying
one thing in terms of another" (41). No, he doesn't lay out the groundwork the way Johnson will do some 80 years later, but he has the right hunch. As poetry's self-appointed spokesman, he made the claim, "Poetry begins in trivial metaphors, pretty metaphors, 'grace' metaphors, and goes on to the profoundest thinking that we have" (36).

In the mid-50s, building on Frost's speculations, John Ciardi called our attention to the metaphorical roots of words, making the then outlandish but now quite believable claim that all words, short of onomatopoeia, can be traced back to metaphorical constructions (51). Thus "meander" has its root within the Greek name for the river Meandros in Asia Minor. Consider the invention of "pandemonium" by Milton, as the linking of "all" with "demon," or, to take an example from our own time, "astronaut" as the merging of "star" and "sailor". The list could go on. The phrase "To make a shambles" has its origin in the term used to name the place where butchers left their discardings in Eastern Europe. The Iroquois apparently named the raccoon "arakunen," meaning hand-washer. One can look up the word "cloud" in the Oxford English Dictionary and find this derivation: "O.E. clud: rocky mass or hill." How playful these basic words then become--and how metaphoric! To bring such knowledge to students is to open up their eyes to what we daily gloss over: the play within language and the visual
nature of everyday words. But note something else as well: how PHYSICAL these metaphors are. Each word seems to stand on a deceptive mound of previous words, which in turn reach their roots back to the physical properties of earth and our experience of it.

Literary scholar Andrew Welsh in his 1978 book The Roots of Lyric may be said to be building on Frost and Ciardi (and anticipating Johnson and Lakoff) when he traces the roots of lyric poetry back to the language games played in nearly all pre-industrial societies: charms, riddles, images and proverbs, all functioning in the form of metaphors. Within such traditional riddles as:

Behind the village sit those who have donned white handkerchiefs

[Romania: for fenceposts topped with snow]

Father's scythe is hanging across mother's Sunday skirt

[Sweden: for the crescent moon]

he finds the kind of physical, metaphoric thought-kernels we've been talking about. They both come from close noticing and train close noticing. With the metaphor in hand, as part of our daily language and meaning-making tools, we can come to see the crescent moon the way the riddle foretells. The same would be even more true for the ancient poetic form of proverbs, as in:
No one tests the depths of a river with two feet
(Ashanti)

He who cannot dance will say the drum is bad
(Ashanti)

(both from African Proverbs 10-11)

Early societies passed along hard-earned wisdoms this way—as little kernels of metaphorized truths, to be lived with and applied day to day. Here thought is kernalized, made into units that can be carried. Such was the functioning of proverbs throughout time and across cultures. Our problem—as far as training students in the depths of metaphoric thought—is that most sayings of these kinds have been buried, or filtered down into meaninglessness or irrelevancy. "A penny saved is a penny earned," or "Every journey begins with the first step" and all such truisms come to seem empty through over-use—and unavailable for meaningful probing. Yet I've known a 4th grader who could apply "He who cannot dance will say the drum is bad" to her own situation of losing a friend who began making fun of the long books this student read: immediately, she saw the relevance of the proverb to metaphorize—and thus interpret—experience. Why is the writing in our schools often flat—and the thinking stale? Maybe it's because we've lost the historical links to our own linguistic heritage (whatever our nationality). Maybe it's because we haven't had "our proper poetical education in the metaphor," to quote Frost
Like proverbs, poetry grounds us (or re-grounds us) in the ways of "tensive language," as Philip Wheelwright contends. He illustrates his point with a grouping of single lines, playing out the various ways a line can "move" and hold our attention:

Let us honour if we can  
The vertical man  (Auden)

She walks in beauty, like the night (Byron)

White in the moon the long road lies  
   (Houseman)

After great pain a formal feeling comes  
   (Dickinson)

(All quoted in Wheelwright, 48)

We might call one direct metaphor, another simile, a third indirect metaphor, etc. The key training, though, especially as students get older, would be to gain an interior feel for the different moods created by the range of lines like these, experiencing, in a series of exercises, the full quiver of approaches, a working knowledge of the shift poetry can make from senses to sense-making. For this, they need practice in the operations of "tenor" and "vehicle" within the metaphoric operation (see I.A. Richards—as described in Ricouer, 147), with "tenor" being the import or meaning of the expression, and "vehicle" being the literal term or reference, usually connected in some way with our
Let's end this section by adding in one more key concept--the way irony and playful opposition inform the use of metaphor. Katherine Kearns, in her book *Robert Frost and a Poetics of Appetite*, quotes that quintessential American poet as saying that "life sways perilously at the confluence of opposing forces" and theorizes that for Frost, "poetry is ... that thing which frolics in the turbulent middle between oppositions" (46). In her view, irony in Frost's poems "becomes the means by which the poetry resists all reductive terms and all synthesis" (57). Like active metaphor, she says, "irony, in refusing to stabilize the referents, works [for] subversion at the level of language, becoming a disequilibrating force" (58).

It's just such a "disequilibrating force" that poetry and metaphor can supply, keeping language on its toes, full of sensory and imagistic exuberance, activating Wheelwright's "tensive language" inherent to all experience. In human experience, Wheelwright says, "the basic organic strife shows itself in various tensions ... the tension between self and other persons, between self and physical environment, between love and antagonism, between one's impulses and the decisions of rational thought" (46). All true art, growing out of these realities of experience, will by nature "bear traces of the tensions and problematic
character of the experience that gave it birth" (46). Where ordinary language of necessity closes down or confirms meanings, poetry and the whole of art keeps meanings open, re-engaging the oppositions Kearns and Wheelwright speak about and which Frost made so much use of.

2.4 **Sign vs Cliche, Metaphor vs Metonymy: Jakobson and Ricouer**

What I’ve described could also, with certain reservations-- which I will discuss shortly--be called the semiotic process, which could be briefly summarized as the means by which events, objects, phenomena, words, and images come to take on "signification" within a particular cultural framework. Such is the framing mechanism that societies use to structure values and interpretations, shaping cultural practices and behaviors, rewarding or condemning, emphasizing or belittling the "signs" of the world into organic wholes that define an era, a culture or a civilization. A "sign" can be anything, from a gold ring that may to some symbolize fidelity or marital bliss, or to others, the confinements and restrictions of marriage. Just as a particular brand of automobile, in the 1990s, such as a $30,000 Lexus, might symbolize to some a sense of unrestrained wealth, or to others the economic imbalance within American society of the time. "Signs" are not fixed agents, rather they are the fundamental building-blocks of
"reality" through which meaning and value is constructed. It all depends on what aspect of the "sign" is chosen by a particular individual or group to be emphasized or interpreted (such an aspect may be called the "signifier"), and thus leading to the "signified" message, the symbolic or metaphoric code that results from the overall semiotic process. All this too, as in the daily metaphorizing that Johnson and Lakoff expose, is mostly unconscious and "automatic"--but that does not mean it is static. As the semiotic interpretations of the many semioticians over the past century show, from Michel de Certeau's interpretations of the interactions of individuals in cities (139-140) to Umberto Eco's investigations of the different "signs" that colors play in various societies (159-160), there's an intricate, complex process that goes on in the way that signification takes place within societies and in all time periods. Indeed, most of what constitutes social life can be articulated as an on-going semiotic process of valuing and re-evaluating the basic ingredients of experience. And the more complex a society, the more complicated the process becomes, the more that metaphor and signification weave webs of meaning around how we see ourselves and how we behave.

All this is well and good--and endlessly fascinating. But one problem emerges, that problem being how rigidified the process can become. Metaphors that were helpful when
first formulated become habitual as they get passed down the line, become a kind of "prison-house of language" (see Mitchell, Iconology, 8), blocking us from freshly experiencing the world. Since we MUST make use of metaphorical phrasing (as Johnson claims) in order to speak or to think at all, we end up choosing the same metaphors--mostly unconsciously--again and again. "You know the drill," "Been there, done that," "It's a winter wonderland," and on and on. We pull words and phrases out of a hamper of worn-out patterns--just as middle school students left to their own devices will continually draw hearts and flowers, "m birds" and rainbows. Over time, our thinking has a tendency to become dulled, as does our speech and our perception -- and much of the magic and the poetry of language (and of being in the world) is lost. Or not seen at all.

How do we break the habits of daily signification? Roman Jakobson would say: through poetry. He defines the "poetic function" as that which "commits organized violence on language" as we commonly make use of it (quoted in Hawkes, 141). Jakobson sets up a formula which condenses all the various figures of speech down to two: the metaphoric and the metonymic. The latter could be seen as functioning on the level of prose--of the shifts we go through in naming, applying one term or aspect of a concept as a short-hand way of conveying a larger phenomenon. So, in the
example Raymond Gibbs poses in *The Poetics of Mind*, we can metonymically say "mothers tend to feel responsible for their children's bad behavior," when we more largely mean "housewife-mothers" (326), with all sorts of unmentioned implications behind our assumptions of what such mothers "should" be or feel. Metonymic language shuffles words within a single category. It allows us to quickly shift through descriptions without having to define every aspect of our assumptions. When we write to a friend, for instance, that "I feel crummy about not seeing you at Christmas," we hardly mean the implied metaphor at all. "Crummy" appears to be some catch-all term, not related to "crumby," as in "all broken up," but to some vague state of "crum." It's metonymy at work--it "stands in" for our feeling, it will do for the moment, but doesn't say very much. According to Jakobson, metonymy is the "combinative function" within speech, helping us to lay out our basic descriptions of the world (see Hawkes, 77-79). Metaphor, on the other hand, at least for Jakobson, is the "associative factor," reaching vertically to make connections beyond mere combination, crossing categories, taking aspects of one subject and placing them "upon" another (see Ricouer's description of Jakobson's principles, "Process" 150). Its reach is grander than metonymy; it allows us to break what I've referred to above as the tendency of signification to grow stale. It has
a certain wild nature, expressing the human discontent with "the way things are." (Frost says, "If it's a wild tune, it is a poem" [18].) Poetry's "violence" is productive, in the long run; in the short run, it can cause discomfort by seeming strange. If we write our friend, "I feel like I've been swimming under the ocean for a year, not seeing you," they know suddenly a good deal more about us. A connection has been made which was never there before.

Paul Ricouer would agree with Jakobson--but only up to a point. Building on the latter's ideas, Ricouer shows us how poetry, by breaking down our assumptions, can help re-connect us with our first primary relations with things and our sensory experience (150). But eventually he parts ways with Jakobson because he believes the Czech school, of which Jakobson was a part, emphasizes too much the semiotic nature of metaphor and implies that when we make metaphoric connections we are mostly shifting between established meanings within the associated terms (Rule 176).

"Imagination," he says, "does not merely schematize the predictive assimilation between terms ... nor does it merely picture the sense thanks to the display of images aroused and controlled by the cognitive process. Rather, it contributes ... to the projection of new possibilities of describing the world" (152). To my thinking Jakobson is saying just what Ricouer does about the freeing nature of
the poetic process. It may be that our different ways of reading Jakobson may be mostly the result of a different sense of what semiotics is all about. Ricouer says making the metaphoric "move" in language synonymous with the semiotic one is limiting, since the signs that semiotics makes use of are too pre-conceived and fixed (Rule 180). My reading of semiotics says that signs are not so pre-formed in their packaging, but able to be untangled and re-constructed almost at will. Still, I think Ricouer offers us a friendly warning: not to think of metaphor as the mere shuffling of symbols, mapping one set of signs and references from one arena to another, but as much more inventive and fluid--a "predicative" rather than a "substitutive" event ("Process" 143).

2.5 Antiphonal Epilogue: The Power of Opposition

Always, at least for me, the power of metaphor lies not in theory but in how it becomes useful in individual poems and for individual students. Indeed the ultimate power of Jakobson's "associative move" is to break into metaphor in order to individualize thinking, to reveal the vast potential of linking one concept with another. All students need are the tools--as the following assignments suggest.

Shown two poems of opposition and personification, one by Federico Garcia Lorca and the other by Carl Sandburg, Nicole, then in fourth grade, produced the following short
Admittedly, she builds on their examples. Where Lorca spoke of day and night ("Night is ever quiet / Day goes and comes. / Night is dead and lofty / Day is on the wing") and Sandburg personifies night as a speaking being ("Night gathers itself into a ball of dark yarn .... / Night speaks and the yarns change to fog and blue strands"), Nicole tries out her own way of entering an opposition between "tree" and "God":

I am a tree floating in the air
floating up every second
but wait I stopped I'm on
a cloud and looking at
the world

I am god in stupid tree's place
and it sure is not a
palace.
I am stuck in the ground
with nothing to do
besides growing and growing.

In terms of the issues we've been discussing, what has she done? In true child-language, she has become the subjects she's chosen. Where the adult models remain at something of a distance, she narrows the gap between herself and such abstract realities as "God" and "Tree." In some mysterious way I will never fully understand, she renews them, the "ordinary" and often un-seen (because so familiar) tree taking on an element of free-floating holiness, re-orienting our typical view of "heaven" being in the clouds. As a reader, I feel truly "up in the air," suspended. Not an easy
task to achieve in five short lines. Maybe it's the tension of opposites that Wheelwright talks about which supplies the energy here. "Tree" is talking heavenly language, and "god" is foul-mouthed ("stupid tree's place") and whiny (which "sure is not a palace"), shifted from "his" place of ubiquity to the mundane--but now seemingly glorious--task of "growing and growing." The categories we usually associate with tree and God have been monkeyed with, tossed up, disassembled, and actively recombined. This is metaphoric play at its most child-like simplicity--a simplicity which when truly "tensive," to borrow that term again from Wheelwright, "is never quite [so] simple" as it seems (48).

So does 6th grader, Chad, when he writes his poem below called "Window to the Future." His poem, in a way, just as much as any poem about a painting, is an ekphrastic evocation of an observed scene--in this case, the school's back parking lot. We had read James Wright's poem below in order to get at the interplay of close observation of detail mixed with tiny, accurate metaphors drawn from the same.

Wright's poem begins so quietly, so painterly--and proceeds gradually to a last line that sucks the air from beneath us:

*Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota*

*Over my head I see the bronze butterfly,*  
*Asleep on the black trunk,*  
*Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.*  
*Down the ravine, behind the empty house,*  
*Cowbells follow one another*
Into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.

Without belaboring the oddness of the last line (we did, of course, play out the various interpretations), we concentrated on the precision with which Wright takes in the small world around him, so that with all our senses we too almost sway there in the hammock--the wind lightly blowing the butterfly, so bronze against the black, the unseen "distances of the afternoon" somehow capturing the fields these rural students would have been so familiar with. Looking back now, I wish we would have made more of the indirectness of that metaphor, which doesn't exactly personify the afternoon as give it another dimension, as if Time itself had the features of the earth. These being sixth graders, I suppose we needed to key in on the more obvious comparisons--the horse droppings blazing and the chicken hawk (more likely surveying for field mice) taking on aspects of Wright's character himself, looking for a home.

I then asked the students to make two columns on their pages, filling one with details from the scene before us and the other with whatever metaphors and similes they could come up with. The art room's windows in this case were some of those huge ones, encompassing the whole wall (which in so
many schools have been covered over and replaced with frames of mediocre color and small rectangular frames). Most of the students had a fun time with the assignment. The electric lights were seen as "hats," the telephone wires as "fuzzy worms," and so on. But it was Chad who took it further. I remember him coming up to me and tapping my arm, asking me if it would be alright to call the circle in the trees, on the hill across the way, a "window to the future." I told him I liked his idea--and about 10 minutes later, he came back to me with this:

(window to the future)

the wind blows
the trees sway
the field is like an airport
and the last touches of snow
lay on the ground
I can barely see the old house on the hill
through the mist
the treetops touch the sky

and puddles everywhere I walk
there's a hole in the trees that looks like a window in the distance
the view is silent
the ground is wet
(should I go through the window)

I have no idea where Chad is now. I don't know if he went through that window. I do know that his teacher told me that, bright as he was, he was having a terrible year, getting ready to flunk 6th grade. Who knows what was going on at home. Or maybe it was his very brightness that was
getting him into trouble. There was a bit of a sassy edge to him. He knew his line was good--and didn't really need to ask my approval. But even so, he made the poem work. He SAW that scene before us as no other kid in the room did on that day. And I draw out these particulars about what I remember of Chad to suggest one key thing about metaphor: it's not just a language device--in the most telling cases. It's a device of making connections between what we feel inside, what we are going through, even unconsciously, and the expanse of world around us. So often I've felt: the right--the un cliched, natural image is there, if we open our eyes. No one else even would have seen that circle in the trees, or made it into a window, had they looked where Chad looked. It was his memory, his sense of himself in that troubled year, that brought him to see it as he did.

Cynthia Ozick, in her essay "Metaphor and Memory," goes against the grain of, but also adds an important last link to the theory I've been detailing. She says that metaphor is not so much the "wildness" of new connections that works as "an intruder, a kidnapper of reason," that "chases off the sentries" of our careful minds, and "shoots the watchdogs dead" (269). This she calls "inspiration," and though she admits that it is "allied to the stuff of metaphor," she claims it does not do what metaphor does at its heart, which she says is much more involved with awakening memory.
Evoking a central metaphor from Judaism, from a passage in Leviticus that admonishes the Jewish community to remember that they too have been strangers and should welcome the stranger into their midst, she says metaphor helps us form such central connections with the "other" inside us, with the past that shapes us, and with the physical realities out of which our past was born and our future will emerge. "Metaphor," she says, "is compelled to press hard on language and storytelling; it inhabits language at its most concrete. As the shocking extension of the unknown into our most intimate, most feeling, most private selves, metaphor is the enemy of abstraction" (282). It works against stereotype and bland thinking by reminding us of the fullness and surprise of our lives, of our connection with all that is around us, with all that is not seen. This is a fiction writer's definition, and the student of history's. It links metaphor to our deepest moral needs. "Through metaphor," she says,

the past has the capacity to imagine us, and we it. Through metaphorical concentration, doctors can imagine what it is to be their patients. Those who have no pain can imagine those who suffer. Those at the center can imagine what it is to be outside. The strong can imagine the weak. [...] Poets in their twilight can imagine the borders of stellar fire. We strangers can imagine the familiar hearts of strangers. (283)

Jan Mukarovsky, Jakobson's compatriot in the Czech school of semiotics, says that art is inevitably bound up with its historical moment, helping us shape or intuit
"where we are now." So, as an example, he finds elements of "the line," so familiar to students of Art Nouveau artworks of the 1890s, in the poetry of that era as well (5). So we might visualize Albert Bierstadt's canvases of the late 1800s, with their glorious depiction of light flooding the majestic plains and mountains of the American West as a reflection of our own national obsessions in that era, a truly tensive visual meditation on a landscape (and indeed a way of life for the native peoples) soon to be devoured. If Mukarovsky is right, the metaphors we find at any moment or era, be they personal or cultural, artistic or political, will invoke the deepest needs and concerns of that time. And so will our metaphors for what metaphor itself "is for." We live in an era deeply in need of curing the splits between ourselves and others, between ourselves and the earth, and between the economically blessed and the desperately poor. So maybe Ozick's version of "what metaphor is for" does not so much refute the theories of the previous writers I've mentioned, but rather brings all them together into a working whole. Maybe her version of the function of metaphor in our cultural, aesthetic and political life is our own "window to the future."
CHAPTER 3

THE ROLE OF THE PHYSICAL (THE BODY AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD) IN THE WORKINGS OF METAPHOR, POETRY, AND VISUAL

ABSTRACT: If metaphoric thought is central to the way the mind works, and if such thought is heavily grounded in the body and the physical world, as Johnson and Lakoff have claimed, then it would seem inevitable that much attention should be paid to how the body operates in such a dynamic. This chapter looks at key theorists who have made such a project their goal. I especially make use of Martin Jay's excellent summary of 20th century French thought in regards to overocularization, along with Rosalind Krauss's survey of 20th century artists in The Ocular Unconscious. Additionally, I look at Martin Heidegger's theory concerning "The Origin of the Work of Art," where art stands as something that mediates between the human world and the vast world of the "earth," the unsayable realm of all that gives us being. Finally, I look at how these theorists, each of whom argues in his or her own way for a physicalized sense of perception and understanding, might be applied to looking at visual art and poetry.

3.1 Metaphor and the Physical World

Poetry is not only a means of creating metaphors. Rather, because metaphors are so fundamental to the construction of thought, born as they are from the physical realities of the world, poetry, as the art of the metaphor, is--or could be--a way for students to regain a sense of wonder about the world. When we shape a fresh metaphor--in a poem, a novel, an essay, in a painting or even a conversation--we establish a relationship to a world.
Consider this paragraph from the middle of Harriet Arnow's *The Dollmaker*. In it Gertie Nevels, a woman from the hills of Kentucky transported to the tenements surrounding the factories of Detroit, ponders her doll-carving in the late evening light:

The heart white light overhead hurt her eyes and made a shadow on her work. The night sounds of Detroit came between her and the thing in the wood, but worse than any noise, even the quivering of the house after a train had passed, were the spaces of silence when all sound were shut away by the double windows and the cardboard walls, and she heard the ticking of the clock, louder it seemed than any clock could ever be. She had never lived with a clock since leaving her mother's house, and even there the cuckoo clock had seemed more ornament than a god measuring time; for in her mother's house, as in her own, time had been shaped by the needs of the land and the animals swinging through the seasons. She would sit, the knife forgotten in her hands, and listen to the seconds ticking by, and the clock would become the voice of the thing that had jerked Henley from the land, put Clovis in Detroit, and now pushed her through days where all her work, her meals, and her sleep were bossed by the ticking voice. (210)

It is a world of THINGS that is evoked here, things with resonant meaning. Things which are both physical objects and which place themselves in the fictional environment so that the fullness of their sensory momentum shapes Gertie's world for us. Even non-entities take on a physical presence here, such as the "spaces of silence" in the evening that "shut away" all other sound. Our realities--personal or public--are composed of such spaces, which in turn determine relationships. Arnow's world is the fictional
fulfillment of Mark Johnson's concepts of physically-based thought, a thought fully cognizant of the presence of the thinker/the perceiver's body.

William Stafford gives us a poem that in a similar, quiet way links what poetry does to a desire to reach back into the elemental aspects of the world. In it he touches on many of the concerns I would like to bring to this study, uniting, in a verbal space, much of what Mark Johnson says about the embodiment of thought, of what Rosalind Krauss makes use of when she says there is a body which does the seeing (98) and what Martin Heidegger claims as the "origin of the work of art," of what all art does for our connection to the depth of mystery that surrounds us.

EVENING NEWS

That one great window puts forth its own scene, the whole world alive in glass. In it a war happens, only an eighth of an inch thick. Some of our friends have leaped through, disappeared, become unknown voices and rumors of crowds.

In our thick house, early evening I turn from that world, and room by room I walk, to enjoy space. At the sink I start a faucet; water from far is immediate in my hand. I open our door, to check where we live. In the yard I pray birds, wind, unscheduled grass, that they please help to make everything go deep again. (58)
This is precisely what I think poems are about: projecting us back, via words, into an elementary (and elemental) re-engagement with being, whether that "being" consists of a memory from deep back in childhood, a scene out on a city street, a pair of shoes, or a hammer, or the physical realities of mountains, rivers, stars, volcanoes. My experience in schools tells me that kids hunger for these sorts of connections, but that too often these are missing from the curriculum of study. That too often basic wonder is missing, as facts are accumulated, assignments lined up and checked off, principles conveyed.

3.2 The Case for a Physicalized Perception: Berman, Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, Rilke, and Krauss

Morris Berman in his 1981 book The Reenchantment of the World places much of the cause for modern disenchantment on our Western attitude toward perception. I would like here to briefly visit his case, as he sets the stage for similar and more complex arguments concerning ocularity made by Martin Jay and Rosalind Krauss, and the even wider and transformative theories of Martin Heidegger concerning art's role in human experience.

"The view of nature which dominated in the West down to the Scientific Revolution," says Berman, "was of an enchanted world... The cosmos ... was a place of belonging. A member of this cosmos was not an alienated observer of it
but a direct participant in its drama" (16). Gradually, as
"reason [became] the essence of personality," our perception
grew to be "characterized by distancing oneself from
phenomena, [while] maintaining one's identity" (72). We
became very good at observing the world--and less and less
involved in participating in it. This allowed for an ever-
increasing catalog of description and classification, of
naming and analysis--and an ever-decreasing sense of
connection to what we catalogued, what we dissected. Such a
division may well have brought about much of the
 technological advancements of the West, but, says Berman, it
also "discounted a whole landscape of inner reality because
it did not fit in with the program of industrial or
mercantile exploitation" (132). Whereas, prior to the
Scientific Revolution, "the world was seen as a vast
assemblage of correspondences ... [where] all things have
relationships with all other things ... [that] mingle and
touch in an endless chain" (74), the new mind split and
dismembered that chain--and placed people at a remove from
all they observed.

I should note here that although Berman implies a "lost
time" that we can be "re-"engaged with, I am not so much
projecting that ideal time in the past as imagining that we
might move forward into a stronger engagement with the earth
and our own experience. Whenever I use the prefix "re-" I
don't mean a return to some previous golden age but rather a process by which we can go back into an event or place we have experienced at one level (such as a town we grew up in, a memory, or even a read-about phenomenon, such as a volcano, which we may never have actually seen) and re-experience it again through the method of art. This seems a bit different than Berman's use of the prefix, but may have a similar aim—to overcome the distance from experience that he claims Western science has placed between us and the world.

Western thought has deep roots within a kind of distancing ocularity, as Martin Jay points out in his massive survey, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought*. Even the word "theory," so crucial to the structuring of Western conceptual thinking, is closely related to "theater," as a call to "look attentively/to behold" (Jay, 23). Vision, he tells us, is linked to abstracting, to "seeing the whole picture" (26) and he makes use of James Gibson's distinction between the visual world, which includes sight as a working part of the whole of the senses, and visual field, which allows us to arrange and project objects in space, separate from their other sensual properties. With the emphasis on perspective that developed in the West, "'the single eye [became] the center of the visible world,'" he posits, quoting John
Berger, and the "visual field replace[d] the visual world" (54-55). So a view of space emerged that appeared infinite, extended, and controllable, versus local, inhabited, and context-bound. What was removed from vision was the physical presence of the world observed and what was "achieved" was the ability to control and manipulate all that we saw. "The dawn of the modern era was accompanied by the vigorous privileging of vision" (69) as a means of "taking in" the world.

Jay's book contains its own sort of catalog: a survey of the objections to the distancing nature of over-ocularity. These began to percolate up in French thought, dating back--oddly enough--to the introduction of the camera. He quotes Jean-Louis Comolli: "The photograph stands as at once the triumph and the grave of the eye" (149). And he even places the Impressionists, and certain post-impressionists as Cezanne, as painters who wanted to give back, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, a more participatory vision, a "'lived perspective ... not a geometric or photographic one'" (158). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty provides Jay with marvelous material for filling out his impressive array of interlocking theories. For Merleau-Ponty, "an actual 'thing' in the world transcends all of its aspects" (303) and "whereas [science may look] on things from above, [painting] immerses the viewer in the world on view" (314).
All this, at least for me, is a stunning reaction to an over-emphasis on objective sight which Berman traces as the source of our disillusion, our loss of close connection with all that is around us. The camera and the emphasis on distance puts us at a remove, whereas, for Merleau-Ponty (and many of the others Jay summarizes), "'[We] do not see according to an exterior envelope; [we] live from the inside'" (316). Indeed:

The flesh of history is as unsurveyable (emphasis mine) as the flesh of the natural world; we are always in the middle of a multilayered process best understood in terms of the figure of speech known as chiasmus. The visible and invisible [is] like a fold in Being, a crossing over, a hinge, not a flat landscape to be observed from afar. (319)

Early on, Henri Bergson claimed similar territory. He was, according to Hannah Arendt, "the first modern philosopher ... to dispute the nobility of sight" (Jay 186). Similarly to Nietzsche, he recognized the unreliability of sight--for we see as much from our memory and our own experience as we do with some "objective" optical frame. Our eyes are part of the body, connected to all the senses and the emotions. "It was not until Bergson that the rights of the body were explicitly set against the tyranny of the eye," says Jay (191). With it as "the ground of all our perceptions" (192), we move within a world, not as some objective observer.
The demands such an analysis places on art of all kinds--from poetry to photography, from dance to music--are immense. But the burden falls especially on the first two, tied as they are to the visual image as a means of conveying experience. Just as one could photograph all the streets of a city "from all possible points of view ... [and] never equal in value the dimensional object along whose streets one walks" (Bergson quoted in Jay, 202), so a poem that merely chronicles what one sees would mostly miss the internal workings of the experience.

Rainer Maria Rilke certainly felt the burden of transcending sight's limitations. His famous poem on "The Panther," for instance, laments the bars of vision:

From seeing and seeing his seeing has become so exhausted
That it no longer sees anything anymore. The world is made of bars, a hundred thousand bars, and behind the bars, nothing.

(transl., R.Bly, 246)

And in opposition to that empty vision, Rilke places things. In his 1907 lecture on Rodin, for instance, influenced as he was by the sculptor's evocative, wordless presences, he says:

Things. As I pronounce this word (do you hear?) a stillness forms; the stillness around Things. All movement comes to rest, turns into contour, and out of past and future time something lasting is composed: space, the great tranquility of THINGS which nothing drives onwards.

(quoted in Jehncott, 106)
Such a statement could almost have been written by Bergson (or, as we shall see, by Heidegger). And a few years later, Rilke says of Cézanne: "It's as if every other place were aware of all the other places" (Jehncott 80). So it is with Rilke when he writes of a black cat: every place in the poem, every point of reflection becomes something that transforms vision and also undermines it, returning us to the complex experience of looking...

Black Cat

A ghost, though invisible, still is like a place your sight can knock on, echoing; but here within this thick black pelt, your strongest gaze will be absorbed and utterly disappear:

just as a raving madman, when nothing else can ease him, charges into his dark night howling, pounds on the padded wall, and feels the rage being taken in and pacified.

She seems to hide all looks that have ever fallen into her, so that, like an audience, she can look them over, menacing and sullen, and curl to sleep with them. But all at once as if awakened, she turns her face to yours, and with a shock, you see yourself, tiny, inside the golden amber of her eyeballs, suspended, like a prehistoric fly. (tr., S. Mitchell, 65)

Note how in his lines it is vision itself which disappears, tumbling into the blankness of the cat's eternal eye. No poem I know captures more fully the essence of what Bergson and Merleau-Ponty (and other philosophers Jay presents) are saying. "True sight" would be something that not only takes
in all the senses, it would take in the whole of our multi-layered consciousness as well, just as for Rilke's fictional stand-in, Malte Laurids Brigge, sitting in a garden,

> There is nothing that predominates in the garden; everything is everywhere, and you would have to be in everything if you were to miss nothing.

(quoted in Jehncott 150)

What I hear Rilke--and behind him Bergson--calling for is an embodied perception, a sight which takes in the world "prior to the dissociation of the senses" (Jay 194). An experience of space which does not ignore intuition, memory, hearing, distance--which does not pretend we could ever get a picture of "it all"--but which remains fascinated by the illusion of the eye as a part of a much larger experience.

Contemporary critic Rosalind Krauss picks up on this strand in her book *The Optical Unconscious*, tracing the urge to create a "contemplative abstraction of the world" (5) back to John Ruskin and "the modernist vocation of [the] stare" (2) and forward to folks like Michael Fried and Clement Greenburg and a "vision ... pared away into a dazzle of pure instantaneity, into an abstract condition with no before and no after" (7). To this she links in modernists like Conrad's and Mondrian's fascination with contemplating the sea as the epitome of distance-viewing. Along with Frederic Jameson, she questions Conrad's project as a kind of bodiless seeing which "'virtually remakes ... objects,
refracting them through the totalization of a single sense" (11). Her critique here parallels quite closely Jay's, laying out the case against "modernism as ... the history of an ever more abstract and abstracting opticality" (13) which "masks what lies beneath it ... or represses it" (27), allowing "nothing [to enter] from the outside" (24).

Against modernism which "dreams of rationalizing form" (191), she sets artists like Giacometti, whose "Suspended Ball" (1930) suggests that underneath such rationality lies "a condition of carnality that refuses formalization ... [a] irreducible polymorphousness, radically nonsimple" (191). For her, as for Merleau-Ponty and Bergson, "human vision ... [is] less than a master of all it surveys, [but rather exists] in conflict with what is internal to the organism that houses it" (179).

The overall import of her study is somewhat beyond my own, but there are important points of overlap, most notably in her emphasis on the surrealist's attempt to undercut the distorting rationality of our ordinary vision. I will have more to say about this in Chapter Four. For now, Krauss's analysis seems to come right out of Bergson when she comments on Clement Greenburg's inclination to want us to "grasp objects as wholes" (98), as works of art at some moment of pure seeing. To this program she posits an alternate view, one I am in agreement with, one that
objects--much as Bergson would--to such purity as running against the way we really perceive. What if we didn't "suspend time" this way, but recognized the way it complicates all vision? She says:

> When time has not been thus suspended, then the trajectory of the gaze that runs between viewer and painting begins to track the dimension of real time and real space. **The viewer discovers that he or she has a body that supports this gaze.**

(98--emphasis mine)

Rotate the vision, she seems to be saying. What if we tip it, the way Salvador Dali's photographic collage, "Phenomenon of Ecstacy" (1933) seems to have us do... with the head and eyes angled off center to break out of our ordinary and assumed "grid" of vision, with everything "in its place," albeit forcefully so? We might discover a way of seeing much closer to Rilke's, or Duchamp's, a vision "[lodged] ... at the fold between the body and the world..." (111).

It might be interesting to conclude this section by noting how Morris Berman also found usefulness in the surrealist's program to undercut our assumptions about vision. The surrealist movement expressly set out, he claims, to re-engage the world of correspondences left behind by Western rationality and the Scientific Revolution. Its purpose "was to free men and women by liberating the images of the unconscious ... deliberately making such
images conscious" (96). "Modern science and technology," he says, "are not based only on a hostile attitude toward the environment, but on the repression of the body and the unconscious; and unless these can be recovered, unless participating consciousness can be restored ... then what it means to be a human being will be ... lost" (132).

Tracing out the implications of his claim, resonating as they do all the way back to Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, and Krauss, will be one of the challenges of my study.

3.3 Heidegger's Agenda: Re-engaging the Earth

Agreeing with Berman, Krauss and many in Jay's French catalog--and indeed forming the deep layers under their thought--stands Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher and author of Being and Time, whom Richard Rorty has called one of the three great thinkers in the 20th century. We are doing to wonder and being, says Heidegger, what we always tend to do: skip over the essential parts of life on our way to productivity and use. Nathan Scott, in summarizing Heidegger, puts it this way: When the things of this world "are simply considered to be material for one or another kind of observation and experiment and use--then they become inert and fall silent" (154). The result of that silence is that Being itself is lost, a close immersion in the spirit of what it means to be alive. For Heidegger, he says, "the
great task of the imagination is the recovery of a range of sympathy and conscience which will permit us to deal with the world in terms other than those simply of aggressive action" (153).

In his "The Origins of the Work of Art," Heidegger gives us an approach to learning that places art (and poetry) at the heart of our re-engagement with the world. Difficult as his theory is, and troubling as some of his personal and political choices were, there's much in his thinking that we need to listen to. In our era, it's almost as if we can forget that "earth" exists at all. And by "earth," I take Heidegger to mean all the forces that birth and sustain us—from the sky and water around us, to the blood and nutrients inside us; from the gasoline that powers our engines, to the oil beneath the sands of Saudi Arabia. Although it seems that Heidegger meant a more narrow definition, fitting in with his own environment of Bavarian Germany (he talks about Van Gogh's shoes, for instance, "returning us" to the world of the peasant woman who may have worn them), it's quite possible to interpret his "earth" as the sum of all the physical aspects of our experience, even the nature of language itself, which we find ourselves also "born into," imitating without even knowing, at least in the beginning, quite why. Human societies shape themselves around these "concealed presences," forming their own levels of meaning
and rituals of how things are done, built around whatever
codes of representation are in vogue at the time. But
"earth" is beyond all representation--it is the very source
of our Being, it lies concealed in the mists of unknowing.
We find ourselves balancing our human worlds of meaning
within the realm of the "earth" that has brought us here.
Our problem, according to Heidegger, is that the better we
get at shaping our own little human worlds, our economies of
use, our frameworks of representation (abetted by ever-more-
efficient technologies), the easier it is to forget the
complex relationship we have to our original Being.

What art does, Heidegger says, is return us, by
whatever means the artist can muster, to some sense of our
original relationship to Being and all that "earth" entails.
So Van Gogh's painting of the peasant's (or his own--as
Meyer Schapiro contends) shoes takes us back to what it's
like to walk across a field (or a city street, for that
matter). The painting does not use the shoes, so much as
meditate on them, draw out something of their unsayable
essence. Says Gadamer, one of Heidegger's students:

A work of art does not 'mean' something or
function as a sign that refers to a [particular]
meaning; rather, it presents itself in its own
Being, so that the beholder must tarry by it. It
is so much present itself that the ingredients out
of which it is composed--stone, color, tone, word-
only come into real existence of their own within
the work of art itself. (Heidegger's Ways, 104)
Thus a work of art, it would seem, participated in or made, be it a dance or a painting or a poem, would be a way to return to the very physical presence of the world which Johnson says we build our thought out of.

We need not be stuck with one interpretation of that physical presence. Heidegger makes Van Gogh's shoes into a marvelously compelling vision:

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes, the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spread furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. Under the sole slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls.

Figure 3.1 Vincent Van Gogh, "A Pair of Shoes"

In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintery
field ... This equipment belongs to the earth, and is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself. But perhaps it is only in the picture that we notice all this about the shoes. The peasant woman, on the other hand, simply wear wears them. If only this simple wearing were so simple...

Lovely writing. One can see why Heidegger was so attracted to the world of poetry. But at this stage we need not accept his view verbatim. Going beyond Heidegger, Jacques Derrida bids us keep the reference open:

Why should the shoes belong to peasants? ... Why, indeed, should they not be claimed by 'armed phantoms,' or an immense wave of deportees trying to find again their name? Why ... should [they] 'return to' or 'be attached to' anyone at all? Why not rather 'the bottomless memory of a dispossession, or an expropriation, of a spoilation'? 'And tons of shoes piled there, the pairs mixed up and lost.' (quoted in Megill, 175)

How to choose between these two compelling readings of Van Gogh's simple yet evocative painting? Perhaps we don't need to, we can rely on both to keep open our reading of these shoes--or Magritte's mysterious shoe-feet or even Andy Warhol's fashion shoes--letting each work of art return us to the vastness of the world we so readily evade as we live our daily lives.

And we do. Evade, that is. We, at least in the West, have a plethargy of evasions. Particularly now, when, as Norman Bryson says, reproduction has nearly completed its "colonization of the real" (223). That is, as we glide along
in our sea of representations, in only a few ways linked to that-from-which-they-came. But at what cost? If the "earth" as Heidegger defines it is the home of our truest wonder, connecting us to what is beyond us, how shall we live fully without it? The task of art, as Collins and Selina interpret Heidegger's theory, is to serve "as a kind of interface site, a meeting place of human purposes and decisions, and their un-masterable, non-human horizon" (133).

I am not saying that we can ever--through poetry or a painting or anything else--step out of our language-bound world. Whether Heidegger thought that we could is up for debate, but seems unlikely. He's well aware that it is through language itself by which we create our way-over-the-void, building our reactions to the shoes, or an ocean or an oilspill. As Gadamer, his student, puts it: "The primacy of language is not simply a unique trait of the poetic work of art; rather, it seems to be characteristic of the very thing-being of things themselves. The work of language is the most primordial poetry of Being..." (109) What I am saying is this: Heidegger's theory, along with the insights about the body and vision from Berman, Jay and Krauss, supplies a framework by which to re-orient our whole approach to the teaching of art toward a re-engagement with essential wonder. A PHYSICALIZED engagement. So Van Gogh's painting of the shoes, that Heidegger makes so much of,
becomes a way of bringing back into our consciousness what those shoes are. And art as a whole, including poetry, becomes a means of grounding us in a fresh reunion with all essential elements. Art for Heidegger is "not a reproduction of some particular entity ... it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of that thing's general essence" (37). Debate how we will the full implications of Heidegger's thought, this one element of his ideas on art seems summarily useful: art returns us to THINGS, it mediates our relationship with the world in which we dwell, opening up what we often do not see. Van Gogh's shoes do that, as do Magritte's, as do Robert Smithson's non-sites, or Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers-- or even Sean Scully's abstractions of the push and pull of opposites within colors and rectangles and squares. Heidegger provides us with a way to see them all afresh--and to bring to students a working concept: that art of whatever kind connects us with the world again, or more precisely, with the processes we go through in shaping "worlds" out of "earth" and all the complications involved in that elemental exchange. For our deepest thoughts grow out of re-investing the things of the world, from trees to sky, from birth to sexuality itself, with meaning and significance, with an original and originating wonder so easily bled from our daily lives.
Without reiterating Mark Johnson's full theory of the way metaphor functions (as reviewed in Chapter Two), one can see quite readily how Heidegger's idea supplies a strong link between what thinking is at base and what art does. If thinking, as Johnson has shown, is the manipulation of image schemata, grown out of the body's experience of the basic elements of the world (height and depth, in and out, here and there, etc.) and if poetry--like any other art-- as Heidegger claims, "is the saying of the unconcealedness of what is, ... bring[ing] the unsayable ... into a world" (74), then art may well be our conduit, our bridge back from our everyday thinking, which often operates without being aware of HOW it operates, to a greater sense of the physical and psychological realities from which thought is born. In other words: if poetry and art by nature are made from, and return us to, the essential physical properties of the world (as Heidegger claims), and if thinking (as Johnson claims) by its nature is woven from metaphors grounded in our physical experience of the world, then the two, art and thinking--rather than being divided into separate camps--have something vital to say to each other. My task in this study is to consider, and to formulate, through working with kids and poetry, some idea of what that "something vital" is.
There will be more to say about that "something vital" as my study proceeds, but let me take a stab at it now. It seems to me that as a tool of the imagination, as Johnson sees imagination functioning, poetry might have much to do with how we "take in the world," how we make sense of an idea, understand a concept or a painting, or juggle the complexities of any experience or thought into something we can use, that is, participate in, remember and apply later, these being to my mind the basic tasks of understanding. We would just have to see how.

What we need to do, it seems, is invest ourselves, often in a very physical way, in a place of interaction, so that the forces inside us meet up with the forces beyond us. Thoreau serves as a model here, as does Frost, for both sought inspiration for their art and their thought in direct contact with the natural world, to discover what it might tell them. Richard Poirier, in his wonderful study of Frost's poetry, Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing, puts it this way:

"How does anyone 'know beans'? More perplexing still, how does anyone know that he knows the them? This is the question set and answered by Thoreau and, with more subtlety and less show-off wit, by Frost in his poems of work and the work of his poems. The answer is that you 'know' a thing and know that you know it only when 'work' begins to yield a language that puts you and something else, like a field, at a point of vibrant intersection" (278)
This process described by Poirier articulates the link language makes with the physical plane as we build understanding. Without that "field," without a physical world within which to apply thought, thought has nowhere to go. It flounders, as so much student thinking and writing does, in generalities and pre-conceived opinions. To really think, in an authentic way, would be to open up the tools of thought, so that the roots of our language meet the fundamental "realities" of the world in which we live, the way they do in Poirier's image above. Wonder would then serve as the route to thought, and thought would continually lead us back to wonder. Poetry and art, as Heidegger seems to claim, would be at the heart of the exchange.

3.4 Reading Poetry and Art With a Heideggerian Eye: Smithson, Peale, Doty and Clements

I’d like to close this chapter by reading a few works of art and poetry as a way of applying Heidegger's theories in specific ways. Only through such specificity can his case be fully tested. The most immediate person who comes to mind is Robert Smithson, that flash-in-the-pan artist of the late 1960s and early 70s, who strove so hard to lift art out of the galleries and out into the world at large (and died trying). Of course his masterpiece "Spiral Jetty" now looks peculiarly Heideggerian as a space where the human-constructed presence of the earthwork meets back up with the
briny silence of the Great Salt Lake. And despite all of Smithson's words about it, the piece itself is silent. One can only imagine walking along it from a distance (it being underwater most of the year), yet even in that imagining one returns to a kind of haunting, one's position in time and space turning as the spiral turns. What more can we say of it except that it "moves the earth itself into the Open of a world and keeps it there ... [that it] lets the earth be an earth" (ORIGIN, 46)?

Something of the same could be said for Smithson's "Mirror-Span" photographs which he did in Montclair, New Jersey, near where he grew up. Once again, the human world, this time in the form of an elongated mirror, meets the earth, in the form of a small crevasse between two limestone
Figure 3.2  Robert Smithson, “Spiral Jetty” and “Mirror Span”

cliffs. One can imagine Smithson using the means of the mirror to return to his childhood wonder at the basic expanse of these cliffs. His mirror photographs here are like a tiny piece of silent, performance art (like a Navajo "event" poem, only acted out, as if Smithson had written: "place a mirror across a ravine, take pictures of it from above and below, allow it to enter again the ice which forms it and the sky to which it opens"). The mirror stands-in for himself almost, for the silence Heidegger would have us feel
as we try to bridge the unsayable part of our being--finding our own gaze shining back at us, the transparent "span" all that holds us in place.

Shining the mirror of art back in time (we could almost turn anywhere!), we might find Raphaelle Peale's equally fascinating, though so much tinier, still-lifes of the early 19th century. Alexander Nemerov, his marvelous study The Body of Raphaelle Peale, makes a compelling case for a phenomenological reading of this elder son of Charles Wilson Peale, who steadfastly refused to enter into the expansive vision of his father's mastodons and public portraits but clung to the precision of a bowl of blackberries or an egg placed so quietly in its morning cup. Says Nemerov: "His pictures are about the body--the body as the site of a pleasurable or anguished nonidentity" (189), causing us to imagine that Raphaelle is as missing in his exquisite still-lifes as Smithson is in the empty reflections of his mirrors, whether giving back to us beaches of stone in Scotland, the jungles of the Yucatan, or the cliffs of Montclair, N.J. To Nemerov, Peale's blackberries and melons call upon a "presocial relation to things ... in which objects do not have names but gain in sensuousness; in which secure distinctions between subject and object break down" (4). Whereas his father's canvases "showed off" his accomplishments, from the excavation of the massive skeleton of a mastodon to his self-portrait pulling back the curtain
of his museum of natural history, with shelf after shelf of arranged and catalogued creatures of the world, Raphaelle's pictures refuse that longer view. In Heideggerian terms, they refuse "use" in favor of returning us to presence. They return us to things, meditating on our quiet pleasures (and, according to Nemerov, our ambivalence about our own existence—the body that exists amidst other bodies, vegetable, animal, or human). The elder Peale's work "shows ... a dramatic visual 'thinning' of the specific object," leading to a "visual model for the mind's mastery of the universe" (48). His son's work, on the other hand, speaks for quite a different stance, based as it is, as Nemerov puts it, in "a primarily absorptive state of being"
What I'm saying is that Heidegger provides a still-functioning means of re-entering many works of visual art, from the traditional to the experimental, and that such readings might give us fresh ways to bring the art to students. Perhaps the same thing could be said for poetry. Just like painting, it can remain a distant art, unless we can bring the "body" of it alive.

Take Mark Doty's "In the Form of Snow," an evocative memory piece layering at least a couple different worlds into one. Notice, on first reading, how sensual it is, full of sounds and textures and smells...

*In The Form of Snow*

The summer I turned eighteen I worked my first job, night shift in a laundry and dry cleaning plant. I lugged the black watchman's clock from room to room, swept the trash out from behind trouser presses and pleating machines and the huge bins of soap like cylindrical snowdrifts.

The Chicano kid who went home at midnight told me ghost stories, how the plant was built over the wash where La Llorona walked, the mourning woman lost in lament and a dark rebozo, crying for her children who'd never come home. I was alone from twelve to seven, always something to make noise:

falling coat hangers, one of the big drum washers turning a little as if shifting in its sleep, and once the boss came in at one
and called me over the intercom--
my name, amplified, booming
through those unlit rooms--
to accuse me of stealing a shirt.

At dawn, under a moon
like a nickel gone through the wash,
I'd walk the fourteen blocks home
through the stucco houses and storefronts
to the white apartment, flanked by oleanders
on University Avenue, to my new wife.
Most mornings I only fell asleep;
sometimes she would be up counting

her calendar of yellow pills,
or reading a novel. We didn't know then, though maybe anyone around us could have said, what we'd come to--grief and anger

that would seep into everything like a dye.
We were more worried about how to buy an air conditioner for the bedroom that looked out onto the city clock

blinking the hour, and what to say, and about the small cluster of blood that had loosed from her body like a traveling star and might have been our child.

We didn't as my mother said, know shit--much less, afterward, how we'd learn to get over it. Loss you can imagine before the fact, but forgetting...

What seems most real to me now is the smell of the solvent they used to clean stains, how it seeped into my collars and sleeves, and nothing we could do would take it out.

The snow this morning comes in great casual gusts and then scatters into separate motions, single flakes that have made me think

of the laundry, and of the color of the stolen shirt. These flakes could fall anywhere, and do, or don't--some seem to blow on
to nowhere we can conceive. Though some settle, and the fact of this taking place seems miraculous, because anything could have happened, and this did.

How to talk about such a beautiful poem?! Each time I read it, I re-enter that world again--or rather, that double-world, crossed as it is between the mundaneity of the dry cleaning plant and the beauty of the falling snow, the weight of both almost too much for the frail body of the 18-year-old boy the speaker once was. All I really want to say is how PHYSICAL the poem is, how much it rocks in a world of sound and soap, of spilled blood and yellow pills.

The factory too is like a body: it turns in its sleep, moans, speaks with the anonymity of the owner. All of the emotions in this poem are GROUNDED--her pills form a calendar of days, their anger that becomes a dye, their lost child a traveling star. Metaphor becomes memory, as Cynthia Ozick would say, and the memory in this case returns us into a swirling early world of pretend-growing up, of that fierce silence before two different clocks (the watchman's and the city hall's), wondering what to say. Even the words are carefully chosen for their physical resonance with the play of emotions, in assonance and alliteration, in lines like "who'd never come home. I was alone," full of juxtaposition and enjambment, the O's echoing off of those "big drum
washers" and on to "and once the boss came in at one / and called me over the intercom..."

As for Heidegger, I think his ideas are present in both the language and the subject matter. Doty has found a visual/aural means of capturing our lives as a "thrown-presence," often unseen by us, mixed in with things, air conditioners and time-keepers, intercoms and turning drums of soap. How much farther can we see ahead than these two newlyweds? Thinking of Mark's poem and the memory it evokes in Heideggerian terms opens it up for me and lets me imagine us all in such a bubble of some up-in-the-air time, with little more than our language to speak the memory, to answer the moment, to let it be.

Finally, let me take 5th grader Steven Clements' poem about Gerard de Horstholst's painting, "Samson and Delilah," as an example, both of a student's engagement with physical reality (via a painting) and of the way the awareness of the body can shape seeing. It may tell us something about the issues involved in writing a poem about anything, and in trying to define—or refine—what we're asking students to do when they engage with the arts.

The scene is: Clinton Elementary on the near-north side of Columbus. A fifth grade classroom, again rather noisy. As visiting poet, meeting the kids for a second time before they go to the museum to write, I toss out the idea of
writing in the voice of someone in a portrait or other scene with people. Steven sits at the back of the room, near the teacher's desk. He is larger than most of the other kids. As you will be able to tell, his spelling is atrocious—though

Figure 3.3 Gerard von Horstholst, "Samson and Delilah"
some might describe it as unique. With no prompting or extra information from me, he selects a reproduction of Horstholst's painting, and takes the view of Samson...

First, let me translate Steven's poem into slightly more conventional English:

Poem

I feel so hurt when the tricklen blades cut my hair. It feels like I am too tired to move.
I thought she loved me--I guess I know what she wanted. But my hair.
Why? Will I die? Yes, I wish to. Oh God almighty [old god our mighty] why did it have to be me? He was my friend. Never in my life if I live will I trust another woman or have another friend. Like in friend, I will end. The piercing of my eyes--will I ever see again? The blades of steel ranching through my hair.
The candle, the candle will never let me see another day.
The candle burning on my back. My love has tricked me by poisoning my drink and making me weak. So let me go and my nonforget-able life. Around me I see nothing, my eyes too weak to move. My heart of love is in my stomach digesting.

-Steven Clements
5th grade/Clinton Elementary

[see next page for his original handwriting]

My insights concerning what Steven has done are these:

1. He seems to have understood something about the painting.
2. He seems to have entered into it, that is, participated in it. He's projected himself into another person's experience, in the classic poetic manner of taking on the persona of what he is writing about.

3. He has used terms from the painting which indicate at least a certain amount of looking—he mentions the candle, for instance, the comb, the drink. It seems unlikely that he would have included these details without paying a certain amount of close attention.

Figure 3.5 Steven Clements, "Pomey"
4. He has brought some **knowledge** to the work--certainly not of art history but of the story being portrayed. Without this knowledge, he would not have been able to construct such a telling poetic and emotional insight. Since he probably didn't hear the story at school, it's likely he got it elsewhere--in church or at home. That is, he's able to bring previous knowledge to investigate a new scene.

5. His poem creates an emotional event, more than a descriptive one. We pay less attention in the poem to the details of the painting than to the internal dialogue he imagines going on inside Samson's brain. So while the poem might be criticized, from an art-appreciation point of view, he has got some key part of the **emotional essence** in the work.

6. He makes use of **metaphor**, in a rather stunning way, at the end. "My heart of love is in my stomach digesting" takes a fresh turn on an old phrase--an old image of the heart being a movable item (as in "my heart in my throat") able to indicate the emotional state of a person. And he doesn't mouth the cliche--he transforms it, sending the heart down into the stomach, implying that the poem itself--or this monologue--is a way of digesting what has gone on.

7. He physicalizes the painting, as well as his response to the story. The strengths of the poem are in the **physical, kinesthetic details**. This may be where the heart of his understanding lies--and of what his poem has done to OUR understanding (as readers of his poem, as viewers of the art): we've come to dwell, with Steven, **within** the work--we feel more fully the candle burning on his back, or the comb (here a fierce symbol of control and deceit) "ranching" through his hair, or the poison circling through his body. It is a despairing voice we hear, almost as a physical presence, wandering around in our heads. The poem is more than words on the page--they seem to happen, as Frost said such lyric or theatrical poems do, "on a stage, in a setting." But quite inside us! They suggest that to write a poem--about a painting or anything else--is to hear the phrases internally.
This leads to a last insight, one indirectly concerned with Steven's wacky spellings: he has lived—not so much tacked on—a language that suits his understanding of the work. That is, it is an internal language, one that may have limited his ability to critically or aesthetically consider the full features of the work. I would contend that this internal language could be a central feature of "taking a work in" (understanding it). Those trained more in art appreciation may well do that indirectly, or inadvertently. But for a beginning student, this immersion-within-the-space of the painting may be ESSENTIAL. It is what I would choose to teach. In short, it seems Steven—if only for this instance alone—has "found a language" that put him and something else, in this case a painting, "at a point of vibrant intersection."

I lay out these insights not to give a definite answer to the role of the imagination in understanding but to raise a number of questions. If any of what I've speculated about Steven's poem is true, it does not tell us quite how this happened—or how to make it happen again—or how such amazing verbal-visual integration might occur again. Maybe it was a fluke in the week. Maybe he didn't even understand, even when I praised the poem, what had gone on. Maybe it was just the mood of the day (he was a slightly older, and certainly larger, student—he may have experienced a recent love-loss that, coupled with his understanding of Samson's story, gave him a "gift from the muse"). Are the skills he applied that day teachable? By digging into them further, might he be able to do other kinds of writing with more flair? Might he come to know-what-he-knows? How is this special event of his poem able to be extended? Could it, if
we understood it better? Is it all "a mystery," or does the body really engage us in our seeing, the way Steven's poem seems to here? Are there ways to carry this further--to train it, without destroying the magic? In other words, wonderful as his poem is, it only begs the question: what now? Yes--this happened. But what does the imagination have to do with understanding, and how can we find ways to engage the body even further in the seeing process?
CHAPTER FOUR

THE ROOTS OF PLAY

ABSTRACT: Here I compile an array of theorists who claim a great importance for play as a factor in art, poetry—and indeed, the development of societies as they grow and change. Not negating, but quite outside of, a view of play that emphasizes the set roles one takes up in speaking a language or interacting in society (as in Wittgenstein and others), essentially, as I use the term, play functions more as "the change agent" within society, challenging our everyday dryness with humor and with sometimes vicious challenges to the status quo. This strand of thinking runs from Coleridge, who theorized about Secondary Imagination taking apart and reshuffling Primary Imagination's original constructs.

Related to Coleridge is Bateson, who from watching monkeys play at the zoo saw their feigning and jousting as the beginnings of abstract thought. Recently, we have Sutton-Smith, who traces play back to the roles we learn in childhood, where a mother may set up role-playing (even in such a game as peek-a-boo) that then guide the child into interacting with others in a way that tests out boundaries and attitudes, shaping group behavior and individual response. Donald Hall follows the roots of poetry back to childhood as well, where words and babble created a kind of linguistic womb in which music and meaning wove together a sense of the world. It's interesting to tie these theorists to Josef Huizinga's grand conception of all of society circling around the nature of play—from monetary policy to the rituals of religion.

No doubt, in many cases, the "play" as it is performed, actually serves to keep people "in line." That in-line-ness may well be what Coleridge was talking about as "primary imagination." Through playing our parts, of student or worker, joker or knight, etc. we learn who we are and what is expected of (and denied) us. What concerns me, however, is that other nature of play—the Secondary—thats which
undercuts the rules, or gets around them, as best it can. The play that poetry engages in, stepping out of rigid sentence structure, treating the page as a "field." The play of the subconscious that the surrealists honored. I connect this strand of thought to Susan Stewart's view of nonsense and its challenges to the limits of ordinary sense—and Hans-Georg Gadamer's vision of all of art creating and keeping alive symbols, play, and festival within society, giving us our one true space of freedom. All to support the claim that PLAY (in the sense of re-formulating and testing limits) is an essential ingredient too often left out of how we think about the arts and their importance to education.

4.1 The Imagination's Challenge to Ordinary Thinking

To review where I am so far: I'm trying to establish, first of all, metaphor's primary function in our thought process, something put forth by Robert Frost on the poetry side, and Mark Johnson in the realm of philosophy and the body-in-the-mind dynamic. Secondly, I'm building a case for a need for grounding thought and art in the interaction between our perception and the physical realities we find ourselves in. These first two ideas are interconnected, one dovetailing into the other. Those points made, at least tentatively, I want now to consider the way that poetry and the arts in general disrupt our normal thought processes, the metaphors that we produce internally and then barely take cognition of. I want to deal here with what Coleridge calls "secondary imagination"—a role for which Johnson seems to ignore, as he barely touches on art's place in the process of imagination, but which we still seem to require if we are going to make sense of what the arts do to keep language and perception fluid and awake.
Jeannette Winterson, the contemporary English novelist, puts it bluntly: "Art objects," she says, in her book of the same title. It objects to the stale way we come to see the world, not looking around us, not taking it in. "Every day," she says, "in countless ways, you and I convince ourselves about ourselves. True art, when it happens to us, challenges the 'I' that we are" (15). "Art has deep and difficult eyes," she says. It nags at the dullness we so often let our lives become. We protect ourselves from seeing, through all kinds of methods, but "when the thick curtain of protection is taken away, protection of authority, protection of trivia, even the most familiar of paintings can begin to work its power," and what we find is that "the painting objects to [our] lack of concentration; [our] failure to meet intensity with intensity" (10). Along the same lines, Heidegger says, "We believe we are at home in the immediate circle of beings. That which is, is familiar, reliable, ordinary. Nevertheless, the clearing is pervaded by a constant concealment in the double form of refusal and dissembling. At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny" (54). One might say we play with art, or art plays with us, to push us back into contact with that ever-present but easily ignored "uncanny." We do not see this, most of the time, both writers are saying. We need art to shake us up. No other force will do.
This is the very conclusion Coleridge came to in the early part of the 19th century. Coleridge's system of the function of the imagination is similar to Johnson's, except that he splits it into two realms--the Primary and the Secondary. The Primary Imagination operates very much in the way Johnson's image schemata do. I will argue that, much as Johnson downplays Coleridge's theory, breaking Imagination into two roles is quite necessary to understanding what the arts have to do with it thinking--something that Johnson does not address. Johnson details well the creative aspect to our everyday thought. But he fails to deal with how even the image schemata he describes can become rigid systems of their own. To make sense of the arts' role in reshaping the imagination we still need something on the order of Coleridge's summary of how we can break out of habitual patterns of thought. In his brief but explosive comments in Chapter XIII of his Biographia Literaria, defining the role of the Secondary Imagination, he posits:

The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception ... The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree ... It dissolves, dissipates, in order to recreate...

(272-273)

Future commentators have made much of Coleridge's distinctions here, claiming for primary imagination the
basic, daily operations of the mind as we pick and choose between categories of our given words and concepts. Nathan Scott, for instance, says that Secondary Imagination serves "to unfix and then to refix that which the Primary Imagination has already fixed--in cliche" (29).

Coleridge says that Imagination's role (in the Secondary realm) is to awaken "the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us" ((BL 29). He admits, according to Scott, the power of Primary Imagination, of the "creative act being performed by the mind in the most ordinary acts of perception" (27). But he's honest enough to see how even such extraordinary acts can become dulled and routine after awhile. We need something on the order of his Secondary Imagination that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create." What it dissolves is, according to Scott, "the cold, inanimate, routinized, banal world of the daily round" (28).

Coleridge's description of his theory is much briefer than Johnson's. All I know is that it WORKS when we apply it to the teaching of the arts. Who can doubt, after working with high school student writing, or indeed any writing, our own included, that thinking is always in danger of running into the quagmire of "cold, inanimate, routinized" banality? Words by nature grow stale, metaphors become frozen into
cliches. If Johnson fails to address this problem, it does not mean that we should. We can gather the usefulness of Jakobson's theory that "poetry represents organized violence committed on ordinary speech" (quoted in Hawkes, 141)--and know that what he means is close to Coleridge's "dissolving" of too-rigid language. We can embrace the language games created by the surrealists of the mid-twentieth century as ways to break the hold of common thought patterns, thus releasing new poetic energies. If the connections between ideas produced by such games is arbitrary, that's all to the good. We will need, periodically, to have the world flipped on its head, even arbitrarily, if we are to learn--again and again--the nature of the extra-ordinary in the ordinary.

"The poet's job," according to Jakobson, Terence Hawkes explains,

as one who works with language the way a painter works with colour--requires him to refuse to permit [the] anaesthetic [of ordinary language] to operate ... What is important in any poem is not the poet's or the reader's attitude to reality, but the poet's attitude towards language which, when successfully communicated, 'wakes up' the reader, and makes him see the structure of his language, and that of his 'world', anew. (70)

Such a structuralist view seems no less valid today. The contemporary poet Stephen Dunn says something very similar when he claims that although "poems must be clear, by which I mean they must repay our attention to them, they shouldn't cover territory that's already clear. That's banality and
platitude. They must make available the strangeness that is our lives" (20--my emphasis). Funny, "strangeness" is the very term the Russian structuralist Viktor Shklovsky uses when discussing the "why" of poetry. He says that its one central role is "that of 'making strange'... to counteract the process of habituation encouraged by routine everyday modes of perception. We very readily cease to 'see' the world we live in, and become anesthetized to its distinctive features. The aim of poetry is to reverse that process, to defamiliarize that with which we are overly familiar, to 'creatively deform' the usual, the normal, and so to inculcate a new, childlike, non-jaded vision in us" (Hawkes, 63). Amen. Beyond the theories of post-structuralism and deconstruction that have flourished in the years since Jakobson and Shklovsky, these ideas of theirs still serve us well. How stunningly close they are to Coleridge! How much they explain when we come to approach any good poem.

So I trust Liese Millikin, a 5th grader at Mansfield St. Peter's Elementary, who, after being introduced to Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" and his wonderful portmanteaus (brilliant + light = brillig; slither + lithe = slithey), invented her own word structures to make meaning out of a difficult time in her life. She calls her piece,

Arunning Raway

The dumble fays and drampen bugs all occupy themselves,
While me and the fudwas play in the sun.
And the coopperdops and the riddledoos sing in the grass,
But the world is flippied and damzled about.

I flip down on the crench and the doon is down,
But I haven't gone home.
Dother and Mad come out to lind me,
And I ralk faway to the stream.
Mad has guven ip,
But I reep kunning.

Somehwere, outhere, there's a place for ye and mou,
But I don't wunderstand and I don't even care,
'Cause someone's gonna come lookin',
Someone's gonna see,
That right where I'm astandin',
I'm stayin' here forever.

Is this play on the order of Johnson's image schemata? In some ways it IS. Liese's poem plays wildly with the categories of "here and there" (becoming "outhere") and you or me (becoming "ye and mou"). I love also how she plays with relationship switches, "Dad" becoming "Mad" and "Mother" becoming "Dother". In some way I can hardly explain, I'm AWAKENED by her poem, the way Coleridge says we are by art, the way Heidegger does, the way Jakobson or Winterson do. And that's what I'm after: the way art awakens, objects to our lethargy, the way it shakes us into hearing words again, to knowing the strangeness, the distance between ye and mou, and the deep wish we all feel at times to "run away," to make something else of our lives that become too much stale and routine. I know I come to
art—and perhaps we all do—to experience that renewal, to be shaken to the bones, to rise up singing.

4.2 Five Levels of Play

Imagination may be defined as a kind of play, operating at a number of levels in the way we take in and make sense of the world. I will be making use of five of these levels, as defined below.

1. Play as shifter
   I begin with an over-all thesis that unites all types of play as the ability to make conscious shifts between levels—play as a "change agent" within language, thought, and action, which keeps things in motion.

2. Play as in playing-with
   Here I build on the ideas of Coleridge and Brian Sutton-Smith to define play as both undercutting the world-as-it-is and as the way we structure new meanings. I include Gregory Bateson's theories of play being an essential tool in the evolution of communication, and refer to Donald Hall's idea of poetry returning us to "crib language" and the babble of pre-linguistic play.

3. Play as in playing-a-game
   Here I look at Josef Huizinga's contention that ritual and games are at the heart of human development. I reflect also on some of the game-like concepts of the surrealists.

4. Play as in play-acting
   I make use of some concepts of Robert Frost as well as some recent thinkers on the nature of "taking on roles."

5. Play as daydreaming and the creation of alternate worlds
   Here I connect play to Michael Benton's term "secondary worlds," which he in turn borrows from Auden and Tolkein. I also make use of the work of Gaston Bachelard who speculates on "poetry-as-
reverie," retrieving moments of playfulness and dreaming from childhood.

a. Play as the Shifting of Level

"For many years the conviction has grown upon me that civilization arises and unfolds in and as play."
Josef Huizingas, HOMO LUDENS

"Only when love and need are one,
And work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and for the future's sakes."
Robert Frost, "Two Tramps in Mud-Time"

Play has long seemed to me to be essential to the teaching and writing of poetry. Whether we are setting up a lesson or tackling a new poem on our own, we have to get into a "ludenic" mood (to borrow Josef Huizinga's term) to even come close to the feeling of the art, or any art. To remain in the realm of prosaic and practical language and thought defeats us before we even get off the ground. We have to put away thoughts of what to get at the grocery store or the upcoming physics test. Even the use of that term "off the ground" implies a separation of the poetic process from where we usually stand. Through whatever means we can muster, we have to enter into a field of invention, of pretending, of speaking in other than our usual voice. If that isn't close to the child who is dream-playing in the backseat of the car and talking of her plastic ponies changing colors because they have eaten the "magic grass," or the one riding her red tricycle down a root-splintered
sidewalk playfully laughing that she is "pushing in summer," then I sadly mistake what poetry does. As Donald Hall says, poetry brings "the metaphors of the forbidden child into the words of the rational adult, making a third thing which enlarges human consciousness" (124) But how? And to what end? Particularly when we grow out of those childhood years—when, as Coleridge and more recent philosophers such as Heidegger have put it, use and the daily grind of work and ordinary language have drained us of our original surprise at being alive—can play once again be a resurgent force, one that can shake up the rigid role and thought categories of adolescence and adulthood—the cliches that can entrap us into limited ways of visualizing and experiencing the world?

The Latin root of the word "allude" is "ludiere," meaning "to play with," and modern French still retains a term, "ludisme," "meaning behavior characterized by playfulness"). To "allude" originally meant using allusive, or figurative, language—and as such was close to metaphor. But the ludenic root can extend to such words as "elude" (to playfully evade), "prelude" (the music before the play), collusion (secretive play behind the scenes), or illusion (to set up a play—or deceptive—scene). As several of these definition-roots indicate, the connotations of play as they've developed in the West have been somewhat negative—play as playing-false or being fool-hardy. Ludicrous, for
example, which originally meant merely "very playful" has come to mean ridiculous or laughable. We tell someone to "go fly a kite," if we want to tell them how useless they are; we say "stop playing around" if we want them to pay attention to what really matters. Just as we've often treated metaphor as mostly a term of flourish rather than of meaning-making, so we've treated play as something childish or flippant. It seems we haven't much valued play--except off-handedly, as "the work of children"--even in our talk. Yet there is some indication that play may go deep into who we are as human beings (Rogers and Sawyers, 56) and into the evolution of human communication and thought (Bateson, 181). My own contention, my own research question in this regard concerns the role that play takes on in the uses of poetry, in a classroom and beyond. My hunch is that poetry is "essential play," play that--as Robert Frost has put it--is a kind of work "for mortal stakes." But how might the various meanings of play interact to open up for students both the enjoyment and the worth of poetry--and by extension, all the arts? If Huizinga is even partially right in thinking that "civilization arises and unfolds in and as play" (i), there seems to be a huge gap between our common uses of the word and its potential function within human thought and living.
With all the various meanings we give to the word "play"—playing with the truth, playing a role, playing an instrument, to name a few, along with the physical concepts of the play of the waves and wind, or there being a certain "play" or "give" in a revolving wheel or in a situation—how can we solidify them to a single working concept? My thinking is that they all represent an ability to play-with-levels, to shift within certain confines or constructs. I'm seeing play, along with metaphor, as one of "the change agents" within life and language that lets us find the "right move," as, for example, in a rigid frame of a chessboard or the free flow of bodies on a dance floor. Such is the spark of playfulness in even the shortest of poems, as in this one by that most witty of Japanese poets, Issa:

\[
\text{Don't worry, spiders, I keep house \quad casually.} \quad \text{(transl., Robert Hass, 153)}
\]

Or in Buson's:

\[
\text{Coming back-- so many pathways through the summer grass.} \quad \text{(transl, Hass, 83)}
\]

What joy there is in each of these. And yet so much of the play here is carefully planned. Play is just that: the space between "what is planned" or required and how we do it. The play in these poems happens BETWEEN the lines—in the gap between the last two words of Issa's poem or between the
second and third line of Buson's. Poets often "toy" with our response this way, the line breaks serving the function of the play and pausing within speech and jokes.

Play is not so much a specific activity as an attitude, a state of mind, a fluidity which opens spaces within the logical, the planned, whatever urge it is in us to "get things straight." Play asks the sassy question. Not fully rebellious, but at the heart of most truly revolutionary thinking and action, it keeps awake the liminal states, taps into dreams and day-dreaming, grows out of naps, invents games, wants to toss balls against walls, is impatient with sitting still. Not unrelated to the metaphorical mind, it does not so much worry about making a "true" connection as much as making any connection at all. It shifts oppositions at will--reveling in juxtapositions which stretch across categories or cause spontaneous laughter. It was, no doubt, the voice of the coyote-trickster of Southwest Indian legend, and resides in the inventive storytelling we do when we fantasize, or embellish the truth. It is the essence of embellishment itself--from medieval tapestries or artwork "dressing up" the margins of the early hand-printed Bibles. It lives in Van Gogh's ever-more-wild brushstrokes. It is in the myth--as Cynthia Ozick defines it (282)--the inventive side of the mind which the Greeks brought to us most of all, not so concerned with memory or even meaning-making as with
a good, exuberant and cosmic story. It runs on the river of the tongue, as much as in the inside of the current when it slips out of stale pools. It imitates, aping always whatever it sees, hears, or wants to poke fun at; it carefully watches "how it is done" and then shifts the pattern, ever discontent, seeing if there might be a better, or at least different, way. It is the flutter in us. The heart murmur. The heart. It is the child--not the one who whines, or fears, or clings or grabs-to-get-it-all, but the one who has made a mountainside of the green carpeted stairs, who climbs the willow, sure even in memory that if one rises high enough he can see all the way downtown; who during the worst years of the Holocaust mimicked soldier and guard, gas chamber and grave, and played cards with the cut-off tops of discarded cigarette packs (Eisen, 134). Wherever we find ourselves, it takes what is and bends it, molds it, tosses it in the air, turns it around or inside out. Makes important spaces out of two puddles in the middle of the cul-de-sac. It listens. Whispers. Shouts. Sings. Squeezes through windows, if it can. Dances in the eyes. It is the jumping-off place of poetry, the impulse toward the unplanned song. It takes up the words and joins their parade, even before it can speak a full sentence, even before it knows where all those little black marks are going.
b. Play as "Playing-With"

I refer here to play as the natural urge to "fool around" with things, be they words, objects, situations, or other "realities." It is the side of play that Donald Handelman emphasizes, who has suggested the contrast of "ritual, which validates and maintains social order, and play which 'comments' on it" (see Schwartzman, 46). In this arena, "the 'playful' aspects of play [connect] incongruent and novel aspects of the social context ... implicitly question[ing] the inevitability and appropriateness of the social order" (46). I believe this is the side of play and thought Coleridge considered, as mentioned earlier,

My point exactly. The "playing-with" side of play, as an aspect of Secondary Imagination, is often used to undercut, make fun of, evade, or joke--or to in any number of ways subvert the status quo. I think here of a first grader I observed in an Ohio Arts Council residency. The scene itself was very fluid, one that might easily lend itself to fooling around. Students had been brought into a special room to work for a week with the visiting poet, a wonderfully sweet woman named Nancy Kangis, quite in love with the playful side of poetry herself. To create a relaxed atmosphere, students sat on a large rug instead of chairs. Nancy was having these young students contribute to a group poem about a dragon (or some other mythical scene) and the
phrase "flying carpet" came up. As she was writing those words on the flip-chart, one of the students just in front of me (I was adopting the role of "objective observer," sitting as much to the back as possible) leaned over to another boy and said, "Did she say 'flying carp'?" and they both cracked up laughing. So he said it again. In fact, all through the exercise, he never got quite got involved, preferring instead to "undercut" from the sidelines. Like Phillip, his was the kind of outsider-response that drives many teachers crazy (myself included). However, as I thought about his cleverness, even in that one phrase, I realized that Nancy's lesson--as most lessons do--left little room for him to bring his full abilities to the floor. His talk was play in its disruptive state--and may have deeper roots than we know within the make-up of children's basic natures.

Consider again an artist like Robert Smithson, whom I touched on in Chapter Three. His entire career could be seen as one of the undercutting of authority and of traditional expectations. From the playfully mock-serious "Eliminator" to the playing-with perception he takes on in his many mirror-pieces (are we seeing the piece itself, the world to which it refers, or our own reflection--our own wishes for what the piece might be?), to his massive "Spiral Jetty" which plays at making a mythical--and now submerged--space
within the Great Salt Lake, Smithson's work *undercuts* and plays with our daily habits of mind and perception.

Figure 4.1 Robert Smithson, “The Eliminator”

Such is the sort of "playing with" perception poetry and visual art always thrive on. In art, we can consider the givens of our lives and re-name them, re-question them, make
jokes about them, distort them. Such play may well be a version of metaphor, but to my mind it's useful to see a certain style of perceptual distortion as pre-metaphoric. A child can, for instance, look at a crowbar and ask the following questions about it:

- Can you crowbar yourself open?
- Why are you named a crowbar?
- If you are a crowbar, are you a crow?
- Is your mother a fork? (Maleak-5th gr)

No doubt this is visual-metaphorizing at work. But it's also simply playful. The third question, for instance, "If you are a crowbar, is your mother a crow?" is more word-play than metaphor. We need this stage of metaphor in order to tip things out of the rigid grid by which we look at them. We can draw (or write about) a tree, for instance, by lying underneath it and looking up. So much of our visual habits are cliched (perhaps more strongly even than our words). We need to do something to enter our habitual spaces, to pick up our ordinary "things," and flip them on their heads. Only then is the realm of metaphor even accessible to us. I want to believe that there is a pre-metaphoric, pre-sign area of visualization which we must enter into first, on a purely experiential level. Let's consider one short poem by Gregory Orr:

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The Builders
for Trisha

Midnight: the field becomes white stone.
We quarry it. We carry the cut squares
strapped to our backs.

On the side of a bleak hill,
we build our hut. Windowless,
but filled with light.

This poem is in itself richly metaphorical--referring to the
ritual of love, as well as to the ways that human beings
find to make personal meaning in their lives (the inward-lit
hut) in the face of outward adversity (the bleak hill). Even
the moonlight has become immediately metaphorical in the
first line! But there's a way I want to read it--indeed, I
think it's the way we first enjoy it--where the story is
real, is a tiny play, a dream-world where we just get to the
visualize the light coming from within the hut and don't
think about the further implications. This is play at its
most basic in poetry. It's deeply related to myth and
legend, to ancient story-telling and creative lying. I think
metaphor grows out of this play--that play is a necessary
stage all its own.

As Orr's poem illustrates, "playing with" can reveal
itself as a kind of shuffling the usual order of things.
This perhaps comes closest to Brian Sutton-Smith's
contention that all play grows out of the mother-child
relationship (11)--or as I will put it, parent-child talk.

Sutton-Smith says:

> The mother provides the safe expressive frame within which her stimulation and the infant's responsiveness can assume those characteristics commonly known as play. The communicational frame she provides includes at least the following expressive attributes: a play face ... play vocalization ... play time ... [and] a play place. (12)

We will have occasion to return to the power of this relationship when we look at Donald Hall's theories about the origins of poetry, but for now Sutton-Smith's provide a nice grounding for how play expands in the post-infant life. The playfulness that such parent-infant exchange fosters eventually becomes an imitative practice through which future learning can take place. He calls one feature of this "The Exchange Routine," where "the mother imitates the baby [thus] establishing a contingency between her own response and the baby's earlier act" (13). The mother "becomes" the baby--and as the baby grows, the baby (and eventually the older child) can play at becoming the parent. This exchange builds to what he calls "Central Player Routines," which dominate the years from four to ten where "most of children's games ... involve a similar situation in which one child is the central actor, and the others are responsive to that actor's initiatives" (13).

How do Sutton-Smith's theories fit into a "playing-with" mode of play? Simply through this: as the parent-child
play frame expands, the whole world becomes a "play space" for changing roles and patterns. Listen to this exchange with an almost-five-year-old, who is lying down on her back as her father puts on her shoes, looking so comfortable (while he does all the work):

F: So, are you a queen?
D: No, I'm a bat.
F: A bat? Do you fly around?
D: Yes, I fly around and I purr.
F: You purr?
D: Ya, I'm a cat-bat.

Silliness rules here, playing-with rules and roles. There's a touch of metaphor, although I'd say that's not the dominant event. The main event is the building of a relationship for play which Sutton-Smith says can extend to future mental operations.

From such speculation it seems a natural step to the "playing with sound" side of poetry. We've already seen a version of such play with the 1st grader's "flying carp" joke. There's more to this side of poetry and play, however, as Donald Hall points out in his two marvelous essays, "The Vatic Voice," and "Milktongue Goatfoot Twinbird: The Psychic Origins of Poetic Form." By the "vatic voice" he means that sense of the river of language which poets can feel themselves entranced into (just as a reader can, if so inclined, be carried away by the music of the words before thinking about their meanings). It can consume us, Hall
says, carrying us away without our control. "We are surprised by it," he says, "and we may very well, having uttered its words, not know what we mean (3)." Its goal is to "clear a passageway to the insides of ourselves (3)," by means of pure sound. He traces the origins of this voice, in his second essay, much as Sutton-Smith does, to the crib-talk of infants, "the autistic babble, the 'goo-goo,' the small cooing and purring and bubbling. These are the sounds of pleasure; they are without message" (Hall, 126). Hall reminds us that we always live in this home of language too, much as we may whittle our talk down to the practical and the social. Step away from it, listen to it as hundreds of people jabber in a crowded bistro, or lean in, as Frost recommends, to enjoy the flow of words "from the other side of a door" and you'll hear what Hall means. We begin, says Hall, living again with language at the level of play, whenever we step into realm of poetry.

Can we move from the language babble of infants to the sophisticated shifts of thinking in adulthood? Gregory Bateson would contend so. He touches on this in his "Metalogue: About Games and Being Serious," an investigative conversation with his daughter, and more expansively in his influential "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," in which he watches the mock-behavior of monkeys at the San Francisco zoo. In the first piece, in answer to his daughter's
question as to whether their conversations are "just a game," whether he is "just playing around" with the questions he asks and his sometimes evasive answers to hers, which frequently get them into what they've come to call "muddles," he comments,

I think that the muddles help. I mean--that if we spoke logically all the time, we would never get anywhere. We would only parrot all the old cliches that everyone has repeated for hundreds of years. (15) Of course her next question is, "What is a cliche?" In answer, he refers to its origin in the realm of early printing presses where commonly used words and phrases were kept on their own readily usable bars. This is what we're doing much of the time, he says, plugging in "ready-made sentences" to substitute for thought. "In order to think new thoughts," he continues, "or to say new things, we have to break up all our ready-made ideas and shuffle the pieces" (16).

All I can say is: how Coleridgean of him!

But he goes even further when, watching the monkeys, he realizes that something amazing must have happened in evolution when animals developed the ability to differentiate between real action and play action. Games of chase, for instance, do not really signify anger or a wish to hurt, though they make use of the same action. The same with play-biting, play-fighting, etc. They somehow say, "This is play" which for Bateson is translated into

something like this: 'These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote.' ... If we now substitute 'which they denote' for the words 'for which they stand' in the expanded definition of
play, the result is: 'These actions in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote.'

From these ambiguities he traces a key source of complex thought. From simple playing-around, evolution was able to develop the skills of playing-with so central to making new meanings of old materials. "The evolution of play," he concludes, "may have been an important step in the evolution of communication" (181).

c. Play as in Playing-a-Game

This is how Josef Huizinga, in 1944, defined play:

> Play is voluntary activity ... executed within certain fixed limits of time and space, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different from ordinary life'. (28)

One key term here is that of there being "fixed limits" to play. Such a statement refers equally well to poetry, music, and other arts. In the arts, just as in a game, we accept a certain field or set of boundaries when we write a poem or act in a play. There are conventions that lift the act or the performance out of "ordinary life." Just as when we sing, there is a sense that this is not ordinary speaking, but a way of communicating that lets us dwell in another realm. Perhaps this why we use the term "playing music," for music too happens in a realm-beyond-the-ordinary--even in
the most unlikely places, someone can pick up a guitar and
the harmonies within the chordings and finger-runs lift us
into another sense of "reality"--and we have the sense that
the cochlea hairs in our ears are being played with the way
wind plays with ocean waves, creating patterns and beauty
out of what might otherwise be pure chaos.

In stressing the game-like and ritual-based nature of
play, Huizinga refers to play's "secludedness, its
limitedness" (9). He speaks of a sense of being in a "magic
circle" when we play, which serves the function of creating
a space for "sacred play indis-pensible for the well-being
of the community" (25). I am struck by how much these ideas
about limits and play-within-a-space link to what poetry is
about as well. Within chaos or an alien, play-deprived
world, poetry offers something of a retreat to other
knowings, to lost wonder. Indeed, Huizinga sees "poetry ... as the stronghold of living and noble play," particularly
when "civilization as a whole becomes more serious--[when] law and war, commerce, technics and science lose touch with play" (134). Such was the case in Poland in the middle of
the 20th century, when the reigning dictatorship made free
communication of ideas nearly impossible. As Huizinga would have predicted, poetry was one of the last spaces left for
playful undercutting of the status quo. Witness Tymoteusz

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Karpowicz's poem, "The Pencil's Dream" (1957), a clever commentary on the way of being then in demand:

When the pencil gets ready for sleep
he firmly decides
to sleep
stiffly and blackly

He is help in this
by the inborn
inflexibility
of all the lead in the world

The spinal lead
of the pencil
will break
but cannot be bent

He will never dream of waves
or hair, only of a soldier
standing at attention
or coffins

What finds its place in him
is straight, what is beyond
is crooked
Good night

(tr. Czeslaw Milosz, 100)

Could the messages in this poem--about breaking boundaries, about the metaphorical dimensions of "waves and hair" have been said in any other way at the time? It's unlikely. So childlike, the poem seems almost inoffensive, yet it undercuts the state agenda in a most telling way. "The Pencil's Dream" reminds me of Huizinga's rhetorical question: "Is not all personification from beginning to end a playing of the mind?" (139) We adopt certain rules--such as the personifying voice of the pencil--and find a way to say things we might not otherwise be able to conceive.
"Poesis," Huizinga says, "is a play-function. It proceeds within the play-ground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind creates for it" (119).

Even the surrealists, those afficionados of mystery and chance, created a series of deliberate structures for their play, as for example, in Breton's rules for stream-of-consciousness writing. For how, when writing "freely" do we not find ourselves recycling back to our daily abstractions and cliches--or creating total nonsense? Breton and others, according to David Gascoyne, found that purely free-form Dada only went so far (12). In the end you had to "construct a frame" to open up the chance of mystery revealing itself.

Says J.H. Mathews, in *The Surrealist Mind*:

> When Max Ernst spoke of 'means of forcing inspiration,' he was not boasting of having mastered a surefire method for creating graphic images. Rather he was acknowledging that inspiration must escape any artist who does not realize that it has to be forced to yield up its secrets. (88)

Though obviously the making of art is not business-like or planned in the way one might set up a dimestore or a stock-fund, there are just as obviously techniques to be followed, even if the goal is the revelation of kinetic energy of paint (as in the seemingly dashed-off but actually quite considered works of certain abstract expressionist painters) or the purely odd and dream-like imagery of the surrealist poets. Perhaps it would be best to think of it
all as a game. We play the game of writing a sonnet, or when breaking lines into a sense of "free" verse. So often I have thought of my own lessons in poetry (or even in composition) as games set up to reveal or seek out deeper meanings we would not come upon otherwise.

One such game is to list all the words using alliteration, half-rhymes, and "the mutes" (b, d, g, k, p, q, and t) as one can in three minutes, then to use as many of these as possible in a poem that gives directions but makes no logical sense, as in the following, by high school senior Adam O'Dell:

Go West and take the game of gems into your hands  
Cover the glow so its blame will be hidden  
back behind a shining silver shield  
Elude the time and price with twice killed mice, then build a hill and wait in your own mud, sloppily  
Gem light that sixty stones won't stop, still no light will come to those who build anything on cracked steps steeped in ice

So very Stein-like, at first glance, Adam's poem has its own inner logic of sound--and a bit of sense. But what I am saying here is that it didn't "just happen." Asked to write a Stein-like poem of nonsense, one suspects he would have fallen into merely copying her word-jumbles. Here he does more than mix up phrases, he evokes a motion, creating the
kind of fresh word-pictures we expect from poetry, yet without a twinge of cliche. It is the game that has made it happen--the mostly arbitrary rules (based though they are in solid English prosody).

So say Cacciari, Chiara, and Cicogna, in their wonderful study of "Imagination at Work: Conceptual and Linguistic Creativity in Children": "Individuals--be they children or adults--if not provided with specific environmental constraints follow a 'path of least resistance,' that is, they retrieve a specific instance of a given category and pattern the new creation after it" (157). As the surrealists discovered, and as I suppose Huizinga would agree, the "game," and the intricacies of its rules, create the energy in the new work. The more concise, the more well-chosen and invigorating the rules, the more possibility there is for fresh discovery.

Here's another game, based on the following poem by Ohioan Jeff Gundy, "Chainsaw Inquiries":

What do chainsaws love?
Lumber. Dust. Live wood pulled down by the dying. Sun on last year's leaves.

Do chainsaws share a hidden fear?
Rocks. Nails. A few, older, fear their appetites, and that what they chew does not nourish them.

If chainsaws dream, of what?
Of hands that never tire, tanks that never empty. Forests rising quick as grass. A heaven where silence never falls.

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Do chainsaws share a secret grief?
They cannot hold what they eat,
cannot keep what they kill.
They cannot feed themselves. (25)

We could talk about this poem for some time, with all its clever commentary upon our over-consumptive society. For now, it's the game that Gundy provides us with that matters. For could we not take anything, and by asking some basic questions about it--using a twist on the old personification technique--see something fresh inside it--and in ourselves? As does high school sophomore Amanda Covault in her poem, "Questions for Water":

Can water feel a heartache?
Heartbreak is water's dependency. It lives to soothe our pain.

Does it cry when misunderstood or mislead?
Yes, it pours upon the shore its salty ache.

Is water always smooth or are there rocky roads along the way?
The rocky roads are hidden as makeup hides a woman's wrinkles.

Can water feel & taste & look alike?
All water is born on different shores.

How fun! What could have been a sappy poem about lost love and the distance between people becomes a playful construct that takes our old cliches and lets us walk within them, feeling the links between oceans and heartbreaks, life-maps and wrinkles-in-skin, and (in the wonderfully evocative last
line) the distances between nations and races and our own private desires.

As Coleridge contends (as indeed does Heidegger): we take "the loveliness and the wonders of the world" for granted (quoted in Scott, 29). The surrealists could be seen as being essentially the last Romantics in this way, the surrealist poem being a game for opening up inner and outer passages, as Mary Ann Caws says in her essay on their poetics, "Outlook and Inscapes" (92). Surrealist poetry is not completely free-form after all, she says, but a poetry obsessed with opening up "places of passage: stairs and mirror, door and window, threshold[s] and crossroads ... to be traversed and retraversed, to be meditated in" (93). Looking back to Sutton-Smith, these would be our places of play, the natural realms within which the mind can once again find its liminal state.

d. Play as in Playing-a-Role

An essential side of writing poetry--and of the lessons I've been exploring with students--is the taking on of a fictionalized role as one writes the poem. Robert Frost referred to this side of poetry when he said that:

Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It may not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing. A least lyric alone may have a hard time, but it can make a beginning, and lyric will be piled on lyric till all are seen as heard or sung by a person in a scene--in character, in a setting. (13)
Again, this may be said to be part of the metaphoric process: we take on another voice, we speak "as if" we are someone or something else. But it seems useful to think of this role as a kind of play-acting as well. As in the play of infants and pre-schoolers, or the games of children from the middle childhood years on up, we take on roles in order to see "the other" from another view—and to take on our own selves afresh. This is the role of legend, of myth-making. It is, after all, difficult to know the other, or to speak directly of the deepest concerns of the self. Yet students can readily make up a character and reveal things about themselves and to themselves they might not have otherwise. We pretend to be a soldier on a Civil War battlefield; we leap through time, with Langston Hughes, to "raise the pyramids" above the Nile. The more we know of history—or any facts—the more we are able to dream (to play) with those facts. In a poem or a painting, our dreams can feed our knowing, can deepen it, can make it more personal and present, even when it's about distant things.

Mieke Bal has an interesting passage in her recent book, *Quoting Caravaggio*, concerning the nature of this sort of "play acting." Acknowledging that "the word play has accrued meaning," that Wittgenstein has made much of the game of language (emphasizing that "games have rules") and
that "object-relations theory ... argues that the presence of play is vital and the absence of it fatal for a healthy development of subjectivity" (119), she nevertheless makes a case for a certain "undecidability of meaning," in looking at a painting--or anything else. Building on Derrida, she says: "It is because meaning is undecidable that play becomes important for a determination of meaning, albeit always a provisional and contextual play" (119).

She goes on to add in Michael Ann Holly's theory that "looking is a form of play (120):

The model of looking at stake ... is that of performance in all of the many senses of that word. Performance, here, can be seen as role-playing, as framing and framing-up; as a speech act, doing something to the other; as achievement, carrying out a much-needed task; as a recycling of the rules of the game in a game that can be neither new nor identical to the earlier one. Among the many metaphors for what art does, what seeing is, and what writing affords, this would be my favorite, precisely because it is so multisemic. Art performs; so does writing; so does the looking we write about and with. (120; emphasis mine)

In other words, we read a painting (as Bal has so convincingly argued elsewhere--see her Reading Rembrant, 1991) and reading the painting, or anything else we observe, meaning performing it. Taking on roles to see what we become. Such seeing, she admits, is context-based. We don't have the freedom to see spaceships landing in the midst of "The Last Supper," at least not without great ingenuity. But
we do play the role, and the role we play, the seeing we perform, is the meaning we make of it. Thus she turns Wittgenstein around: yes, there are rules within the game—any game—but the game we play within the rules is where we find the meaning.

We have already seen an example of such play in the previous chapter, when I considered Steven Clement's poem on "Samson and Delilah." Without Steven taking on the voice of Samson so convincingly, misspellings and all, the painting would have been dead for him, as it would be for so many students who have never heard the original story. Steven takes the story (the overall "game" of that Judeo-Christian heritage) and plays his own game within. It is in the playfulness of his language, and the pointedness of his seeing, that the painting then becomes his own.

Here's an example, from 5th grader Byanca Price, a student in an LD classroom in Columbus, Ohio. Within the context (the frame) of Rene Magritte's "The Beautiful Relation," she becomes a participant:

When she cries it rains.
She talks to the world
Her nose smells the smoke in the air.
She knows the war is bad.

She talks to the world
And she cries and she talks too.
She knows the war is bad.
She eats the city, my part, my part.

And she cries and talks too
But she knows she has to do it
She eats the city, my part, my part
And the balloon talks to her

But she knows she has to do it.
Her knows smells the smoke in the air.
And the balloon talks to her.
When she cries it rains.

Nothing would require Byanca to take on that role that she has in this poem. To add in the war, or the "eating" of the city. The assignment was merely to "write a pantoum" about the painting, repeating certain lines according to the

Figure 4.2  Rene Magritte, "The Beautiful Relation"
pattern provided. A very rule-based structure, even more so than our daily speech. Yet it is her sudden personifying of the face in the sky—and her own personal connection to the city below—that totally makes new meaning out of the work. This is what I mean by playing a role, as well as what Mieke Bal has contended when she, borrowing from Michael Ann Holly, talks about our viewing and writing about art as “a form of play, a play for stakes” (Carravagio, 120).

One more example, if you please. Here is another 5th grade student, observing Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas’s "Song of the Towers." Given a different set of rules—to write about four or five things he sees in the painting and begin each line with "Sometimes..." he directs our attention around the work, as if he had a flashlight and could pinpoint each moment, each emotion:

Sometimes, playing jazz so electrifying there is lightning

Sometimes, so hot you carry ice blocks with you

Sometimes, so mysterious there are hands reaching out at you

Sometimes, so hard to look at the tall buildings.

Jason Wood
Here, Jason is playing a series of roles, intuitively recognizing (or maybe it's the game he's playing that causes him to recognize) that each angle of vision is a role all its own. We can't always change the situations we're in--just as, once we enter one painting or subject, we must stand within its elements. But we can choose to stand. We can find our own game within the larger context. Sometimes...
e. Play as Daydreaming

Here, and perhaps most importantly, I want to think of play in Gaston Bachelard's terms as "play-as-reverie" or daydreaming. He says that to read or write poetry is "to rediscover the great calm lake where time rests from its flowing. ... This lake is within us, like a primitive water, like the environment in which an immobile childhood continues to reside" (111). Play here is play-as-daydream (in the Freudian sense). We indulge ourselves as we write a poem (Orr's "The Builders" is such a work), passing off into "the possible," which Jerome Singer contends is one of the main goals of childhood play. He claims that early make-believe play, when suitably nurtured by a family and by other individuals ... may serve as the beginning for the emergence of a major dimension of human experience. This dimension can be termed the realm of 'the possible,' the ability of the growing child, and, later, the effective adult to engage in subjective thought processes... (187)

There is a free-spirit to much of play, whether it be the spontaneous play of children on a playground or a nursery, or the more structured, yet no-less inventive, play of a pick-up basketball game or a poetry lesson. We get to be children again, when we play with words, when we joke, or tease someone we love. We can daydream, as Russell Edson does in this selection from his prose-poem, "The Taxi":

One night in the dark I phone for a taxi.
Immediately a taxi crashes through the wall; never
mind that my room is on the third floor, or that the yellow driver is really a cluster of canaries arranged in the shape of a driver, who flutters apart, streaming from the windows of the taxi in yellow fountains ... (193)

Is there any more "point" to this than the sheer joy of daydreaming? Perhaps that IS the point--or the argument--here, if there is one: that daydreaming is fun, is visually playful, and need have no other purpose. So says Michael Benton in his book Secondary Worlds, building on JRR Tolkein and W.H. Auden. Tolkein, as Benton quotes him, believes that the storyteller (and, I will add, the poet) "makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter" (22). And Auden, picking up on the phrase, stretches the idea even further:

Present in every human being are two desires, a desire to know the truth about the primary world, the given world outside ourselves in which we are born, live, love, hate, and die, and the desire to make new secondary worlds of our own. (23)

Auden says this comes from a "dissatisfaction with the primary world," making daydreaming and storytelling a natural call for change, or at least for the opening up of greater possibilities.

So we may stand at a window and wonder if the hole in the trees on the distant hill could be "a window to the future." Yes, it is metaphor at work for us, but it is also the inventive, playful mind which had to first see the circular shape within the gap, which had to dance its way over into all the chances for comparison available, which
had to reach down into the life-of-that-year, in the emotional turmoil of 6th grade in Savannah, Ohio for Chad Edmonds. And come out with "a plum," a bit of resonance to re-awaken a day (and maybe a life).

Michael Benton puts it this way:

The love of language for its own sake becomes a love of language for the sake of what it can do for us in helping us to represent and understand our experience. (76)

Play with objects and situations gives way to play with words, which in turn gives way to play with metaphor--which can bring us back to the objects again, seen now in the lens of playfulness and wonder. If the objects begin to speak for us, can touch some resonance within the poem or the painting (or the song), we enter that essential realm of wonder Bachelard tries so hard to evoke. We can become, as adults (or in the case of high school students, maturing adults), children again. Says Michael Benton:

Freud's classic essay 'Creative Writers and day dreaming' sees the adult writer engaged in essentially the same activities as the child at play. Both create a secondary world that they take seriously, invest with large amounts of emotion, govern with certain rules and laws and thus separate sharply from reality. Furthermore, he argues that a 'piece of creative writing, like a daydream, is a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood.' (24)

How similar this is to what Donald Hall says poetry as a whole is after:
From the earliest times, poetry has existed to retrieve, to find again, and to release. In the [person] who writes the poem, in the reader who lives it again, in the ideas, the wit, the images the doctrines, the exhortations, the laments and the cries of joy, the lost forest struggles to be born again inside the words. (129)

To engage in poetry, and all of the arts, then, I am proposing, is to venture into regaining just such a playful world-view.

5.3 Essential Nonsense/Art as Play: Considering the Work of Susan Stewart and Hans-Georg Gadamer

Finally, let's look at the work of Susan Stewart and Hans-George Gadamer as it relates to the notion that play is more than mere "playing around," that it works at a deep level when we look at how societies structure themselves or at what art does within society to keep the spirit of engagement alive.

For Stewart, play--in the form of nonsense (which would correspond to what I've called "playing-around")--sets the boundaries of culture, for it establishes what does or does not "make sense." In one culture, for instance, dressing up as monsters and goblins and knocking on neighbor's doors for candy, the way most communities do in the U.S., is "just plain fun," whereas setting up lights in a cemetery and decorating the graves of ancestors in a joyful spirit of celebration for a "day of the dead," as is common practice in Mexico, would be seen as "a little sick," that is,
outside the normal. There is, Stewart contends, a boundary of sense that runs at the edge of every culture. We test that boundary through play with varieties of "non-sense," leading to a compelling thesis that playing is a constant if invisible factor in helping to define sense itself (4).

"The rules for conceiving reality are constantly in process," says Stewart. "Once other levels of living become readily incorporated into the everyday lifeworld, once they are taken for granted, they become, so to speak, 'dead metaphors'" (40). Ah--here we have Coleridge's basic dichotomy again, where Primary Imagination conceives of a world, which then solidifies into an accepted truth, necessitating a Secondary Imagination to undercut and play with the first, keeping our world-making in flux. Such undercutting Stewart would call "nonsense," which she claims is at work in multiple ways throughout all culture and language. Agreeing with Huizinga, even a society's monetary assumptions become part of the dynamic. "Like language," she says, "money is a confidence game society plays with and against itself" (4). And art's role is give us alternative worlds that can play with the givens we find ourselves in. She says:

Each world presents a system of differences in relation to any other world. To step into the artistic text is to transform the external into the internal ... And each transformation opens up the possibilities of transformation itself.
Nonsense, like art--indeed as something of a cousin to art--can shake the pre-supposed assumptions we boundary ourselves with. How large, for instance, are we? In our own eyes, we certainly seem rather large. Who is to say that anything is "as wide as the sky"? Or that a mouse is small? In comparison to what? Microbes? Galaxies? She catalogues a variety of folk-lore and literary references to size--from Jonathanisms like "There was a man in Boston who was so large when a babe that is was impossible to name him all at once" to Alice's disappearing down the rabbit hole, wondering: "'in my going out altogether, like a candle, ... what I shall be like then?'" (101) For the brief span of the joke or the fable, the song (think of the popularity of "Puff the Magic Dragon" even with adults) or the novel, we leave this world, and if we are lucky, come closer to seeing--or at least sensing--how arbitrary our daily assumptions are. "Exaggeration and miniaturization ... are characteristic of all in-between states, all states of being other-than-in-the-proper place" (103). Again, I would say that poetry and all the arts give us means to stand in such "in-between states," with the hope of re-engaging our own
assumptions about living and what the world is made of. Just because our culture has banished such in-between play to the isolated pockets of Las Vegas and Hollywood, cartoons and the mockeries of WWF matches, whereas for many cultures mask-making and elaborate festivals have involved the whole society in elaborate games of play and face-changing, does not make her point, or the importance of nonsense and play, any less essential. Indeed, I would say that because the lines between play and life have been so rigidly drawn in our culture, and maybe even most especially in our schools, the need for a return to play is all that much more essential.

Hans-George Gadamer will supply us with a final note, one that adds new textures to the underlying melody of these reflections. Like Bateson, Huizinga, Sutton-Smith and Stewart, he finds play functioning at all levels of society, "in ritual, in the administration of justice, in social behavior" (124). Like Coleridge, he sees art performing a kind of play in the basic ways human beings get things done. In his essay, "The Play of Art," he says: "Human production encounters an enormous variety of ways of trying things out, rejecting them, succeeding or failing. 'Art' begins precisely there, where we are able to do otherwise" (125--emphasis mine).
Ah--there's a key phrase: "where we are able to do otherwise..." Daily human productions by nature "stand there available for use," whereas for Gadamer, as for Heidegger (who was his teacher, by the way), "the work of art refuses to be used ... it has something of the 'what if' character that we recognized as an essential feature of play" ("Play of Art," 126). Play keeps our wits alive--and art serves an essential form of play, keeping us open at an essential core where our "worlds" are formed and reformed.

Art, for Gadamer, as well as being bound up in "festival" and the operation of "symbol-making," is playful at its heart. He does not hesitate to use the term "mimesis" as a way to name what art does. But not just mimesis in the form of pure mimicry, either of parody, fantasy, or reproduction, but of supplying us with the tools to see ourselves in far more essential ways. He says:

The play of art is not some substitute dream-world in which we can forget ourselves. On the contrary, the play of art is a mirror that through the centuries constantly arises anew, and in which we catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar. (130)

We may not be fully free, he says, except in the play of art, bound so often as we are to conventions of the societies in which we find ourselves. Art is play, a sort of play that is "less the opposite of seriousness than the vital ground of spirit in nature ... [where] ... our forms
of play are forms of our freedom" (130). I shall have occasion to talk about the importance of play for that notion freedom as I move now into a study of text and image as they shape the very world-making processes that Gadamer, Coleridge and Stewart, among others, have helped us here to unveil.
CHAPTER 5

THE COMPLEX INTERPLAY OF IMAGE AND TEXT

ABSTRACT: To teach poetry in our time is to grapple with how images are created and processed, in our individual consciousness and in society at large. Poems, I will claim here, are intricately connected with visuality, so that all that has been said above about metaphor feeding a physical approach to thought, and play opening up metaphor's deeper possibilities, turns on its head one more time with the introduction of how visual images differ from or add to verbal ones, creating that "complex interplay" between image and text that WJT Mitchell and others claim is so much a part of the working of society.

Here I admit that poetic imagery is naturally tied to visual imagery to be effective, but go on to trace some of the 20th and 21st century problems within those two realms. I look at the way images of all kinds (from childhood toys to how our lawns should look) step in the way, at times, of us seeing anything "with fresh eyes." Similarly, I look at the problems of an over-reliance on the poetic image, an aesthetic that, according to Marjorie Perloff, has run its course. I suggest some ways that poetry--and all the arts--can renew themselves, not by ignoring the problem but by seeking ways to physicalize education, giving kids contact with the physical world, as well as by opening up the field for poetic play to include the media world, as a way of addressing the image-stereotypes that Mitchell says thwart our perception of who we are and where we might be going.

5.1 Ekphrasis and Metaphor: Poetry and the Visual Arts

To embrace a view of poetry and language that is based in metaphor, physicality and play, as I have done, is ultimately to embrace an ekphrastic view of the written word, or at least the poetic one. Simplistically stated,
there's a cyclical process at work whenever we write or speak: When we make metaphors that create pictures in the reader's or the listener's mind, or more accurately, the reader or listener creates pictures out of what we write or say, consciously or unconsciously playing with the metaphors or signs within which our words work. We are making images, calling on the reader or listener to conjure those pictures in their minds out of the air. Poetry and fiction, of course, rely most heavily on such ekphrastic work. The poem or story that does not "take us there" can hardly move us or bring us new ideas. If we do not see ourselves climbing the trees in Frost's "Birches," or the world swirling out of control in Yeats' "Second Coming," it's doubtful we'll make much meaning out of the poems--or any other poems--either.

There is thus, WJT Mitchell has pointed out, nothing all that different between writing a poem about a painting and writing "a description of a kumquat or a baseball game" (PT 159). It is a matter of projected seeing or of sensorially recounting that game, that piece of fruit, that memory, just as a painting might bring us a scene from history, a vague impression of a circus or a field, or in the case of portraiture, a beloved family member or a figure from the distant past. Paintings and photographs, and fiction and poetry bear a strong resemblance then. All hope to conjure worlds we can enter, trusting that we as watchers
or readers will "not look down" to see that the painting or
the poem is literally standing nowhere at all.

Such is the "ekphrastic wish" that Mitchell discusses
(PT 156), the deep desire of the painter or poet to capture
that realm of the "other," the world that cannot be said or
"brought over" into the chosen medium. Neither poems nor
paintings build fences or cities; rather they shape our
ability to participate in the physical worlds we find
ourselves in, to "see" that fence, to "know" that city...

Poet after poet in the 20th century has probed this
interchange between visual and verbal imagery, starting with
William Carlos Williams and Rainer Maria Rilke in its early
years. Both studied hard the work of sculptors and painters,
talking with visual artists, aiming in their poems to catch,
in Rilke's case, the spirit of a panther in words the way
Rodin might in bronze; in Williams' case, to make his poems
move with unmediated commentary, to be pure form, a record
of "the thing itself" (see Dijkstra, 168). Pound's Imagism
movement too sought to do the same thing: to rely on things
and images to carry meaning, and not the writer's authorial
voice (Pratt, 29). Wallace Stevens, Frank O'Hara, Denise
Levertov--poet after poet as the century unfolded sought
that ekphrastic purity: to make "the moment in the world"
stand fresh before our eyes.
In a way, each poem "worth its salt" gives us a "way of seeing" itself, of entering the space it evokes in a way that is peculiar to that poem or that poet, that does more than "describe" but rather conjures what it might have been like to be there. We might take for an example Gary Snyder's "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout":

\begin{verbatim}
Down valley a smoke haze
Three days heat after five days rain
Pitch glows on the fir cones,
Across rocks and meadows,
Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read,
A few friends, but they are in cities.
Drinking cold snow water
From a tin cup, looking down for miles
Through high, still air.       (3)
\end{verbatim}

Influenced by Buddhist philosophy as much or more than modernist aesthetics, Snyder's poem nearly removes the self-gives us that world from a high vantage point, the quick sensory details yielding a presence that can almost be inhaled. By bleeding most of the verbs out of the poem, Snyder emphasizes the thing-ness, the way Williams always thought to do. This world is sharp, clear, as its language is. It's full of facts, with just enough adjective/verbal flourish "pitch glows" to awaken each of the senses.

The same could be said for Yeats's "The Second Coming": it opens up a world that we need to learn to see. Yeats doesn't "back up" to give a suitable explanation for where we are going; no, we are thrust in (a "thrown projection"
indeed) to a world we can hardly know, until we start to
swim with the images. Here's the opening:

  Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
  The falcon cannot hear the falconer.  (91)

This is more symbol-based than the Snyder. At least we
question more whether we are to picture a real falconer, or
a kind of god-like figure trying to control the world (the
falcon?). Still, the central image of chaos continues:

  Things fall apart, the center cannot hold,
  Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
  The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and
everywhere,
  The ceremony of innocence is drowned...

Again, we're clearly in a more symbolic land than "Mid-
August..." No calm drinks of snow-water here. Yet we are
asked just as powerfully to invent our place to see this
world. We must play with the imagery, we must make sense of
whatever the "blood-dimmed tide" might conjure.

  The same with Issa's little poem:

  The man pulling radishes
  pointed my way
  with a radish.  (transl., Robert Hass - 156)

Much simpler, but no less subtle. Issa "paints" a mental
picture in ten words. One that seems to me to be just as
hard to get out of one's head as Snyder's or Yeats'. We
"see" with the radish-pointer. We follow Issa down the road.
Would it have been any different to imagine these poems
having been written about paintings?
My main point, then, is one drawn from Mitchell. Each poem creates a little symbol—a reference to a perceived or invented world—an entrance back into that world (the way a painting can bring back a historical period...). It is something of a "visual art," as I have claimed before. It's certainly doing something that's a lot closer to what painting is doing than it is to what an editorial or an article in an encyclopedia is. As Mitchell and others have claimed: the strict divisions between word and image, visual and verbal, may be too arbitrary anyway. It's more like there's a continuum of images (see Mitchell's chart in *Iconology*, 10), from the graphic to the literary, each acting in its own way as "characters on the stage of history" (*Iconology*, 9). Find a painting of a pilgrim in the 1600s, pull up a photograph of a dustbowl refugee from the U.S. heartland in the 1940s, conjure an image of a hitchhiker in the 1960s—you have images which would evoke a time period, which indeed moved through their times as "figures" that directed thinking. The same figures in literature, be they in the old Russian "Way of the Pilgrim" or Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* or Kerouac's *On the Road*, would provide something of the same "figure" as their visually based counterparts. Even if the mechanism of their arrival is somewhat divergent.
Mieke Bal, the Dutch art historian, has argued for just such an awareness of the "interplay" between text and image. "'Verbality' or word-ness is as indispensable in visual art as visuality or image-ness is in verbal art" (On Meaning Making, 212). "Signs" after all (her stated mission is to bring a working model of semiotics into art interpretation) are often equally visual and verbal. A painting does not exist "purely" in the world of paint, but in our dialogue with that paint, be it representational or abstract. We "read" the visual clues of a painting. We visualize the images of a written text (Bal, Reading Rembrandt, 19). What could be more useful in helping students make use of the multilayered ways we "see" the world through words and pictures?

5.2 Image/Text and the Colonization of Experience

There is, however, a bit of a fly in the ointment, a flaw in the soup, a snag in the weave. For the power of representation, on all fronts, from the visual to the verbal, has grown immensely, in this "age of mechanical reproduction," to borrow Walter Benjamin's phrase. Everywhere there are IMAGES for us to emulate or critique. Radio reporters describe in great detail the conditions of the Gulf War, just as scenes from Vietnam spread across the evening news were said to undermine much of the public's support for that war. W.J.T. Mitchell contends, "we live
ever more in a new image-repertoire of stereotypes ... publicity images with human beings trapped inside of them" (Picture Theory, 390). If he is right, as I believe he is, the role of perception within the functioning of the imagination takes on added significance. Both "language and imagery have become enigmas," he claims, "prison-houses which lock away understanding from the world" (Iconology, 8). To understand how we see the world--and how those stereotypes come to be--would be crucial to re-orienting ourselves (and students as well) toward a richer, fuller experience of the world (a more engaged world view) and our place within it.

To define the workings of perception in our era takes on a weird twist, starting with the question of whether we actually see the world at all. The power of received images--from tv, from advertizing, from movies and posters, even from our own photographs--has become so strong, some have said, as to erase whatever actual connection we may have once had with a physical, perceivable world, and replaced it with, as Mitchell puts it, "an age of hyperrealism, in which the technical mastery of illusion and realism is so complete that it offers itself as an aesthetic in its own right or puts itself at the service of totalizing fantasies" (358). He gives the example of "Disneyworld's wave pool [which] advertises itself as 'better than a day at the beach'"--and
one could posit dozens of other examples to symbolize how the fantastical invention of worlds has replaced a more physical investigation of the world within our daily consciousness. Yards become lawns, animals become cartoon characters, meals become packages, and the weather (or sex itself) becomes something we watch on a screen, far removed from anything we might significantly touch or experience deeply.

Norman Bryson would concur. As I've mentioned before, he sees our age as one in which "representation is in the process of putting the finishing touches to its colonization of the real" (223). The colonial reference seems fitting: wherever we live, whatever we may be, is hardly ours any more; what we once were or knew, has been taken over by forces quite beyond our control, made not fully ours. (In contrast, Bryson associates "the real" with our experience of the body, which he contends lies beyond our representational grasp; refusing in itself to be re-presented, it constitutes whatever it is that we experience at base.) Art for Bryson moves now within this strange dynamic, bringing into our perception glimpses of what might be beyond our easy conceptions. He sees Cindy Sherman's work, for example, as doing something of that--breaking rather forcefully the body back into our experience, reminding us that our neat little patterns and cartoon-like packages are hardly close
to what it means to have a body, to experience pain, or love, or death. To "know the real" (which must be something close to what it means to perceive at all), we would need to break through our own colonization. We would need to know the body again, to find places where our perception might stretch past our easy (and sometimes deadly or confining) stereotypes.

My task is not so much to prove Bryson's or Mitchell's contentions, but to see what they might mean for perception as it connects to imagination, especially in the lives of today's students. How different IS it for them than it was for students a hundred years or so ago? When four year olds see themselves emulating the body-thrusts of sex-stars like Brittany Spears--as an example of the colonization of our bodies by the new "image-repertoire of stereotypes"--one can ask: what's left of US? Will the imagination be able to survive the onslaught of such received roles and stereotypes? What might art's role be in that process, as the place where images are created? What's poetry's role, as the craft where metaphors are born? Will art or poetry or childhood itself be able to stand in such a wind? Close to forty years ago, W.S. Merwin wondered if "the experience of being human, that gave rise to the arts in the first place, can continue to be nourished in a world contrived and populated by nothing but humans" (271). That is, will we have imagination, will we have original and meaningful
perceptions, if we do not know ourselves as something other than versions of stereotypes Mitchell details?

My hunch is--and my experience teaching poetry-in-the-schools tells me--that much of "the real" in students still remains within them. We still have bodies, after all, and the basic realities of earth still control us, even if they're more and more beyond our basic consciousness. It's just that such "realness" stays often untapped, behind a wall of convenient stereotypes. One wouldn't guess, by outside appearance and attitude, that the girl in the leather jacket and spiked hair is fascinated by the idea of what it would be like to ride on a dolphin. Or that another, hidden amidst the crop of anonymous, "preppie" (i.e. "good") students writing poetry on a gym floor, could conjure the line, "Age is a biproduct of splendor" and know something of the mystery in her words. That is: I believe students walk around quite hidden INSIDE their bodies, which on the outside conform to any number of typical categories (jock, socialite, serious student, neo-hippie, drop-out, etc.), with a wide range of complex emotions and understandings of "the human dilemma" and the beauties of the world they frequently have nowhere safe to express. But I worry: for how long will they hang on to, or even continue to be aware of, the subtleties of their own experience, or the intuitive "tellings" of their bodies, as the forces Mitchell describes become all the more ubiquitous and compelling? Will they be
able to see a field, sit down in a mass of weeds, or go walking down a street at night, without cringing, without the received images of the "hyperreal" re-placing what they are able to touch and see?

Scott Russell Sanders expressed my fear in a talk I heard him give. He told the story of going to Alaska to speak about the power of place to a group of native Inuit. In the corner of the room was an Inuit boy of 15 or so, dressed in a Indiana Hoosiers t-shirt, with his head down, mostly pretending to be asleep. He perked his head up only when Sanders mentioned being from Indiana, and the boy wanted to know if he'd met Bobby Knight (falling back to inertia when the answer was "no"). Bobby Knight and Indiana basketball for this child appears to be what Mitchell means when he talks about "publicity images with human beings trapped inside of them". They are what Guy Debord refers to when he says, "The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (quoted in Jay, 381). Where is his "real" body for the 15-year-old in Sanders' story? Where is the place where he actually IS? What is his perception of anything around him?

Of course, it has always been hard to know oneself or to see the world. Peter Brueghel the Elder, in the 16th century, gave us a powerful illustration of this in his
drawing of Elck. The scene is of a man hunting through an array of trash, full of baskets and lanterns and chessboards and bundles, with versions of himself everywhere--playing tug-of-war, hiding in a barrel, disappearing in the distance on some sort of journey. And central to us is one version of Elck, peering like Diogenes into a lantern, as if to discover something significant. Behind him is a frame for a painting, at the bottom of which are the words (in Dutch): "Nobody knows himself" (Stechow, 26 & 29). The implication is that even in 1558, when this work was done, thoughtful
people knew the difficulty of breaking through the mess of the world, through the stereotypes and illusions, to a stronger sense of what it means to see ourselves.

The difference for us now is that the power of representation has become so strong as to create a kind of straight-jacket on our perceptions. Perhaps this comes from our trusting in the power of sight too much. Martin Jay suggests so, in his book *Downcast Eyes* referred to in Chapter Three, tracing our strong belief in the abilities of our sight to define the world at least as far back as the Renaissance. Western perspective gave us a means to "lock in" the world, becoming, in John Berger's phrase, not so much a window on what-is-out-there, but "a safe in which the visible [world could be] deposited" [Jay, 58]. Such currency had immense weight in conquering the world, though not so much in knowing it. Jay gives us Walter Ong's view of how along with such emphasis on ocularity, we grew in our ability to collect and name things, but also entered a period of "the depersonalization of the external world, and the glorification of observation as the only valid way of knowing" [67].

So we came, with ever-increasing advancement in representation abilities (perspective drawing --> the camera --> moving pictures, etc.), to gather in the world but not so much to perceive it or know it. In other words, if the route to overdetermined stereotypes was via a too-heavy
reliance on sight as our main source of understanding, then any "way out" would have to include a quite different approach to what perception entails, one not confined to sight alone as the source of experience. To investigate the renewal of perception, we'd have to come to understand the whole nature of sight differently, or even how sight is codified into language and meaning. The surrealists would be useful, as Krauss has claimed (see Chapter Four), in reaching into levels of change that "go against the grain," that seek new associations and surprise. But so also might John Ruskin, even though Krauss places him as one of the arch-priests of opticality. For at base he bids us return to perception with a fresh spirit, not to see what we have been told is there, but to let it guide us. This was no mere matter of recording. He was quite aware of sight's limitations. Note such admonitions as:

Such is always the mode in which the highest imaginative faculty seizes its materials. It never stops at the crusts or the ashes, of outward images of any kind; it ploughs them all aside, and plunges into the very central fiery heart...
[Modern Painters, V.2, quoted in Fishman, 30]

This is not surface-seeing--but engagement in the PHYSICAL act of perception. As Fishman puts it, what we can learn from Ruskin is that "it is essentially the intuitive character of the imagination which enables the artist to grasp the inner truth of phenomena" (30). Ruskin is aware that no matter how much we try to see, something escapes us.
He counseled drawing students: "Place an object as close to the eye as you like, there is always something in it which you cannot see" (quoted in Clark, 176). How distant is this from what Krauss would have us be aware of? From what the surrealists contended?

Perception is inevitably wrapped up in our biases, in the limitations as much as in the powers of our visual repertoire. Therefore, perception needs imagination--needs a "plunging down into the very central fiery heart" of things to get at any genuine re-experience of our experience. It opens us, the way Jeannette Winterson says art does--objecting to our easy, daily categories. Shaking us down to who we are, bidding us see with our whole selves. Like a modern day Ruskin, she bids us step out of the readymade frames we too easily place upon our perceptions.

I believe poetry may be a route to such a resurrection of the multi-dimensional nature of perception. For "to see" in poetry is more than an optical process. As often as not, the most evocative metaphors in poems are the ones that appeal synesthetically to the whole body of perception. Take Pattiann Rogers' poem below as an example, one which might teach us something about seeing with the whole body:

SUPPOSE YOUR FATHER WAS A REDBIRD

Suppose his body was the meticulous layering
Of graduated down which you studied early,
Rows of feathers increasing in size to the hard-splayed
Wine-gloss tips of his outer edges.

Suppose, before you could speak, you watched
The slow spread of his wing over and over,
The appearance of that invisible appendage,
The unfolding transformation of his body to the airborne.
And you followed his departure again and again,
Learning to distinguish the red microbe of his being
Far into the line of the horizon.

Then today you might be the only one able to see
The breast of a single red bloom
Five miles away across an open field.
The modification of your eye might have enabled you
To spot a red moth hanging on an oak branch
In the exact center of the Aurorean Forest.
And you could define for us, "hearing red in the air,"
As you predict the day pollen from the poppy Will blow in from the valley.

Naturally you would picture your faith arranged
In filamenteed principles moving from pink
To crimson at the final quill. And the red tremble Of your dream you might explain as the shimmer Of his back lost over the sea at dawn.
Your sudden visions you might interpret as the uncreasing Of heaven, the bones of the sky spread,
The conceptualized wing of the mind untangling.

Imagine the intensity of your revelation
The night the entire body of a star turns red
And you watch it as it rushes in flames
Across the black, down into the hills.

If your father was a redbird,
Then you would be obligated to try to understand
What it is you recognize in the sun
As you study it again this evening

Pulling itself and the sky in dark red
Over the edge of the earth. (18-19)
Notice how her lines simultaneously address the body, the senses, along with memory and the perspective of personal experience. To live in her poem is to re-engage the nature of taking in the world, the "strangeness that is our lives," as Stephen Dunn put it. We come to see from inside the nest, as if we were inside a metaphor for Bergson's preocular perceptual experience. There is memory in this seeing. There is re-engagement with the particularities of color and dimension (as the far-away becomes immediately large). Rogers' poem ignites a fractal beauty, to use Alice Fulton's phrase, that poetry is after (55-59), not a single-point perspective, but a multi-layered engagement with being lifted out of our comfort zones, mixing visual imaging and linguistic play into one frame. If our everyday worlds lock us into received metaphors and readymade relationships, poetry asks us--requires of us--a freshness that is always in need of renewal. My experience of it, especially when teaching children, is that it opens up perception in ways that reach beyond pure opticality, that it can engage us with seeing-deeper the way Ruskin recommends; and that it can, when fully experienced, "put us off balance," off-balanced from our traditional grid, the way Krauss and the Surrealists would have us be, at the heart of where perception meets imagination, in the metaphoric furnace of meaning. Such is the premise of my study.
5.3 THE TENDENCY OF ALL MEDIA TO HINDER ENGAGEMENT

Before seeking tentative "answers" to the problems of representation and imagery in our time, perhaps it would be to consider the function of all sorts of media in processing human experience. For although I think there are very specific ways that the forces of our current image-explosion has "upped the ante" in terms of how distant we are from the environments in which we live, there is a way that human technologies and devices have always done so. Of course there is a deep irony here: the tools for knowing (which in some ways define what media are) become just as much tools for not-knowing.

a. Language as media--and its tendency to thwart perception

Language itself can get in the way of direct experience. We name a thing and it becomes, without our much realizing it, what we have called it, well removed from its own substance. Philosophical descriptions of such a process abound, but I will stick with a situation that I recently observed. It concerns an exhibition at the Columbus Museum of Art of photographs from the Depression made by members of the Photo League (1930-1952). I had occasion to take several groups of students through this show--and invariably as soon as they heard the word Depression, it seemed that they began
to see the whole show as about poverty and sadness. After several weeks, I began to avoid the room during my tours, not having found a way to open up other emotional elements in their viewing of these wonderful photographs. Finally, on the last day of the exhibition, I had a hunch. I took a group of eight fifth graders into the first room of the gallery, gave them a quick introduction to the work and then asked each student to look around, find a photograph he or she liked and see what was going on in it. They came back quickly with the usual responses that the people were poor, the kids were sad because they had no place to play, etc. With no intention to deny the political and social realities of poverty and the Depression, I still wanted them to look closer. I asked them to go back and find photographs that had other emotions besides "sad" or "angry" or "lost." The results were stunning. In a manner of minutes, by placing different labels in our heads, we were able to find a wide variety of photographs with all sorts of other emotional dimensions: joy, pride, power, curiosity. For example, we found one of boys playing on the dilapidated side of a building with great abandon. None seemed to be bemoaning their lack of a proper playground: they were curious, adventurous, inventive, but hardly "depressed." Not to say that there isn't a great deal about poverty, now or then, that evokes pity and despair--and conditions which
call for action. I only wish to point out that the words we
use to assume we know what something is about can distract
or mask us from observing what is there, even in something
so seemingly simple as a black and white photograph. As many
have said, words can become labels and labels can become
walls or deceptrors.

b. Other media as attempts to put "reality" at bay

All sorts of human media and inventions set up screens
between us and whatever immediate worlds we can find.
Mosquito netting, for one thing, prevents us from "knowing
better" those tiny lovers-of-blood (I'm in favor of them).
Automobiles suction us past territory so fast we barely see
it (I'm not so in favor of them). As Michael Pollan has
shown, in his wonderful essay, "Why Mow? The Case Against
Lawns," the American suburb, with its obsessionally trimmed-
green order, puts at bay the decay of leaves, the tracking
of mud across rug-doctored carpets, or (when transferred to
a intensely-watered Phoenix location) the invasion of desert
sands. Lawns, Pollan contends, are an attempt to NOT know
the land we live on, with all its particularities and
geographies, but to create a vast carpet of sameness from
one coast to the other. "Our lawns exist less here than
there," Pollan says. "They drink from the national stream of
images, lift our gaze from the real places we live and fix
it on unreal places elsewhere. Lawns are a form of
television" (229). And he posits gardens that conform to the growing conditions of their climate and location as quite the opposite, where one can come to know the place where one lives, and what grows there in what season.

Children's toys as well, as "representations" of the world, could be and have viewed as a primary means which we consciously or unconsciously give kids to help them make their worlds. Barbie as a cultural American icon, according to Mary Rogers, fulfilled such a role when first introduced in 1959. Many--including myself--have long objected to Barbie's false modeling of the female body, a model so unreal and "perfect" as to thwart most other views of what a woman can or should look like. Much as the doll has no doubt contributed to sexual stereotyping, Rogers claims the full story is more complex than that popular conception. First of all, Rogers claims that Barbie filled a niche in American culture. In an age of vast social change, Barbie gave girls something to "believe" in. In some oddly prescient way, says Rogers, the popular doll let girls in on the changes about to appear in their lives over the next decade. (Given the doll's immense popularity, she must have fulfilled SOME deep need of the times.) Says Rogers: "There was something outrageous, even rebellious, about this toy made to look like a thin, well-developed, attractive woman who was single and not the least unhappy about it" (144). Perhaps she gave
girls the courage to care about themselves, to not always serve a man, at least not in the same way their mothers had. Sure, emulating Barbie's physique and life-style may have sold girls a false image. But that's not the deeper problem. Rogers contends that the real "bill of goods" may have been more subtly dishonest: Barbie did not prepare girls for the doubts that emerge as one matures, for instance. "Her identity was a hall of mirrors, a maze of possibilities ... [But] what Barbie lacked was confusion. Never did she face hard choices; never was she morally at odds with herself or uncertain about how to proceed" (144).

So it seems that America may have subconsciously adopted such things as lawns and Barbies as means of symbolically controlling nature—a mediation of experience of such basic elements of the earth as grass and what it means to have a sexual body—which in some ways have contributed to our distance from those realities of nature as well. Any number of examples of the most popular items of our culture could be said to be performing something of the same function—that of media mediating between us and whatever might be "out there" and whatever may be said to exist down in the interior of our own lives.

c. The Photographic Explosion

Of course it could be said, to recall the above examples, that such fiercely-held-to icons as the American
lawn and Barbie do not put down roots, so to speak, without a good deal of help from the semiotics of image-text put forth in advertising and other image-shaping media. It could be said that we like lawns and Barbies because we like how things look at a distance (up close, they're a lot messier and in need of trimming). Susan Sontag digs at this issue in her still-compelling essays from the mid-70s, collected in On Photography. Much as she admits to being in love with black and white prints, she can't help reflecting on photography's ability to put distance between ourselves and experience. "Photography," she says, is "a powerful instrument for depersonalizing our relation to the world" (167). We can pick up a photograph from another time or place and feel that we almost "know" that person or that scene. While that might in some ways be appealing to us, giving us a wider visual contact with history, for instance, it also distorts the meaning of what it means "to know." Do we possess knowledge of a person or a place merely by owning a photograph of it? Sometimes it can seem so. It can make "real" events on the other side of the earth more dramatic. At the same time, she says, the photograph can make "familiar things small, abstract, much farther away. It offers, in one easy, habit-forming activity, both participation and alienation in our own lives and those of others" (167).
Of course there are layers of complexity to her argument. While she maintains that photographs are a "way of creating distance" (164) and that "To possess the world in the form of images is ... to reexperience the unreality and remoteness of the real," she makes no mention of how literary images can succeed in doing the same thing. She does not consider the ways that both photographs, like poems, can do what art always does: put us at a distance that helps us to question "what is going on," rather than just swallow it. That problem aside, it's not just the photograph itself that bothers her, it's the ready availability of photographs in their profusion all around us. The ubiquity of images stemming from photographs and their manipulations means that we take them for granted/take them FOR reality--indeed, seldom do the kind of questioning referred to above. Instead, she contends that photographs remove us from history and our own experience, as much as taking us back into it. By disconnecting us from the context of the shot, photographs can weaken our experience of time. "Photographs," she says, "are ... not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it, or a replacement" (165).

The art critic John Berger, in his essay responding to Sontag, to a large extent agrees, and contends that such distancing can have immense personal, and more importantly, political consequences. He says:
The industrialized, 'developed' world, terrified of the past, blind to the future, lives within an opportunism which has emptied the principle of justice of all credibility. Such opportunism turns everything--nature, history, suffering, other people, catastrophes, sport, sex, politics--into spectacle. And the implement used to do this--until the act becomes so habitual that the conditioned imagination may do it alone--is the camera ... The camera records in order to forget" (54-55).

The only hope, he contends, is "if we could begin to supply the contexts that the camera erases--if we could come to be the camera's memory" (57). By using "words, comparisons, signs [to create] a context for a printed photograph," he contends, we might do what Mitchell suggests: begin to understand imagery's power over us (Iconology, 31). We might, so to speak, bring the poetry of life back to the photograph, blending words with the image, and returning both back into the physical and political realities of life. But that's assuming that our words don't run into some of the same distancing problems as our imagery. As we've already explored in my example from the Depression photographs, words tend to replace what we might see with what the words precondition us to see. And, as we shall consider in the discussion of Marjorie Perloff's ideas below, they too can be tainted with their own kind of "image-dust" from a years of over-use.
5.4 POETRY AND THE PROBLEM OF THE DEADENING IMAGE

A world mediated by images becomes problematical when those images are taken for "real," when they become so assumptive that we no longer look past them to check for ourselves, or so pretty and appealing that we'd rather live in them than in the less pleasant or more ambiguous realities the earth and our actual bodies have given us. Maybe in some secret place, we even want it that way. In her aforementioned book on Barbie Culture, Mary Rogers quotes philosopher Susan Bordo on the ability of our wishful-sight to overcome what we know: "We all 'know' that Cher and virtually every other female star over the age of twenty-five is the plastic product of numerous cosmetic surgeries on face and body. But ... such 'knowledge' is ... unable to cast a shadow of a doubt over the dazzling, compelling, authoritative images themselves" (quoted in Rogers, 19). To know our true being, to know our history--the billion year history of the earth, the miraculous growth of living things upon it, and our own more recent but no less miraculous development--is not to live in a sanitized fantasy. Any art, and in particular any poetry, which allows us to stay in the fantasy is not being true to its calling.

Such is the argument Marjorie Perloff makes in her book Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media. Her idea is that our everyday use of language, and mainstream
poetry's language as well, has become so bland and familiar as to dull our awareness of the world rather than engage it. For examples of ordinary speech, she refers to such recent phenomena as the extreme similarity of network newscasters who, despite differences of race, age and gender, and "slight differences in accent ... use the same language, an up-to-date Standard English, whose vocabulary, syntax, idiom, and even inflection are reassuringly uniform" (36). She quotes Michel de Certeau, from his wonderful essay, "The Jabbering of Social Life" (1986): "Seized from the moment of awakening by the radio ... we walk all day through a forest of narratives, journalistic, advertising and televised" (37). How do we break through this profusion of nearly meaningless language? Perloff asks. Getting off a plane and nodding to the stewardess's farewell, she ponders, "Who is to know [if we are having a nice day] or not?" (40).

In such a world, similar indeed to the one Sontag evokes as a ubiquitous display of context-less photographs, or Mitchell describes as full of images of hyperrealism, disconnected from the grit of actual earth, actual people, Perloff says that we've created, at least in America, a situation where the generic response or example is often preferred over the actual, more ambiguous or troubling one. We need quick-response words, full of stereotyped categories--and much of our poetry now, she says, fits the
bill nicely. Such a situation has come about, she says, in a round-about way, beginning with imagism and Pound's call for a poetry that spoke through pictures and objects rather than fancified language. Pound's theories can still sound compelling, she admits, and may have served its function for a time, but, almost a century later, even our poetic images have become awfully similar to those sound-byte references so much a part of talk-show language. What we get, according to Perloff, in the poets who have continued to work with the image as their main poetic tool, are "little movies" that are, in essence, not much more than miniature models of what we get from the rest of the media world. One of the examples she chooses is from Philip Levine:

To Cipriano, In The Wind

Where did your words go,
Cipriano, spoken to me 38 years ago in the back of Peerless Cleaners, where raised on a little wooden platform you bowed to the hissing press and under the glaring bulb the scars across your shoulders--"a gift of my country"--gleamed like old wood. "Dignidad," you said into my boy's wide eyes, "without is no riches." And Ferrante, the dapper Sicilian coatmaker, laughed. What could a pants presser know of dignity? That was the winter of '41, it would take my brother off to war, where you had come from, it would bring great snowfalls, graying in the streets, and the news of death racing through the halls of my school.
Some may find this poem moving—and full of telling imagery (the scars shining like old wood; the snowfalls graying in the street). Levine is known for his gritty-world picture-poems. Perloff points out other aspects in his medium, however, finding in his poem "representations ... one meets in the world of ... [the very] politicians and media people the sensitive poet supposedly distrusts. Cipriano, the pants presser, and Ferrente, 'the dapper Sicilian / coat-maker,' are true sentimental sitcom figures, even as the poet's 'sensitive' memories of World War II have the inflections of a miniseries like *The Winds of War* ... As we read 'To Cipriano,' we can easily visualize the screen version..." (44). Our poetry, to a large extent, has come to fit in too nicely with the world of the media at large—playing around with borrowed images that don't come much closer than our advertisements and talk-shows. She questions how well "imageful language" can meet the task of what poetry must do—which is to revitalize everyday language—if bland, endlessly-repeated images is exactly what advertising speech and imagery supplies us with on a daily basis. Her suspicions, and those of other poets and critics she quotes, have "a good deal to do with the actual production and dissemination of images in our culture" (57). Much as Pound and other imagists sought to create "radiant clusters" of images by which to illumine the world, she says that even by
"the early sixties, when 'radiance' had itself become a product sold by most cosmetic firms and soap manufacturers, the image had become problematic poetic property" (76-77).

Within such a landscape of endless image-consumption as that described by Perloff, Sontag, and Mitchell, what's a poet (or any artist) to do? Certainly not just create more endless and easily-consumed images. Yet if imagery is so deeply and inseparably involved in how we speak and make sense of the world (as I've established in Chapter Two), how shall anyone avoid it? The problem remains the same whether one is facing the imagery of poetry, of advertisements and the movies, or of deadeningly-stereotypical country-western songs. How to use language at all which does not immediately eat its way back to something-that's- already-been-said feeding something-that's-already-been-thought so many times before? It is under the cloud of that question within which I will have to develop the analysis of my study.

5.5 RECLAIMING THE IMAGE (TENTATIVE "ANSWERS")

a. The Re-Physicalization of Learning

The first steps in addressing these concerns could in some ways be quite simple, building on the ideas laid out in Chapter Three: Get physical... Pick up the most ordinary thing and study it, describe it as if you'd never seen before... Go outside... Walk... Get out of the enclosed
rooms that so mediate between us and the weather, the terrain (be it urban, rural or suburban) and look around... Try methods of looking that involve more than just gazing at the landscape... Invent... Find a different angle from which to sit, lie, roll... How often do we do this in schools, except in "blow-off-steam" time at recess?

Gary Paul Nabhan for instance, a naturalist who has written a number of essays about children's relationships with the natural environment, reflects on his own growing up in northern Indiana, along the shores of Lake Michigan, and says that "During my first twelve years of school, I figure that my teachers offered a total of less that six uninterrupted hours in the marvelous natural laboratory at our doorstep: the Indiana Dunes, a hodgepodge of buried forests, quaking bogs, and mountains of sand. Even in a place so well-suited for nature study, my teachers kept us inside classrooms for a thousand hours for every one hour they took us into the field" (38). The same could be said for our city schools. We need to get out into the terrain and see what happens when we learn to look. Early on I spoke of the tools of poetic imagery being outmoded--as Perloff suggests--but I wonder if the tools of imagery are not so much worn out as is the way we have used them. Can poetry still be a guide to our seeing? I suspect that America is still out there to be discovered, once we turn away from the
easy-daze of our tvs. Can we not go to the museums to test our ability to see beyond ourselves and our biases? Can we not go into caves and "take in" environments with which we are unfamiliar? In the early seventies, artist Robert Smithson brought rocks from far away into his "non-site" pieces, subtly questioning whether we've not made "the map into the territory." He laid out mirrors in the landscape, as if to say: do we see back only what we expect to see, our own reflection more than what's there? Of course his agenda was not as simple as that, but we can start there. Perhaps we can take up his challenge and "go see for ourselves."

In answer to Perloff, I wonder if the tools of image poetry, freshly applied, might still guide students (and all of us) into taking in where we live in non-stereotypic ways? James Wright's "Lying in a Hammock on William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," (quoted in Chapter Two) comes to mind, with its fierce mix of all the senses. Perloff criticizes his much weaker poem, "From a Bus Window in Central Ohio, Just Before a Thunder Storm" because Wright as the purveyor of the scene "remains outside the picture frame ... a seemingly passive observer" (21) supposedly giving us images to capture a world. In "Hammock" however, he places himself within the imagery, drawing us into a sort of participatory seeing that can enchant as well as intrigue the reader. Recall his opening:
Is this a "distant observer"? I don't think so. Wright in his best poetry encourages us to be immersed in what we see--touching the soft skin of a horse's ear, taking in the presence of the animal as we stand in its shadow, acknowledging the cricket who has crawled through the screen to sing on his open book. Leaning back to see "the chicken hawk float over, looking for home," as we too might be...

To say that the imagery in Wright's poetry no longer enchants is to miss the power of language to engage us in a scene. Does it take a certain "magic," a certain poetic attunedness, to attain such a balance of inner and outer seeing? No doubt. But that does not mean that we can't continue to try, that there aren't particular skills students can accomplish which can encourage more than cursory perception.

Consider, for instance, 11th grader Caroline McEnnis's poem below, compiled as a series of fragments from ambling around a small Ohio town one weekday morning as part of a poetry-writing assignment. (I asked the class to not try to write full poems this time, but to key in on lines and sharpened observation--striving to have each line take on a "tensive" feel, an element of irony or surprise.) Her poem is clearly not a "single moment" poem the way Wright's is, but nevertheless I love how the images spill into each
other, form separate units and then begin to move back together, the way our impressions on a street often do:

Fragments

That house would be so at home somewhere else.
* Canopied by purple fairies.
* The shackled man was most courteous despite all the clatter.
* Never be locked out again - We'll lock you in while you wait.
* The house wanted a new set of earrings, so he decided to visit his friend Albany.
* He's a sweet old man, if you catch him after bathtime.
* The painting looks so violated as a shirt pattern.
* Desperate elephants will even resort to ink.
* Of course the earth is rare, there's only one.

Walking backwards with birds
* The house sags its task unfinished
* Roots grip the earth stretching for new life death is letting go

Caroline McEnnis
River Valley High School

In her own way, Caroline makes use of the wide range of senses and observations that Wright does. Where Bergson makes the claim that no series of photographs of a street
could equal the experience of walking down that street (see Chapter Three), she leads us down through the town from the inside view of a quirky, playful observer. One who does not miss the shackled prisoner being led from the small town courthouse; one who knows that birds do NOT walk backwards; one who knows that language has its ambiguous yet pointed possibilities, that it can teach us how to walk where we are (backwards or forwards) all over again. Her poem doesn't replace the walk down the street, but through a series of multiple views (like a camera with many lenses), she suggests an engaged, receptive way of walking that takes in more than what we see.

In contrast with Perloff, who would have us mostly play with new artifice in order to avoid or transform ordinary speech, I wonder if such "engaged perception" might do equally well? I'm thinking of Pattiann Roger's dramatically inventive poem, "Suppose Your Father Was A Redbird," which I analyzed earlier. Might part of what we need to do be to re-engage the tools of poetry, rather than destroy them, at least as a first step?

b. Widening the Lens

Merely re-inventing imagery in poetry will likely not be enough in itself, in order to answer the challenge of an overly-mediated world. We cannot pretend that the world of mass media has not greatly changed our cultural landscape,
stretching into every community in the developed world and far beyond that world besides. That would be like painting pictures of barns with no cars or electrical wires attached. So let's not! Let's take the world we've "fallen into" and invite it to join the poetic arena, the way Caroline does when she takes note of the painting (Van Gogh's "Starry Night" perhaps?) pasted onto a t-shirt. Like her, we can treat the intrusions of media as part of the environment and reference-points that a poet draws on. If our "world" is now a mix of pictures of national park monuments more than walks to our nearby woods, as much--or more--contained in references to the last movie that we saw as in stories our grandmothers told us, then let us bring that in as well. We don't have to repeat the imagery the ads or the movies give us--rather can we not let the writing of a poem be our digesting of the whole weirdness of the world as it comes down to us?

Take the following poem by Frank O'Hara--a poet of the 20th century who knew how to "take it all in" as well as anyone ever has:

Avenue A

We hardly ever see the moon any more
so no wonder
it's so beautiful when we look up suddenly
and there it is gliding broken-faced over the bridges
brilliantly coursing, soft, and a cool wind fans
your hair over your forehead and your memories
of Red Grooms' locomotive landscape
I want some bourbon/you want some oranges/I love the
leather
ejacket Norman gave me
and the corduroy coat David
gave you, it is more mysterious than spring, the El
Greco
heavens breaking open and then reassembling like lions
in a vast tragic veldt
that is far from our small selves and our
temporally united
passions in the cathedral of Januaries

everything is too comprehensible
these are my delicate and caressing poems
I suppose there will be more of those others to
come, as in the past so many!
but for now the moon is revealing itself like a pearl
to my equally naked heart
(355)

No, there are no references here to recent movies he's seen
(though there are in other works of his), but there is a
deep willingness not to be shy or too refined in his
references. "The leather jacket David gave you" carries as
much weight as the "El Greco" skies. Well, no, maybe not as
much. For all his talk about needing city-scapes around him,
and his love of movies and museums, O'hara's poems still
lead us, as great poetry always has, back into the largest
expanse. The leather-jacket references take their place in
his cosmology, but the larger world nearly always rushes in.
His poems do what Heidegger says poems should do--they bring
us back to an openness where the little lives we make meet
the hugeness of all we cannot comprehend. O'Hara's poems
gain from letting in his current obsessions--and those
obsessions serve to let in what is quite beyond him--the
nature of being on this earth.
c. Addressing the Stereotypes

As we look ahead to the sort of role poetry might play in a media-driven age—and as we will likely not get rid of our need for shaping our worlds through language any time soon—it's likely words in poetry will continue to have to do the kind of work that they have always done. As Jakobson says, they will have to commit "organized violence on language," to shake us out of easy habits of speaking and of assumption. If our stereotypes are stronger now—as Mitchell and so many others have said—then the task will have to be tackled with that much more commitment and ingenuity. For a last example, let us take a series of poems by poet and journalist Christopher Merrill, a writer who has seen first hand the destruction caused by the facile use of words, as a result of Slovadan Milosevic's greedy and savage politics in Bosnia. Milosevic ran his government—and his war—with a smoothly contained television campaign, continually twisting words to suit his purposes, causing the near-destruction of a whole and prosperous people along the way. The full horror of his use of lies to rev up hatred and stave off the condemnation of the world is now legend. How does a writer, from whatever background, live through such an event and still come out believing in the power of language to communicate honestly to our times? For a good number of
years, Chris could not write poetry at all. But then gradually he began these wildly surrealistic "cadenzas," built on terribly arbitrary "rules" and frameworks. Here is one. Note that the bizarre imagery hardly seems all that outlandish, given the horrific war out of which it arose. Yet Merrill's poems also seem to reach into a deeper truth, an earth-awareness that is as strongly felt as James Wright's Pine Island poem.

Return the swastikas--that's what the letter instructed us to do. There was no signature, although the canceled stamp bore the figure of a famous poet. The thieves thought our confusion was a mask. Nevertheless they offered to forge new documents for us. Our passports had expired, and we were afraid to ride our horses over the Alps--the Trinity Alps, that is, where vigilantes had turned the sawmills into training centers for the afterlife. The felled trees spiked with nails, the tribes drowned in the lake, rugs woven out of feathers: these we could return, at least in theory. Where's the poet now? we asked the thieves, who were printing up a series of manifestoes concerning the rights of bears. We had run out of fences. Feathers, too. The horses lay on the ground, in the first snow of the season. We propped a cross against the barn door and bolted it shut. We vowed not to open our mail until the spring runoff, when we could present our credentials to the guards at the pass.

(Merrill, in manuscript)

Surely this is "play for mortal stakes," to quote Frost again. But how can such outlandish examples be of use to American students--students who have not felt the horror of such a war, although by now they have at least had a taste of what international politics can do to shake up a nation?
I think, much. I took Chris's poems to a high class in the winter of 2000. First, we thought about all the roles people can be asked to play, or subconsciously fall into. We made lists such as the following: miner, judge, cheerleader, hood, cop, lawyer, mother, student, jock, sinner, saint, preacher... and others. Then I asked them to write poems where different "stereotypes" from our list performed oddly surrealistic tasks. I said not to worry about whether the tasks were technically possible or likely--just to make a "little scene" happen in each line, piling line upon line to create little, if strange, "worlds."

Here is one:

THE FORGOTTEN
The poor shop for hours in stores of wealth and class
The rebel listens and obeys the commands of everyone around him
The teacher falls behind and lets everyone pass
The liar tells the truth then weeps knowing that he was truthful
The adored stand shyly at the back where no one can find them
The believer second guesses all that seems unreal
The forgotten don't forget those who have

Ashley Harlan (12th gr)

Ashley, of course, never lived in Bosnia, and probably had read little or nothing of the racial and ethnic stereotyping which whipped up hatred and slaughter in that land. Yet she knows other stereotypes, the ones any high schooler lives with, invisibly placed like irremovable tape across the
locker of each student as one moves down the halls. Can our study be a way of un-labeling ourselves? I think her poem is a small step in that direction, even as she undercuts the stereotypes by reversing the roles. It is particularly her last line that moves me. Who has been forgotten? Maybe it's the millions of children without insurance (surely one of the strongest ironies in a country which can manage the kind of wealth exhibited on the ad pages reproduced earlier). Maybe it's those students who don't fit the categories, who slide between the cracks. For me, her poem is at least one reminder that poetry can creatively counter the strong push we feel at times to all be the same (or rather, to blindly fall into our received roles). My hope is that there are many more ways out.

CHAPTER 6

METHODOLOGY: A CASE STUDY OF AN ARTIST IN THE SCHOOLS RESIDENCY IN A SMALL TOWN OHIO HIGH SCHOOL
6.1 WHAT TYPE OF STUDY IS THIS?

As stated in Chapter One, this study is a blend of ethnographic, interventionist, and self-reflective methods. Ethnographically, I wanted to "get a picture" of their world, as much as possible through their own eyes and words. To that end, I conducted interviews to get a sense of their "world" with selected students prior to and after my time teaching poetry in their classroom. I sought to get discussions going with them concerning the places they played as children, as well as the places they frequent and value now. Secondly, I attempt to read their poems with an eye to the underlying values, experiences and self-reflection contained within. Thirdly, I hoped for them to get "pictures of their world" by taking photographs out in their communities--and having them write poems about these photographs. My intention was that the points of view and topics that they chose, in both the photographs and the writing, would tell me something about how they see and what they value about where they live.

The study is interventionist because I don't want only to get a sense of how they see their world but to weigh how a study of poetry and art changes how they see it. As I've mentioned before, and as I will spell out in my next section, I analyze their poetry and their talk for ways that
poetry has made their writing and their perception more
dynamic and inventive. Any number of words and terms could
be used to say what I'm looking for: more "connected"
description, more "personal" investment, more "precise"
metaphors, more "surprising" leaps and connections, all
blending toward shaping a more attuned consciousness of
their immediate world (and the worlds beyond). Instances of
increased use of these admittedly subjective language
devices I will term as indicating the development of a more
"engaged world view." Determining such development will be
one of the defining burdens of my study.

Finally, my study will be to some degree *self-
reflective* in a couple of ways. First of all, I am much
interested in the nature of life in small-town America,
having passed through many such places on numerous bicycle
trips and admired the outward beauty of the surrounding
fields and imagined that "neighborly" life goes on there to
a greater degree than in suburbs and cities. Having
subsequently *lived* in such a town for five years myself
after college, I know that such feelings are overly-
presumptuous on an outsider's part. People who grow up and
who live for most of their lives in such environments are
just as likely to feel isolated and bored--with little in
common with their neighbors that they see way TOO much of,
and little to do (in some cases) besides watching television
in the way of outside stimulation. Yet the beauty remains: fields, side-roads, streams and other out-of-the-way places not so enveloped in concrete, billboards and neon signs. It still seems more possible in such worlds that children growing up have played in creeks, tumbled down hills, explored old woods more than their suburban and city counterparts, simply out of having more access to such places. But is this still true? How much do they value such experiences? I have found in previous residencies that what I teach seems to resonate most strongly with such students--and I've wondered why? Is it that I pick poems which have rural subject matter--or that "image-based poems" emphasizing single moments of experience, which I tend to be partial to, also resonate with them? Yet I often introduce them to surrealist exercises--so how does that factor come into play? Is the surrealist style of looking somehow in tune with their experience? How could that be? Maybe my instinctive attuneness with Heidegger's sense of art being grounded in our deeper relationship to the earth (see Chapter Three) comes across particularly well (even without me stating it) to kids who have a naturally more grounded relationship to the surrounding land. This is not to say that poetry ONLY speaks to such conditions--or that Heidegger's ideas require such conditions to be made useful in our approach to art--only that they may be most
immediately so. Maybe the kind of language-play-grounded-in-physical-exploration-of-the-world that I aim for works best in such an environment.

As something of a "participant/observer" within the study, I want to pay attention to my role as "guest poet" in the English classroom. How much am I able to tell about "how they see their world" through the poetry they write and through our recorded interviews? How does my own thinking process change (and my view of the town change) as the lessons unfold and evolve? What am I NOT able to see? What DOESN'T get through? What exceeds my original expectations? What guesses can I make as to what they carry away?

### 6.2 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This case study lays out a series of fourteen lessons designed to test out the theoretical premises of this study and revolving around the following questions (see also Chapter One):

1) How might a more thorough grounding in metaphoric play via poetry and the arts contribute to a more engaged world view--that is, a more original, contact-based, inventive and personal connection with their own thinking, perceptual and writing processes?

2) What ways can we find to link metaphor, poetry and the visual arts more strongly with physicalized seeing, the kind of kinesthetic perception Bergson and others have argued for (see Chapter Three)?
3) How might a deeper understanding of metaphor, language-play and engaged perception help students work against cliched, stereotypical thinking? And what other methods of language play and "creative distortion" (such as those investigated by the surrealists) can we make use of involve students more strongly in their own perceptual processes?

4) How can poetry and art assist us in more productively negotiating the image-text dichotomy so central to our age and to the shaping of an engaged world view?

The theoretical groundings for these questions is laid out thoroughly in the preceding chapters of this study, but let me briefly re-define the terms of these questions--and why they matter. By metaphoric play I mean a basic stance toward perception and language which I sought to teach students as a means toward engaging the world around them. The metaphor comes from learning how to make connections between disparate realms of experience, observation, and memory. The play part involves risk. I wanted to see how much the students could come to value risk and surprise (versus the safety of the cliched phrase). This is by no means a closed question. Metaphor is often taught in high school (and in earlier school years) as "just another thing to memorize" for a test. Learning to work with it, to apply it in honest and creative ways is something that may go against a main urge of teenage life: to fit in, to NOT stand out. One of the key questions of this study involves working against this natural urge: how can we get students to trust that the way strong metaphors make us stand out is worth the
risk? And that risk is a means of opening up our perception, our learning and our understanding of ourselves?

By physicalized seeing and writing I mean something quite measurable: how did the lessons seem to engage students in trusting their sense impressions of the world--as a step toward more thoroughly engaging that world? What lessons seem to help the most in that process? Can poetry help students "pay more attention" to the immediate environment--be it a classroom, the outdoors, or an art gallery? In what ways can we encourage them to involve their own kinesthetic sense in their observation and writing? To do so, again, may work against a couple of trends in high school life: the urge to be grand and abstract in their thinking, and the tendency in some teachers to encourage such thought. One key aspect of my second question involves exploring ways that poetry might help bring the physical, sensory world back into student thinking and writing--to the end, once again, of using language to develop a more engaged world view.

Thirdly, I wanted to know how poetic play of all kinds can help break down stereotypical thinking and the preponderance of cliches so characteristic of high school poetry. Metaphor cannot perform this task alone. I wanted to try out methods of involving more dynamic sound within the poems, for one thing. Although poetry is traditionally
linked with the sound of language, too often teachers stress strict rhyme and meter techniques (which in themselves can be very limiting for beginning writers)--or they go the other way (as I often have) and avoid stressing sound elements in poetry at all. Could we hit some middle ground? Might there be elements of play in the areas of half-rhyme, assonance and the mutes which can break students out of their usual rhyming patterns--and allow them to stretch past cliche? Secondly, I wondered if we could break down the strict reliance on simple, declarative sentences in poetry, in order to break the language habits of ordinary speech. Playing with new structures, such as commands, questions, intentional fragments, irony, and surrealist devices might help students regain the wonder of working with language-as-language which Mukarovsky, Jakobson and other theorists have claimed is at the heart of poetry (see Chapter Two). I wondered if these tools might be quite as important as metaphor to shake up student writing and evoke fresh thinking. Might students, through language play, even come to SEE better? Might the two processes--of observing closely and juggling the words--actually work together, separate as they may seem?

By extension, I sought to bring in exercises (and research tools) designed to investigate "the image-text dichotomy," by which I mean W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of how
we as human beings have always woven together our worldviews from an close interplay of what we see (and visualize) and the words or meanings we articulate to make sense of those impressions (see Chapter Five). I hoped through the assignments and the follow-up interviewing and analysis, I could begin to measure ways that such a dichotomy works itself out in student poetry and discussion.

The **visual** component of my study, therefore, is essential to investigating what poetry does for students as they develop an engaged worldview. How does THEIR world look to them? What does poetry and visual art seem to have to do with how they see that world? Did their views—or rather, their TOOLS for seeing—change as we proceeded with our work together? Did they come to value the physical environment more, be it what they often think of as the "boring" places in which they live (so less dynamic than the "hyperreal" world of TV—or seemingly so)? Did they trust their own abilities more? Were they able through the poetry to value their own thinking processes—and to make stronger connections between their own memory/experience and the world at large? These are the major questions I hoped to answer as the study unfolded, via the following data collection and analysis.

Finally, by **a more engaged worldview** I mean how the students see the world around them, from their immediate
surroundings (school, home, town, fields), to the world of visual representation (in paintings, photographs--both those from "fine art" and from more "everyday" photographs), to the larger human and natural world of history, science, nature, and the political realm. All these I see being linked to and reflected in their poetry, other writing, and thinking. Most of all, I want to use my data to speculate on art's potential role in helping to shape stronger bonds between all these realms in students' daily life and learning.

6.3 COMPONENTS OF THE STUDY -- Sequence of Events

a. CLASSROOM CHARACTERISTICS

I worked with two 10th grade English classrooms taught by Jill Grubb at Mt. Gilead High School, totalling 42 students, both of which were designated "AP" (Advanced Placement).

Classes met on a block schedule, allowing approximately an hour and forty-five minutes for each session. An advantage of this is that the block allows for more extensive exploration and reflection per session (one main reason for choosing this school).

The teacher, Jill Grubb, was asked to participate in this study because of the previous work she has done in integrating poetry into her daily classroom. She brought a great deal of experience to the investigation, and was very much of a consultant on the progress of the lessons as they unfolded. She knows poetry well, and knows and cares about these students. The lessons were planned with much consultation between the two of us, especially over email but also via communication after class. (See Appendix for more on Jill's role.)
b. SEQUENCE OF EVENTS (October - December 2002)

1. Jill and I introduced the project and the questions to the students in late September, 2002.

2. I met with the classes to give them an overview of what we would be doing and why. During that period, I also asked them to introduce themselves to me by relating three things: a) a story someone in their family once told them; b) something they are able to do which others might not; c) some intriguing fact they know. I was hoping that these would serve as "ice-breakers" between us, in a somewhat unconventional fashion, helping me to remember their names and giving me tiny insights into their interests and families. (Which is exactly what happened: I knew their names within a day--and picked up a wide variety of information.)

3. I asked a few students (eight from one class, four from the other) to meet with me for an interview session prior to starting the poetry lessons. I decided to concentrate these sessions on getting to know how they saw the town--where they had grown up, what they found valuable about the area, what they found frustrating--just as a way of gathering some preliminary data about student "worldviews."

Most of all, in meeting with these students, I wanted to listen to how they talk--to the things they seem to value and how they express those values. This provided me with important "data" to look at what changed in their language and thinking as we proceeded.

4. Students were asked to keep "poetry journals" for several weeks at the beginning of our time together, taking an anthology I compiled and responding to particular by visualizing what they saw in the poem, both in terms of meaning and of the visual images conveyed.

5. I spent the next six weeks or so teaching poetry in both classes, usually on the order of two times a week, interspersing my lessons between Jill's regular English assignments. As often as I could (usually one or two times a week), I "sat
in" on her classes, reading two of the books they were reading, participating in class discussions, and even taking the quizzes on particular chapters. By simply observing, I hoped to get a sense of who these students were, how they responded to their English classes in general, and how my own sessions in poetry might be most usually tied to what they were learning overall.

6. My lessons were laid out in a sequence of 14 poetry skills that I wanted to concentrate on in order to look for particular data in reference to the philosophical tenets of this study. (See "Data collection" for particulars.)

The first five lessons emphasized poetry skills related to metaphor, physicality, and poetic play. The next four applied those skills to an investigation of the physical environs of the town, the local State Park, as well as the local Krogers grocery. The last five were devoted to image-text connections, writing about paintings, historical photographs, snapshots the students took themselves, and including a trip to the Columbus Museum of Art.

7. As mentioned under #4, students were invited to take photographs of "their world," about which they would be asked to write poems. About 24 (mostly disposable) cameras were procured through donations from local shops.

8. I interviewed selected students as the semester ended, looking for three main things:

   a. How they view their worlds, especially their engagement with the small town/rural environment around them.

   b. How they "see their way into paintings," describing them, making sense of them saying what they value in them. I hoped here to get some sense of how the poetry we've done has affected their connection to the visual art world, as a means of weighing how their "worldview" has changed or grown.

   c. How they see poetry now--both the reading of complex or somewhat ambiguous poems, and their own poems. What did they learn from the sorts of exercises we engaged in?
9. I collected a book of student poems and arranged a reading of student work at the end of the semester, partly as a goal to shoot for, partly to give us an additional way to value the writing we did over the quarter.

10. Students were asked to fill out brief evaluation forms, looking back at their experience over the quarter.

4. HOW I WEIGH THEIR WRITING (AND THEIR TALK)

My judgement of the development in their writing and talk is by nature subjective. I "read" their poetry using "my ear" to tell me where a particular student's writing has gotten stronger, or which lessons seem to have had the most effect and why. When listening to and transcribing the tapes from our discussion sessions, I listen to those subtle instances where somebody says something with meaning--or makes a stunning comparison--or begins to observe with a freshness in their response which was not there before. I'm not convinced we can pin such growth down or chart its course, or the arts would not be the nebulous things that they are, "reading empty" one moment and striking sparks in our hearts another, with only the slightest shifts of tone.

There are, however, a number of points which I look for as I analyze the collected data.

Basic considerations in all their poetry:

1. Less reliance on cliches to make a point--or, if cliches are touched on, the ability to twist the phrase to make it new. More subtlety and surprise, even in the use of a clause in prose, or the way a line is broken in a poem. More "creative tension"
in the lines and within the poem itself, so that where either is going is acutely unpredictable and yet somehow "right."

2. Less abstraction and the use of more telling detail to carry a point (in prose) or to ground the scene (in poetry). More concrete observation--more "arguing from evidence" (even in a poem), that is, more of a sense that we are "building a world" when making a poem and not so much spouting ideas or emotions.

3. More personal investment in the writing. More of a sense that "something is at stake," even in a playful way. I look for an energy or immediacy to the point of view. This does not have to mean being "gushy" or making every bit of writing "confessional" in nature. It may be best typified by the phrase "moving the camera in," so that the reader is seeing things from a chosen closeness rather than a generic distance.

4. More texturing of details. More overlap of the senses (synesthesia). Less straight narrative in poems and more attention to the play of language, to the interaction of images and lines--and less of the "and then..." syndrome.

5. Are the metaphors less predictable and generic? At the same time are they "apt," that is, are they "born out of the scene" rather than placed into a line almost as if any metaphor would do?

Particular considerations when dealing with poems about visual art or other ekphrastic applications of the skills of poetry:

6. References to the physical or visual world within the poem or prose piece. Do students actually describe parts of the painting in the poem? Are colors mentioned? Are relationships between places or spots or items in the visual work brought effectively into the piece of writing?

7. Is there a "chosen point of view," rather than a blanket attempt to be "objective"? What attempt is there in "taking on a voice"--which may be the
best sign of all that an "engaged world view" is at work, as a recognition of the variety of points of view possible?

8. With non-representational art, is there an ability to "personalize" the piece anyway— that is, to "make something" of the tensions and materials, creating a particularized meaning that is at the same time "true" to the work at hand?

9. With representational art, is there an ability to do more than "tell the story" of the scene? Can the student "put a twist" on the narrative or show an awareness of subtle choices on the artist's part?

10. Does the feeling of the poem match that of the visual work, so that rather than treating the work as a launching pad for some unrelated imagery or concerns of the writer's, the images, metaphors and point of view of the poem mesh with those of the artist, in a kind of close but intricately textured interchange?

Thirdly, I analyze the interview sessions, conducted after the poetry lessons were over. My main goals with these were to:

1. Gather insights into what ways the physical world is a part of (or apart from) the students' daily lives. Questions would hover around their connection with the world-beyond-the-representational during their growing up years (and now). Where did they play? What did (do) they feel attached to? Given that these students mainly live in a small/rural environment, it may be that they have a deep love town for the land still—or they might feel isolated from "where it's really at," in the cities or in places depicted on tv. I want to know what they value about where they live, and what they don't. Their answers to these questions supply me with information for weighing their relationship with question two of this proposal.

2) My second goal was to look closely at visual art with them—at paintings and photographs. Choosing from a wide variety of styles, I would have them describe the images and then ask them to
make meaning from them. By weighing their answers, coming as they would AFTER we had done a significant portion of the poetry writing, I attempt to glean insight into ways that the writing affected the way they negotiate the image-text exchange. How much detail do they pay attention to in the paintings and photographs? How often do they use metaphor in making sense of what they see? Are they more "open" in their responses than they were in earlier writing? Do they seem to shy away from abstract work—or non-narrative work? Or do they enjoy the more complex/surprising pieces? All this helps me shape some analysis of how their worldview is expanding. If Mitchell is right about the complex interplay of image-text as we shape our worldviews, the answers of these students to specific questions about the paintings should give me a great deal of insight as to how they see the world.

3) Similarly, I wanted to hear how they would "read" a poem or two, as a group, after our writing time was over. How much are they able to visualize the text, creating their own visions of the images and metaphors? How open would they be to ambiguity in the lines? To "not always being clear" about "what it meant" but enjoying the picture of it anyway? How deeply could they read their own meanings into that picture, "arguing from evidence" within the poem itself? How much did they seem to value what the poem could do?

6.4 THE LESSONS

a. Lessons in Teaching Metaphor, Physicality and Play

1) "Moment Poems" from To Kill A Mockingbird

Assignment: Take a moment in the novel and write a poem about it from one character's point of view. If possible, keep the identity of the speaker hidden. Make us realize who is speaking—and the moment they are viewing—from the details and language they use.

Key concepts conveyed:

a. Visualization—using language to help a reader picture a scene

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b. Making links between prose and poetry--taking a "known quantity," the novel and exploring it with new skills.

c. Riddling--linking poetry to play by encouraging them to convey more through detail than telling
d. "Acting" with words by having them take on particular character's attitudes

Results I was looking for:

a. If we "knew" their characters through their writing--were able to guess the character and their attitude
b. If they did more than just "tell the facts" but rather gave a fresh take on the events, adding metaphor and interpretation to their poems

2) "My Mind is Like..."

Assignment: Write a poem loosely based around the starting phrase, "My mind is like..." and work with at least three playful metaphor. Expand, invent, dance around them to see where they can take you.

Key Concepts:

a. Introduction of the power of metaphor
b. The physicalization of thought, linking the abstract with the concrete
c. Stepping beyond the narrative in poetry into poems built around the image

What I was looking for in weighing the results:

a. Creative wildness that still linked back to personal meaning--that is, some kind of balance between "reaching for the odd connection" and some sense that the metaphors created had some importance for the student, and were not just randomly chosen.
b. If they also saw importance, as well as play, in their poems. That is, if they saw the importance IN play.

3) Riddlesport

Assignment: Write a riddle poem describing a sports (or other action) in slow motion and completely in terms of metaphor.

Key Concepts:

a. To connect the physical realm of experience with the use of metaphor, in order to continue building a link between the concrete and the abstract

b. To further develop their skills with metaphor

c. To reinforce the idea of play in poetry, via the riddling aspect of guessing

Results I was looking for

a. A slow-motion feeling to the poems-if the details were not rushed but evolved slowly

b. A leaping in the metaphoric choices--comparing more diverse things that are not so close as to be obvious

c. Carry-over in the next poems of more "automatic" use of physicalized metaphor

4) Earth Water Fire And Air: An Exercise in Creative Memory

Assignment: Describe a memory--or creative a dream--of close involvement with one of these four physical elements. Use metaphor and imagery to evoke the feeling of "being back there."

Key Concepts:

a. Linking memory into the writing process
b. Increasing the power to evoke physical and visual sensations via the poem

Results I was looking for):
  a. Stronger use of surprising metaphor (less reliance on cliche)
  b. Close attention to physical detail
  c. Pacing--a greater sense of when a poem is "done"

5) Suppose... An Exercise in Alliteration, Half-Rhyme and The Mutes

Assignment: Construct a pack of 32 word cards (see Chapter 7 for details) and use these to create inventive lines beginning with the word "Suppose..." (based on the title by Pattiann Rogers, "Suppose Your Father Was a Redbird")

Key Concepts:
  a. Playing with sound in the poems
  b. Playing with invention--not sticking so closely to reality in the poems

b. Applying Metaphor, Physicality and Play to Exploring the Physical Environs of Mt. Gilead

6) Exploring Downtown Through Metaphor, Detail and Suppose...

Assignment: Explore the downtown area, taking notes of "details," "metaphors" and "what if..." Then write a poem taking a particular point of view, using those notes as a guide for invention.

Objective: To test out the principles in covered the classroom as to their transferability into a more open-ended environment and assignment.

Key Concepts: same as objectives.

7) Writing at State Lakes: Exploring a Natural Area

Assignment: Write a "staring poem," using James Wright's "Milkweed" and Gary Snyder's
"MidAugust at Sourdough Mountain Lookout" as models. Stare out, then look close by, making parallels between to invoke this environment in your poem.

**Objective:** Similar to #6--to engage a physical and open environment, testing their abilities to make use of metaphor, physicality and invention as they create the poems from their own devices.

**Key Concepts:**

a) If they could leap past cliche, even within such a cliche-ridden environment as "the woods." Could they invent here as well?

b) Making the familiar strange, the ordinary extraordinary.

8) **Surrealist Play in the Downtown Area**

**Assignment:** Write a series of two-line stanzas, following certain rules as laid out in a kind of "road map" to the downtown area (see Chapter Seven for specifics), throwing the dice to determine your next "move." Then compile the various lines you create into something of a surrealist poem.

**Objective:** To work with surrealistic seeing to open up the familiar world of downtown to poetic imagining. The arbitrariness of the game and the various options/suggestions would be a way to break down "ordinary seeing" and cliched language.

**Key concepts:**

a) Surrealist techniques applied to a small town environment to create "new seeing"

b) Game-like nature of the poetic enterprise made explicit in the inventing strategies.

9) **Odes to Food: Writing at Krogers**

**Assignment:** Write two or more poems as you wander around the grocery store, using William Carlos Williams' "This Is Just To Say" and Pablo Neruda's "Ode to Watermelon" as models. That is: try a "secret apology" poem for something you might
imagine doing with the food here, and an "ode of praise," exaggerating your love for a particular food item.

Objective: To apply the inventive strategies to the "visual culture" world of the grocery store, seeing how metaphor and physicality naturally become a part of their writing--if there is any carryover effect into this new environment.

Key Concepts:

a. Exaggeration as a strategy in creating lines.

b. Humor and irony--how to make use of these in varying the tone of the poems.

c. Responding to a media-produced world, versus the more natural world of the State Park, and the more "every day" world of downtown.

c. Applying Metaphor, Physicality and Play to Exploring Visual Images

10) Writing Visionary Image Poems Based on "The Crucible"

Assignment: Imagine a character in the play in a situation NOT describe in the play itself. Write a poem in that character's voice describing a dream or vision they might have in that situation.

Objective: To open up the idea of using imagery to convey a point of view.

Key Concepts:

a. Developing a stronger sense of the power of images to convey character and ideas.

b. Continued work on taking a fresh point of view.

11) Creating Images from Images: Writing Two-Line Poems in Response to Slides of Paintings

Assignment: As you view a series of slides of paintings (either of well-known American artists,
or of dream-like images by surrealist painters and photographers), "respond" to each slide by writing two lines that in a way "capture" a point of view on that slide.

Objective: To work on responding to visual images with verbal ones.

Key concepts:

a) Reaching beyond narrative in poetry--and into the realm of letting images stand on their own.

b) Developing the ability to respond (speak back) to visual images--to read them in a poetic way.

12) Writing Poems in Response to Paintings at the Columbus Museum of Art

Assignment: Wander the galleries of the museum, finding works that evoke a poetic response in you. Take a point of view that can help you "enter" each work, finding the poem within. Remember to include significant details from the piece within your poem, letting your lines bank off its images.

Objective: To apply the concept of creating verbal images from visual ones--in a more open-ended setting and assignment.

Key Concepts:

a) Responding to visual images with verbal ones.

b) To personalize visual images--finding poetic ways of reading art works.

13) Writing Poems in Response to Historical Photographs of the Mt. Gilead Area

Assignment: Choose a photograph from local history and write a poem taking on the point of view of someone or something in the picture. Let your poem convey something of the knowledge you have gained concerning the time period and the history.
Objective: To "take charge" of owning your own history by poetically conveying yourself into the past.

Key concepts:

a) To test out ways of contextualizing an historical photograph by giving it a story--thus making meaning out of what could be a "blank slate."

b) To explore creating poems from facts--weaving information with metaphor and invention to enhance a personal connection to the world the students live in.

14) Writing Poems in Response to Student Photographs of the Mt. Gilead Area Now

Assignment: a) Take a series of photographs of things and places around town, emphasizing a fresh angle of view. b) Write a poem about one of those photographs, finding your own way in--to make the photograph your own.

Objective: To see how the students would do in creating their own visual images of the "ordinary" world they live in now--and how they would do in applying the skills of poetry in responding to each other's pictures.

Key concepts:

a) Visual response to the physical environment

b) Verbal response to their own visual images
7.1 LEARNING THE METAPHOR:

ABSTRACT: The first stage in working with the students in re-seeing/re-investigating the world revolved around the use of metaphor. Our first task was recognizing its use in everyday speech--and in the development of any paragraph or novel. The second was working on the ability to contextualize and particularize our own metaphors, growing them out of the situation at hand, rather than "plugging them in" from some pre-ordered set of cliches and conventions. A good or effective metaphor, we began to see, has these qualities:

- It is **fresh**, meaning not heard before. It makes us perk up our ears--it wakes us up.

- It is **situational**, or context-bound, appropriate to (or accurate for) the scene, person, idea or feeling being described; if for instance we were writing about a character in a novel, a strong metaphor would be one that "fit" their personality and world-view.

- It is **surprising**, making leaps that stretch the mind, almost in a riddle-like way; that is, we have to "tip the head" to get it, but our perception of the scene/idea etc. is strengthened as a result.

- Thus, a good metaphor **raises** as many questions as answers; it is something of an "argument" or an interpretation of the event/person, etc.

- Lastly, it is **physical** in nature; it pulls us back to the body-in-the-mind concepts that Lakoff and Johnson describe (see Chapter 2/Section 2); it grounds thought in projected, bodily experience,
helping us to visualize what might otherwise be a
totally internal or aloof experience; it brings
out the inner world (of perception and feeling)
so that we can "hold it in our hands" and "walk
around in it"; and it brings the outer world in,
helping us to experience internally what might
otherwise be something distant, remaining outside
of our own experience and comprehension. In
Cynthia Ozick's words, it makes us at home in the
world of the stranger (see Chapter 2/Section 5)
and lets the stranger have a place in our secluded
home.

All these are working principles that are themselves applied
ONLY in situational contexts, particular to the individual
writer and individual assignment. Thus... these portraits...

a. Mockingbird Relived [Lesson 1]

ABSTRACT: Here I describe our attempt to break apart a
novel through re-visualizing the moments within that
novel, taking on the voices of different characters and
projecting our own consciousness into what they were
experiencing. It is thus an exercise in Ozick's concept
of "making the stranger a home" (see Chapter 2/Section
5). In contrast to watching a movie adaptation, writing
poems about the novel helped us to "slow down time,"
testing out the various "signifiers" within the small
events that make up the book as a whole.

I spent my first few days with the classes as "just
another member of the class," reading the novel at the pace
they did, taking the quizzes, participating in discussions.
Reading To Kill A Mockingbird together became a metaphorical
experience in itself, with layers of connection we learned
to walk in and out of. It almost seemed to me that Jill was
teaching them (and me) to read for the first time, asking us
to slow down our pace and take in the subtleties of moments.
One morning she asked us to look at a passage where Scout is
falling asleep after the jail incident and in her half-waking state sees her father calmly folding his newspaper before the arrival of the crowd blur into an image of him pushing up his glasses before he shoots the rabies-mad dog earlier in the story (156). And I realized I'd read right over that parallel. The students, too, apparently, as it took a lot of coaxing for anyone to see what Harper Lee meant. I began to wonder what else we were missing.

Following her lead, on Friday, September 27, as introduction to my first writing lesson with them, I began somewhat blatantly by asking: "Why read a novel like this?" Quite surprisingly, for so bright a class, they had very little to say. Maybe they were a little surprised at my question. Jenny said: "Because she wants us to..." There was more resentment in her voice that I'd ever have imagined. Other answers followed suit: "Because it's good for us." "Because it's on the list of books to read." "Because we're AP and other kids can't." Only Amber was able to come up with something more meaningful: "Because it might give us lessons we can look back to later in our lives." That's what I had in mind, thinking about the scene in The Great Gatsby where Tom and Daisy hit Myrtle with their car and just keep on going and Fitzgerald talks about the speed with which they live, not giving them time to go back and even see what they've done. "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy--
they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money...'' is the way I remember Nick Carroway putting it (180-181). Jill brought up the scene in *King Lear*, where Lear is asking his daughters to praise him--and proceeds to disinherit his favorite daughter Cordelia because she won't play the game of buttering him up the way Goneril and Regan do. With such moments in hand, I suggested, literature gives us the means to weigh our lives. We can ask: *When was I like that? Am I looking for flattery here more than genuine feeling? Have I in some way "run over people" on my way to success?* And it strikes me now: I was asking them to engage literature as a metaphoric process in itself, a place we can go for images, characters, gestures and scenes to serve as measuring sticks for our own behavior, our own dreams.

First, though, we have to experience the story on some level beyond an absorption of plot. How does that experience happen? I suppose it's different for each reader, but it may help to visualize the novel as a series of moments. At least, that was the premise that Jill and I presented to the kids, using poetry as a means to "stop time" in the novel. We asked them to pick a character and write a poem in his or her voice at a single moment in the novel, not explain who is talking, just letting the character and the moment come through in the description and voice. We used Ann Stanford's
poem "The Blackberry Thicket" (103) as an example of a poem strongly evoking the fullness of a single experience through detail and metaphor. Each line in her poem adds a strand to the picture as she places us in the scene, from the opening on:

   I stand here in the ditch, my feet on a rock in the water
   Head-deep in a coppice of thorns

She gives us enough details to establish location and presence, then proceeds to spin out memories, references, sensory evocations:

   Remembering stains-
   The blue of mulberry on the tongue
   Brown fingers after walnut husking-

I hoped the kids would take from her example the notion of filling their poems with the senses--a tough thing to do for high school sophomores. For it's the "big ideas" that often matter most to them. Stanford gives us some of that as well:

   Here I am printed with the earth
   Always and always the earth ground into the fingers

but she couples such grand thoughts with the simplicity of the place as well:

   Surely not alone
   I stand in this quiet in the shadow
   Under a roof of bees.

Maybe it is, most of all, the experience of HEARING a poem that I wanted them to achieve at this moment. So little of
what they've heard or read out in the world, or in the
school itself, will have had this sort of evocative, up in
the air feeling. There is no "great message" here, just the
honoring of standing on a rock in a stream, picking berries
overhead. I wanted them to recognize the subtle use of
sensory language (the stain of mulberry, the juice of the
blackberries) and I wanted them to feel that wonderful sense
of the "box clicking shut" at the end of Stanford's poem,
the finish that is also open-ended, the metaphorical
surprise of "a roof of bees." It is, most of all, experience
that this poem honors. I wanted them to have that
experience, if only vicariously, watching a poet "perform" a
moment, enjoying the sights and memories for all they are
worth. I suppose I wanted some of each of these things--
moment and metaphor, senses and presence. A large order for
a first assignment. But it gave us a place to start. I asked
them to write one of those moments--perhaps a quiet one
within the story--as much in the voice of the character as
they could. Here's part of what Corky jotted down:

JEM'S AMUSEMENT

As I stand, shaking away my branches, I realize
that I'm at the Radley's house. I approach,
feeling droplets push through my pores as I start
to get closer. It seems
like hours. When I finally get to the door, I
raise my hand, feeling like an anchor...

Not perfect. It plods. And "It seems like hours" is a
distancing cliche. But "feeling droplets push through my
pores"... now that's nice, it captures the slow motion without telling us it's slow, as does the hand feeling like an anchor. Over and over, with their early poems, I see it happening: the metaphors when they work are physical, and physicality ground the writing, letting it slink past generality, turning us closer to full experience. Kelley writes, thinking of Scout listening in on her father's conversation with men come to warn him of trouble down at the courthouse:

I press my
face against the glass
as if I was being
suctioned into their
conversation

There—wouldn't you say—is the true surprise of the metaphor, for Kelley's words suggest a powerful image of Scout being pulled through the window, surprising and "open-ended" in that it's almost as if she's in two places at once--hidden away in her childhood on one side of the glass, and out in Atticus's adult and dangerous world on the other. We could have spoken out or written out such an analysis, but it's unlikely that Kelley has understood what she's written in such an abstract way. Instead, she has FELT the moment, re-engaging it. She's visualized her reading experience. And I would consider that the first step toward taking the novel seriously, toward taking it in, developing her own sense of how moments happen and how they matter.
Josh's metaphors are more evasive and clever, getting closer to the heart of Jem's hatred at having to read to Mrs. Dubose as punishment for destroying her flowers:

Knocking on the chamber door
An answer
Skulking, hit by a breeze of dragon's breath
Dark gloomy, a hint of courage or death
Holding my sentence in my hand
I enter
wretched visions
I start to slay

A riddle, so hidden, in fact, that at first I don't get. But then I see: he is able to metaphorize every tiny bit, even the chamber door calling up medieval scenes, as does dragon's breath for Mrs. Dubose's fierce words. "My sentence in my hand" refers to the books Jem is required to read to her for a month, as atonement. Even Jem's reading, then, is a kind of "slaying." A stunning, original view of the event, from Josh's point of view.

Few were able to play the game this well. But Josh taught us all a lot in showing how deep one can go into a moment. What else but metaphor can achieve this? How can we hear the resonance of his task until we see it through the eyes of the reader--in this case, Josh, speculating on what the moment would mean for him. For just as it is Kelley being suctioned through the window as much as it is Scout, so it is Josh as much as it is Jem who views the reading as slaying. It appears then that approaching a more engaged
world view necessitates finding our own metaphors for ANY experience, even one we have vicariously through reading a novel.

Jenny, on the other hand, tries avoiding the flourish of metaphor completely, sticking to a steady pace of inner monologue as she describes Atticus approach the mad dog:

Are you really
Ready for this?
You're going to have
To do it sometime.
Take your time.
Glasses up.
Who cares?
Hands steady
Focus
Steady now
Always was.
Just a little
To the right.

This poem achieves its purpose without the flourish of metaphor that Josh uses. That too taught us something. Maybe sometimes all a poem has to do is hold thought still, enough for us to climb inside. We certainly feel her there, standing as if were, in Atticus's shoes. Thus Jenny's metaphor could be said to be the whole experience of being that steady, as she herself may have to be someday, pitching a softball game or standing before her own courtroom.

Ideally, one would put the two skills together, as Brian does in his poem about the death of Mr. Ewell, written a couple weeks later, after we'd done additional work in
metaphor and physical detail. Notice how much more full the portrait is now:

MR EWELL

The cool drink is like a morning dewdrop to my tongue. But I don't taste it. The smell of fall rushes through my nostrils, but I don't smell it. My mind is as focused as I can, here with this bottle in my hand. I hear some children talking - it's HIS boy. My nose boils and I start following them in this blue-black darkness. They stop, I stop, I feel the cold shine of the metal on my thigh. I pull it out, and grin wickedly. This is best served cold! I race at them, but the boy hears me. That's aint right, he has a ham? He hits me but I hit him harder. He falls... I slice at the ham. I twist his arm and hear a crack, like a branch snapping in a high wind. Someone else is here, I hear them, I turn but trip, I put my hand out, but this cold, hard metal was waiting... I fall, never thinking, but I feel something hit my stomach. The knife had been waiting... for me.

How much more rich this is! Yes, it's more narrative--it tells a fuller story. But it's also fully absorbed into a single character's mind. And a villain at that, making us feel at least an ounce of sympathy for the most despicable character in the novel! Notice the sensory shifts and surprises: the beer compared to a dewdrop, his nose "boiling," "the cold shine of the metal," mixing sight and touch so quietly. Even the "branch snapping in a high wind" conveys a sense of the motion and danger involved in the
scene. And Brian has picked up some of Jenny's internal pacing as well, as in: "That ain't right, he has a ham?" I can hear Ewell saying this to himself. I can hear the internal temper in "It's HIS boy."

Jill said she teaches this novel to encourage in students a healthy respect for the ability to "step in someone's else's shoes," Atticus's code of honor. Hasn't Brian done just that in his poem (even if he gets the facts of how Ewell died perhaps a little off)? Maybe that's what Cynthia Ozick means when she says metaphor is a moral device, helping us to permit the stranger--or the different point of view--into our thinking (see Chapter Two/Section Five). If disengagement can mean being wrapped up only in our little views of the world, reading this novel with Jill--and through the eyes of poetry--became for us a first step in doing otherwise, in approaching the world through a multi-layered, metaphorically-rich point of view.

**b. Lessons in Visualizing Metaphor**

On the way to persona poems like Brian's there were of course a number of other smaller steps. In order to begin thinking about reading in a more visual and physical way, we tried a short exercise in having pairs of students pick a poem in the anthology I'd given them and invent the movie they would make for that poem, or a line in that poem. This was more difficult for them to do than I would have thought.
They most likely needed more instruction in the moves a camera can make. Given more time, I think it's an exercise which could help students slow down and focus their reading. Movies go by us so fast, we hardly know the tricks on the eye (and the mind) that are being played. To visualize scenes ourselves can perhaps have the opposite effect.

The next day, as a break from discussion, we showed a clip from the 1961 movie version, with Gregory Peck, stopping it in several places to check for visual metaphors. This too only went so far. (They were more interested in analyzing the acting--so many of them thought Peck was wrong for the role--not forceful enough, too unassuming; someone wanted Bruce Willis to take his place. I could only groan.) Still, I believe in the double-sided nature of this exercise--of thinking cinematically about poems and metaphorically about moments in movies. The one place they could see this working was when the camera moves down low, peering in toward Atticus as the cars of the mob angle in around him. "It's like they're pinching him," Heather said. "He's in a trap." Aha... someone got the point.

I had also given them the option of writing out film shots for a poem in their journals, but few took me up on it. Kelley was one. For Margaret Atwood's "Strawberries," she wrote:
The camera would be focused on one bright red strawberry dangling on a spring green vine. Its shadow would be deep blue with the sunlight dancing on it as it blew in the breeze.

For Langston Hughes' "Suicide Note," a three line poem that goes,

The calm, cool face of the river asked me for a kiss.

for which she would film:

It would be a misty foggy morning with a girl walking through empty space, dressed in a white, raggedy dress that is knee length. Her arms filled with cuts and bleeding. When she reaches the river she kneels down and goes to kiss the wild water, as a wave grabs her & pulls her in, the mist disappears.

Pretty linear that one. I prefer the single focus of the strawberry one instead. Yet I can't help wondering if Kelley got her start toward some of the amazing poems she eventually wrote by placing her language at the service of a camera first.

The most helpful supplementary exercise we did for introducing kids to the intricacies of metaphor was a spur-of-the-moment idea that I stumbled upon in seeking to make the connection between the kind of metaphors we do in poetry and the ones that appear in prose. After the mad dog-angry crowd image mentioned before, I realized the book was more layered with metaphor than I'd ever imagined. On a hunch, I said: "Hunt through the book and find a metaphor somewhere and read it to us." When this went slowly, I made it even
more specific: "Put your finger down anywhere on a paragraph and see if you find a metaphor there." Only at that point did the lesson sink home. Left and right around the room hands were up, stumbling over each other to ask, "Is this one?" "I think I've got one here." Here's a sampling:

Sarah McGlynn: "Dill was a villain's villain" (44).

Brittany: "It was over. We bounded down the sidewalk on a spree of sheer relief" (110).

Sara Gruber: "Summer was the swiftness with which Dill would reach up and kiss me when Jem was not looking" (116).

David Fuller, locating a clue to Atticus's calmness under pressure: "In a group of neighbors, Atticus was standing with his hands in his overcoat pockets. He might have been watching a football game. (70)

Even Garrison, who often acted disconnected from the poetry, seemed pleased with his discovery of "Atticus's voice was flinty." (30)

And Emma, true to form, found one that touched on the racial bias that central to the book, noting how black people's homes were referred to by one character as "nests," implying a certain animal nature to their abodes (175).

And I noticed, on page 36, the phrase where Scout is staying behind after lunch "to advise Atticus about Calpurnia's inequitities." Even the verb "advise" becomes metaphorical here, suggesting a role she's taken on of "lawyering" her lawyer father.

Everywhere we looked, metaphor was at work, shaping the tone of a verb, suggesting connections and textures and character traits with quiet aplomb. When I look back on the
semester, I think this was the single most important event for showing the value of what we were doing. No longer was metaphor just a pretty poetic device, but quite at the heart of good sentence construction. Throughout the rest of the time, Jill would frequently report to me about someone noticing metaphors elsewhere in prose they were reading or in someone's conversation in class.

c. Metaphor and the Mind [Lesson 2]

Looking back, it does seem like we did a lot with metaphor, though I hope it was in enough varied ways to make the immersion worth it. I stressed it as a means of grounding thought. In one class, I said it was the link between four levels of experience, which I put as a chart on the board:

Mind <---> Things <---> Body <---> Vision

(language) (world) (senses) (visualization)

I suggested to them that metaphor and visualization allow us to link the bodily senses, with which we first experience the world, back to things, which form the basis for language and the mind and lead us to envision what we're saying. Alluding to Johnson (see Chapter Two/Section 2), I said that all language and thought is physically based, it's just that we forget these connections. Poetry asks us to step back into them. No doubt this was more theory than they needed,
but I wanted them to know the structure underneath some of what we were doing.

First we read Patricia Fargnoli's poem, "How This Poet Thinks," which begins,

I don't think
like lawyers, quick in the mind,
rapid as a rat-a-tat-tat,
or academics, who pile up logic
like wood to get them through the winter.

I think the way someone listens
in a still place for the sound of quiet--

and which includes lines like:

When I think, sometimes it is
like objects rushing through a tunnel,
and sometimes
it like water in a well with dirt sides,
where the wetness is completely absorbed

and the ground rings with dampness,
becomes a changed thing.

Then we tried lines of our own, based on the phrase, "My mind is like..." I asked them to stretch their ideas, the way she does, not just naming what their minds were like, but saying how, in a second phrase or two. Perhaps this let them apply in a direct way all the abstractions we'd been talking about earlier.

Here are some results:

My mind is like a river,
running through the woods,
turning until it reaches
a grudge. (Ci'Arra)

My mind is like a birdie in a badmitten match
always changing direction (Heather)
My mind is like an ocean - large, loud, watery.
My mind is like a leather glove - rough, tough, worn. (David F)

My mind is like a restaurant,
Always serving me something new
Once one thing is finished, another begins
Never closed, open 24 hours (Lauren)

My mind is like a cat with yarn or a baby with clattering keys
It opens like a crowbar, rusted & aged, would a once locked door (Josh)

The twists here are beginning to work. Ci'Arra's grudge, for instance, that single word changing the flow of her river-mind, the way we hold onto something that bugs us and won't let it go. Heather's badmitten birdie, seemingly accurate for her changes in moods. David's ocean and leather glove images, added onto with the quick words that follow. Josh's crowbar line which even with (or because of!) its disruptive punctuation models what it is trying to show--the opening of new thought from a locked space.

There were of course plenty of less insightful lines: Kurtis wrote, "My mind is like a door, an open door," and Breanne: "My mind is like the sky - my thoughts go on forever." But even on the most minimal shift, some energy could be felt. Ashley Sherbourne wrote, "My mind is like a flower, alive." I told her I love how much importance falls on that last word. From that single gesture, as we will see in future examples, it seems her poetry started to grow.
I think the point taken in was this: to re-engage the world, we might begin with trying to define the nebulous recesses of our own minds, using metaphor to suggest possible ways of visualizing in a physical way the unseen processes we go through when we think. In doing so, our minds became ACTIVE places, filled with shifts and gestures, migrations and erasures. If our individual minds are as radically different as these poems suggest, perhaps it is okay to be ourselves, while at the same time appreciating the different minds around us. In one interview later, two students looked back on this assignment as a place where they discovered how to say something about yourself in a poem but not be too revealing (see Chapter Nine/Section H), appreciating how others had done the same. When we read back Nate's lines,

My mind is like a thick cement block
not easily changed or manipulated
My mind is like my mother
always getting ignored when it gives me orders...

we could laugh with him at his self-depreciating good humor and yet realize he'd been quite honest. There is a bit of a hidden truth about Nate in those lines that makes us reflect back on who we ourselves are. Such two-way recognition could be said to be another important step toward more fully re-engaging both our own minds and the larger world around us.

Summary: These beginning exercises in metaphor did not seem to get tiring at all. In fact, the more
we played with the idea of metaphor, the more intricate its workings became. If I had to do it over again, I'd do even more with finding visual metaphors in movies, for instance—and comparing those with the subtle verbal metaphors that fill the novel. These lessons were only a start at beginning to read the world metaphorically... the first step toward an taking on a more engaged world view.

7.2 THE PHYSICALITY CHALLENGE

Abstract: In keeping with Johnson's theory about all thought growing out of our bodily experience of the physical world, and Ozick's idea that metaphor is our way of bringing memory back into experience (see Chapter Two), the next set of exercises had the goal of linking metaphor to tracing out—in slow motion and meticulous memory—ways that we experience the physical world. TV erases much of that slow motion memory, makes us impatient with daily experience. Poetry and art, at least according to Heidegger (and me...) hope to do the opposite—they ground us in a different set of time expectations, asking us to participate more fully in the tiniest of experiences. To live beyond the gloss of easy surfaces and inside moments of meaning.

1) Fighting Bland Generalization [Lesson 3]

As shown in my literature review, the tendency of language is toward abstraction and cliche, using stock images that serve the function of getting us by, conveying basic concepts, going with the flow. That may be particularly true in high school where the daily rule is "get along," "don't stand out," "move with your friends in an orderly, friendly way down the hall." The students in Jill Grubb's two English classes were no exception. Nor am I. And when it comes to writing, abstraction and generality
and lack of surprising detail pose the greatest obstacle for either exciting poetry or meaningful prose.

Take this batch of "poems" the students wrote with Jill on the first day of school as self-portraits. I will type four whole ones as examples. I think you will find some sweetness here, some cleverness and genuine caring. What you will find almost nothing of is a concrete example that couldn't be applied to just about anyone growing up anywhere in America at this time. Some of their choices were "How To Be A Kid," "I Remember..." "I Come From..." and "How To Be Me."

How To Be A Kid

Torment your family
Cut your tongue on a curtain rod
Don't eat vegetables
Steal your sister's makeup or your brother's football
Let your sister drop you on the sidewalk
Play with friends all day
Find Christmas gifts
Stay up all night
Fight siblings in a long car ride
Always interrupt your parents
Never clean your room
Throw clothes on the floor
Talk on the phone forever
Stay on the computer forever
Torment your family

Sara Long

*

The Difference Between Bad and Good

It's fun to do different things in your life to come
Some things that are extremely bad and something really good.
Some things good like getting into fights with your brother and putting a hole in the wall,
or going to Disneyland where the rides were
fast.
But sometimes things aren't fun and you'll have
to go through with it
like getting grounded after fighting and being
sent to your room.
Or going home after having fun and you still
want to be there.
Memories are different in many ways and you'll
just have to face the facts. -Corky

* 
If you like to misbehave
If a friend can brighten your day
If you like to ride your bike
Then being a kid is the perfect job for you
Being a kid means
cutting your hair, rollerskating, having fun,
and getting dirty, it's all a part of the job
Sometimes you will cry
like when your dog dies
But family and friends will make you feel
better

-Ci'Arra

* 
I am a son
I am a brother
I am a friend
a golfer
a student
a caffeine-aholic
a die-hard Broncos fan
I am clumsy
lazy
irresponsible
I am friendly
kind
outgoing
I am a person
I am me

-Nate

I could go on, but you get the point, yes? I guess this is
what Jakobson would call metonymy--something standing in for
something else, naming it (a golfer, or someone whose dog
died) but not evoking it, not making connections to events
or relationships beyond the named (see Chapter Two/Section
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4). Even when particular events are named, such as "stealing your brother's football" or "fighting with siblings on a long car ride" the situation is generic. These are the stereotypes of kid-life, the situations that Harper Lee will make particular and real, the situations that these first poems do little to convey. Not to say that the assignment Jill gave was not a good ice-breaker on the first day. I'm sure the kids laughed and found out something about each other, and spent some time thinking about where they came from or what matters to them in their memories. I only lay them out before us as what most of us would write as "poems" given no specific models and without specific training in making lines carry physical weight and particularity. Perhaps, then, they might serve as a "control" sample of where the students began.

How then to latch on to particularity as an ingrained skill in writing? There must be hundreds of ways. Here are some that we tried, ones based directly in our physical experience of the world.

Of course metaphor, as I've been claiming all along, can be a force for physicalizing our thought and language, especially when used in particular response to particular stimulus, not as the standard worn-out phrases, "It felt like an hour," "I was light as a feather," "He ran like there was no tomorrow." As I have in some other classes, I
brought in a bicycle wheel one day, spun it in the air and asked, "What is this?" Immediately the connections came:

- a roulette wheel
- a wheel of fortune
- the solar system
- the turning of the seasons
- the turning of everything (how we come back to things from before, the next year, the next day)
- life... because when we're older we are once again helpless as we were when we were babies
- relationships -- we're tied (like the spokes, we're tied to different people in different ways and if one spoke gets out of true (as in a relationship going sour) sometimes it can send the whole wheel into "sourness," creating that "yucky noise" (as one student said), catching on the brake and slowing us down.

All these abstractions--things we go through in that vague thing called "life"--now have something physical to hold onto. I can feel that nagging loss of a friendship "catching on the brake" so to speak. We can at least try to picture the wheel as the turning of the solar system (a concept so far out of our daily grasp as to be invisible to us most of the time).

In keeping with the idea that metaphor slows down time and particularizes, I asked them to do the exercise (as detailed in the methodology chapter) of taking a daily action, in a sport or elsewhere, and writing it out in slow motion in terms of metaphor. The results were not as strong as I would have liked (maybe because people had about eight minutes to write, since we talked so long). But the concept,
I believe, remains strong. And they began the attempt to connect the sort of "riddling moments" they'd done so well in the Mockingbird poems into their own experience.

Corky wrote:

I walk, slowly trudging like a zombie to my destination. I fall down, not wanting to get back up. A field of warmth flows from my feet to my neck until a warmth covers my body. Finally, the shining light begins to fade until there's nothing left but a solid darkness. And now I am in my own world.

Again, as with his poem about Jem's mad dash toward Boo Radley's house, Corky's struggling to be specific and to find metaphors that are more than generic (like a zombie; a field of warmth flows). But I can't help feeling that I am inside that sleepiness he's trying to convey. Maybe it's just the line about the light beginning to fade. Or the claiming of his "own world" at the end. Maybe it's just that I too want to be there in that world of sleep. At least it's more specific and seemingly real than his earlier piece about "Some things good like getting into fights with your brother and putting a hole in the wall, or going on a fun trip to Disneyland where the rides were fast."

Ci'Arra too, who wrote above "Being a kid means / cutting your hair, rollerskating, having fun" was able to engage us into a tiny particular moment of that fun with her swimming riddle:
I slowly bend over like a wilting flower
I grip onto the edge resembling a scared child
at his mother's side
I quickly fade into the sun's horizon
and leap into the world as if I were
a tadpole entering the stream

Something of the reality of swimming comes through here,
even in the line about being shivering and somewhat scared,
waiting for the meet to begin. But what I really like is
that sense of "fading into the sun's horizon," for being
underwater. At least to this mediocre, near-sighted swimmer
(me) would be like that, dangling somewhere at the distant
distance and soon is unnoticeable. I hear a
sweet melody coming
from behind the staircase. Then it stops.
The bench, the staircase, and the melody fade away.

I believe Ben could have done this with even more care, had
the time allowed. Still, there's a momentum here, a rising
crescendo that gives way to a pleasant ease. It seems that
by having to find at least the beginnings of "new names" for the most basic attributes ("10 small sticks" for the keys, "ivory trick stairway" for the keyboard itself), he's had to imagine the thing itself, stretching beyond the common name for it. That's the essence of the assignment--and I only see that now, upon reflection. That we didn't quite achieve the strongest of results doesn't deny the usefulness of such metaphorical re-naming what they already know as a step toward re-experiencing the world.

b. Touching the Elements: Earth Water Fire Air
[Lesson 4]

Abstract: This lesson is my most deliberate attempt to engage the students with Heidegger's ideas about poetry and art drawing us back to the unsayable realities of earth and the various physical realities that surround us and shape us but which we hardly know or acknowledge (see Chapter Three/ Section 3). These students, with perhaps more direct experience of such elements--of feeding a horse in a cold winter barn, of weekends hunting deer--were able here to tap into that basic knowledge more readily, honoring it in a way that only art can.

I make much in Chapter Three of the need to re-engage the earth again. Even if so much of our lives now are lived at a distance from "the elemental" realities of rivers, forests, fire, cold, that doesn't mean that those strong realities are not a part of our make-up, however they make their way into our daily lives. We will still burn coal or gas (albeit at a far away power plant or hidden down in the
basement) to light and heat our homes. Our cities yet hover over the banks of rivers, and even if we don't quite rely on them in the same ways for transportation, etc. what gets drained out of the watershed upstream from Los Angeles determines what's left when it gets down into the city. In short: even in a post-modern age, we fool ourselves if we forget that we have actual bodies, that blood is salty and pumps in a very physical way through our veins, that we are water, that concrete doesn't entirely cover the ground.

I wanted to bring these "realities" before the kids, in the form of poems, and see what they could make of them yet. I suggested that our strongest memories are often associated with sensory things. Even Scout's narrative in *To Kill A Mockingbird* is basically a hymn to the power of sensory memory: the heat of Maycomb in the summer, sleeping outside in the tree house on certain sweltering nights, the oddity of building a snowman one day and watching Miss Maudie's house burn down that same night, the spooky extended distance of racing past the Radley place, the presence of that holy knot in the tree and the loss when it was sealed over. I suggested that we too might in our poems learn to "unpack the memory."

Borrowing a lesson from dancer Shawn Womack, which I've written about elsewhere (see Hermsen, 2000), I asked them to make lists of moments they could recall that involved earth,
water, fire and air, in any way. Water might come in the form of ice or snow, of course. At the edge of the ocean or in the form of a childhood bath. Air might as much involve shadows and light and open windows. Fire might be a friend or a foe. I asked them to read around in our anthology a series of selected poems for 10 minutes or so--and then asked for suggestions of which one to talk about. One class choose a playful poem called "Whales" by Harley Elliott, another leaned toward Christopher Merrill's more ominous poem, "Childhood." We marked in the first how the "quality of sleep in bathtubs" gives way a visions of "the sun fading out forever / above the deepening layers of light" until eventually the speaker imagines us "down among the whales / as they pass their squeaking / banshee songs swell[ing] / beneath the green black sea" (55). I was hoping that such lines might show them the soft touches metaphor could take, lifting us out of ordinary knowings and into an awareness of being connected to things and creatures far beyond our immediate worries. It's a visionary re-engagement of an environment quite beyond our ken here in the Mid-West, one that helps make the whole world once again fascinating.

Maybe Chris Merrill achieves the same effect, in his exhilarating if turbulent evocation of childhood:

Childhood

Newspapers scarred the stream;
Words swirled in the eddies;

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Grey figures - a dead thief,  
The President and his wife,  
Two race horses - floated past  
And sank...  
    Or snagged the rocks  
Rippling the slow water  
Until the sun, like a man  
With a knife, cut them apart  
So they could sail away.

...  

On the last night, outside my tent, someone  
Startled the woods: a flashlight fluttered; twigs,  
Like small animals, crackled underfoot;  
Mosquitoes buzzed the netting. I held my breath  
To hear the hushed voices, a muffled cough,  
A siren down the road...  
    A match was struck,  
I crawled outside: my mother and my father,  
Dressed in white, stood near the sumac, waving  
Their hands of fire. They touched the trees, they licked  
Their palms, and rose above the burning woods.

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What a discussion we had about this poem in the first class!  
People saw the invasion of "the news" in the opening line,  
foreshadowing as it does the loss of President Kennedy. Some  
saw the second half of the poem as a dream, the kind of  
dream we can sometimes have when camping, others thinking it  
symbolic of losing his parents to the wider world (of  
politics, of work, of his own growing up).

Finally, we had just enough time to glance at Susan  
Mitchell's "Blackbirds," with its mystical, almost fairy-  
tale like opening:

Because it is windy, a woman  
finds her clothesline bare, and without rancor  
unpins the light, folding it into her basket...
Looking back, I think I subconsciously wanted to move them to a new level of writing, one where the surprise and creative weirdness of their "mind" poems blended with the actual experience of their sports-riddle poems to evoke a more magical worldview. One where myth and fantasy was not so alien to daily routine. One where Flannery O'Connor's "business of embodying mystery" came to stronger fruition, where Stephen Dunn's call to "bring home the strange," opening up experience for the plain wonder that it is, could be recalled again in their writing. In some ways, all that transpired on this day built the groundwork for the inventive work they would do over the next few weeks.

Here are a few of their earth-water-fire-and-air poems. Bethany's, for instance, something of an ode to fishing:

   The Lure

   Planted like a tree on the edge of the bank  
   My box of traps is my accomplice  
   Ripples, clouds that come and linger  
   Shifty and uncertain, it moves along...  
   and comes back,  
   it is also my secret friend.

   The light plays with my senses  
   My mind drifts and is consumed  
   The immaculate display of whim...  
   I am a willing captive.

Now all the preparation in metaphor and moment, physical detail and internal voice, comes to fruition for Bethany for the first time. The lines themselves are playful, they linger, they are secretive, revealing just enough to know
she is fishing, but not bothering with facts about the catch or the rest of the day. It is, as she says, herself she has caught here, **planted** in a place and activity she knows from the inside.

So too Heather, who, during my opening interviews with volunteers willing to talk about growing up in this area, said she'd rather live almost anywhere else. Her parents had moved out to the country specifically because she had loved horses at age five. Now she's into the internet and make-up, fashion shows and malls. Yet she's able to step back into a time of what could only be called "mud":

**Building Our House**

From the ground up we built it  
The rocky earth was shifted, heaped, and moved  
Until we found its position satisfactory  
At first it was just a hole in the ground  
But later it would become much more

The summer rains turned it into the mud puddle of a giant  
Winter would bring icy winds  
And freeze the earth solid

I can still hear the low hum then roar  
Of the space heater  
I can still smell the burning leaves

For a kid not so much in love with horses or the country any more, she sure is capable of recalling that time, the time her parents built a home--for her. Yet she doesn't talk ABOUT it... she gives us the rocky earth being "shifted, heaped, and moved," she evokes a bit of magic, as a child
then might have seen it, the giant's mud puddle, and sensed it--the mud frozen solid, the sound of the space heater, the smell of the burning leaves. I didn't tell her to "make sure you include the senses," somehow she just knew to. I take it as a sign that the physical world had began to find a way into their poems--and that memory was giving them a way to honor their particular experience, a key factor (as I say in Chapter One) of achieving a more engaged worldview.

Even their metaphors were getting sharper as a result of engaging sensory elements. Of a day at the ocean Sarah Smith wrote just three lines during that period:

```
Small waves lick my toes
like fire to a log
consuming me as tides rise...
```

Those three lines are more valuable than a dozen, containing as they do the surprising twist of calling the ocean a fire. It's nearly a surreal move, comparing herself to a log burning. If the ocean is often compared to a releasing force that overwhelms our "solid" consciousness, Sarah has given us a small memento of that change.

Memory kicks in too as Sarah McGlynn recalls a childhood friend who had "the wind knocked out of her" during a fall in gym class:

```
Climbing a tree or a rope

I hold fast to the earth as
I move up through the air. Knowing
if I were to let go, the air
```

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would pass right through me, & I'd be back to where the air began.

How much more to say about that experience? She's caught distance, fear, even a bit of elation (as the fall might feel), certainly a ton of O'Connor's "mystery" in that telling last line: "& I'd be back to where the air / began."

Perhaps because of Chris Merrill's poem, perhaps because of its ancient aura, fire drew the most writers to it that day, but--impressively--in quite different ways. Here Brittany finds it as a metaphor for some disappointment in herself:

The Fire

Sitting there glowing in the night,
How I got here I don't know
People standing all around me rubbing their hands
They're relying on me to keep them warm
I start to flicker and shrink
A man grabs a stick and starts to poke at me
Trying to stay strong for their sake,
I just don't have the power to
So slowly I start to die
As I feel I've disappointed them

It was only reading that poem aloud to the class the next meeting--and looking back at Brittany--that I felt how much the poem didn't just take on the voice of fire (as I'd thought on first reading); rather, the fire took on the voice of her. I cannot speak for what's back in her days, and I guess I don't need to; I just felt that at that moment I understood something, something very metaphorical and
sociologically true: how we can poke and prod at our children, asking them to keep us awake and warm, when maybe they just don't want to.

Even Garrison, whom as I've mentioned seemed less than excited to be doing poetry, was able to write his best poem this day. After all, as the school quarterback, he had his years of playing football with his brothers...

First Games

I was too young to play, but I didn't care
Everyone was bigger than me
But that didn't stop me either.

Alls I wanted to do was play football,
I didn't care with who, or where,
I just wanted to play.

When we would be done,
I can remember my mom being mad
Cause my clothes were all grass stained

And I usually had a fat lip.
Me and my friends just had a blast
Playing with the older kids

And I can remember on the nights it hadn't rained
How hard the ground would be, but that just made it
That much more fun.

Clearly metaphor has NOT sunken in for Garrison yet, if it ever would. But that "hard ground" has come to stand for something--maybe a test of his "manhood," maybe a symbol of his being able to "take it."

One more poem of fire, one based in reality, though it might feel like a dream...
Memory of South Carolina

Going down the long winding
country road once more
I can almost see the blaze
before we can reach it.
I feel the heat
consuming me, wrapping itself
around me like a soft blanket
made of fine sheep’s wool.
Reaching the climax of the hill, I
see small tips of gold and sundipped
red reminding me of the last rays of
sunshine before earth elopes with total
darkness.
Now I can see plain as the
dashboard of the car, the fire.
A blaze, that comforting oblivion
Of yellows and reeds and oranges
stretching for acres
swallowing the rich green earth.

Amber Seitz

I wanted to hug her and yell out, "Amber's first really
strong poem!" Look at how full of tension (and tensive
language) it is--almost being able to see the fire before
getting there, in some kind of premonition, as well as the
strange comfort of the heat wrapping itself around her. Then
there is the line that most makes the poem for me: her twist
on the old familiar phrase "plain as the nose on my face..."
but no, she twists it, and appropriately makes it "plain as
the dashboard of the car," lit up as it is with its own
internal fire.

I didn't at first recognize the strength of these poems
when I read them to myself that evening. Only standing
before them reading their words back to them the next day
did I hear the links they were making, to the poetry, to the metaphors, but most of all to their own memories, to the worlds they may long have known, but perhaps in some ways not known that they knew. Until now. Students in the inner city would well have their own "gritty worlds" to explore in poetry, taking up Heidegger's call in their own ways.

These rural students had their own "engagement," even if many days they didn't value it or consider it in any way special. But to hear their own words back had, I believe, a confirming effect. This was not the world of the internet, this was the "unimportant" physical world all around them--and they had just shown us multiple ways to make it shine.

7.3 THE WILL TO PLAY: "SUPPOSES" [Lesson 5]

Abstract: The time came to be more radically playful, to take on Gadamer's ideas about art working as play, symbol and festival (see Chapter Four/Section 3). A classroom, after all, is a rather arbitrary space, full of its own conventions. Here I decided to set up a rather elaborate game to the end of getting them to forget about "making sense" with their poems and just enjoy the creation of intriguing lines. "Line play" seems to be the message of this day--forgetting its usually tight relationship to what comes before or after. As Coleridge might say, how can we get to a truly engaged sense of what Secondary Imagination can do unless we break apart some of the typical connections we make with words (see Chapter Four/Section 2b)?

Words: this game starts with taking them up, as Jakobson demands poetry do, AS WORDS, as sounds and tumbling units of voice (see Hawkes, 79). This exercise also hopes to introduce students to new ways of seeing language--and to a more engaged world view--through
playing with this substance (language) we take so much for granted. Let the words be paint, be sound, be a field on the page we dance through. Not toward nonsense and total breakdown of communication, but through wider associative possibility...

On Thursday morning, two days after our session with the "elements," I got up, against my habit, at 4 a.m., feeling something was wrong with the plan we'd concocted for the day. As some of the kids had gone to see "The Laramie Project" on Wednesday, a play based on interviews done with townspeople after the brutal murder of Matthew Shepherd, we had thought interviewing each other about their own memories and writing poems based on those interviews would be a nice tie-in. But not enough of the class had actually seen the play--and those who had gone did most of the processing they needed to do, at least for the moment, during the long bus ride home. On top of that, we'd written about our own memories on Tuesday, so I wasn't in the mood for such a similar assignment. But what to replace it with...

Then I thought of play, that concept Gadamer makes so much of in relation to art (see Chapter Four/Section 3). The sort of word-play we'd done when we came up with metaphors for what "my mind is like..." but not had a chance to return to or build on. The play with sound I'd been wanting to squeeze in all along. The assignment that arose was perhaps the result of not enough sleep, too much thought, and of disturbing the shadows in our basement at such an early
hour. Perhaps more elaborate than it needed to be, it proved to be the most fun we'd had so far.

In my sleepless stupor I came in and announced, "THE UNIVERSE IS PLAYFUL," chalking it in capital letters across the board. Playful, I told them, as Atticus is playful, not responding with defensiveness before the crowd of vengeful and racist men gathered at the prison to lynch Tom Robinson. He is firm, yes, but not vicious or flat in his language. Even there, his wits are about him, even as Scout breaks up their plans with her innocent questioning of Mr. Cunningham. Playful as the woman who organized the Angel Brigade in "The Laramie Project," gathering friends together to dress up with wings and raise them to block the angry anti-gay protester from view. Even as Mr. Tate at the end of Mockingbird has to play with the law a little to avoid a pointless trial for Boo Radley.

Because I was in the mood a deeper connection with them, I told two stories. One was about the time Carla and I rode our bikes across the country, in preparation for which I sold my old green Raleigh ten speed to buy a 15 speed Schwinn that could handle the mountains more easily. Sold it to a geology major at Wittenberg University in Springfield, a stranger whom I never expected to see again. Then, a couple months or so later, riding across the plains of Wyoming, just a little ways past the Grand Tetons, we heard
one of the few cars to pass us for miles turn around and circle back, only to pull up right beside us. Having been warned to be careful of people who have been harassing bikers in this mainly deserted territory, I cringed, wondering how to defend us against an assault. The driver called out and it is then that I looked over, only to see my green Raleigh mounted on a rack on top of his car. We stopped and talked. Apparently he was on his way to a geology seminar up in the Tetons, at a place we'd passed 10 miles back. Had we been 15 minutes later getting up that day, he'd have already turned in the driveway by the time we got there. As it was, we got a little taste of how playful the universe can be.

The second story concerned something far more serious--the death of my mother this past August. Without going into details about her illness, which was mercifully brief, and her life of 81 years, which was blessedly long and beautiful, I told them what happened when I drove up to see her at the hospital in Michigan a week before she died. On the way, as we are wont to do, I put in a tape to pass the time, reaching behind me into the tape box and for some odd reason deciding I'd just "take whatever I got," but secretly hoping it was by Greg Brown. It was by him, but not the tape I thought I had. It was, instead, "The Poet's Game," which I'd forgotten recording off a CD years ago. I listened to
near the end of the first side, coming to the end of the last song as I turned off the headlights in the parking lot. I met my brother in the corridor about 9:30 pm, as he was heading home--he told me her stroke was worse than we'd thought. We hugged (a rare occurrence for us), and I stayed with Mom till 11:30 or so, deciding then to drive out to my parents' house and get some sleep myself. I knew I was tired from the long drive and worried as I was, I didn't know what else I could do right then. Out on Grand River Avenue, I called Leslie from the cellphone, then decided to listen to the rest of the Greg Brown tape--again, as we are wont to do, even at times like these, thinking to fast forward through to the other side. But for some reason, I reached out to stop the forwarding button, in case I'd missed something--and Mom's voice came on. It was an interview my daughter Isa had done with her a few years before for a college project. Mom was talking about one of her pet peeves--about why people can't get along with each other better (I'd always ribbed her about that naivete). But here's the point: I didn't even know I had that tape, much less recorded "The Poet's Game" over it. And had I just let it fast forward, I never would have known. Nor might I have suddenly realized that this might be my daughter's grandmother's last weekend alive, and called Isa, asking her to up to come up the very next day. She did, and was able to
play her violin for Grandma one last time, and make her a last dinner (which, as it turned out, she never got to eat).

Call either of these incidents—and dozens others like them—coincidences. I prefer to think of them as the universe playing—as Frost said—for mortal stakes.

And I said that poetry was called by some the way we get to play with language, opening it up after all the daily stuff we do with words to close them in and make them stale.

Long—and perhaps too serious—introduction to a playful exercise. Nevertheless, here's the game sheet for what we did:

1. Pass out 35 blank cards to each "player."

2. Have each person put "concrete nouns" on the first ten, each word with a strong B, D, G, K, P, or T sound (called the mutes, and said by many people, including Mary Oliver, to be the strongest sounds in the language, especially for poetry).

3. Shuffle these cards and deal out four to yourself, leaving the blank cards aside.

4. For each of these four words, come up with three words that "alliterate" with it, either for the first letter or for other strong letters (for "strum," for instance, one might add three cards with "middle," "song" and "strike"). The only hint here would be to keep the words as physically or concrete based as possible. At this point, you will have 22 cards.

5. Now, add five active, interesting verbs from your blank cards. You will then have 27 word cards.

6. Shuffle all the cards-with-words on them again, and draw out four more, adding two "half-rhymes" for each (half-rhymes being words that almost rhyme,
but not quite--such as "leaf" having some of the sound of "life," but not all; they can add a subtle new texture to poems, without the reader being so blatantly made aware of it, as with full rhyme).

This should give you a deck of 35 words, each with at least a certain amount of sound potential in relationship to the other words.

Any number of poems could be written from these words. (And I should say that it bears a strong resemblance to an exercise by Linnea Johnson in Chase Twitchell's *The Practice of Poetry* [111].) My original idea was to have them write a poem of 16 lines, using two words from their pack in each, but that got shifted over the course of the day to "Write a poem, of whatever length, using at least two of your words in each line, with every line or so starting with the word, "Suppose..." I used as a model the long poem by Pattiann Rogers, quoted in Chapter Five, "Suppose Your Father Was A Redbird." I've loved it for quite some time as an example of a poet thinking freely, while still making a compelling point. Besides that, it's full of good sound and of a sort of metaphor which I thought would stretch the students at this point. Her imagery is incredibly physical, not based only in the eye, but also in the body.

The poems that resulted surprised and pleased me immensely, varying a good deal from A Block to L, but all equally playful and inventive, not so much in the realm of
sound, but banking off the sound of the words in order to combine them in intriguing ways.

I suppose a string of their lines might suffice to give a sense of the flair they attained on this day:

_Suppose a paper clip began speaking,_
_Laughing as it was brushing its teeth_  (Erin)

_Suppose Dakota could stroke,_
_Blackbirds could breathe,_
_Suppose doors had names_  (David Fuller)

_Suppose the flamingo, startled by its prey of sparrow_
_Instead of goldfish leapt out of the fountain to clasp a different snack_  (Emma)

_Suppose the bard had orange hair_
_The horse's name was Shadow_
_Your bedroom wall screams at you_
_A monkey showed up at your door_
_Suppose your head was smaller than your dog's_  (Kurtis)

_Suppose you clasped a star_
_Holding tight to you a light_
_Making your heart soar_  (Sarah S)

_Suppose you were dancing in flower fields_
_Freezing, screaming, wishing you had some heat_
_Wishing blankets would drown you_
_And the fire would stay strong_
_Pictures in the clouds of pumpkins and mushrooms_
_Suppose you could stroke your smiling heart_  (Julie)

Let me pause here to say that even as I type these again, I see at once more exuberance, more humor, more depth and more joy in these than in anything we'd written so far. But before analyzing, I have to hear some more. L Block students, for whatever reason, wrote more on the order of
whole poems, as Sarah Keener's:

Suppose the course of your life
Was rearranged
Instead of silence
Screams could not be heard.

Suppose being proud
Was balanced with shame
Would you be shameful
Or forever dawned with pride?

Suppose life was a paper clip
An endless curve of fame
Counted by every stroke
To where you may arrive

Suppose clouds were at your feet
Cranes would never fall
And raindrops never kissed the sky
Would you wave a white flag
Or surrender?

Sarah's lines here, as in a few others', are less silly, but equally textured and turned. It's just that the play here led here to more cosmic thoughts, yet each with a touch of unusual imagery, as in the line about the paper clip. (I should mention that I also threw in the rule of having people say words out loud every two minutes or so, for use within our poems as the writer saw fit--which is why "stroke" and "paper clip" repeat in poems above, and "laugh" or "flubber" in a couple lines below.)

In A Block, by contrast, people veered toward single lines, stuffed with as many of the words from the cards as they could contain:

Suppose sleepy sunsets were sheets of silk
Suppose gallantly green gardens were swallowed in darkness  (Amber)

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I can't explain the day. Maybe my unconscious woke me from my sleep to tell me it was time to stop plodding through the "basic exercises" and come up with something
new. If we are to keep our work in the classroom fresh, in the teaching of poetry or anything else, maybe there are times to simply "break the plan" this way. My friend Stuart, with whom I have concocted similar assignments during various week-long summer workshops we've taught together, refers to such sudden shifts as "calling an audible," recognizing that the configuration of the "defense" requires a new move. Part of the excitement of the day--for me as well as the students--was just in that: trying something we hadn't done before. As we constructed the card decks, it was almost as if the "game" could go any number of ways. As such, maybe we were experiencing the sort of engagement I referred to in Chapter One: a sense of possibility, even in how an assignment unfolds. It all hinges on that word "Suppose...

All I know is that I drove home that day enthralled (tired but enthralled). There were many ways we had "played" with poetry already, according to the types of play outlined in Chapter Four. Several times we had taken on roles--of characters in the novel, or taking on the voice of "fire" as in Brittany's poem quoted earlier. You could say we played continually with metaphor--and with riddling, when people tried to describe an action without giving it away. But this is the first work we'd done with conscious word-play. And it seems unlikely that such combinations of ideas would have
happened without the wide range of unrelated words we had in front of us. Would Jenny have thought of the "ground sizzling" without the 35 card deck and its range of shuffling possibilities? Would Brian have imagined a "distant daylight dawning in your brain"? Would Nate have ever thought of his wonderful insights, of stampedes being clumsy or laughter having a temper? Would Shelby have made us laugh, imagining the goal of becoming a board? I doubt it. Not without the words--and Pattiann Rogers' gorgeously inventive world view. It freed something inside of us--perhaps accounting for the sense of joy that leaps out of so many of their lines. And perhaps accounting--though I think nothing ultimately can--for this last "Suppose Poem" which Kelley finished and brought to me the next week, so full of its wish for another life:

Suppose

Suppose you could make a fantasy reality. You awaken to the sun dissolving into raindrops, follow the stones, and fall upon roses soaked and soothed, in crisp snow pellets. The tree in the shallow distance screams at you, pouring out its purities, all to one. Its beauty enlightened with misty grass. A glistening snail slithers a pathway of glitter, a path that leads to a beautiful unknown. A stroke of smiles flashes from passing beauty, outlined in fury. Passing Beauty from the Perfect Fantasy. Trudging through fantasies, imprinting every step of your journey
into the spongy mud that trails your way. You cross the dusty pavement, shielding with colorful varieties of glistening insects. You close your eyes, and you find yourself floating into the white forevers. Grains of pale white sound call out to you. "Come, and let us tickle your bare toes." Motions of blindingly beautiful horses await you. Free spirited, light hooved, their manes left floating in the wind. Suppose you could grasp that perfect setting by its wild, yet peaceful mane. And gallop with them forever more. Absolutely no fears of living the unlived life.

I know it's overblown. It could be trimmed. I have to believe it just "came to her," that this sort of exuberance will not harm her writing as she moves ahead. How much does she know of "the unlived life"? I could only wonder what poems would follow this day, for Kelley, or for the rest of us.

Summary: Student after student said in their evaluation that this was one of their favorite assignments (along with "my mind is like..."). That could be just because it was different. But it could also be that they appreciated the chance to say something here that a more "naturalistic" poem might not allow for. One view of the world gets boring. This sort of play with language is precisely what Jakobson says poetry provides for. We can "sit still" in our minds and be logical only for so long. Here was a chance to say something new without feeling embarrassed (the "festival" of the class gave us that permission). Maybe one of the components of an "engaged world view" is this ability to play with whatever arises, to dance the dance of each day as fully as we can.
7.4 APPLYING METAPHOR, PHYSICALITY AND PLAY: INVESTIGATING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY THROUGH POETRY

Abstract: One might call all that came before a warm up for applying the skills of metaphor, physicality, and play on their own. My goal, as I told them, was not to turn them into poets. So it's not the "quality" of their poems that matters here, although I look to the flair and detail of their metaphors and lines to clues me into the "progress" they are making. All I felt I could give them was the experience of playing with these central poetic concepts as tools they might use for re-seeing the world around them. Starting with "looking around" the town most of them have grown up in.

a. Why Did We Use the Poems We Used?

After some terrific writing in my first few weeks with them, starting with finding the poetry in Mockingbird, stretching into metaphor and ending with the playfulness of the "suppose" poems, we took a week break for Jill to be able to wrap up some loose ends of her own, vis-a-vis the curriculum. This was a 10th grade English classroom, after all, and not a poetry seminar! I used the time to reflect on where we'd been so far and where we might be headed.

In many ways, all we had done so far was warm-up, building the rapport and the repertoire for tackling the kind of exploration-of-the-world we'd be tackling over the rest of our time together. Some of our opening exercises were allowing me to know them and them to know me. I could begin to guess what sort of assignments would go well with A Block that might not with L--as well as what lessons Brian
or Jenny would thrive on, and what might better suit Josh or Sarah Keener. As any teacher knows, nothing much happens without that kind of trust and subtle knowing, especially in the realm of poetry where the personal combines with the risky to reveal depths we can never be sure of. If I wanted them to respond with honesty and trust, I had to show them that the assignments would "hold them up," that they could let go of the safety net of daily language and come to speak (and perceive) in ways they might not have before. Such trust probably began with coming to hear and discuss a more difficult style of poetry and get something out of it even when it didn't make the kind of immediate sense that a textbook might. Perhaps this would be comparable to learning to look at art work which didn't automatically tell a story or picture a calendar-like scene. At this stage of our time, such "open" reading was still hard for some. I was finding that sometimes it helped to just read the poem and not push the discussion too far. If we got bogged down in making sure that "everyone got it," some of the energy and time for our own exploration disappeared. We'd discuss some but then let a bit of the mystery remain, to be "tested out" in the process of writing their own pieces. Isn't something just absorbed through the playful sound of the words? I suspect that was true with a poem like "Suppose Your Father Was A Redbird." Had we dwelled too long (at least at this point)
on weighing the significance of every line, we would have made it a "rational event" rather than what it became—a spur to them writing at the edge of their consciousness. The poem became more of a visual stimulus, as we placed ourselves inside the nest, looking out over to see

\[
\text{The slow spread of his wing, over and over,}
\text{The appearance of that invisible appendage ...}
\text{Learning to distinguish the red microbe of his being}
\text{Far into the line of the horizon.}
\]

I wanted to trust that they "got it" based upon the poems that they were able to write that showed a similar leap toward bodily seeing, and that they would be able to apply that strength and engagement as we moved to writing about the world outside the schoolroom doors. Hearing Rogers' poem and leaping into writing directly afterward seemed to give them incredible momentum. I've come to believe in the power of such osmosis. How often do they hear unusual or surprising language anyway? Certainly not in the classroom, and not on the radio, where the metaphors are mostly over-used and warmed-up regurgitations. At least once in each class we heard poems out loud, and it would feel at times as if we were being swallowed into Monet's waterlilies.

We were doing what poets do—maybe this is a trick poets use to "open back up the world"—reading widely, and letting the unconscious energy of a particular poem or poet feed our own re-direction. I wanted them to dwell... in the
power of words, in their own visceral response, rather than a conscious analysis, in what happens when one just starts to "walk around," letting the mind and the eyes wander, in shaking out the stiff and set mind. And I, at least at this point, would be the "game-master," who, to the best of my abilities, would try to "mentor the festival," who would lead them to making, eventually, such discoveries on their own.

Now it was time for a new game. Coming back a week and a half later, I had five hand-outs prepared, each with different poetry approaches spelled out on them, all aimed at exploring the local Mt. Gilead environs. I wanted to "test out" what they'd absorbed so far by applying it in an open setting, where they might feel free to take off in new directions. Still, from past experience, I knew it wasn't merely a matter of having them "go write a poem and come back." The power of metonymy, of shuffling in phrases heard so many times before, of looking at things from the same slant--usually the "objective," vertical, video-eye point of view, incognizant of what lies above or below or inside--is too, too strong. They would need "sparks" to ignite the spirit of play, metaphor and physicalization which we'd worked on in class. At the same time, I thought they needed a wider range of choices. The "suppose" lines were great, but they mostly followed a set formula within which to play
with the words. Now the "field of play" would be a whole town, a place they all probably felt they knew well already. I guessed at the time (and later interviews confirmed) that many of them would be thinking, getting off the bus, "Oh, I see this every day, what will there be to write about here?" How could I get them to see it anew? Despite all this pondering--or maybe because of it--the two days that followed were two of the best I've ever spent with kids.

b. The Four Block Field Trip: Writing Downtown [Lesson 6]

On Thursday morning, October 24th, at 7:30 am, we got right on the bus and headed downtown--four blocks away. Our time was limited and I wanted us to have the whole period for exploration and writing. Parking downtown, I set up the assignment, though first we had some catch-up to do. One student in L block, Emma, had written in her journal, "What makes a good poem?" She'd been wondering a lot about it--why certain people get published, whether somebody could just dash something off and it would be okay, but most of all, what made a poem good when it was good? All I could say was: good question! And certainly one it was time to start answering.

So at the top of the morning handout I put:

**Question: What makes a good poem?**

Of course there are many reasons that one might stand out more than another. But one reason might
be that the poem takes something we see everyday and flips it around--helps us see it in a brand new way.

For instance, in the poem "The Builders," Gregory Orr makes us see the beauty of a peaceful field at midnight but AS IF we could take the moonlight and make a house out of it...

The Builders   (for Trisha)

Midnight. The field becomes white stone.
We quarry it. We carry the cut squares
Strapped to our backs.

On the side of a bleak hill,
We build our hut. Windowless,
But filled with light.

Writing a good poem usually means playing with your words in some intriguing way, or with the way you phrase something, or with the entire way you see something.

This lead to a heated discussion (well, almost heated) of "The Builders," for, as might be expected, many did not "get it." Despite my explanation on the page, they had to twist their minds around to see the blocks of moonlight being cut. When they did, it was often an "aha" moment for some of them. Shelby in particular, who in her journal on a similar poem, Jeff Gundy's "Chainsaw Inquiries," had written: "This poem is about all these questions nobody would ever think to ask about a chainsaw. Does THAT make any sense?" All along she'd been struggling to play the game, to see beyond the most prosaic phrasing (see my portrait of her in the next chapter). But this morning, she woke up briefly with a loud, "Oh, I GET it!"
Without that "aha," I would suspect, little of what followed would have unfolded. It may be that seeing that one could turn the field into moonlight and then imagine cutting it into squares is not some weird hallucination but an intriguing "mind-turn" which could give them permission to do something of the same. Imagine, though, if one of them in casual conversation with a friend had said, "Wow, look at that moonlight out there on the field. It looks like ice! Wouldn't it be cool if we could cut it up into squares and make a house out of it? It would seem like the walls were glowing!" Pretty as this is to dream about, I doubt there was a one of them who wouldn't have laughed their friend out of the room. Yet that's exactly what Gregory Orr's poem is saying one could do. As very young children, they might have made a house out of an old tree branch lying in the dirt beside the garden, or turned a wagon into a mock rollercoaster ride down the driveway. In the game that follows, poetry—whether they knew it quite consciously or not—was asking them to trust those same "what if" powers and apply them to the most common thing they knew: this town where most of them had lived all their lives.

Laying out the choices for them, I saw I had way too much on the page (see the attached handout). Besides, it was a bit cold out in the early morning air, and threatening to rain. How long would they be able to stay outside, trying
out all these choices, before their fingers froze? So I shortened and condensed the whole idea. I had them go out on a little "detail/ metaphor/ invention" hunt, dividing their papers into three columns, with those headings at the top. They were to look closely, jotting down anything they saw and trying to describe it--in quick notes--in the first column; then try to come up with possible metaphors and similes for what it looked or seemed like in the second; and try out some wild "what ifs" or "supposes" in the third column. Off they went. My last words to them, as they scattered, were: Try to find different places to watch from--an alley, a corner, up a fire escape... or out in the monument which sits in the middle of the intersection.

Many took me up on these suggestions. Amber went up a fire-escape that looked over the downtown roofs, Phil decided to be the lone sentry out at the Civil War monument in the middle of town. Jenny wandered off to the steps a church several blocks away. Rachel chose a bench right at the main intersection. I placed myself down in a stairwell right outside the Cornerstone Cafe (selfishly, it was out of the wind) which forced me to look at the town eye-level with the street, with stray plants growing out of the concrete steps. Shelby--and I think a few others--actually went IN the cafe, chose a table and began to take notes.
This was exactly the kind of gathering and dispersing I was hoping for. It was taking the "let's invent a world" feeling from early childhood and overlaying it across the actual space where most of their parents (and they themselves) banked and drove and shopped. Here they were as high school sophomores, many of them in the process of getting their drivers' licenses, taking on jobs, opening bank accounts, thinking about college, and I was asking them to PLAY with the rigid--and seemingly stale--concrete world of a typical Ohio small town on an average, if chilly, Thursday morning in October. Climb up on a roof? Who would do that besides a telephone repairman (or a burglar)? Sit out on the monument? On other days you would be looked at as crazy or dragged in for truancy. Stare at a half-deserted parking lot? What I think was happening was a matter of linking metaphoric play and the physical world to joyfully toy with the given, taking time away from ordinary task-thinking into the realm of art-seeing. Did they do this willingly? Their interviews afterward told me that they loved it--that they look back on these two days fondly as opening up a new view of the town. Did they do this consciously? Yes and no. Some were no doubt making rather deliberate choices to "see again." Others may have just thought: oh, that would be a cool place to go. Either way, it was the spirit (and the structure) of the poem and the
assignment which turned the wheels of the game. Conscious awareness and less-conscious impulse were combining toward an end, which was the poem they would write, a handlable product into which they could pour their discoveries, jotted down in the form of their notes.

After about 20 minutes, we headed back to the heated bus, wrinkled and rain-dotted notepads in hand. The time was so much more condensed than I'd imagined. Still, we'd been outside... and we had rather visceral experiences to go on. The bus became our window, our reflective space, from which to look back on where we'd just been. And maybe, quite luckily, the rain threw a "productive wrinkle" into my plans. For what is a more engaged worldview but the ability to experience and then to reflect? The moments on that bus would provide a "mental move" we could apply in future writings as well.

I set the rest of the assignment up by quickly surveying the options on the handout, and we read a couple more poems. In this case, I have to say that there was little direct correspondence between the example poems we read and the poems they wrote. Maybe, as with Pattiann Rogers' example, the main point was to be reminded of poetic language--the flash of metaphor, the leaping of a surprising phrase--as one might set up a tonic chord before heading into the playing of a sonata. We heard Mandelstam's
"Leningrad," where he imagines coming back to his old hometown after several years of exile. His nearly-surrealistic imagery and wild commands ("this December day/the egg-yolk with the deadly tar beaten into it" and "Open wide. Swallow/ the fish-oil from the river lamps of Leningrad") may have just nudged them further into suggestive possibilities. Nobody got that wild in their poem, but maybe the example made them stretch a bit.

Many wrote a "here I am and this is what I see" sort of poem. Others were more inventive... taking the point of view of a barber pole, or a parking lot, or a step at the bottom of a church stairway. One might be labeled as a safer approach, the other wilder and riskier. I came rather to see these as merely two options they carved out of the possibilities I offered them. What's marvelous to me is how many found their own route to the "grail," that of taking in this ordinary space with more engaged eyes.

Rachel took the first approach, a here-I-am poem grounded in sensory imagery:

I sit on the bench, old and worn, surrounded by the tilted pole, the half-opened windows, the ding dong as the time slips away, the streetlight, neglected by day, taken for granted at night, the consequences of lazy people, beauty, leaves the color of blackberries...

Ah... listen to the quiet voice here. This is not Mandelstam leaping up to "swallow the fish-oil from the river-lamps of
Leningrad." And that's not the point anyway. Notice instead how keen her sensory images are. The bench is a bit generic, "old and worn" but how? Then she gets gradually more specific and multisensory: while we are noticing that the pole is "tilted," we are simultaneously hearing the sound of the bells. What a careful mixing of imagery, even if she juxtaposed them by accident. Here is the diaphoric move at work (see Wheelwright, Chapter Two), where the poet unpretentiously places two things side-by-side so that they can suggest resonance. Rachel may just be recording the most telling details from her list. What they do for us as readers though is gradually form a scene. To quote a scientist friend of mine (actually, Jill's husband, Tom Grubb, a biologist at Ohio State): she's "arguing from evidence," showing us that she's capable of feeding the tiniest detail into her poem and making us notice. Her lines about the streetlamp, "useless" in the day and then ignored at night when it IS of use, push that observational, engaged nature a step further. For here she's not only recording, she's playing with the paradoxes of this world, gently nudging us to consider what else we may not notice, whether it be the trash on the sidewalk (the ugly) or the subtle beauty of something as simple as these leaves the color of blackberries. What's most moving is that she's done all this without stating it out loud at all: she's presented her
"proof" by merely laying her evidence before us. She seems to feel no "generalizing" need to explain it all away with a phrase like, "How much we miss in this quiet little town..." as some might do. She just makes me want to step inside her eyes and see the world with this much love and clarity.

Lauren too has done some careful observing, this time from the inside of something we usually pass by. Look how she starts her poem called "An Abandoned Building":

The rusty ladder prevents
the door from opening

Isn't it nice that she feels no need to lead into the poem with some sort of "explanation"? Like a subtle film-maker, she merely places us there and lets us re-orient ourselves to get ready for what her "feature" may be revealing. Perhaps without Lauren meaning to, the little detail of the blocked door takes on something of a symbolic import. Perhaps this comes from the cryptic power that our earlier games had been training. Our Mockingbird exercises, for instance, had asked us to condense a novel into a single, telling moment that might "stand for" a larger whole. Our sports-riddle exercise had asked us to pay attention, if in memory, to the tiniest gesture and to visualize it metaphorically. Now Lauren (along with so many others) is able to do quite the same thing with what is right there before her eyes. Disengaged? Far from it. Instead, the poems
seem to be teaching her a new way of taking in even the "abandoned" details of the world. She continues:

Paint lies on the floor
in abstract designs
The walls waiting to be finished
Bits of leftover wood lie on the floor waiting for their turn to be used
Shut off from the world
You would never know from the outside.

She makes a lot here from those little abandoned realities: the paint spilled on the floor, the bits of wood "waiting their turn to be used." It's a somewhat closed poem--she doesn't go into that abandoned space very far (as we'll see Ci'Arra do in a moment, when she imagines a world under the paint of a peeling wall). But she's acknowledged that world exists. She's moved from a quickly passing windshield view, from which we'd hardly register that such places exist in Mt. Gilead, to one asking us what else we "would never know / from the outside."

Doesn't it seem that Rachel and Lauren, to pick just two examples, have made "little worlds" out of their poems? These are structures they've created, one detail leaning on the next. The poem provides a frame, as perhaps a sketch-pad would, to work against generalization and make a gesture toward particulars. That ability--to let the world stand for itself--seems to me now to be ones of the skills I admire in
what these students taught me. Call it a more "engaged world view" built up of the senses, making connections and meaning from things as they jibe up against each other, creating a frame for us (and, one presumes, the writers themselves) to walk back in.

Brian was more inventive, picturing himself not just observing his chosen place, a parking lot, but actually BEING the concrete where "the shoots cut through me and stretch towards the sun." Here is his, "Confession":

I've been worn out.
Years of football and hard shoes
Make potholes in me.
I am all but forgotten.
The shoots cut through me and stretch towards
The sun.
The trash clogs my pores.
Not allowing me to breathe.
But I remember
Races down hill,
the victor touching me first.
I was a secret meeting place,
A battleground for wars.
I've seen childhoods
Bloom and grow.
And so I shall stay.

I love how he sees below the surface here. Just as with Lauren's poem, in contrast to someone "just driving through," he knows what places even as empty as that parking lot can mean a lot to kids growing up, who use them for secret places and inventions. That's what I'm coming to understand about Brian... he's growing up and he's doing well in school, but he's keeping a part of the child-like
mind inside him. If nothing else, the poetry seems to be allowing him to do that.

What has caused Brian to make a different move here? Yes, one of the suggestions on the handout was to "Write a poem from the voice of some THING you see here--as if it had a kind of human awareness--about all it sees and what it would say. But we'd made little mention of HOW to do that. Somehow I think Brian just "knew" it was time for him to take a step deeper. He'd written a fine "football memory" poem already, with an attention to detail that Lauren and Rachel had yet to apply at that point. Now he's able to layer across that highly physically-suggestive language this sort of playful I-think-I'll- write-from-the-point-of view-of-a-parking-lot move. That is not to take anything away from the other two poets above, only to suggest that it's tough to do the second without the first. It's a very childlike mind he's allowed himself to enter here. The child who can visualize a parking lot as a battleground. Yet there's an adult, very theatrical awareness going on too. Like Lauren focusing in on the rusty ladder, he is able to suggest a close-up of the victor's feet "touching me first," with the most graceful of flourishes.

From Rachel to Lauren to Brian, we can see something of a continuum: from telling details of "the unseen" placed side-by-side ---> to articulating details leaning toward
"stepping inside" those same ordinary worlds around us --- to imagine BEING inside or becoming the things of that world itself. None of these moves stands out to me as being necessarily better than another. Combined, however, they suggest a range of options for helping students re-engaged the worlds around them, from small towns that dot the maps everywhere across the country to the alleys and road ways of larger urban and suburban environments.

What's lovely about the day is that each poem has something of the fingerprint of the student writer. Tressa comes up with only four lines:

Wish wash wish wash as the traffic goes by.
As traffic stops silence fills the air.
Sidewalks are deserted islands.
Wish Wash Wish Wash.

And she needed help from Lauren to even come up with that last line! (They made a joke that Lauren should get special credit in the anthology.) Even with so small a poem, I can't help smiling. And imagining there's an expansion of her world-view going on. Knowing her, this IS what she sees: a "paused" moment amidst a wide world of energy. If Buson had been our teacher--that wizard of Zen-like attention from 16th century Japan--she'd have his follower perhaps. Tressa considers here that "windshield-view" world I referred to earlier, moving on within its own sound. And there's a bit of sensory awareness too--something I think she would not
have written back in the classroom. True, "silence fills the air" is pure cliche. (For does it? I would have thought that just then other sounds became noticeable.) And yet... she prepares us then for that stunningly fresh line about the sidewalks becoming "deserted islands," with their elongated terrain, almost being wish-washed away by the passing vehicles. It's a brief stop, this poem. With a tiny, engaging (and engaged) bit of refreshment.

Lots more was happening, it seems, as the students spread out to watch their town in the early morning mist. Holly, in a move similar to Rachel's, stuck with carefully honed observation, overhearing a man whistling as he walked down the street, "a tune I'd never heard before ... / ...so pretty it could almost put you to sleep." It's that "extra phrase" that matters, a personalization of the sound that makes her hearing personal and convincing. Just then the town clock strikes 8 am, and "the man looks up. / He looks a while at the peeking tower of the building" and then walks on, continuing his whistling. Just that captured moment, with Holly there wondering what it's like to hear with his ears and see with his eyes. Brian, Rachel, Lauren and Tressa visualize unpeopled, "empty" worlds, populated in the past or in some imagined future. Holly builds her poem in quite another way, finding engagement with those who have walked this town before her.
Nearby, Ci'Arra was peopling a world hidden under the cracked and peeling paint on a wall, a whole village hiding there, where

\[
\text{as the waves roll so do their minds} \\
\text{while they're going cautiously about} \\
\text{the day. Careful for the rain} \\
\text{that flees from outside into} \\
\text{their village, flooding their minds} \\
\text{with thought...}
\]

How stunningly different this poem is from all that have come before! Ci'Arra's mind may be a more dream-like one. If Rachel is a sensory-viewer, Ci'Arra may need to find the mythic or fantasy layers. Perhaps the columns upon which they recorded notes guided the styles people chose. While I don't have her original notes, I imagine Ci'Arra jotting down, on the order of our "suppose" game: "Suppose there was a village under the cracked paint, fighting not to drown in the flood of the rain." Like Gregory Orr, she's invested an ordinary scene with potential for inventive meaning. Not a meaning "structured" from an accumulation of details, like Rachel's, but rather placed there through her own sense of invention. Nevertheless, Ci'Arra finds her way to make her poem a "view" of--or a commentary on--the outside world as well, where we so often find ourselves rushing about so quickly, ignoring the rain which also might be "flooding [our] minds with thought..."?
The route of the poem—in these examples and so many others from this single class period that I could mention—seems to be an idiosyncratic one that follows individualized paths through the same territory:

- The accumulation of detail chosen by the poet-viewer so that a "world" starts to shape up.

- The option to mostly list this detail, while at the same time shaping it, or to "become" it, in some way entering it from the inside.

- Whatever the approach—realistic or more based in myth and personification—an ability to shift the reader's perspective from line to line, to suggest camera-like shots—as in Tressa suggesting we see the sidewalks as islands, or Holly calling us to see the man stretch his neck to acknowledge the village clock, or Brian taking us back into childhood, stretching our sense of time as well as visualization. (Such a skill may well constitute the "playful move," at least within this type of assignment.)

- As a pre-requisite, perhaps, for such an attention to the reader's perspective, the ability to recognize the divergence of inner and outer possibilities, always playing with what's seen on the outside and what might be hidden and might take effort (or invention) to picture on the in.

No doubt there would be many ways to formulate these same principles. Likewise, they will likely vary somewhat from assignment to assignment, from class to class. For this group, at least, they provide some insight as to why the day worked so well, why we all went away pleased, despite the
rain and the cold—and the fact that the impending school buzzer call us back to its locker-lined halls.

For now, let's look at two last poems, one narrative, one riddling, to see if these moves still apply. Both invent worlds out of the most ordinary daily sights on the Mt. Gilead streets. In the first, Corky picks up on his wild adventuring in the suppose exercise ("suppose all the stones were trees and the trees were stone as the water is cement an the bus is a camel..."), picturing himself robbing the stallwarth Bank One building, where "the eagle stands on the wall, keeping guard." He captures well a kind of surreal scene as "green floods the room ... people run[ning] frantically like chickens pecking for food" until finally order is brought and this concealed place is brought back to normal. I exit the building with red and blue lights flashing around. But when I look up, sure enough the eagle stands, smiling above all. I give my remarks to the eagle before I am taken away. And as if a flood of nothingness swept by the city, everything turns to normal and silence once again.

An odd—and potentially dangerous—way to get some excitement in a small town! But I love the sense of irony, the subtle undercutting of traditional concerns, people pecking at the flood of green. Is this not creative visualization, showing a growing ability to open up "normality" and frame it in quite another way? I love the slow-motion "talk" with the eagle as he is whisked into the
police car. As in the other poems quoted earlier, there seems to be a bit of "camera work" going on here, pulling on and in a way mocking all the cop shows he may well have watched growing up. It's an amazing shift from Corky's earlier "How To Tell the Difference Between Good and Bad" or even his depiction of Jem's race to the Radley house, with "water pushing out of (his) pores." Whereas before he was only able to suggest drama ("As I stand... I realize I am at the Radley's house") here he can place himself (and us) in the midst of it. While on a par with the "inventive" move in engagement, along with Brian's and Ci'Arra's, Corky finds his engagement by placing himself with the narrative.

What I think the engagement with seeing is creating for the students is **ability to choose their entrance point** for an assignment. Some are more comfortable with viewing things from a distance, as Lauren and Rachel chose, honest and effective as their descriptive poems are. Others need to do a bit of "projective seeing," inventing worlds beneath the cracked paint, hearing the voice of the concrete, breaking up the order of the "normal" banking day. As Sara Long does, with this persona poem in the voice of... well, you guess...

```
Why do I have to turn?
I'm getting so dizzy
After all the years I've been here.
People act like I'm not here
But I wouldn't look at myself either,
Seeing my red white & blue skin go
Up and down, up and down.
But the people who walk in the
```
Door beside me never come
Back out.
I see their bodies, just not
Their heads.

Do you know? It took me a while too. And then when I saw that she had taken on the voice of the barber pole, I saw how much she had internalized that object, making it speak for herself, in a way. For what student does not feel ignored at times? Sara is often quiet, not making a splash
in class. Perhaps here she's found a comrade in arms, turning and turning, taking in the world of faces (heads) passing through the door and never returning... This is play and metaphor, and subtle commentary, mixed together. Like her fellow writers, she's found a way to invest herself in what she sees. To let what she sees stand for often unexpressed feelings within. Had she written, "I feel lonely, no one ever notices me," or even something more energetic like "The world ignores me so that I disappear before its eyes," we'd probably never read the poem again. Here, however, she's given us the double joy of the metaphor: to be the barber pole and yet hear Sara's voice speaking from within the symbol.

**c. Writing at State Lakes [Lesson 7]**

Here's a wonder: after a rainy early morning, the sun comes out by 10 am, in time for me to plan a trip out to Mt. Gilead State Park, a mile out of town, known affectionately by the people in town as "State Lakes." Between classes, I head out and check the trail and by 11:00 we're on the road. In this case, not everyone chooses to go. A group of boys has decided they're not interested (Kurtis, Garrison, David Fuller, and Zack). That's okay. We're a more coherent class without them. For the rest have chosen to be here.

I start by having them choose a rock from a pile I've collected along the dry stream bed. Searching for some way
to get them involved immediately, at a sensory level, I ask them to "get to know it" as we walk along the trail. Then, for our first stop, I collect their rocks, ask them to close their eyes and re-distribute their stony friends amongst the group in a random fashion. It's an old environmental education game, the purpose of which is to help us realize that even the smallest stone has its own unique characteristics, its own unique flavor. As we start to pass the rocks around in a circle, they rather easily are able to find their own again. Perhaps that's not so surprising, yet if they'd seen all those rocks spread across the dried streambed where I collected them, my guess is they'd perceived them as "just a bunch of rocks," without any significantly different characteristics. But if each single ROCK is unique and identifiable by subtle nuances, what about this place? There are, after all, state parks all around the country and most of them have rocks and trees and lakes and streams, and pathways to walk through "the woods." I say this to them, asking them to think about their town as well. Wouldn't they know it too by its nuances?

I'm not sure they take that all in--how can we ever be? But I tell them I'm building a case, with their help and through the poems, for the value of the experiment we're tackling: making art out of "what's here."
My "evidence" for something sinking in is the terrific discussion that follows of three poems about natural areas on the handout I've given them. The first is by the late James Wright, his wonderful poem called "Milkweed":

While I stood here, in the open, lost in myself,  
I must have looked a long time  
Down the corn rows, beyond grass,  
The small house,  
White walls, animals lumbering toward the barn.  
I look down now. It has all changed.  
Whatever it was I lost, whatever I wept for  
Was a wild, gentle thing, the small dark eyes  
Loving me in secret.  
It is here. At the touch of my hand,  
The air fills with delicate creatures  
From the other world.

Maybe it's good that we start with James Wright. For one thing, it let's them know that there are well-known poets out there who grew up in circumstances much like theirs. I tell them that he too grew up in a small town in Ohio, Martins Ferry, along the river, that he lived in several other places in his life, including Italy--and Minnesota, where this poem was written--but that he always thought back in his mind to his beginnings, pondering the place he grew up. It seems to me now to be a poem about a discovering a different way of seeing. Perhaps one could call it a "move out of the grid." I've often wondered how a poem so good could be so generic in the beginning. His "seeing" in the first few lines is a distant kind, covering only the basics,
as we all do in the country--the small house and the generic animals (it's telling that he doesn't even name the species--we all assume they are cows). But when he looks down... out of that usual "eye level" view, that is, brings his sight in closer, he finds that even the milkweed seeds are looking back at him with "small dark eyes." There is not just seeing, there is love there. And his hand reaches out toward the changed world.

This last part I leave out. For I want to know what they think. Without getting the fact that he's seen and touched a milkweed pod, Sara Gruber says: "It seems that he's talking about himself. Something in himself that he lost." And so, without getting it, she's "got it," leaping to the heart of the meaning, even though she misses a key detail. I've noticed that sort of leap-ful meaning in many of the kids. Lauren, for instance, who in her journal said that Gregory Orr's "The Builders" was about "recovering their wonderful love" (well, it is, but it is first of all about building the house of moonlight). The abstractions, I guess, call to them--and yes, they do matter. I want them, however, to read more slowly, to see HOW the poet got to that important statement. Which is, no doubt, the reason for choosing riddle-like poems like "Milkweed" and "The Builders." There are plenty of nature poems which would be quicker to grasp. The riddle slows us down. If we don't get
it right away, we can have a tendency to skip over the possible meanings. But if the riddle makes us STOP, we can take in the poet's moves, even unconsciously. And perhaps apply them to our own seeing.

We try another poem from the Minnesota countryside, Robert Bly's "Summer, 1960, Minnesota":

I
After a drifting day, visiting the bridge near Louisberg,
With its hot muddy water flowing
Under the excited swallows.
Now, at noon,
We plunge through the hot beanfields,
And the sturdy alfalfa fields, the farm groves
Like heavy green smoke close to the ground.

II
Inside me there is a confusion of swallows,
Birds flying through the smoke ...

III
Yet, we are falling,
Falling into the open mouths of darkness,
Into the Congo as if into a river,
Or as wheat into open mills.

Similar to Wright's poem--and written around the same time--this enigmatic piece from Bly's influential *Silence in the Snowy Fields* illustrates another kind of move for shaking us out of the grid of disengaged perception. Notice how calmly it starts, with almost the tone of a diary entry. At this point, I can tell them Bly's history of heading off after to college to try being a writer in New York City, but finding his real roots called him back to the farming territory where he grew up in Minnesota. That he tried to find the
depth of imagery he saw in Spanish surrealist poetry back in the Midwest. Perhaps they don't have to know that much about the Deep Image school that Bly and Wright come from in order to appreciate what he's doing. And what is he doing? Visiting a bridge, for pete's sake! I tell them that when my oldest daughter was growing up, near Plymouth, Ohio, that we sometimes made our entertainment by riding our bikes to the little bridge that crossed the creek up the road, climbing down and playing in the water. And they understand this. They have all done the same sorts of things. The "heavy green smoke close to the ground" is not a surrealist image for them (or for me)--it paints in a multi-sensory way the heat of the summer in farming country.

But what about the imagery of the next two sections? Is it too strange? Maybe not... now that they've played around with similar lines in our sessions. Jordan says that "he's pulled inward now," after the outward travel of the first lines. And Emma points out that by the third section he's moved out into the whole world--a natural progression that I hadn't noticed until she discovered it.

Perhaps our talk about both poems is subtly telling us: we too can make these sorts of re-engaging moves in our poems and in our perception. As in the Wright poem, we can "look out" and then bring the world closer to us as we shift our vision to an alternate angle. A simple technique,
perhaps, similar to learning to alternate hands in dribbling a basketball. One does not just learn this, however, by being told to do so. Perhaps coming to the state park--and stepping outside of the school on all these field trips--is to allow us the chance to experience in a very direct and physical way the "triangularization" of looking ---> altering ---> writing (or recording) that seems to constitute part of shaping the more engaged world view that art can bring us.

We spent so much time with the rocks and the poems that our time for writing was quickly disappearing. How I wish now that the principal had allowed us to stay the whole afternoon, as originally planned, so that we could do this conceptual groundwork as well as have the time to try out the ideas in depth. In staccato voice, I suggest that they write their own "staring poem," "taking in as much of what you see around you, looking far out, as James Wright does, but then at some point switching and looking closer beside you." Of course I remind them to weave in metaphor and description. To be a tad surprising so that the poem takes on a bit of a riddling form. I don't say it, though I'd planned to, and I wish I'd suggested that they imagine they're writing at a different time in their life, not as a member of a class but here for a different reason, after something important has happened or is about to happen... Or
that they try the Bly approach of starting in "reality" and moving farther into dream and wild connections. Some of that dramatic, inventive tension comes through anyway, maybe because of the various "moment" poems we'd done previously. Maybe because slowing-down attention we've paid to the stones and the poems we've read "pays off" in the attention they bring to their own seeing.

David Cook's is more a generic "nature poem," though I have to admire him for making the start. He had defied his buddies Kurtis, Garrison and David Fuller, to even come along. Looking back, I think this was the beginning of a change for him, a first step at placing himself in a poem:

Sitting in the middle of the valley
on an overhanging log
Seemingly floating above the earth
Many colors--green orange yellow brown
I see the light, flowing to get through the trees
The hillside in front of me
A disaster of trees twigs leaves and slopes
It's quiet except for nature playing its own tune
I stay here, I just take it all in, everything

And I think he means that last line--and truly began to feel that on that hillside he was "floating above the earth."
There's the beginning of tension in his reaching out into the distance and the basic touchstones of this imagery ("many colors--green orange yellow brown"). Like Rachel in the previous class, he does his best of paint the scene. And then, like Rachel, he "moves inside" to make what he sees
more than the typical nature calendar. That change happens when he decides the hillside "in front of me [is] a disaster of trees twigs leaves and slopes." What fresh and honest observation! That word "disaster" being a new way to acknowledge the decay, the non-prettiness of nature. That honesty, that directness, that metaphorical move is the start of shaping a more engaged world view for David, as it has been for many of the others.

Erin's is similar, following directions, but playing with distortion a bit more, with the tension of "passing through the door" that builds to a last line of sweet familiarity:

Glancing down then up again,
I see the open door.
Leading to the lake.
Sunshine pours in through the trees
And reflects.
Is it reflecting off the water
Or am I reflecting on a moment in life?
I hear the trees rustling and birds chirping,
But walls surrounding me
On both sides.
I see the open door.
Taking a chance, I run through it
To the peaceful lake that
I know.

One can see Erin taking advantage of our earlier discussion when she considers if the water is reflecting or if SHE is reflecting. As with Sara Long's barberpole poem mentioned earlier, the lake has allowed her to see inside herself and into its physical nature at one and the same
time. What would be better than to have places around us like that—"the peaceful lake that I know"—which can be inside us as well?

Sarah Keener, more than anyone else here, has begun to shape her lines and stanzas (we've seen examples of that already). And so the pacing of her poem is sharper, the nouns sometimes more particular, the verbs more carefully chosen:

Place among the trees
Dead branches torn
Lying motionless
Waiting for time
To pass.

Bitter breeze
nipping the dry air.
Pressing against leaves
as though
waving "goodbye."

Lost among them,
branches, trees, leaves
cold breeze, acorns
lost between life
and death.

Leaning back
against bark
staring down
to where
creatures rustle
guarded by
just this tree

It's nice, when lines spin out this way, how connections can start to happen which were not even originally or consciously intended. Reading her poem back to the class the next week, I wonder aloud if Sarah had thought about the way
that acorns indeed are suspended "between life and death," in the way they are no longer part of the large tree they came from and are not yet sprouted (or may never sprout) into new life. She hadn't... but the insight is there for us to gather up anyway... I like also how specific she gets at the end, "guarded by / just this tree." It makes the singularity of trees, in all the wide forest, seem important. I am with her here, leaning back, comfortable in that spot beside the lake.

Josh's is more ecologically aware, if perhaps a tad too vague:

Only the Few Saved

Small and large this snapshot of life
Don't taint my beauty
I'm filled with invisible trash
I hide my demise with my wondrous walls,
with tree shades of every color.
Can you hear the wretched noise?
With my glitter tinted glass I attack more than magnetize
From small pebbles to giants who linger at the top.
We all have helped destroy me.

I like how he plays against the prettification of nature here. He brings a wider knowledge that the beauty we see at a state park like this, particularly in the "fall color" time, can mask a decay beneath the surface: "I hide my decay with my wonderous walls." He speaks for nature, but includes the "we" in that voice, the we who keep weakening its health while pretending that all is well.
Meanwhile, there's Kelley, who wrote two poems during this time, each twice as long and complex as anybody's else's one. She said to me later, "I just can't sit and listen to all the talk," so she was writing the first during our discussion, and the second, which I include here, over on a small bridge that spans a part of the trail.

I hear the bridge creak unsteadily beneath me,
my imagination looks deeper and spots a troll.
You can dig into our soul,
but be careful,
too deep and you may pay a toll.
Water is shallow.
It's like a painting,
the muddy banks drip softly
into shallow,
still, yet rippling water.
Autumn tinted leaves that
sleep upon the water
look as though they are
small, separate fires
whose flames have silently faded.
Dull, gray rocks play the role of headstones.
With my feet dangling aside the bridge,
it looks & feels as though
I can walk atop the shallow waves.
I turn at the breeze blows in,
the other side is completely different.
The rocks are still entombed within the dark waters.
But moist blades of fading grass enclose the rushing waters which are not so still as the other side portrays.
Emerging from the lining are rusted stems,
brightened with the new
blooms of almost
winter berries.

I still wish someone could tell me how someone who could perceive this much and exhibit this much vocabulary could be flunking English! More on that later. For now, I want to point out how camera-like her eye is, slowly scanning the whole surround, getting a little silly at time (the trolls, the tods), but mostly bringing out the details of the trees, the rocks, and the deceptive surface of the lake as if it were all on a photographic plate rising up toward her words. Does she perhaps have a graphic mind? Her interest in poems only started, as I understand it, a few weeks ago, when she was refusing to read Mockingbird and Jill suggested she write about the tree out the window every day, at least to give her something to do! Does she have the sort of visual/sensory imagination which Henri Bergson would ask us all to have, and which schools do so little to train? Indeed she will drop out of school before the semester is over. In the meantime, I wish I could take her anywhere at all--and watch the poems emerge. Without me giving her much of anything but the opportunity, and the smallest hint of direction, she has found her own ways into the writing and into an engaged language that shapes and troubles our vision so that this lake will never be quite the same again.
b. SEEING THE WORLD WITH A SURREALIST'S EYE [Lesson 8]

Abstract: This lesson adapts certain aspects of our previous "suppose" game and maps them onto the town. Students wandered from spot to spot, working playfully in two-line stanzas, then following directions to the next possibility. It is an exercise, thus, in what Michael Ann Holly would call "playful seeing" (146), engaging what IS and making it into our own.

Thursday afternoon was so beautiful, for late October, that I regretted again the principal's decision to limit our field trips to the length of the class. We had just enough time in L Block to eat lunch in the sun at the cemetery down the road, but not really enough time (or energy) to start a new assignment and rush through it quickly. Indeed, it seemed we were beginning to develop a different kind of time and way of being around each other. We relaxed, we took some time to wander among the gravestones and record dates, and we got back on the bus. It was all gorgeous... and the way I wish education could be more often. Why couldn't such open time be mixed into the schedule on a regular basis, so it wouldn't be a question of pulling kids out of class or finding subs? What if there were periodic times to go out and explore, to apply what we were learning beyond the confines of the school walls?!

Regardless, the next day at least was time for exploration, if once again colder and threatening rain. In L Block, I wanted to go downtown, since they'd been at the park the day before, but I didn't want to do quite the same
exercise. Instead, I gave them the map below, a dice cube, and told them to go off, pick a place to begin and start the game, writing two lines in each spot before moving to the next. First, however, I wanted to remind them what a good line was... so, in quick fashion, I asked them to page through our poetry anthology and find a few lines or so (even a single one) that they found striking. This exercise alone gave me confidence that something was sinking in, for the lines they chose had just the kind of power I would be asking them to emulate. They even surprised me by not picking the easy stuff. And just as their lines about "my mind is like" revealed aspects of their personalities, so did the lines they chose. I wrote some of them down afterward..

Sara Smith, whose own poems had begun to reveal a strong sense of place and rhythmic tension, chose from this poem about growing up in Williamsport, Pennsylvania:

It was in an empty lot
Ringed by elms and fir and honeysuckle.

David Cook picked out these from a poem of mine, foreshadowing the kind of metaphysical poet he would gradually blossom into:

A kind of hellish pleasure in the shrivel of those
death-hands as they climbed the black walls
of the flames and fell back in.
Josh, appropriately for him, chose a part of Russell Edson's stingingly sarcastic prose poem, "Erasing Amy Loo":

"Shut up about Amy Loo. Bring your head over here and I'll erase Amy Loo out of it."

Ryan, whose family farms 2000 acres of land, picked these lines about a farming community in the hills of West Virginia:

Dust on the roads, dust
on the sumac

Zach, perhaps the most conservative student in the class, chose these lines by Rilke:

I am circling around God, around
the ancient tower

And Kelley, romantic that she is, picked Diane DiPrima:

I am a shadow crossing ice
I am rusting knife in the water
I am pear tree bitten by frost...
I am mad as a blizzard
I stare out of broken cupboards

I had the hope then--and I still do--based on their ease in finding these lines, and from our discussion yesterday, that if nothing else I might have shown them how to read into a poem, picking evocative lines that might pull them on. Poetic language is by its nature NOT everyday language. We needed this little opening go-around to remind
us of the subtle flair that poets use to help us re-enter the world, even in a single line.

So here's the game, constructed intentionally to evoke the sorts of tension-filled lines--lines built upon opposition, surprise and compression--they picked out above, and which we'd been experimenting with all semester:

A MAP TO THE TOWN (A POETRY GAME)
THIS IS JUST A WAY TO INVENT SOMETHING NEW...
TO MAKE A POEM WITHOUT TRYING TO MAKE A POEM

Directions: For each spot, do what the directions say, then write 2 lines as if they were part of a poem you were making.

1. Start somewhere no one else is (preferably where you can't see someone else in the class).

Jot down ten nouns from what you see--each with a strong sound of B, D, G, K, P, or T.

Then write two strong lines of poetry using those two of those words in each line (with a twist--paying attention to how your second line plays against your first, extending it or contrasting with it in a way that catches us off-guard).

2. Cross a street (carefully!) and find a new place to sit.

Jot down 4 unusual pairs of "opposites" (example: What if window were the opposite of sky?)

Write two lines using those opposites, such as: "The window blurs its own thoughts on purpose
The sky peels apart the clouds"

3. From that same spot, pick someone you can see (not a fellow student) or imagine someone--even someone in a car.

Write 2 or 4 lines that begin, "All day, he..." or "All day, she..."
4. Stay in that spot, or find some place no more than 10 steps away. Find something small around you—smaller than a breadbox or smaller than your hand.

Look at it for at least 2 minutes, noticing little things about it.

Write 2 or 4 "impossible questions" about it—thinking of it as if it were human or had a point of view and feelings of its own...

As in: "Does the stoplight at night wish to vanish into a dozen shells beneath the lake?"

Don't worry about making sense—just make your questions create interesting pictures and possibilities.

5. Walk no more than one block in either direction. Stop and look around. Throw the die you were given—or pick a number in your head between 1 & 6, looking the direction the number below gives you:

1 = up / 2 = down / 3 = in front of you
4 = behind you / 5 = to the right / 6 = to the left

Take something you see and write 2 lines that begin, "Everybody knows..."

Don't stay necessarily in the realm of reality. Invent. Be playful. Yet be specific. As in:

"Everybody knows the bricks were once able to listen..."

6. Take two lines that you wrote already and write the opposite of what they say.

7. Find a spot and sit down. Write two lines from the point of view of someone who left Mt. Gilead 20 years ago.

8. Walk somewhere zigzag from where you are. Stop and look around.

Find something around you that is the same color as something you have on.

Using that color (and/or that thing) as a starting place, write two lines that begin, "I never..." or, "I once..."

9. Write two lines that are a "creative lie."
10. Without turning your head, from the side of your eye (your peripheral vision) find a source of light. Look at it, or walk closely up to it.

Write 2-4 lines that begin, "The light is like..." or, "The light is..."

NOW:
Sit down somewhere close by and spin your various lines into a single poem, adding or subtracting (dividing and recombing) as needed.

You might think of it as just a series of "images from Mt. Gilead" or you might try imagining that they all come from the point of view of one person or thing you saw during the "game."

I don't have space to include all the intriguing poems that came out of this game. I worried they would get too scattered, that they wouldn't be able to maintain the wildness they'd put into their "suppose" poems. I needn't have. The results confirm for me, more than anything else we did, the value of the exercises we'd done so far, which seem to have made them able to stretch at will, from rather beautiful nature-based poems of the day before, to these playful, crazily insightful lines from the streets of the town they walk every day. All despite the fact that it began to sprinkle rain at the exact the moment we stepped off the bus.

Here are just four examples, to get the idea of what they were able to construct out of seemingly random phrases. Oh yes, now I remember--most people didn't have time (or
energy) to do that final stage of weaving the lines together... so we let the groupings stand on their own. Here, to begin, is Erin's. Note how she starts with the most mundane of observations (people and dentists make up a town as much as the bricks and pavement) and opens suddenly wider. It's as if the first stanzas provided her with a bit of "ground" upon which she can build a much wilder structure:

_Mt Gilead_

1
_As the pavement and bricks make up this town_
_The people and dentists help it too_

2
_The music plays softly in small novelty shops_
_As rain hits the ground as if it were angry_
_The air conditioner wrrrs to try to cool down_
_The chair acts as if it were a resting place_

3
_All the day, he walks to his job_
_All the day, he dreams about rain_

4
_If a door knob were not to open a door,_
_Would people still eat bananas?_

5
_If silver wasn't a color, would unicorns_
_Still dance on otter's brains?_

6
_Everybody knows the door will open_
_To a field of dreams_
_Everybody knows that trucks dream_
_About eating chicken teryiaki_

7
_He never attempts to walk around_
_The rain never comes in his dreams_

8
The cozy little bustling town makes me
Think of my old home
As the traffic clogs the busy one way streets
I remember the small streets of Mt Gilead
Erin Combs

I love the oppositional combinations that are starting to happen here. I'm in a quite "real" place--with dentists and truck drivers, novelty shops and air conditioners--which comprises one side of Mt. Gilead. And then, as if the directions to the game sprung loose a series of trapdoors underneath her more prosaic lines, a new tune begins to play across her keyboard: a man dreams all day about rain, doorknobs threaten NOT to open, trucks have culinary desires, the rain reverses and refusing to return to his dreams. We are walking the line Susan Stewart defines in her book *Nonsense*, where what makes sense is continually in negotiation with what does not (see Chapter Four/Section 3).

Josh's contribution has something of that same natural combining power, if more closely-observed wackiness:

1. The pebble-basined pole stood fast in the belly of the earth
   Slowly the bug had reached its powerline

2. What if money were opposite the business that made it?
   What if signs and their meanings had no bond?

3. All day she drives around, not know where around is

4. Does this number want to be more or less than a stuck-
Everyone knows that the true color of stop is blue
Everyone knows that stop has been cursed

The pebble covered pole leans over from arthritis

The small insignificant ignorance of that place
It pulled the shades - everyone and even the blind could see better

Did you know, it's true, only small things fall and the large have to hold them up

When he read this poem at our closing reading in January, Josh introduced it saying "This isn't really a poem, just a bunch of lines I wrote down." I have to disagree with him. I think, multi-layered as it is, it's really just a different kind of poem, circling around a space, pulling in more wildly diffuse insights than he might have created otherwise. As he's shown in other assignments, Josh is able to merge the mythical and the realistic in paired lines that open up both sides of the world. His "pebble-basined pole" is a very REAL pole to me, but as it stands fast in the "belly of the earth" it takes on more than mundane meanings. And when he pairs it with the bug as it "slowly reach[es] its destination," the whole world of the small takes on a richness that our "quick sight" approach to a town like Mt. Gilead is bound to miss. Perhaps by breaking his poem
into tiny surreal supposes, Josh creates a composite picture of the place that is stronger than if he had written, in his mind, a "real poem."

And here's Sarah Keener again, who maybe has learned more about uniting her diverse images into an overall effect:

Leaves opposite the trees
where gravity stops pulling at the earth
where the pumpkin wishes to cry
and doors walk.

Everyone knows that a wall can talk
here, where the windows stare
down to lonely streets.
No, the windows are empty.

No one knows the man
who walks slowly among doors,
or the woman who paces
where bricks fly.

Ah--I love it. Maybe she will look back years from now and say, "Why did I write all that wild stuff?" I hope not. I hope she sees that, amidst the flying bricks and the walking doors, she's caught something of the feeling of a town in transition. There were, after all, plenty of "empty windows" in second stories of buildings being remodeled (slowly, it seemed), including a new Chinese restaurant coming in, and even some people moving doors down a side-street from a revamped office. So her poem is in some ways a naturalistic portrayal of change, while at the same time an interior-voice one.
There is, I notice, a bit of a "conversation" going on. Just as in Josh's aside, "Did you know, it's true, only small things fall..." Sarah invites us in to consider this mythic Mt. Gilead with us, reversing herself in an entirely believable way when she first suggests that "the windows stare / down to lonely streets," then interjects--as if she is speaking directly to us--"No, the windows are empty." That's part of what is growing here, as the kids learned to re-see their town. To say "Suppose," after all, implies that someone is there to hear. We didn't make these myths, we didn't take up the "suppose" game in a vacuum. We came to try out speculations, in a carnival atmosphere, walking around the streets like surrealist detectives, clipboards in hand.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, there's Ashley Sherbourne's poem, which she took time to revise into something of a whole. Reading it over, I recalled her single line of three weeks before, "My mind is like a flower, alive" and marvelled at the way that first stab at tensive language grew into this swirl of surprise...

What if pavement was the opposite of people?
Would it open the doors of bricks?
Everybody knows the bricks can sing and dance.
And whisper among themselves.
And the man that goes through the doors of bricks--
Who is he?
All day he pushes a cart full of pieces of cardboard.
All day he speaks Chinese.
The bug beneath his foot,
what does it dream about?
Popcorn and moss?
Does it, was it, could it be one of us,
and does it have to worry about being
squished beneath moving towers?
The light is like beautiful teardrops...

Notice how wide-ranging and sensory Ashley's references and camera angles have become. It's hard to believe this is the same student of just a few weeks ago. She's gained a much more dramatic and flexible engagement with the world, now focusing on the bricks, adding music to vision, now zeroing in on a man passing through a door, then zooming even closer to the bug beneath his feet. She even gives us two possible dreams for that bug, then shifts back to a much grander view--of two moving towers (which could be at one and the same time our legs AND the World Trade Center), and the light shedding its tears over all.

Summary: Just as a fine poem fights against paraphrase, this lesson defies my attempt to pin it down. Perhaps it just worked for this one class, wacky as they are, disjointed as they are (unlike A Block). It allowed them their own paths into the words and made the town itself a field of play. To "engage" the world this way, I will forever hope, is a way of taking the ordinary and seeing the riches inside...

d. INVESTIGATING VISUAL CULTURE: POETRY AT KROGERS
[Lesson 9]

ABSTRACT: Who would have thought a grocery store could supply so many options for writing poems? Of the ten choices I had prepared, we tried out two! Maybe I just wanted them to be able to enter this side of their town too: the commercial one, so full of advertisements and
bright colors, so contrasted to the more subdued and decaying downtown (no boarded up windows here!). It was our first and unfortunately only, attempt to write about visual culture (is it the food we're buying, or the glossy, enlarged posters and the flashy packaging?). It proved to me that entering such places takes a different approach. In contrast to downtown, there is so MUCH going on, it's a struggle to concentrate. Still, they were able to run with it all. And metaphor, physicalization, and playful invention became (without me much reminding them) the keys we used to unlock this world as well.

As it turns out, one of my "contingency plans" for the field trips turned out to be a welcome change of pace for all of us. Not knowing what the weather would be like in this third week of October, I thought we needed a place to go inside, should it be rainy or cold. It was both at 7:30 Friday morning, so we headed off to Krogers, where I'd gotten permission for the kids to wander the store, hunting up poems down the aisles of flashy, tempting packaging and the mounds of California produce.

Only later did I think of the contrast this assignment made with the other field trips. For here we were, writing, in a way, about visual culture, or at least about the packaging that surrounds our daily sustenance. Grocery stores in America are not all about filling necessities, or even mainly. They are cultural events that buy into a visual (and visceral) wash of consumption, where what something looks like on the package has often much more to do with why we like it than what is necessarily in the box. Even our salmon is "painted" pink with dyes, so that fish from force-
fed farms take on a "natural look," compared to the unappealing gray they would be left if taken straight out of the farming tank.

The store's location itself is telling: it sits as the head-pin of Mt. Gilead's version of a strip mall, set back from the road surrounded by its ocean-size parking lot, with a chain clothing store on its west side and a Radio Shack, McDonalds and video store across the street--all the most basic "signs" of the national, commercial culture eating its way into the traditional fabric of cozy side streets and schools, banks, post office, hardware and jewelry stores, etc. that make up the "old town" just eight or so blocks away. By coming here, in a way, we had actually left Mt. Gilead and entered America, the store looking like every other chain grocery anywhere else.

Of course the kids were thinking none of this. I'd even guess that this world is closer to the world they inhabit most of the time. They don't, for the most part, wander downtown, poking down alleys or propped up on benches, nor do they spend endless hours at the state park. They do make nearly daily trips to the store, or consume the endless food ads on tv, or directly out of the box. It is clear, from the moment we walked in: they love it here. And so, I'm glad we gave them this chance to see what poetry has to say in such
a place. When they got off the bus, it felt like a party. I joined in and went with the flow.

But first, we paused to set up the assignment, making again the bus our classroom,. I had come up with ten ideas for writing in this place, but we'd decided to try the cemetery in the second half of the period, so I pruned the choices down to two. We read first Pablo Neruda's "Ode to Watermelon," a fun poem to start off with, with its burgeoning imagery for this "tree of intense summer," this "jewel box of water ... warehouse / of profundity, moon / on earth!" whose

hemispheres open
showing a flag
of green, white, red,
that dissolves into
wild rivers, sugar, delight!

They've seldom seen metaphor used so profusely before, at least in this half-mocking way, exaggerating on purpose what we all love but may have never thought of praising in this way. And so it seems like a liberating poem. For a change, instead of having to be serious, it invites us to be extravagant in what we love. I suggested the students might try the same, writing odes to cheese or celery, Froot Loops or Snickers, stuffing the poem with as many wild metaphors as they could, but in their exaggeration trying to find something "true" in the food itself.
For a second, shorter idea, I took as a model William Carlos Williams' well-known poem, written they say as a note left for his wife on the kitchen table before heading off to his office in Patterson, N.J. where for most of his adult life he was a family physician. I tell them this because, just as we are making poetry out of the everyday world around us, Williams made poems out of people he saw at the bus stop, or visions outside the hospital window, or what he ate for breakfast...

This Is Just To Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Justifiably famous as one of the sweetest (excuse the pun), most moving poems ever written in America, it captures a magic within the ordinary--and a cadence within daily speech--that is nearly meditative, focused as it is on the simplicity of pure, if somewhat forbidden, enjoyment. So I suggested that, along with a "ode to cheese" poem, they "write a poem as if it were a note you might leave on some
shelf in the store for someone to find later (or else a poem-as-a-note you might leave on the kitchen table), apologizing for something you've not-quite-really sorry for...

Some of their poems are basic hymns of praise:

Ode to Apples

Oh how the apple makes me feel whole
The stem extending up as to reach the heavens like thoughts growing wanting to be heard always more keep coming brown and rough no two the same shining and glistening in the summer's sun

Brenna Burson

Others are more indulgent and "sinful":

Ode to Reese's Peanut-Butter

Brown creamy peanut butter rich with a nutty chocolate taste smoothly plastered over a warm piece of bread... mmm...

Ode to the Bakery

Friendly old ladies serving hungry girls giving extra rolls to please

Shelby Louis

It was Shelby's short poems that clued me in to their comfort in this somewhat artificial world. Particularly in
this second poem, she reveals a sense of community and comradery not seen in the downtown poems, where the dominant sign of life is traffic and "sidewalks [are] desert islands". As I will write about in the next chapter, this is really the first time Shelby's poems have revealed any spark. From her love of the food, she has, in these tiny poems, produced gems of unfettered enjoyment, crystallized into tight, suggestive language.

Ben Vail's poetry also came to life for the first time in this place. He'd shown interest before now, but never quite lifted his poems off the ground of the prosaic. Is it a kind of **play** that the food poems allowed him--and others--to indulge in? Indeed, in our rather prosaic world--where participation in drama is mostly reserved for the actors on the very-distant world of tv, and where most singing is done by larger-than-life celebrity bands and singers on the radio--maybe food and other forms of consumption are the places where we get some direct participation in a playful culture? Just a thought... Either way, Ben had fun with his "Ode To Pudding"

---

Oh it is me, that awful stealer of appetites.  
That mischievous thief, innocence.  
I am a wonderful thick snack.  
I am wrapped in colorful paper to catch your eye.  
People dream of swimming in pools of me.  
A pack of 4?  
Oh, just one more!
The pack is through,
Such a lonely spoon...

Tellingly, when we read this out in class the next week, people nearly applauded Ben's last line. It was perhaps, as for Shelby, his passage into letting the poetry speak in his
voice.

Last lines took on more importance now, no doubt under the influence of Williams' zinger. Without even belaboring it, they seemed to have come to know how essential it was to have that last line "click shut," like a well-made box:

Note

I ask for your forgiveness,
I have taken
the Captain Crunch

I'm sorry but the brightness of the yellow box drove me to it.
Surely you would

have done the same thing if you had skipped breakfast

Liz Ray

Drink

1
My thirst grows
My soul grows weak

2
Oh how I need
just a
little
drop

I see it,
so near
It's within
my reach
Forgive me
for I
drink

Brenna Burson

Sometimes a writer would stumble on an unexpected emotional, even existential, tone, as in Brenna's poem below about those little salty fish crackers known as...

_Fisheys_

I was birthed
into a heat
many on either
side
There was but
a slight
indent
upon my
face
different flavors
yet all
the same
I see my
fate
I enter the
mouth of death
only to swim
in the sea
of me

Brenna Burson

Is it too much to consider this poem a wry comment on consumption? Or a meditation on "the other" that we become? Probably. Yet that image of floating in a sea of one's own
death is just striking enough to stay with us in a haunting, if joking, way. For Brenna too, this day was the first that her poems took on this kind of pacing... a play with line breaks that led to a much finer-tuned melody within. Somehow the style they found to respond to the food aisles of Krogers fit--quite intuitively--that place itself. To write poetry in a grocery is in some ways naturally pretentious--it invites sarcasm, a self-conscious edge that opens up their voices. One might speculate that giving them this opportunity to play with the symbols of their common culture--the poptarts and the puddings, the slathering concoctions of chocolate and peanuts, the salty, empty treats we consume by the billions each day--took poetry into a different room, perhaps opening some doors that had been blocked off.

Jenny's poem is a mock-mythical fable of the difficulties of being a true loner in a world of clustering and safety:

Ode to a Single Grape

A round sphere
That walks across
The smooth floor
Not walks, runs
At fear of
A higher power
Reuniting the grape
With a vine
It has struggled
To break away
From.
What a brave
Purple grape,
To wander
So far from home.
Sitting in front
Of bread products
Galore.
Rye, Wheat, Sourdough-
What is this?
A u-turn at
Hot dog buns?
Maybe grapes aren't
Meant to be alone.
It did take
Lots of courage
Even for just
One minute,
Alone on the floor
At the grocery store.

Even Kelley is able to transform her normally elegiac voice to explore new territories of tone, in her poem called:

SORRY

I know your project was due,
I'm sorry,
I took the Twizlers that
Supported your house.
I'm sorry,
I chewed the Marshmallows
That hung as your clouds.
I'm sorry,
I gummed down the gummi bears
That once stood as your family.
I'm sorry,
I snatched the candy corns that
The bad boy wore as a dunce cap.
I'm sorry,
I scarfed down the Pez that
Were your once burning candles
On your miniature dining table.
But the thing I'm sorry for most of all
Is that I'm not even sorry.
Your family was delicious,
Everything and all.
That one can make mythic meaning out of such ordinary stuff --Twizlers and marshmallows, gummi bears and candy corns-- speaks to the metaphoric power within everything a culture grounds itself in. Kids WILL use these things, not only for school projects, but for little icons of meaning. Oh--not to make too much of it all--but this little excursion into the world of Krogers showed me that "writing outside the box of the classroom," and taking time to bring the physical, metaphoric, playful, and visual more directly into our consciousness, probably means going to the full range of places and commodities that affect kids' lives, including the grocery store. Can we ignore the power and lure of the rich commercial language spoken here in such a quietly loud way? Not really. Perhaps it only adds to our picture of metaphoric swirl we as humans wrap ourselves in. And for a last taste of that, here is Amber's three line poem, full of color and sparkling adolescent desire...

*Lipsticks*

*Luscious crimson reds and browns*

*have touched my lips. Forgive me,*

*for I have tried every color.*

After this rollicking time, it really didn't matter that each class only got a brief visit to the cemetery, as we had planned, beautiful as that place was in its own way, at the other end of town. We'd been, after all, in the mansion of disguise and splendor.
Summary: To really "test out" their new abilities at making use of metaphor and more physicalized, inventive language made we "had" to come somewhere like this, where the poetic landscape is more difficult to find. By proving that they could enter both this world along with the state park and the older downtown, they showed the flexibility and transferability of the components we’d been working on. It felt, at least for now, that they could take these skills anywhere.

To learn a more engaged worldview through the arts one needs not to limit the focus too narrowly, considering only "approved" subjects, like lakes and antique shops. This lesson taught me that bringing in the received culture of ads and product loyalty—and learning to respond creatively to that world—may be a necessary part of enlivening our sight and our abilities to make ANYTHING our own.

7.5 METAPHOR, PHYSICALITY, PLAY... AND VISUAL ART

Abstract: These next five sessions represent the final stage of my time with the classes. In them I wanted to test out how we could carry over what we'd done in the classroom and the town to looking closely at images of all kinds. Would metaphor, physicality and play prove as useful when approaching paintings and photographs as when writing from a novel, a memory, or a physical world one can actually walk through? First we had to make a link between a novel of subtle metaphor, character and description like Mockingbird to a play based in the clash of public and religious images like The Crucible, testing in what ways an awareness of the power and relationship of visual and verbal imagery might help students re-engage their own perception of and connections to the world.

a. Images from The Crucible [Lesson 10]

Images, as WJT Mitchell has shown (Iconology, 9-14), are at work at all levels of human thought and communication, from the vaguest sense impression to the most
elaborate mathematical formula, from the largely pictorial image in a painting or photograph to the more verbal imagery of poetry and speech. My final five sessions with the students dealt with visual imagery and its relationship to the sorts of verbal imagery they'd been making such subtle use of in their poetry so far.

These are the sorts of questions that ran through my mind as I approached this new stage:

1. Would they be able to stretch their poetry-lenses from the more familiar territory of their own memories and community to include the more distant world of paintings (American and surrealist), photographs (historical and personal) and exploration of the "interior space" of the art museum?

2. Would the playful metaphorizing practice they'd become somewhat skilled at provide entrance into the visual world, as I hoped, or might it prevent them from seeing closely? That is, they may have become SO playful that they might not be careful in their description, leaping too readily into worlds of their own invention? Similarly, perhaps metaphor too would become something of a block by placing a wall of words in front of their seeing, forgetting that our words can become labels that freeze perception before our eyes have really taken hold of the expanse before us (see Chapter Five/Section 4).

3. If paintings can sometimes be seen as visual metaphors, would the students' poetic, written metaphors meet the visual ones half-way, or would one tend to dominate the other?

4. And on a curricular level, what would help facilitate a strong exchange between written images and verbal ones?

Obviously, five days writing about images would not be enough to fully answer these questions. One day might go
badly--or well--for any number of reasons. But I hoped we could at least get some inklings of insight as to the links that might be made between these two essential sides of experience.

We began with exploring imagery in Arthur Miller's play, The Crucible. Not planning to connect this particular reading into our activities, I was sitting in class on the Tuesday after our writing in Mt. Gilead just to "settle back in" to knowing them as a class in their normal environment when I was struck by the enthusiasm with which the students got up and acted out the parts. Oddly, a good number of those who hadn't given a lot to the poetry so far were up there at least somewhat enthusiastically taking on their roles. Acting seems to be well respected in this school, where at least two productions take place each year, one musical and one straight drama. As I watched the students walk through their parts, playing and physically living out the book before each other, it began to open itself to me as a document for our exploration of how imagery and metaphor not only connect to effective sentences, description and character development (as in Mockingbird) but also to the ways societies structure themselves, make decisions, and change. This was such a perfect illustration of Mitchell's contention that "an image is ... a character on the stage of
history" (Iconology, 9) that I couldn't resist being pulled under the spell of Arthur Miller's scheme.

The very title of the play offers itself up for consideration: Is it an image or a metaphor? Is it effective? What is it trying to convey? Just as the phrase "to kill a mockingbird" only loosely pertains to the full meaning of Harper Lee's book and yet holds our attention enigmatically, the way a good proverb does, so the image of "the crucible" is more of a condensed and elusive image for the play, moving several directions at once. Who, after all, is being "burned away," the way chemicals are in a scientific--or a alchemic--experiment? Are John Proctor and his wife being "tested" to measure the purity of their souls, just as the victims of the Red Scare purges in the fifties had to make it through those fanatical times to find out "what they were made of"? Or was the Puritan society in itself being tested, burned in the fever of the witch hunts and wild, vengeful accusations?

All this was in the back of my mind as I sought means to involve the students in the writing about imagery we would be doing over our next few sessions. So much as the title is no doubt both an image and a powerful metaphor for those times, it became useful to me to think of Mockingbird as a book bound up with the intricacies of literary metaphor and The Crucible as hinging on the power of images to
control and direct our minds. A somewhat false but nevertheless useful distinction.

So on Thursday, I began by asking THEM to read back their poems from the field trips. Maybe because we were now in "stage play" mode, the sequence of their reading took on a dramatic feel, as if we were hearing characters speaking in a theater. I think they felt that too, putting extra punch into their "performance." From that opening, we moved to The Crucible and I hinted at some of the ideas about imagery touched on above. I told them how I'd been noticing that the images which the characters were using in their speech were often the driving forces behind their life choices. Images, I suggested, were often incredibly powerful, just as someone can present a "cool" image in school or an office and carry a lot more respect than someone with the same ideas and knowledge who does "read" cool. I gave them the example of Herb E. Smith, a filmmaker from Kentucky who had visited my college class the previous week to show his documentary on the history of the "hillbilly" image and its effect on the people who grow up in Appalachia. I told them of one reference the film made to a newspaper columnist in New York around 1912 who argued against strict laws prohibiting child labor on the grounds that working in factories would cure the mountain children away from the lazy habits of their elders. He had an "image"
in his mind of "Appalachian = lazy," I suggested, which he proceeded to invoke in his readers to argue for a cause. I wondered aloud how often "image ---> leads to ---> action" this way. The domino theory about the invading forces of communism, so prevalent in the 1960s, was used as the main argument for our continued presence in Vietnam. The communists would be the force toppling nation after nation directly to our door, the reasoning went. And yet Ho Chi Minh, the leader of North Vietnam, saw himself as the George Washington of his country, pushing out the colonial troops of the French and the Americans the way our national hero had exorcised the British from our soil. Maybe we should revise the diagram to: "metaphor (the domino) ---> becoming ---> an image (the falling of nation after nation) ---> leading to ---> action (10 years of U.S. involvement)"? The relevance of such a dynamic to our current situation in Iraq was not lost on them.

For an example from the play, I asked them to turn to pages 24 and 25. Here three characters "debate" the significance of the recent odd experiences of some of the girls in town, one of whom--Ruth Putnam--has taken to a kind of half-coma, others who have been found dancing in the woods. Rebecca Nurse, respected for her kind heart and one of the oldest women in town, says:

I have eleven children, and I am twenty-six times a grandma, and I have seen them all through
their silly seasons, and when it come on them they will run the Devil bowlegged keeping up with their mischief. I think she'll wake when she tires of it.

A child's spirit is like a child, you can never catch it by running after it; you must stand still, and, for love, it will soon itself come back. [24]

Stunning, isn't it, how this is nearly entirely hinged on metaphoric reasoning and assumption? (It is, to my knowledge, nearly parallel to Dr. Benjamin Spock's philosophy of childrearing, so popular at the time Miller wrote his play, in 1952.) Consider "silly season," for instance. This is a marvelously playful image for picturing what we call "a phase"--as in "this phase will pass." To her mind, and Spock's, children should be allowed to be explore their emotions. A rather liberal, 20th century viewpoint for those Puritan times, I would think, but wise nonetheless.

Mrs. Putnam, her daughter lying there, cannot be so calm. "This is no silly season, Rebecca," she demands. Rather, "my Ruth is bewildered," adding as evidence of the severity, "she cannot eat." Either she's experiencing a silly season or she's desperately bewildered--ah, there hinges the choices this society will make. But the arguments get fiercer as these two pages unfold. Mr.Putnam has talked the town's minister into calling in a professional witchhunter to investigate. This action is seen by John Proctor, the protagonist of the play, as using the rumors of witchcraft to secure a stronger hold on the Salem
congregation, and he claims,

\[
\text{This society will not be a bag to swing around your head, Mr. Putnam.}
\]

So we get yet a third turn-of-the-phrase to describe what is going on. Rebecca's as a silly season of adolescent pranks, Mrs. Putnam's as a bewilderment (leading to an image of witchcraft), and Proctor's interpretation of the whole event being USED (as a bag swung around Putnam's head) for political control. In less than two pages, the argument will ricochet between these competing voices, till Mrs. Putnam adds a fourth image, born out of her loss of several children in childbirth and infancy, and leading her to a conviction that something evil is at work:

\[
\text{You think it God's work that you should never lose a child, nor grandchild either, and I bury all but one? There are wheels within wheels in this village and fires within fires!}
\]

To consider the power of her image, I suggested to the class: Try walking down the street of your priorly-peaceful Salem village, thinking "wheels within wheels and fires within fires" and not feel some cause for action...

As with the previous book, we then took a few minutes to hunt for other examples, on their own. On page 74-75, we found:

\[
\text{Why--! The girl is murder! She must be ripped out of the world.}
\]
(An unfortunate phrasing that succeeds in Elizabeth Proctor being accused of witchcraft herself.)

Is the accuser always holy now? Were they born this morning as clean as God's fingers? I'll tell you what is walking Salem--vengeance is walking Salem. We are what we always were in Salem, but now the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law! This warrant is vengeance! I'll not give my wife to vengeance!

(This being John Proctor's protest as his wife is lead away--and is a further expansion of his image-argument all along.)

Even Justin, a student not often "on the ball" in much of anything, notices how Proctor screaming "I will fall like an ocean on that court!" is more than a threat, it is a image-ful wish to wash away the horrors of the time.

Okay--enough background. It was time to tackle using imagery on our own in response to the play. Not so easy as finding the imagery within it. For I didn't want to have them merely "write a moment" in the play. We'd already done that. I wanted for them to try out "living imagery" in response to the play. We took a glance at a couple of poems which evoke powerful images--which don't so much dabble in metaphor as open up a marvelous image for us to dwell in, Denise Levertov's "Blue Africa" and Susan Mitchell's "Blackbirds". The first conjures, in the midst of a busy intersection, an image where she sees

...elephants cast
a blue river of shadows
and hears

a quiet in Africa,
hum without menace.

She asks that we "Remember,

they are there now.
Each in turn enters the river of blue.

So here the pattern emerges again:

Image (elephants) ---> leading to metaphor
(a quiet, a hum without menace, symbol of peace)
---> encouraging action (in this case, remembrance)

I'm beginning to think that we inevitably live our images, hidden as they usually are, like that mirage of elephants caught in New York City traffic.

Susan Mitchell's "Blackbirds" is equally visionary. And though one class had briefly glanced at it before, I chose it because of the way it also plays with flexibility of vision, with the way a poem can open up other ways of seeing, even when thinking of things as simple as hanging out the wash on a windy day. She begins:

Because it is windy, a woman finds her clothesline bare, and without rancor unpins the light, folding it into her basket. The light is still wet. So she irons it. The iron hisses and hums. It knows how to make the best of things. The woman's hands smell clean. When she shakes them out, they are voluminous, white.
The poem goes on to call for "gratitude / for little things. That feet are not shoes. / That blackbirds are eating the raspberries. That parsley / does not taste like bread." And proceeds to wish "to live only by grace." In this case, too, the vision (of the woman playing her little game with the wind and the iron) leads to a way of being, a sense of depth we often strive for but have trouble finding. That it come through such a "crazy" vision is perhaps not a requirement, but if all I've read about play holds any merit, perhaps we need to play with our given-realities to get to any state of grace, lest we drown in mundanities.

The students, if they got any of those tiny messages, got them through osmosis--we had little time left to talk if we were to experience the process ourselves in writing. A downside, no doubt, of so much theorizing... and responsible, perhaps, for the poems being weaker this day. We had TALKED a lot, but short-changed the model as a means to put the concepts into practice.

What I asked them to do was this: to write in the voice of one of the characters in the play, but put them in some moment outside of the story--perhaps a point not mentioned in the action itself, one made up by the student or loosely mentioned on stage but not portrayed. And then to "suppose" the character has had a vision or a dream. "What would that dream or vision be?" I asked. "Spell it out in the form of a
poem." Once again, time factors prevented us from **playing with** the possibilities within the assignment more. We might, for instance, have brainstormed "other moments," that, say, John Proctor might have experienced in his life. Or Abigail. Or Reverend Hale, just as fiction writers will sometimes write out alternative memories for their characters, events that don't become part of the novel but which help them get a handle on their character. Students could have written out a series of dreams the characters might have, picking one to expand into a full poem. We had to go with what occurred to us quickly--and too many fell into simply telling "what happened in the story," pretending it was a dream. We got a lot of dreams of Abigail wanting John Proctor to come to her, relying heavily on the soap operatic, rather than the political aspects of the story. Boring. Literal. Metonymic.

We did, however, get a few insightful poems, such as this one from Brenna, latching onto the frightening physical image of the "poppet," toy dolls the accusing girls would use to indicate someone was attacking them "in effigy" by sticking sewing needles in the dolls themselves and claiming someone else (such as Elizabeth Proctor) had done it:

*The Poppet*

The doll
arms & legs so frail
so light as a feather
Toss her
and she floats
but only on
the peace
and tranquility
of the world

Anger fills the room
the floating now
is like the fast
dive from a
plane

Sharp and glistening
on the floor
I fall - hard
It pierces me

How can a poem that uses the worn-out phrase, "light / as a feather" be any good? Yet look: that feeling of floating has become something quite other than a cliche by stanza two, it's rather an image of escape from the madness a place like Salem (and the rest of the world at times) can become. An image of grace even. Then the image of floating, so central to the drama itself, from the townspeople's conviction that spirits can hover and perform mischief, is turned again to the fast dive from a plane (modern image, admittedly) to a "jarring landing" on the needle's piercing. In this nightmare image, Brenna has added a fresh level of physical horror to one of the central points (no pun intended) of the novel.

There were several other such instances in their poems, sparse as they were. Julie saw Abigail "floating on dark clouds, / made of soft flower petals," a strong mix of the
"threatening" and "luscious" sides of Abigail's personality. And she ends with these troubling lines, spoken from this female antagonist's dream:

The darkest moments in your life,
they torture you,
they make you strive.

Corky took on a more minor character (to his credit), imagining Giles Corey's point of view as he is being buried in stones. Ending his poem (and Giles' life) with the line, "knowing that the weight of the law had done me in," I believe Corky is perhaps quite cognizant of the double-meaning in his phrase. The "weight of the law," in this case, is an ironical image. It destroys lives, rather than protecting them.

Heather is also able to step outside the main circle of characters, choosing Tituba, the only non-white in the play, a slave from the West Indies accused to leading the girls into dangerous liaisons in the forest:

They come to me for help.
Ancient spirits speak,
Connecting with another world.
In wispy shades of white
They dance with the trees,
Humming a mysterious melody.
One which only I understand.
These unchained souls lend their help,
But the world doesn't want them.

Let's look back at this tiny, deceptive gem of a poem. I like, for starters, how open it is. Not judgmental of
Tituba, and not buying into all the assumed tones. The dancing is not a "silly season," and not "the fires of hell." Rather, it connects the girls "with another world." A different social frame, perhaps. One where the body is not such a threat. Or a different spiritual realm, one more in touch with the earth. They "dance with the trees," as Heather puts it. With the trees. Not just among the trees. That's a nice, subtle twist. I like this fresh reading of the triggering event for all the madness that ensued. And need I point out it's a "metaphoric reading" of the story. These are not sinners, they are not vengeful accusers. They are "unchained souls" who would have transformed Puritan society, at least from Tituba's (and maybe Heather's?) point of view. Whether it's Heather's own view is not the point though. If taking on the world from the stranger's eyes is one of the working features of a more engaged world view, then her poem here about Tituba is strong evidence that her writing and perception has reached a new level.

If it's not unusual enough for a blonde-haired 16-year-old girl, homecoming queen of her class a month ago, to take on so effectively the viewpoint of an old, black conjuring woman from the West Indies 400 years ago, let's consider this 16-year-old lineman-on-the-football team, Brian. Yes, he's chosen to pull off writing from the point of view of a parking lot downtown, and then from the point of view of the
villain (Mr. Ewell) as he tries to murder Atticus Finch's children. Now he takes on the point of view of a woman, Elizabeth Proctor, in jail (a scene not shown in the story), dreaming "her prince will come." Watch how subtly he makes his moves, drawing us into her psyche:

The dirt is rusting,  
the walls bare.  
But light  
shoots like an  
arrow through it.  
The wall breaks down.  
There he stands,  
his head like a torch,  
his body, the sun.  
He reaches for me,  
I for him.  
We touch and I feel  
silk and water,  
yet feel nothing.  
He raises his glamorous wings and sails on the moonlight,  
the wall fixes itself,  
but I am not afraid,  
for I have the light in me.

When I read this poem back to the class the next day, Jill broke into tears (she has a habit of doing that when poems move her). For she realized, she said, he was talking not just of an angel, perhaps healing her spirit, or preparing to take her to heaven. No, the angel is also John Proctor,
come to renew his love for her and so redeeming what had been a strained relationship (there is much in the play of Proctor being unfaithful to Elizabeth, "having carnal knowledge" of Abigail when she was his servant and of this putting an uncomfortable wedge between them). Jill is amazed that the poem could work on both levels--as a religious image AND of a symbol of earthly, matrimonial renewal. She doubts Brian knew that implication. It turns out though, he tells us, this is exactly what he meant.

As with Heather's poem, Brian's vision here is more sophisticated and clever than it first seems. Is, in fact, interpretation at work. Meaning-making in the form of image-making. How else to "get inside Elizabeth's head" this way? In an essay? Perhaps. Or not. Even there he would have had to resort to this sort of imagery to link John and the angel, her earthly renewal and her heavenly salvation. It is the restoration of courage in a soul misused, wrongly accused by the witchhunters, here raised up to the nearly image of a saint (yet without, to my ear, feeling hokey). It is the evocative imagery that pulls this off, all appropriate to the kind of language and mind-set of the time period (or at least of some religious societies, if not strictly those of Puritan times). The arrow light, the torch, the sun, the silk and water, the glamorous wings sailing on the moonlight. These are rapturous conjurers.
They are physical, inventive, accurate, alive. As individual lines they make for luminous metaphors. As a whole, they create a compelling, dramatic image of breaking-free.

Summary: Several conclusions can be drawn from this assignment:

- Flexibility is essential when "making the assignment yours"—that is, the person who gives the assignment needs to offer a means for the students to invent a way in, whether by providing choices or by showing students ways to invent their own. (Unfortunately, not enough of either happened in this case.)

- Imagery is powerful stuff—and perhaps worth separating from metaphor, at least at times. Much more could be done with students making use of dreams and visions in creating images that help us visualize a character's situation or personality in a novel or play.

- Whether caused by weaknesses in the assignment or shortage of time, imagery proved somewhat harder to grasp than metaphor. We would need more work on how to grapple with the power of the visual and its relationship to the verbal.

7.6 Answering Images With Images [Lesson 11]

ABSTRACT: It was time by this assignment to move the spirit of play, metaphor, physicality and image into a more direct connection with visual art. Here students respond intuitively to slides of paintings and photographs, using two-line stanzas to "answer image with image," exploring the "complex interplay" between the visual and verbal sides of experience, making their own on-the-spot personal connections with works of art and considering again the power of images to shape meaning.

Continuing with our investigation of images, on Friday I gave the students a list about "What Do Images Do?"
a. Images are not irrelevant. They influence us, often outside of our conscious thought.

b. They can:
   - guide or motivate us
   - sometimes force us to choose
   - clarify things for us
   - sometimes deceive us
   - make us see things we might have missed
   - divide us from, or unite us with others
   - spark us awake
   - define us (or define others for us)
   - give us meaning

c. They are not strictly from the eyes--they can arise from a sound, a smell, or a song.

d. They can be either very personal or very political.

And I added that one thing perhaps poetry and art can do is give us a kind of practice in responding to other people's images and creating images of our own. I suggested this is what we would be doing that day and over the next several meetings: answering visual images with verbal ones.

As an example, we considered Wislawa Szymborska's "Brueghel's Two Monkeys." I told them that Szymborska won the Nobel Prize a few years ago, and that a good deal of her poetry was written during Communist rule in Poland, where one had to keep the message a little hidden, lest the authorities detect some criticism of the state. I also mentioned that in Europe final exams can be quite grueling...

This is what I see in my dreams about final exams:
two monkeys, chained to the floor, sit on the windowsill,
the sky behind them flutters,
the sea is taking its bath,
The exam is History of Mankind.
I stammer and hedge.

One monkey stares and listens with mocking disdain,
the other seems to be dreaming away--
but when it's clear I don't know what to say
he prompts me with the gentle clinking of his chain.

Not a very descriptive, nor strictly interpretative, it's a poem about the poet making a personal, playful connection with the painting, adding her own life experience into it. Nevertheless, it's important to note, Szymborska doesn't ignore what's there... she simply condenses it into terse, effective language and then sets it into a fresh context. In one grand gesture she has made the painting metaphoric and able to speak to us in a brand new way. Does she deny history or Brueghel's original context? I think not. For who are these monkeys? In Brueghel's time they would have been importees from the exotic lands the Dutch were then trading with, living symbols of wealth and collection. And for Szymborska, 400 years later, quite accurate symbols for the chained elements in the history of mankind.

We talked about the subtle use of metaphor in the poem --the sea taking its bath, the sky fluttering. But what about those two monkeys? What did the students make of their role--in the painting or the poem? David Fuller pointed out that one seems to be in a daydream... and that the writer is too, daydreaming in the midst of an exam. Jill interjected
that it is also the daydreaming monkey, not the one who looks with mocking disdain, who prompts her with the clinking of his chain. (I love, by the way, that last line, making the painting take on an aural quality--a good example of a multisensory image.) I asked, "What is the significance of the final exam being the History of Mankind?" And Zach then hits on the idea that maybe we THINK we're advancing, developing new technologies all the time, but we have to remind ourselves of our history and our limitations. Coming from this science-fiction-oriented computer whiz, that's a telling statement.

a. Writing from Surrealist Images

Now it's time for writing. I tell them that I'm going to show them a series of eight or so slides from paintings (American paintings in A block; visionary and surrealist slides in L). I want them to quickly compose two or so lines as if they were starting a longer poem about the piece, or as if those lines came from the middle of a longer poem. I suggest they do something of the following, varying their approach for each slide:

- Pretend the painting is a memory of yours;
- Imagine it as a dream you once had;
- Take the point of view of a small object in the work;
- Create a metaphor from what you see... etc.

At this point I'm trusting they know their own voices well
enough to "write from intuition," leaping to connections that they don't have to consciously think out. They won't have time anyway--and that (I don't tell them) is part of the point. To circumvent analysis in order to get directly to imagery.

The sweet, utterly non-prosaic, leaping lines that resulted are the product of our weeks working with playful, physicalized metaphor--but also of our engagement with the compelling visual work before us. Intriguingly, several of the students who had not shown much flair before began at this point to shine. Garrison, for instance, who came up with these responses:

For Magritte's "The Call of the Blood":

\[ I \text{ sit perched above the valley} \]
\[ \text{and ask myself, does the river ever end?} \]

For Van Gogh's "Starry Night":

\[ \text{It's like the sky is swirling together with the town,} \]
\[ \text{as if everything were being combined into "one."} \]

For Jerry Uelsmann's untitled photograph:

\[ \text{It is as if a bird, floating among the clouds,} \]
\[ \text{with its wings spreading further with time.} \]

And for Magritte's painting of candles on a beach:

\[ \text{It is as a nightcrawler, coming out onto the wet grass,} \]
\[ \text{enjoying itself, just breathing.} \]
Figure 7.2  Rene Magritte, “Call of the Blood”  
Vincent Van Gogh, “The Starry Night”
Figure 7.3  Jerry Uelsmann, "Untitled Photograph"

Figure 7.4  Rene Magritte, "Recollection of a Journey"
In this case, it's in the middle two stanzas where Garrison at last begins to dig his way into metaphor. Previously, his best poem so far was a straightforward description of his early football days--and not a metaphor in sight. Here you can begin to feel the night sky swirling into one (a fresh take on the picture). And the Uelsmann lines, if vaguer, do a fine job of opening up the photograph for me. If I read him right, the house is the bird here and the walls are its wings. That too is fresh for me--it puts the house up in the sky, rather than bringing the sky down. Might one say that here Garrison has learned to *play* with how he sees the world, if just a little bit? Of course the paintings themselves do much of the work, being so thoroughly non-metonymous, they place us in sweet, mythical worlds without our almost trying. But I think it's more than that: I think Garrison may need fresh visual stimulus like this to begin thinking divergently. What is football after all but a "visual field," and as a quarterback hasn't he been training his eyes to pick up on subtle clues (a receiver breaking free, a defender coming in fast from the right)? So he is when he "reads" these paintings...

David Cook, his long-time friend, does some compelling work too from the same sequence of slides:
For Magritte's "Song of the Blood":

The ball, white, kinetic
The house, timid

For Van Gogh:

The town, praiseful of a starry night,
Mountains in the distance, like a third person

For Uelsmann:

The sky helps me think
The roof open is like an open mind

For the second Magritte:

The ocean, fire; they are each other's nemesis
The water and its many shades

Again, it's "Starry Night" that draws the most stunning response: to think of the mountains like a third person viewing it all! But I like nearly as well the idea of the ball and the house forming a relationship, one kinetic, one timid.

Garrison and David seem to see these paintings on a more visceral level, responding "plainly," if metaphorically, to what is right there. And in some way they are able to do "better" this time than Sarah Keener, for instance, who so often outpaces them (though this is not a horse race). Here her tendency to form abstractions gets in her way of connecting very well to the painting right before her eyes. For the first Magritte, she wrote:
Does it ever make you wonder,  
where you stand?  
Could you be dreaming?  
Or is this real?  

Secrets are hidden  
behind doors.

Why is this so much less interesting than David's much simpler version? Maybe it's that she's left out the concrete THINGS of the house, going for the purely metaphorical. The same thing happens with the Uelsmann photograph. Compare

An open room
no ceiling to shelter it
while he is walking
trying to find himself

to Garrison's "It is as if a bird, floating among the clouds / with its wings spreading further with time." There is so much more ENERGY in that view, something that Sarah's plainer "he is walking / searching for himself" cannot find.

It is Emma, though, who outshines us all, or should I say "outmyths" us? As she showed in her downtown imagery, she seems to thrive on this sort of high-energy condensation of ideas into the space of two lines. I will analyze her writing more thoroughly in the next chapter. For now, consider what she writes about the first Magritte:

What if the house were painted pink? Would the caterpillars still crawl to their windows?

Here, like Szymborksa, Emma has lifted the painting to new meaning by adding something NOT there into it. I for one see
no caterpillars on this little house within the tree ... yet I can feel them there now that she imagines them. And they glow with that same inner light Magritte puts there. Color and speculation have taken on a fairy-tale feeling. The same for her response to Van Gogh:

The black shadow gathered his belongings and traveled out of the classroom into the starry night.

Using personification, Emma has given the night back its story. She's made the poem into a tiny mystery, where the shadow has gone to infuse the sky with his "belongings."

And look what she does with the Uelsmann, once again investing it with a tiny story and with motion:

The owl's gaze rested upon the baby mouse. As he swooped down from the clouds he grasped his prey, scurrying across the mantle.

But of course! if the roof is open, what's to prevent an owl from continuing its hunt right into the mouse's hiding place? There is no owl, no mouse in the scene, yet somehow that little chase across the mantel increases my appreciation for Uelsmann's double-exposure. It is as if during the developing process, layering three photographs into one, an owl snuck in on its night flight journey and Emma caught it in her poem, answering invented image with invented image.
So many of the students made these sorts of beautifully winged moves, there must have been something helpful going on in the assignment. Had we given the weekend, for instance, to go home and write longer poems about these same works, I'm pretty sure we would have gotten much more diffused lines. The discursive, narrative mind is a strong one, ready to analyze rather than to be in a scene. Maybe the "quick-write" approach allowed students to tap into more engaged, immediate takes on what they were seeing, short-circuiting the intermediary mind and letting visual image speak more directly to the verbal ones they created in their poems.

b. Group Constructed Poems

After just six slides, I asked them to write their best lines on slips of paper and put them in piles corresponding to the paintings they were written about. Pairs of students then took those lines and wove them into single poem, cutting words where needed, sometimes dividing and recombining the lines to make for more surprise or better flow. One example should convey the effect. Here is what Sarah Keener and Sara Gruber constructed for "Starry Night":

The stars glisten like a thousand diamonds in the night sky
while below, the village soundly sleeps.

The sky crashes to the ground,
like a tidal wave.
The moon looks me in the eye, 
almost as if he knows me.

The jagged brown thing seems like a hand reaching out for guidance. But the wind silently carries away the pleas. It is as if the wind were God ignoring you.

The church's steeple (needle sharp) pierces the night sky.

Oh it's not perfect. Look at the cliche of "a thousand diamonds" that we'd expect from this painting. Yet the third line does so much to situate us--the night sky soundly sleeping underneath. We're lulled into complacency--only to find the sky crashing around us in the second stanza, as well it might if we were to enter Van Gogh's world. Even the moon is looking at us. I don't even mind the line about the cypress/hand, easy as it is, for it sets up the marvelous twist of having the wind pass us "as if it were God ignoring you." Here the complexity deepens, and by placing the lines about the church steeple just after the pleading hand, Sarah and Sara are making a strongly metaphysical statement, as well as a visually metaphorical one. Van Gogh's paintings, after all, were ABOUT the anguish of looking at the starry sky, or the wheatfield with crows, and feeling God's presence (or, worse, his absence). How did the first writer know this so deeply? And who did the two compilers "know" to put the two final stanzas back to back?
It is my contention that the painting itself guided such playful, accurate connections. And that training the eye and ear to be this intuitive allows for just that kind of playful and accurate writing. Playful in adding the metaphorical leap to tidal waves and eyes. Accurate in knowing to include that deceptively sharp steeple in the distance. The first part of the exercise allowed the students to engage the intuitive sides of their brains; the collaborative part asked them to negotiate between those first intuitive hunches and what the more analytical, shaping side must do to bring it all back into sense.

**c. Working With Realism: Lines From American Art**

In A Block, I tried using a range of work from American artists, given that Jill's focus is American literature. The introduction was fairly much the same--it's just that the work they wrote from was frequently more realistic than the slides I showed the other class. I did this partly for the contrast, to see what differences there might be between the two approaches. And also because I thought A Block could handle a more historical setting.

We talked a little bit about how painters and other artists can reflect a time period or a mood in the country. I suggested that Albert Bierstadt, for example, might be seen as someone who probed the theme of westward expansion in the mid 1800s, just as Edward Hopper and Georgia O'Keeffe
might be said to be exploring the "inward sea," the more nebulous and internal sides of the American experience. Then we wrote, using the same guidelines about making two-line verbal images to find a way into the visual images that the paintings would give us.

As might have been guessed, writing about naturalistic scenes was harder for them than writing about surrealistic images was for the other class. Of course! The surrealist photographer or painter has already given us access to the

![Figure 7.5  Winslow Homer, "Fog Warning"](image)

metaphorical, dream-like world, whereas with the realist artist, those currents run more subtly underneath the
Writing about Winslow Homer's "Fog Warning," for instance, we got far more cliched, flat and abstracted lines in most cases:

Rolling waves crash like my thoughts  (Ci'Arra)

My safety is so close yet miles of fear lie ahead  (Rachel)

The smell of a storm throbs in the air, as
I push against the beating blue and green  (Brian)

Why IS this so much harder? Maybe it's somewhat a factor of Homer's painting itself. Evocative as his scene still is (at least to me) we now are so removed from its realities so as to see it mainly as cliche. How, for instance, does one avoid thinking of Hemingway's "Old Man and the Sea"? How catch the eeriness of that symbolic cloud in the distance? Maybe these kids from the Midwest are just too far away from a feel for the sea? Whatever the reason, every association we tried ran into the same old channels. Some far more subtle probing of its realities (perhaps by becoming the fish, the boat, the oars) would have been required.

Far more satisfactory lines came from Edward Hopper's "Cape Cod Evening." Maybe that's because this image of an old farm house, with the dog facing a field of drying grass, and the dark woods behind is more familiar to them. They themselves have knowledge of this kind of setting--so that may have made it easier to sink into layers of less cliched depth. Yet that doesn't seem enough of an answer. For
American cliches are abundant here as well, particularly in the collie who so readily evokes "good old dog" images of Lassie and the "trusty family pet." What became most useful here was to toss out a "rule" to get around simple description. In this case, I turned to the class, feeling I'd done a lot of the guiding so far. I said, "Does anyone have a rule to throw into the mix before we look at the next slide?" The key factor here was BEFORE--so that the rule became a lens we had to apply, just as one must agree to the rules of a game of cards before looking at one's hand. Amber suggested, "Think myth," so we went with that. When the Hopper slide came up, I heard some groans, as if some were thinking, "How do I apply myth to this painting?" We could have talked the possibilities through... instead, we just wrote, grabbing for a mythic tension here as best we could...

She looked down on me a gaze into our beginning, wondering what happened to the color of our house

(Ci'Arra)

We settled here to rule the land but the land rules us

(Heather)

The stalks of gold whisper in my ear

(Brian)
Figure 7.6  Edward Hopper, “Cape Cod Evening”

I stand alone in the still wind  (Corky)
Dark forest surrounding  (Liz)

Look, I see her soul
like the wild wolf at night  (Amber)

The dog's ears point
toward the west
the field of flowing brown
will grow tall and thick
like a forest drowned in trees  (Brenna)

The windows sealed from air
have forgotten how to breathe  (Terry)

Annubus calls
but it is not their time
Mainly it's the small touches of insight I like here. Ci'Arra's consider of the long-married couple and what "might have been before": "She looked down on me a gaze into our / beginning..." It's intriguing that she, attached as she is to her current boyfriend, should see that hope (or is it despair?) within these two. Heather, so unwillingly bound to the land, as I've mentioned before, gives us this insight into their loneliness and lethargy: "We settled here to rule the land / but the land rules us." How does she know this, how does she find her way so directly to the heart of this couple? My only guess is that she knows it as well, lives it every day of her young life.

I like equally the "just plain fact" lines here, which are so much sharper than the "Fog Warning" ones. Brian's "stalks of gold," Liz's "Dark forest surrounding." But it's the interpretative lines that carry this group-poem deeper for me. Heather's and Ci'Arra's, and then Amber's interpretation of the collie as representing some other wildness that their lives don't have. You can hear the man, as he sets to toss the ball, saying: "Go now, be that bit of energy we've lost." Brenna's lines give me the sense that the land, once tamed, is growing back toward that wildness, so suggested by the thick forest to the left of the house, so that even that "field of flowing brown/ will grow tall
and thick / like a forest drowned in trees." No, this is not Mark Strand gently tugging at each nuance within the painting in careful prose; it's Brenna, a high school sophomore, in three minutes of looking, intuiting what she sees into a wonderfully suggestive leap in time that presents the painting's future. For there is often a feeling in Hopper that some ancient gaze is returning to the land—that civilization has gone about as far as it goes, that the forests are starting to rise again. How can Brenna know this? Maybe because she has seen it too, in the land she dwells in everyday.

Still, we were supposed to "think myth," weren't we? Without being obvious about it (except in Phil's last line), I think that's exactly what these students did. They invented myths. Myths of love returning, even as it disappears (Ci'Arra's); of the land tricking us into thinking we're in charge (Heather's); of the land beginning to speak again (Brian's "stalks of gold / whisper[ing] in my ear,"); of the unseen gods waiting until it's "our turn" (Phil's closing). My strong sense is that without that bent, our lines here would have likely been as flat here as with the Homer seascape. The myth allowed the students' inborn knowledge of this sort of scene come out in other than metonymic ways.
Hopper's paintings--and another intriguing "rule"--supplied a further step. Before the next slide, Jenny called out "Write in single word sentences." And so we did, to the marvelously suggestive imagery of the master's "New York Movie":

Red
rosy
curtains
cutting off the watcher
from the watched

(Jill)

Figure 7.7 Edward Hopper, "New York Movie"
Fiction, Feet, Faces, Forward, Found
Bright, Bored, Buried, Bundled
(Jenny)

Standing sideways,
Puzzling position,
Wondering when
I will be free
(Liz)

Sad
alone
stood up

Lucy's
lonely
lips
(Tressa)

Light,
love,
looking,
worried,
withering
(Brian)

(Terry)

The act has ended, the seats are empty.
There is only a lamp to give me comfort.
(Jeff)

In a theater of my own.
(Bethany)

Oh--re-typing these, I remember that another rule was, "Use alliteration." Who's to say whether the rules helped or hindered the seeing? In a way, I think they did both. For some, they may have been a way around a cliched reading. For others, the use of alliteration may have just added a touch of fun. Little here is as insightful or compelling as L Block's responses to the more surrealistic work.
Nevertheless, reading these lines back, with the painting there before us, opened up both the poem and the art work in an intriguingly interactive way, placing words there to bounce off the visual. Placing us, at least a little, inside that lovely usher's mind, "in a theater of [our] own."

Looking back, I wish we'd had more time for exploring the conundrum of realistic versus more visionary paintings. What techniques would have helped them read the Homer, or these two Hoppers, more thoroughly and freshly? I don't negate the real value of this day. This was, after all, their first foray into writing from visual stimulus! Maybe that explains it: a "better" place to start, for this group, might simply have been with more mysterious imagery to begin with, as we did with the two O'Keeffe works below--and THEN to have a second day exploring the puzzles of the "real."

We ended with two more enigmatic paintings: Georgia O'Keeffe's "Jack in the Pulpit V" and the second of her "Pelvic" series works. Here are just a few of their lines, suggesting how much mobile their imagery is in both cases:

"Jack in the Pulpit V"

The light shines so brightly
shaped like an old man's cane  (Sara L)

I'm calling them to death
memorizing their stares, choosing
no one in particular to doom  (Ci'Arra)

The shining glorious white hook
Trying to capture our minds as though they were fish  (Micah)
A man has perished from this world,
His strength is left, to be remembered
only by his closest company (Liz)

My hole is not rounded like the others
All I want is to be a regular keyhole (Lauren)

Rolling, spinning violently, spilling
all over this world (Corky)

Dark on light,
like the sound of the loudest silence (Heather)

Its shadow extends out as white as chalk (Holly)

The tunnel of nations
in their sleepy destinies (Terry)

The candy cane fades into smoke
being taken out the window (Jeff)

The air touches my face, my hand has
finally broken through (Jenny)

With this painting, as with the next, their language is
at least reaching toward the spiritual intensity of
O'Keeffe's work. It is, after all, not the point whether
these are terrifically sophisticated insights. They were
enough to hold our attention, and take us back to the work.
They breathe. They answer the flourish of the visual with a
flourish in their words. Written quickly, they are only a
start on end-running the conscious mind. To make physical,
rather than intellectual connections. To sense the "smoke of
the candy cane" disappear out of the window. To touch the
chalky shadow. To feel the air, on some unnamed other side, across our faces.

Let me end this day on their quick-takes responding to "Pelvic Series #2." Here I fear saying too much--more words would only get in the way or repeat what I've already said. As much as possible, let their words breathe in the painting, as I believe they were starting to do...

Blue, curvy, open
like a soul pouring out (Brenna)

Blue round ocean
held by the blanket of joy (Sara L)

Dented in the snow like it's
afraid to touch me, disfigured into
the form of perfection (Ci'Arra)

Loneliness, all alone
Not now, something
has come to lie within me (Ben B)

A treasure hidden in silk
floating yet resting (Bethany)

Life always seems pretty
yet can't escape the unnatural blue (Micah)

Alone in the world of sound (Brian)

Giant pool with sand stretching
a never ending invitation (Shelby)

The hole in my tent allows me just enough
to view the magnificent sky (Ben V)
Okay--I can't NOT say something. These are only the beginnings perhaps. Beginning stabs at feeling the painting metaphorically. Attempts to mix concept (loneliness, joy, the soul) with physicalized wonder ("something / has come to lie within me" / "A treasure hidden in silk" / wanting to
"escape the unnatural blue"). These intriguing phrases indicate to me that something vast and quite beyond them fed its way into their visceral response to O'Keeffe. My sense now is that their abstractions still got in the way of living with the work more fully. Again, though, they are beginnings. They hold much promise for making visual work live upon the page.

Summary: The games here represent "ways into" the paintings, just as the games we played downtown shook us out of our normal ways of approaching any scene. Yes, working from surreal pieces gave certain students a head start--especially those who tend to take things literally anyway. There's a sense of permission the painting gives such students: "Okay, see, it's okay to be a little weird... it can even be beautiful, just look at me." I think they'd have more trouble with a Dali, as the beauty of the images would be less obvious--they'd have to invent a way to keep it all contained and the poems would likely become chaotic in themselves, rather than sweetly suggestive.

A few kids--such as Sarah Keener--who already thinks in rather abstract ways--were not able to build on the surreal. That too is interesting: what feeds into one student's range might limit another.

What is assured is that some sort of "game" was necessary to heighten the sense of language and invention as the students approached the paintings. If not, as with the more realistic poems about Homer's "Fog Warning," the result--as we could have well suspected--can be plodding and ordinary, dragging the painting down rather than opening up its magic.

If we are after giving students the means to develop more engaged worldviews, these lessons in "quick-writing" about paintings tell us that an immediate, intuitive response, built on metaphor and projection, can teach us to **be less distant**, to avoid the pitfalls of abstraction (somewhat) and participate in one's perceptions as on a field of play.
Abstract: An "engaged world view," according to the case being made by this study, ought to give us the tools to go nearly anywhere and make personal, meaningful connections with whatever we find before us, via metaphorical, physically-attentive, playful response to what our senses supply us. Not to take it all "at face value," whatever that might mean. Meaning comes from engagement. One need not write a poem about something--or directly produce a particular form of art--to make such connections. But it is the conclusion of this study that the sorts of playful "moves" that poetry teaches can guide and enhance our attention to anything. This is what happened on a day when fourteen of the students rode the bus to the Columbus Museum of Art to write poems about the work they found...

1) Writing Poems About Visual Art

For good or for bad, I chose to make the trip to the museum a bit of an impromptu "test" of where we'd come so far, a test in finding their own ways into the writing of the poems--and most especially in linking poems to visual imagery. I had hoped to do far more with preparing for this field trip, with writing poems for several days about paintings and other visual imagery, but the daily classroom schedule made it difficult to devote so much time to areas outside the curriculum, such as visual art, so we'd really only had ONE day of connecting our work to actual paintings the previous Friday. This day, the following Tuesday, 14 students arrived at the museum, ready or not for "meeting image with image" the way we'd been talking in class. Could 364
they do it? Would they be able to do more than report what's in the painting, or—conversely -- just leap off into their own speculations and emotions, with little reference to the works before them? Would they, after so much time trying to ground their writing in specificity, invention, and metaphor, forget all that and "go general"? I'd seen students do that before, leaving out so much detail from the rich visual stimulus before them, somehow unable to read metaphor into the paintings in more than arbitrary ways. Would these students lean way or the other?

So I decided to say very little in the way of instruction. For one thing, the bus was a little late and the docent-led tours ate up more of our time than I'd planned. I wanted them to have lots of time for exploring on their own. Additionally, I'd already given them very detailed instructions for assignments in the past. I was beginning to feel that they'd had enough of my guidance and were ready to find their own ways. So I said to them, after we'd re-grouped (groups of six or so had been given 45-minute tours of the American wing): "Am I right in assuming that each of you now have poems starting in your head about some of the work you've already seen? That I could turn you all loose and you'd find tons to write about on your own?" I got many vigorous nods.

So they were off. Okay, not quite. I just had to read a couple poems to get us back into poetry-mode. Poetry is not
our daily language. We needed to remember poetry's ways of seeing before we wrote on our own, the way an opera singer needs to stretch her throat and lungs before launching into her art. Margaret Atwood's "Game After Supper" and Irene McKinney's "Sunday Morning, 1950" provided us with that sort of stretching. Both are strong arguments for immersing the reader in a "secluded" point of view, not so much telling us where we are as guiding us to the realization of perspective from a "insider's" position. McKinney does the most to keep us on our toes that way, opening her poem with direct, untranslated physical detail:

Bleach in the foot-bathtub.
The curling iron, the crimped, singed hair.
The small red marks my mother makes across her lips.

The situation is not completely hidden--but he have to intuit the full context, much as we have to do with a painting. As with many paintings, we are given precise physical detail but no orienting as to the overall context or place, besides the title. (Just as Yasuo Kuniyoshi's painting "The Swimmer" in the museum presents us with an over-sized swimmer at the foreground of the painting, with her tiny island-home off set in the distant sea behind her, telling us little about how she got there or why she is so far out at sea.) The poem continues in this vein, layering in one small detail after another, as in a mosaic:
Dust on the road, and on the sumac.  
The tight, white sandals on my feet.  
* * *  
The narrow benches we don't fit.  
The wasps at the blue hexagons.

I was hoping the choice of that poem would guide them toward choosing just as precise details in the paintings on their own. I was also hoping that they'd pick up on HOW the speaker in the poem was viewing the scene all around her as, perhaps, an eight-year-old girl, noticing just what she would notice then:

Outside, the shaven hilly graves we own.  
Durrett, Durrett, Durrett. The babies there that are not me.

Yes, there is some adult awareness:

...We bring  
what we can--some coins, our faces.

But that information is slipped in silently, off-set by the immediacy of such lines as:

...Beside me,  
Mrs. G sings like a chicken  
flung in a pan on Sunday morning.

I was hoping the kids could apply rather directly such an immediate, sensory model. That they could choose a perspective of their own, as if they could stand in the painting and see all the world inside it as if it were around them. I said to them: "Don't just write ABOUT the painting but make a very conscious decision to be someONE or
someTHING inside it, slipping into who or what you are within the midst." I suppose with that one line of instruction I was pre-orienting them already, as well as heading them toward a bit of narrative. It only occurs to me now that I might have used McKinney's model a bit more strictly if I'd asked them to use mostly incomplete sentences, creating a kind of list of the painting's contents from some vantage point within it. I didn't--and the poems suffer from that omission. We COULD have done it that way, the way we had with some of the more contained assignments earlier. But then I might not have had the chance to see what they could do on their own.

One last factor influenced our "results": a good number of those I'd come to think of as the better writers in the class chose not to come on the trip--Josh, for instance, who had sunk into something of a funk in general and announced he was tired of writing; and Emma, of course, who would not have gone without Josh. Amber was unable to come because she forgot (or lost) her permission slip. Jenny, Brian and Brenna--three of the more grade-conscious students in the class--had an important test to study for. And Ci'Arra said she couldn't be away from her boyfriend that long (!). That left Sarah Keener, Sarah Smith, Kelley Toney and Jordan Nelson to carry the ball, so to speak. Still, my sports metaphor falls apart, to some degree, or else is confirmed:
for it took a number of the other writers, ones I'd not come to know as well, to "step up to the plate" and bring the poems alive. That they did is one of the best indications I have that "more was going on" than just the production of good poems from some of the better writers. Even Kurtis and Garrison came through to a degree (they had NOT gone on the Mt. Gilead field trips). David Cook and David Fuller, Ashley Sherbourne and Ashley Slone all wrote poems that, while lacking in full detail, seemed to matter to them and showed some connection to the work at hand. And most especially Bethany Retterer and Ben Vail, whose strength in the writing I'd not noticed before, ranged from room to room (together), taking in each piece in compelling, moving ways.

2) Poems That Evoke A Scene

a) Ann Hamilton's "Reflections"

The students seemed fascinated by Ann Hamilton's enigmatic installation piece, "Reflections," a rather monotonous room of twelve large photographs of her own face as it appears in the hazy glass of her own Venice Biennelle exhibition in Italy during the year 2000. As unspecific as this work is, totally lacking in detail, beyond the blurry faces and the hazy glass, perhaps the students felt more free here to make of it whatever they wanted.

Kelley, for instance, "captured" the work in a rather angry manner:
It seems as if the boy is hiding from Daddy's fist. 
It's like a shattered mirror, reflecting his broken home. 
He's screaming through the silence, everyone is deaf. 
I am not behind this painting.

Kelley is a terrific poet—as we have already seen in her State Lakes meditation, her little "apology" poem from the grocery and as we shall soon see again in her other poems this day—yet here she has done something significant with "getting inside" the enigma of Hamilton's work. How much more COULD she say to make either the work or her poem be more particular? She's done what I see student writers working with art work often do: go for the jugular... that is, capture it as a "sudden whole," a statement of nearly pure visuality. This is narrative trimmed to its bones—just as Hamilton's photographs are. Is she Medusa, not able to be seen? Is she a convict, with butched hair and a refusal-to-enter the realm of what the warden and the guards demand... self-revelation toward change? Or is it, as Kelley has speculated, an abused boy hiding behind his own screaming silence?

This poem would be rather ordinary—a measure of typical adolescent angst—if it weren't for the last line. For suddenly the context is unclear and compelling: is it us (as viewers in the gallery) who are deaf, and the boy's screams are real? Or is he screaming that everyone in his
world is deaf--that he cannot be heard? And then the last line rings even more ambiguously true: for it could well be Kelley herself who is not there, in the land of the abused, or it could again be the boy himself, refusing to be where he is not heard.

Ben Vail takes another approach, this time more directly personal. He calls it:

_The Twelve Faces Behind Water_

_In the blurry majestic state of dreaming_
_I see my fate._
_They tell me not who or what_
_But they sorrow for me and tell me how._

_They are omniscient_
_But withhold the truth._
_They seem happy._

A totally different interpretation than Kelley's--yet equally significant. For Ben too has condensed the room to a small space of the poem, yet given us a fresh angle to receive the work from. It's a tiny myth-of-himself that he has found here. And why not? A high school sophomore is a mine-field of self-questioning, held between childhood prankishness and adult sensibility. Here is Ben, whose father I found out later has a version of Parkinson's and is bed-ridden in a rehab center, possibly for life, testing the boundaries of fate. Here Ben showed us a way to approach this work: not through description but through entering it on one's own terms. And here Ben showed me for the first
time his compelling ability to make new thought out of the obvious. For it's true, isn't it, that fate often times doesn't tell us "who" or "what" or "why," but only "how." To imagine that there are fates out there, as equivocal as these twelve faces, knowing the reasons and the means, but withholding so much from us, is the most maddening "fate" of all. Which leads to Ben's equally ambiguous last line: "They seem happy." Which way to read this? Is it "THEY seem happy," as in them-but-not-us? Or "They seem HAPPY," as in trusting that the "universe is playful" and will keep us whole despite its silence about the grand purpose?

So far both these poems, while supplying strong interpretations of the work, run into the dangers I'd worried about: they skip past a good deal of the presence of the work to get too quickly to a "deep meaning." I would have liked each student to take it all slower, letting the watery or blurry walls sink into our consciousness before leaping so fast to "what it's all about." Still, it seems the visual presence of those walls supplied the writers with much food for thought. We could take each poem back into the space and "live" with each writer's vision to unpack what we saw around us.

b) **Four Weak Poems About Mark Tansey's "Nymphs (Water Lilies)"

Another work that attracted a number of students was
Mark Tansey's take-off on Monet's waterlily paintings entitled, "Nymphesas (Water Lilies)," one of the largest paintings in the museum and one of the most visionary. As in Hamilton's work, water imagery dominates here, albeit with a tad more detail to dwell on. Is this the sort of work that just appeals to the high school mindset? It's "dreamy," for instance, and expansive in its view. One tends to be drawn in, without having to pay attention to anything in particular. It's a visceral piece and suggests getting lost in a world larger than oneself. Four students chose to write about this--I suspect because it was easier than other works. We might learn something by comparing their takes.

Here they are in a group:

I remember being there and hearing the wind roar
The time I tried frantically to grasp the icy handle to stop the water
but it was too cold and windy
so I sat and watched the water pour into
the brook

Justin

Ice is shattered
drifting on the dawn
of tomorrow's fate
upon the peaceful, wild
chilling waters.
Two worlds collide.
The cluttered sky
has fallen into
broken lilies...

Kelley

I'm in this chaos, swimming quickly
The dam bursts, I thought it never would
I'm supposed to die now
Where can I dodge my fate?
This water, an amazing blue, is torn...

David Cook
It was an ice chilling day
and there was a hole in the dam
This river partially iced
but rising in depth
I tried to stop the water
there was no chance
the woods were about to flood
the water was rushing on and on
there was no stopping the darkly flowing waters

Kurtis

First off, I'm disappointed in ALL these poems. It seems they are dashed off, often taking the easy way out. That's a factor, somewhat, of turning students loose in any facility, with only their friends to guide them. I'm quite aware of the likelihood that they all went down to this work that they looked at on their tour and spent more time talking about last week's party than this painting. Therefore, the language tends to be of the easy kind: "It was..." "There was..." "I tried frantically..." "rushing on and on." On that level alone, these poems do not pass "the test" that I set up, leading one to the conclusion that precise, fresh, engaging language is a direct indicator of "engaging" perception, and the opposite of that statement being equally true--as here.

And as for the point-of-view that each one took, there's little to recommend any of these poems as illustrative of an "inside" view. Two of them make a little story of it, of someone trying to "frantically" stop the flood--a stance that captures nothing within the painting at
all. The figure of Monet upside down at the top of the work most assuredly does NOT appear frantic at all... making me wonder if Justin and Kurtis even took the time to consider what was right before their eyes. These kids did what most students would do when looking briefly at a work of art: quickly assume a story, forgetting to weigh that story against the complexities that the painting holds.

But perhaps there is more to learn here as well. Both Justin and Kurtis had chosen not to go on the Mt. Gilead field trips, so these were their first attempts to write "out in the world." With less investment in the poetry (and in their learning generally, as I know from Jill), they are unlikely to put very much into examining the work of art. They've also had less practice in that kind of projection and creative play. Such visual role-playing seems to hold little power for them. Though they'd likely have no trouble watching for hours the intricacies of football playoffs, making the painting move before their eyes is not something they've yet learned how to do. Kurtis had done better when writing quick images from slides in the classroom. A skill that unfortunately has not transferred over to this more open environment. Both Justin's and Kurtis's poems cheapen the painting--they do not make me want to go back to the work and see it afresh. They narrow down, rather than open up its meanings. Still, for these two very elementary
writers, they did SOMETHING. It's perhaps unfair to weigh how much they got out to the field trip versus more accomplished poets.

Kelley and David, however, invest somewhat more energy into their brief lines. Kelley, for instance, though she has proven herself quite able to listen for the full flourish of her words, goes for the minimal effect here. Still, it IS an effect--and the painting takes on more life than it might otherwise. I love the use of "cluttered" to describe the sky. It suggests that way more is going on than at first meets the eye (a nice recognition, a principle Kelley can use later). I like the flow of the first sentence... how full of action it is, geological as these lines might be. The verbs are more active than Kurtis's "there was," or Justin's "I sat and watched." If one wanted to create a disengaged mind-set, I think Justin's poem would be a good model to start with. Kelley's, on the other hand, plunges us into the more actual situation at hand, with wonderful connections not just any student might bring to this painting: of time/fate being split between two colliding worlds. She makes us feel that she knows deeply this upside down world, where "the cluttered sky / has fallen into / broken lilies."

David too approaches something of the spirit of Tansey, though he waits for his last line to show it. After
imagining (projecting) himself into the scene in a rather silly way—why should he be swimming quickly in these waters, there being so much else going on that he could have used? Much however is turned around on the hinge of that last line. I’d almost like to have him go back to the work, take that last line and begin the poem from that point...

There at last, the brokenness of the piece shows through, not by flailing around in the middle of disaster, but letting the water be torn, thereby opening up the potential to feel the dynamic pull between the smooth and the wild worlds that the students often find themselves between. It’s fun to say it—and to imagine—"This water, an amazing blue, is torn..."

c) Student Poems About Other Art

A few students were able to go further on this day. Nate was one, who made a leap similar to the one he did when writing on the bus in downtown Mt.Gilead. I will analyze this poem more thoroughly in Chapter Eight. For now, simply note the kind of playful making of meaning he’s done by projecting another world inside Mel Chin’s "Spirit":

I sleep,
I dream
As most men do
But I see things, visions
his mammoth barrel, it's filled you see
Filled with the hopes and wants of all kinds of
People, men, women, children
All of their most secret wants are stored here
And I can see them
I can see them as vividly as the sky on a clear day
Sort of frightening when you consider it
We all want the same thing
Peace
We just have different views on how to
Get there
Now you must understand this
For true peace will never be achieved
Until all of these opinions stored in this barrel
Are respected
My friends,
That is when we reach the peace
Not from wars, but from finding a perfect
equilibrium
And living in harmony

I will make no claims for this poem as a wonderful example of ekphrasis. The leap is too arbitrary, for one thing. Why all those "secret wants" inside the barrel? On second thought... why not? Even when one considers the ecological underpinnings of the work, are not those very wants the stuff of that barrel as it rolled over the plains? Without evoking the piece very visually, Nate has found his own, conceptual way in. Far more than any other poem we've seen from the museum, he's taken time to articulate a meaning.

When such leaps happened, when the poem worked, the source was usually this: the student had "stood in the midst of the work" and made a personal connection, letting something of the physical presence of the painting or sculpture into their poems. That is no small achievement in itself--and comes close to establishing a more engaged world view, but it suggests more work with writing from visual imagery would have helped them see even a bit more rather than that "something".
Ashley Sherbourne, who did such a marvelous job with the game poem in downtown Mt. Gilead, is able to spin a little of that kind of magic here. In the former poem, she wrote, in part:

What if the pavement was the opposite of people?  
Would it open the doors of bricks?  
Everybody knows the bricks can sing and dance.  
And whisper among themselves.

That poem was guided by my list of questions and prompts. At the museum, she had to supply her own direction:

Rockwell Kent, "To the Stars"

I see the moon  
it's shining bright,  
bright as day  
I look up and get swept away in its beauty  
The stars sparkle like a thousand diamonds  
the mountains rise up  
reaching for the sky  
reaching into the emptiness above  
The clouds swirl around  
closing in on the moon  
trying to tear it from my sight  
But I keep looking  
imagineing that it's still there

I like how she's taken her time with this painting, in contrast to a good many others of the students at the museum. The description is still pretty generic: the moon shining as "bright as day," and "the stars sparkle like a thousand diamonds." But she uses those basic stepping stones to ground herself, it seems, in the scene. Until she can get
more particular and the picture itself enters her writing, versus some generic night scene. For when "the clouds swirl around / closing in on the moon / trying to tear it from my sight" she has at last come down to THIS painting--and taken something of a stand on what the painting is about. She's given an edge to this seeing, perhaps taking the point of view of the figure lying down on the platform (though she fails to mention either or to bring that point of view fully to life), imagining a certain drama or intensity to his relationship to this moon. Now I can hear her poem, look back at the painting, and feel it emerge in fresh light, so to speak, haunted by the desire to keep that moon alive.

Jordan too makes his painting his own, in a reflection on Marsden Hartley's "Pre-War Pageant." Just as he does with other visual scenes (see my portrait of him in the next chapter), he is more capable than many others here of
putting himself within a particular work. Though he would likely know nothing of Hartley's life just prior to WWI (other than what the guide may have mentioned), I still am able to visualize him leaning against some wall...

Gazing through the grimy doorway
Sleepy, tired of analyzation.
Under a beam reflecting back
Finding two eyes look with bewilderment.
One mad, the other calm
looking at me
wondering what I am
my purpose
I am here by accident, mistake
Someday I will have a purpose
we say to each other.
Again--there's not enough to evoke the artwork here without taking a look at the painting itself. Yet there is a dynamic encounter being described: one of looking at a painting that is looking back at the viewer. No doubt he could have written, "I just don't know what this painting is about," which seems to be the point of the poem--but instead, true to Jordan's abilities as a writer, he turns that uncertainty into an investigation of what it means to look at a painting. Hartley too was making a similar investigation of the symbols of war, it would seem, searching for a more rooted identity as he returned to his ancestral country just prior to the war. The symbols he supplies us with are of a still-to-be-determined meaning. I admire how Jordan places us in that cross-fire of speculation. I only wish, as I find myself wishing with the bulk of these poems, that he could have given the particular imagery of the stars and symbols more compelling attention than saying "one [is] mad, the other calm." Clearly I needed to teach them more about seeing.

Three poems from the day stand out as giving more weight to the particularities of the works themselves. The first is Sarah Smith's take on George Tooker's "Cornice," a popular work of threatened suicide that many student writers are drawn to, if only for its dramatic staging. Sarah, however, captures a different mood:
I have crawled from my window
From a dizzying height, I observe
A wind whips my clothes
A bird floats by
So carefree
The stress of the city has bound me
No one looks up
Herds of people off to work
Like cattle to the slaughterhouse
Traffic backed up
It's such a long way down
I feel a need to end all
As I fall I feel like a feather
Turning over, the last thing I see
A calm white cloud on the sky

Though much of this is predictable, there's a careful way that she conveys the intensity of the man out on the ledge. Her vision is stark and crisp, the way Tooker's is. Almost cartoon-like. Somehow Sarah has gotten inside the would-be suicide's mind, not so much describing the painting as what he might be thinking/seeing. There is of course no mention in the painting of the people below--nor of the slaughterhouse pressure that may have led him to this desperate act. But in a cartoon-like way, I find her analysis believable. It's at the end that I am taken fully--and freshly--into the painting. For here Sarah has captured something of the calm within the work. It's so easy to imagine him dying a horrible death. But Tooker doesn't convey that so much as a wish to let go. Sarah may have too. There's almost a smile on the man's face as she imagines him turning back up to look at the sky.
Next let's take a look at Bethany's poem on a lovely "Self-Portrait" in the American wing. More than nearly any other poem from the day, hers takes me into the center of the painting. Like Jordan's she puts us into some mysterious no-man's-land where we don't know if we're the painter, the subject, or the observer of the painting. Incredibly, we may be all three...

I am your personality
conforming to your ways
You can see to the depths of your soul

In me the light bounces
staring intently, as if
I were different from yourself
    boring into me

Perplexed, prized, pleased
Has the image you see
changed? Weather-worn skin,
    blue eyes.

Can a poem do more to "study" a self-portrait than this one? She is both the light awakening the subject and the eye of the painter looking into his own eye. She has, like the painter, physicalized vision--the sort of self-reflection that we all at times feel when looking in the mirror, this time with the kind of attention an honest self-portrait would require. Like so many others on this day, Bethany leaps to the heart of the meaning in the work, but in such a way as to bring us back to these intriguing relationships again and again. As with Kelley's poem about Mark Tansey's
Monet, or Jordan's about Marsden Hartley's "Pre-War Pageant," I can, if nothing else, go stand in front of the painting, read the poem, and be taken back inside the artwork.

Finally, let's take a look at Sarah Keener's poem on George Bellows' "Polo at Lakewood." I will consider her work at the museum as a whole in Chapter Eight—-for I think that along with Bethany, she was one who was able to take full advantage of the day and lift her perceiving and writing to a new level. For now, here is her internalization of Bellows' frozen polo match:

Holding back, then letting go,
Constant movement.

Flaring horses chasing
What is unknown to them.

That doesn't matter,
Keep moving.

Eyes are gazing
Watching, never stopping.
Forward movement
Riders leaning at the ground.

There, something is moving
It seems to be running.

Maybe that's because
I am chasing it.

Of all the works written in galleries, that one does both things I was looking for: 1) In its language and description it evokes the painting itself, making me feel as if I am there; 2) It takes a compelling point of view so that I am not only seeing the whole painting, but feeling myself inside of it.
The fact that poems like Sarah Keener's happened so seldom says it's a tough row to hoe, balancing those two sides of perceiving. As I suggest in Chapter Eight, maybe Sarah could do this because she is both looking carefully AND has a sense of what it's like to ride a horse "in traffic" with other horses. But I think it's more that she's honed her language to a point where it moves hand-in-hand with her perception, riding the physical waves of her invention as she makes the painting her own. Does this equal "a more engaged worldview"? I'd say so. The visual has become the physical--and vice versa. The smallest item or motion matters.

d. Poems About Architecture

Intriguingly, some of the better poems written this day came from our last task: writing poems about some architectural models of recent museums built around the world, from the traveling exhibition, "Museums for a New Millennium." We received a wonderful tour from Dr. Tony Scott, then director of school programs at the museum, who used his extensive training in architecture to draw us into the process one goes through in designing a building. Soft-spoken and academic, Tony nevertheless held the kids spellbound as he told what he called the story of museum architecture, revealing the stunning features of each site--and the architect's choices hidden in each structure.
I wondered how the students would be able to handle all this information and how it would affect their poems. To my surprise, I think their poems only grew richer from such background. Perhaps there are two separate but equally potent ways of responding to visual work through poetry. First, the cold start--the way most of us would look at art most of the time--without previous knowledge of the artist, just taking in what is set before us. Yes, we might look at gallery plaques, or perhaps know something of the time period and the style, but many times (it would seem to me) we can enter a work quite nicely, given an attentive mind and enough poetic skill to weigh the contents emotionally and metaphorically. I've seen students of all ages be able to "read" a work this way, oftentimes coming quite close to its internal content or emotional reality. What else would we expect? The visual play of the images translates into the visual play of the words and the two speak in conversation with each other.

But what about a special case like architecture--or any place where without crucial information about the artist or the work the straight imagery itself might mislead or remain silent? I've become convinced there are many pieces of art (or in this case architecture) where information is essential, or at least, greatly helpful. A good number of paintings might reward either--approaching the work with no
background, or else with the history a tour might provide. In this case, we NEEDED the tour, as Tony was teaching most of us for the first time how to read a building.

After the tour, for my part, I suggested that they think of the museum as "the artist's house," and used as my model Milkweed Editions' wonderful anthology of contemporary poems about visual art, aptly titled The Poet Dreaming in the Artist's House. With the title alone as inspiration, I suggested this basic way to respond:

Describe the building in poem form, using the phrase, "The artist's house is ..."
"The artist's house has..."
"The artist's house is like..."
Act like it is alive--for it IS--alive with the architect's dream. In your poem, imagine being a part of that dream, as if you could climb up inside it.

What struck me most about their responses is 1) how personal they are--how much they made their own connections with the buildings; and 2) how vulnerable they became in the face of the architecture, as if the museums evoked some response in them that made them feel a part of the space--which is what I suppose the architects were after all along.

David Cook, for example, chose one of the more boxy, glass-enclosed shapes:

Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art (France)  
-Jean Nouel, architect-

You seem microscopic compared to other great buildings but to me you are the grandest of all.  
You're open, transparent to the rest of the world.  
A view from your stair is amazing, different, free.
I shouldn't feel hidden in you, but I do.
I like it though.
For inside you I am lost in myself.
Others can't find me.
Stay.

David here is responding to Tony's story about the Cartier Foundation building standing out so dramatically from the more traditional, doric-column buildings that surround it. With nothing but its glass front, it says something quite different, using a paradoxical open-hiddenness, an effect which David has pick up on in his poem. Does he feel as lost in his open space as well? The space of his friends, who have much more traditional attitudes toward things than he does, as I found out in the interviews, may make him want to "hide out in the open," the way he suggests the building does. So many kids hide--and it seems that David has found he might not want to. That puts him in an awkward spot, the way Nouvel's building is. A spot one only gets out of with grace--and a bit of flair. Once again, poetry has allowed him a way in, the way the poems about the slide/paintings did. So much weight rides on that next-to-last line, suggesting that art supplies a place to hide and rediscover.

Bethany, in her poem below, seems equally "in-rolled," held inside the structure as if in a fully-constructed building. Is that the value of models like these: that even more than the actual structures, they allow us to project ourselves into their full dimensions, in contrast to the
completed work, where we might not be able to step outside each individual section? A building **holds us**, in ways we often forget, the way her poem does...

The Tate

*If I would look out*
the window I would see
endless space below me

*Stretching down, kissing the water*
Pondering up in the sky,
Balancing, imagining
I am falling

*Drawing my own picture*
Like a lighthouse or a soldier
Keeping the night under your wing

*Caressing our eyes*
the brilliance and solidness
keeps me comforted, kindly

*Will you let me down now?*

Again, as in her study of the self-portrait earlier, Bethany has taken us inside the work, without elaborate description. I am not quite inside the Tate itself--but I am definitely inside a compelling building, as I read her poem, held in space itself, somewhere between sky and water. We so much take for granted our "position" amongst things. Bethany's poem shows us how suspended we often are, not really grounded anywhere. That suspension could be obvious or unseen, violent or gentle. Life-giving or repressive. Her praise of the Tate opens up the most positive aspects of the model. It is a hymn to the power of museums themselves.
That's what I felt the most, as we wandered and looked, listened and wrote, in this final space of the day. That after spending the day looking at art, we had been given a chance to look at--or ponder--our own vision. The whole wonder of museums came back to me as places to dream, to escape, to enter. I couldn't help believing that these kids would be back--some of them were beaming with a kind of joy I hadn't seen on their faces before, just plain happy to be here.

Once again, it was Kelley who took the assignment to its fullest potential, showing me what the others might have done had I been able to stretch their writing further. Taking the only building designed by a female architect, (which is also the least conventional building in the group), she layered her seeing with a mixture of direct observation and inventive dreaming. As such, hers in the only poem of the day to receive a full "A" on the test--that is, to involve with equal flair metaphor, physical and bodily projection, playful language and role playing, as well as effective visualization. She calls it, appropriately,

The Artist's House

The artist's house is like the deep red coral you find only at the bottom of the sandy ocean.
It was once nothing but a puddle of flames, forever burning higher.
Sometimes the layers mold together

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like the rising lava of erupting volcanoes. Suppose you were that old piano tucked away in the darkened basement of its under tunnels... would you still play your rusty tunes or whimper in the shadows of the corner for fear you will rock its layers of brilliance into shattered nothings? You are like my distorted dreams, twisting things when I climb inside you. My memory fades and in my dream, you are the reality of my own twisted thoughts. You have power over me, breaking my already shallow memory. I feel like my eyes pop out and intertwine with your crazed illusions. I carry a china cup filled with luscious grapes climbing to the top. I gracefully toss the precious china as it eternally falls, and like me, passes your extraordinary wonders, thinking nothing.

Okay—you'd still need to see this amazing building to apply what Kelley has done here, so mixed together are her own "twisted dreams" with the structure. But more than any other poet of the day, the physical presence of what she was writing about influences the poem itself, shaping her choice of imagery. What is even more amazing is the physical dimensions she tucks into each line: "my eyes pop out / and intertwine with your / crazed illusions." Even the opening image of "the deep red / coral you find only at the bottom / of the sandy ocean" that "was once nothing... / but a puddle of flames." Looking at the building, one can find that
burning coral, for the poem is an organic fusion of tunnels and colors, distortions and presence, just like the building is. All of art seems to be falling with Kelley as she holds that cargo of precious grapes. This seems to me to be interpretation at work--interpretation in the form of a poem, making a parallel model suggesting the internal structure of the marvelous presence which the architect has offered us.

Summary: After a rather disappointing day, the tour of the architecture exhibit saved us somewhat. The earlier poems were "okay," possibly because the students were tired--or distracted by having the whole museum to wander in. They do not have the punch and surprise that their lines the freedom I gave them that lessened the depth. I intentionally left the assignment more open, not telling how to proceed. They had to invent their ways in--and so forgot to work the details of the artwork more fully into their inventing.

I have to believe they would have done better if I'd either:

1) kept them all in one space, so not so much time was spent talking and wandering; or

2) given them more precise instructions, more of a set procedure as to how to approach the art work; or

3) had given them more training in looking at and writing about art work (this was only their second experience).

Finally, that the architecture tour produced overall stronger work is intriguing in that:

1) we had a more compelling tour;

2) we all stayed in one area and wrote about the work we had just seen;
3) we had information about the work that we could use in the poems;

4) they had PHYSICAL models that they could "enter" more readily than the paintings;

5) I had supplied them with a concise method or writing, rather than leaving them to find their own route in.

7.8 WRITING ABOUT HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS [Lesson 13]

ABSTRACT: We were lucky. Jill knew the Millers, who are the repository of much local history and who own a terrific collection of historical photographs from the county. This provided us with ready material for continuing our search into the power of the image to evoke thought and emotional connection. Perhaps this was a better "test" of the skills we'd been working on than at the museum where we would have needed more preparation time to sink into the paintings. With the Miller's providing background and visual clues, the kids had visual images to play with, investing their "projective" and metaphoric skills into scenes familiar enough to be appealing yet distant enough to cause them to speculate. An engaged world view? Not a bad place to start: with all that has been forgotten about the "worlds" where we actually live.

a. A Visit from the Millers

After a somewhat disappointing set of poems from the museum--full of personal metaphor and conviction, but not enough detail--I wanted to lead the students back into careful seeing via the use of historical photographs. Once again some guides helped, in the persons of Jim and Phyllis Miller, former teachers in this system, one of whom had taught local history in this very room up until 10 years ago. Like Tony Scott, they were experts in their field who could supply the kids with some useful background, this time
on the place where they grew up. From the Millers we learned all sorts of intriguing facts about the Mt. Gilead area:

1. The name of the town, for instance, which is so striking for a place with no noticeable hills, much less mountains! It turns out the town was named after a place in Virginia which Sara Nichols, a resident in the 1840s, fondly remembered from her childhood. The town's first name, Whetstone, needed to be replaced to avoid post office confusion with a town further west. So Mrs. Nichols petitioned her fellow villagers in favor of her childhood home. One wonders why no one thought to bring up the objection of the obvious lack of steep terrain to justify such a substitution. But then, no one asks now either...

2. We learned about other little events and quirks--such as the shutting down of Main Street for sleigh races every winter. Or the name of the
local butcher: Sister Vanatta—a rather whiskered individual for such a nickname. We learned that the town once had the world's record for the shortest railroad line—the Short Line RR, only one and a quarter miles long, which made it possible for local residents to catch trains to Columbus, Cincinnati and Cleveland, after the town council refused to build a station for the railroad companies within the town itself. High school sports teams would travel to other districts by train way into the 1940s.

3. Most of all, the Millers traced the changes in the town, as the railroads and highways developed it into quite a hub in the area—and its subsequent decline as a vibrant center once those factors ceased to play significant roles in its commercial life. Up into the Millers' own childhoods, Friday and Saturday nights were booming gathering times on the city's streets, just as in many towns across America before the coming of malls and television. Bands would play in the center of the street. Teenagers would gather in their own groups while parents and small children used the streets for places to congregate and exchange news and ideas.

4. Two first-class hotels decorated the downtown, attracting travelers as a mid-way stop between Cleveland and Columbus or Cincinnati, as Route 42 formed a main cross-state highway. The "place to work" for teens was as waitresses and porters in the Grand Hotel's restaurant and rooms. All that came to a close in the mid- to late-50s when the interstate highway bypassed everything, 10 miles to the west, serving nothing at all, except high speed travel and fast-food chains. The seven gas stations that once spotted the town are reduce now to none. The Grand burnt in 1966 and was replaced by a parking lot for State Farm Insurance.
None of this is new information for those familiar with the progression of American life over the past 50 years. The story nonetheless woke up many of the students (and me too). No wonder things seem so "boring and all the same" now--as many students had told me in the opening interviews. They ARE--at least in comparison to all that had gone before. Walking the streets of Mt. Gilead, one is quite literally walking a ghost town, or rather a town built on the top of ghosts, ones we never knew we there. Until the Millers came.
b. Photographs as Containers of History

John Berger answers Susan Sontag's objection to the prevalence of photographs as tools of hiding rather than revealing history with these words of hope:

If we could begin to supply the contexts that the camera erases ... we could come to be the camera's memory ... [by using] words, comparisons, signs [to create] a context for a printed photograph. (57)

Perhaps his prescription could be illustrated by what happened on this amazing day. For instead of lamely glancing through the photographs or type-casting the scenes and people there in uninformed, assumptive ways, the way Sontag might suspect they would do, they had something of Berger's full context by which to enter the photographs. They could use the visual metaphorizing skill they employed so well at the museum, but couple it nicely with internalized background coming from the Millers--and from their own curiosity and projection as to what it was once like in this town they thought they knew so well. I would say their poems, at their best, illustrate a kind of **engaged or informed seeing**--informed by background, engaged with curiosity and a newly-learned ability to become a part of what they observe.

After the Millers' background talk and slideshow, we took a group of photographs they had NOT already seen and passed them out at random to the students. Random, we said,
because one doesn't always get to choose where one lands in history. Rather we become--don't we?--the person that is possible within the givens we are handed. I asked them to first look carefully at the scene before them, invoking all the skills we'd been working on, and jot down notes along the following lines:

1. Jot down five intriguing details you notice in the photograph, everything from the way someone is standing or leaning (we can learn a lot from body language and gesture) to the objects and buildings that make up the scene.

2. Create at least three metaphors or similes for what something might look like or seem. A cloud, a street lamp, or a mound of hay might suggest all sorts of connections we sense but don't often articulate. Poems, as you have shown so well already, draw these out.

3. Come up with two questions--about something you might not guess at first glance. (The Millers are here to respond to these.)

4. One or more "supposes" or inventions for what you CANNOT see in the photograph--something outside the frame or the timing of the picture.

I talked about how much photographs can exclude--which no doubt is way more than they include. They tell us some things but imply much more. If it's true that we ourselves contain all of history inside of us, photographs do too, being something like tiny islands in a vast sea of reference spreading around them, physically and culturally.

To my surprise and pleasure, the students jumped in. They were still sophomores after all, so they hung back at
first, like swimmers before an immense, cold pool. But after I went up to Jim and asked him the location of the photograph I received, others followed suit nearly immediately, keeping them busy with questions the rest of the hour. Even when the students began to write their poems, they would at times go up to check on a fact. It was like having a historical coach along to aid the writing--or one's own private informant to help spur the poem into being. If to respond or create art, we need to "build the knowledge base," as Sydney Walker claims (Teaching Meaning in Artmaking, 2001), here we had our own knowledge base right beside us as we wrote. I felt a whole world rising up around us, mixed of three realms: our own present-day imagination, which we had trained to weave character-moments (via the Mockingbird and Crucible poems); the black and white photographs themselves, so stark in their presence and specificity; and the Millers as people knowledgeable about their own community and its rich, quirky past.

What happened with the students' poems about these photographs was that all the elements we'd been working on so far came into play without hardly having to be pointed out. Through extended practice, the students had experiencing "playing a role," by writing about the characters in the literature they'd read. To project into another point of view was nearly second nature to them now.
And here were walking—or at least movable—scenes from a potential novel right in their hands. Looking back, it seems we could have done even more with that: What IS the scene that emerges here in the photograph? What's the story that the picture implies? The best of their poems do that quite naturally, but we could have gone farther.

Secondly, they'd learned to metaphorize with apparent ease—not merely in a decorative manner, but as the controlling motif within a poem (examples to follow). Again, I can see there are even more aspects of metaphor we might have pushed further—exaggerating an impulse, emphasizing a tiny detail more forcefully or wildly. Choosing an even more outlandish point of view. But the impulse in them that day was more toward "being true" to the historical material at hand, with metaphor serving that impulse toward clarity. They had had some "wild times" in a number of previous poems. Today was a day for realism.

Physicality too was emphasized by the photograph. Being taken as "true" images, photographs provide that immediate bodily reference, even more than paintings. As Berger and others have shown, we take the fact of the photograph for granted (see Chapter Five/Section C). These students are no exception. But by going with the assumed actuality of the scenes, they were able to place themselves inside, rubbing up against the buildings, imagining walking in the snow.
Finally, it was the "suppose" trick that brought our various tools into most ready use. Because they had had relatively extensive experience inventing supposes in other circumstances, there is almost an assumed inventive framework behind many of their poems, so that the metaphor, the play, the visual image and the physical presence of the photograph became one contained field of play.

c. Two Models for Writing About Historical Photographs

Lawrence Raab and Maggie Anderson provided our best models, with one poem taken directly from a photograph, and one almost seeming to. Raab gives us the first, with his marvelously supple reading of:

*An Old Photograph from Vermont*

*We are too far away to see the pattern of the embroidery she holds against the back of the chair in front of the house with its open window and two screened doors.*

*Nor is her face clear, though she seems to smile. Curves of a mountain blur off to each side, and a pair of apple trees press thin shade upon the walls.*

*It is late summer, blackberry season.*

*Beyond fields which we cannot see, a stream burrows into the cool side of a hill. Further, in wild country where she has never gone, one dark pond reflects a circle of spruce,*

*and the birds are silent, for this is the time just before a storm, when leaves grow heavy, and your heat thickens for no reason.*
Why, then, is she smiling,

as the first gust falls into the yard, as husband or father calls from the house, telling her to come in, far off telling her that, as

she strays into the crush of weeds, at the edge of the field, beyond garden, barn, and all of us. You would think she believes

the wind will carry her away.

Such lessons to be learned here! I think we felt them more than articulated them. They are worth pondering nonetheless. For Raab explores this photograph from such an array of viewpoints, letting us enjoy both the seeing of it and the speculations about what is NOT shown. It is an aggressively interrogative poem, questioning the photograph and its hazy subject, offering up one suggestion and then undercutting that with a further question. Where is the photograph itself within the poem? Nicely evoked with a few touches of detail—the embroidery against the back of the chair, the "open windows and two screened doors." But beyond those windows and within those doors, there waits such ominous, compelling presences—a dark side in the scene nearly spilling from within, and the compelling other-world calling the woman from without. For the photograph here is more of a box to contain its subject and the freedom of the poem stretches far beyond its confines.

I think we will see how Raab's model feeds its way down into the students' own work, as he pauses to ask "what next"
questions ("why, then, is she smiling") that guide his next speculation and discovery. The poem rides the inner throbbing of each detail—the embroidery being hardly enough to hold her to her accustomed chair; the lines of the distant mountains beginning to pull her on, even as Frost's "Hill Wife" is drawn beyond the too-small world of her cabin. Even the touch of implied weather in the sky is enough to build a supposition about. There is about the poem an internal mood that often accompanies a storm-front, setting the ground for the prepared-surprise of the last line, a line that builds in the sort of twist I'd been asking the students to notice and practice all semester:

You would think she believes
the wind will carry her away.

Maggie Anderson, herself a confessed lover of photographs, supplies us with a second "move", or perhaps second version of the same move that Raab makes—only instead of building outward, from the center of the photograph to all the worlds beyond, Anderson begins with the outer shell and steps within the frame of the photograph to speculate on what may be going on within. Here is her poem, "Kitchen Talk," which although not nominally about a picture, could easily be, so deftly does it work within its frame:

Along the Outer Banks in North Carolina, there is a grey house that rises from the tall grasses and the sea oat like a tombstone.
Its hull is shedding. The rusted bell of the porch light whistles out over the Sound.

An American flag on the roof twists in white smoke; an osprey swoops in.
A dusty child's face is framed in the upstairs window for an instant only.

Her brother's gone to Raleigh.

From my sandy spot by the highway I can almost hear it: the kitchen talk inside

Mama, how long'd you say to cook that chicken?

Oh, I don't know, sister, till it's done. Just till it's done.

The kids loved this poem, along with Raab's. Maybe that in itself is telling. Together, they offer a nice mix of insider vs. outsider writing, taking a scene and inferring stories within. Even their subtle use of quiet metaphor is telling--the house like a tombstone, the heart thickening. And the senses that are brought into play: the flag twisting in the smoke; the apple trees that "press thin shade upon the walls." These are not dominantly dramatic poems. The dominant narrative moves are generic: there may be a "dark pond [reflected] in a circle of spruce" far off in the hills; the girl in the window may have a brother who has gone to Raleigh. In the course of history, these are the tiniest of details. In the life of the photograph and their "ordinary" lives, they assume dimension. And maybe that's
all for the best. Together they say: small things can matter. Just as they do in a town like Mt. Gilead. Just as the Millers had been demonstrating.

d. Entering the Past: Building the Photograph

Looking back on the students' poems from that day, it's often the lists that guide their writing. Consider Jenny's approach to a photograph of the city streets heaped with snow drifts, taking the shape of two short poems:

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Horses helping a woman across town
A face stares at you while you're
Walking down the frost-bitten streets
Wheels attempt turning on the packed powder
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Clothing, Shoe, and Hat Stores
 "Drugs, Books, 
 Wallpaper"

Two hands catch your eye: 3:41
You're forced to squint by the forceful
Shine of sugar

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Campaigning
Snow
Shoe stores, Hat shops
Drinking fountain
Where are the power lines?
Where is the buggy driver?
The snow is like a vacation, everything stops,
yet you're free to
do anything

No doubt it's clear that the second is the list that prepared her for the poem version above it. Yet I like the two takes together, the sketch revealing her internal brainstorming that helped the poem be more immediate and speculative. I love the looseness of the poem version--its quick survey of the stores and its tiny story of the horses helping the woman along the streets. Yet there is a deceptive "slide" within the poem--the way the senses are evoked by the naming the streets as "frost-bitten." What a subtle use of metaphor--it rivals Raab and Anderson in being hidden. For we think of ourselves or our appendages as taking in the cold that way. Here is the whole town, with the pavement below us putting the whole world on a kind of edge.
And the drama here (the little "play") is no bigger than Anderson's "Kitchen Talk": a person, walking through the streets happens to look down to check their watch and the "time" is a squinted-at reality, even its number affected by the snow and the cold. Is Jenny aware of this? Maybe yes and maybe no. Either way, I'm convinced it's a significant piece for her. Instead of being "planned," the way so many of her poems have been, it grows OUT OF her noticing, it makes its point and moves on. It enriches and is enriched by the photograph on which it stands.

Several of the students got posed photographs from patriotic events. A tough nut to crack, if you ask me. For there is no obvious story to explore, only the person (or the people) standing stiffly, staring or smiling awkwardly into the camera. It's intriguing to consider how they chose to get out of such awkward boxes. Some of the poems become rather generic lists of facts. Ryan, for instance, gives us this rather simple list:

Morrow County Honor Roll

All the names
famous names
local names
names of the ones you know
names of people
who served their country
loyally
you unlucky 37
you lucky 1309
who came back home
Not much depth here. But what was he to do? Handed the attached photograph of a list of names, he invents a way in --or a way out. A way out into some objective surveyor. Yet even here, I like the play that goes on: the play between "famous" and "local" names. (Are these different than the "names of the ones you know"?) Where Ryan's poem takes on a certain subtle strength is in the two lines near the end that contrast the number killed (37) versus the ones who came home (1309) from WWI. To lose 37 men from one county stands out as significant--at least for those familiar with these "local names." Without creating a brilliant poem, Ryan has at the very least made a meaningful one out of a few basic observations and facts.

Matt Fry is another student who had not much stood out in the poetry writing. He usually stays in the land of the literal, as he does with these lines from his earth-water-fire-air memory piece, remembering his grandmother's farm:

...Taking a dip in the swimming hole
goofing around in the hay mail
going in the house and getting some disney popsickles
seeing Dotty and Grandma Wegner playing board games
catching fish with our bare hands
walking along the stream
having snowball fights
sneaking Little Debbie treats from the cupboards...

He loves metonymy--one might even say passionately. I remember that he wanted very much to read his "Grandma
Wenger" poem out to the class and was disappointed the next session when I had typed up only a section of it, leaving off the pedantic opening and ending. But who am I to say? Maybe for him, poetry supplies a means of "keeping the world whole," versus a method to challenge his conventional views. I believe I lost Matt that day, earlier in the semester, as he realized that our two styles were so radically different. He was one of the few not to go on either the Mt. Gilead field trips or to the museum. In fact, the ONLY other poem he put in his end-of-the-semester selection was the following one about this photograph of Casey Bending's garage:

Sportin' his ride

A young man at the auto garage
poses as the picture is taken.
His arm spread out over his new Ford Model T.
A spark in his eye
and a crooked smile,
not a happy smile but
a proud smile.
He runs his hand over the slick metal,
a larger man in the background
imitating the pose on the washed out stone
wall.
The young man smells the new car smell.
He steps in and in a flash
is gone from Casey Bending Garage.
Suddenly a black blur appears on 42,
and an arm waving in the air

Much as Matt would likely look back at the semester and call it a wash, and much as I have to admit I did not get through to him, for whatever reason, we meet at this one point of intersection: we both like this poem. Maybe it was the
influence of Raab and Anderson. Maybe it's the presence of the automobile--like football, such a symbol of American manhood. Maybe it's that it comes from his hometown, evoking the macho world of the men who made up this place eighty or so years ago. Whatever the reason, Matt became more thorough in his writing and observation here. He notices the driver's arm reaching out over ("spread out over") to the new car. He even makes a careful attempt to say what kind of smile the new owner has on his face. Matt, in my estimation, has that kind of smile at times: crooked, not exactly happy, but proud. (Though also a bit more sarcastic than the one he

Figure 7.14 Unknown Photographer, "Casey Bending Garage"
evokes here in the picture.) Most minutely of all, he invents a nice comparison with the man standing far back in the doorway, taking something of an echoing stance. From that frozen frame, Matt then creates a time flip, sending his driver down the highway in a "black blur". It's telling that he names the highway--Rt. 42 being one of the two major routes through town. He even evokes a kind of cinematic effect with the disappearing arm waving in the air. As close to an intimate gesture as one is likely to find in one of Matt's poems.

Can we call this poem an example of a more "engaged world view"? In a quiet way, I think we can say so. No one who didn't know him would likely pause at it for more than it takes to run through the words. But for Matt, it's something of a significant moment. One of slowing down his sight to pay attention to gesture (an arm against a "washed out stone wall") or to the subtleties of a certain type of smile. Out of a wash-out semester, I'll take it. And hope he remembers it some time in the future as he gets into his own new car or says goodbye to a friend, taking his own place in the history of a community.

Micah is equally precise, if perhaps a tad more inventive, in his description of a group of men harvesting potatoes on an old tractor. More inventive, for one thing, in taking on the point of view of something OTHER than one
of the people involved—or, more commonly, some sort of objective narrator standing anonymously outside the scene. Playful also in his choice of the whimsical metaphor that closes out the poem...

Potatoes

I move over the ground
Slow so no good potato is missed
Six men all working
Are gathered on me

They are working just as hard as me
Trying to make the field barren
I slowly suck up the plant
As though it were ice cold lemonade
    flowing through a straw

Wanting to drink, yet wanting it to last

I love this rather silly poem about potato harvesting. Maybe because I've done it myself, albeit by hand, and know what muddy work it is, hardly comparable to drinking lemonade. So the oddity stands out. As does the "ringing true" of what we sometimes feel at certain moments of daily happiness--those moments we wish might continue where we also feel the eerie ambivalence of knowing it will end, often just as the
thought comes into our heads. Micah is definitely "reaching" here, while touching freshly on a common experience. Though his poem is not as visual or precise as Matt's, he makes up for that lack with flair.

It intrigues me that these students who did not often shine in some of the other more inventive assignments, such as Matt or Ryan or Micah, were able to do at least a little bit more with the history photographs. (We will see this even more sharply when we analyze Shelby's poem from this day under Chapter 8, for she is one who turned around her own sense of her abilities as a poet from looking carefully at these photographs.)

Holly is one--a student whose name it took me half of the semester to learn! I like how in her description of one
musician at a July 4th festival at the monument (the "Victory Shaft" monument that dominates the center of town, being the area's one claim to fame as the county that sold the most war bonds during WWI) Holly is able to key in on one person. There's little else here to recommend her writing, save for one line that offers a rather fresh angle on it all...

The Monument

There he stands
His face hidden by his tuba,
A sweet melody flows through the street
Looking about
Eager school children stand watching
Parents and elders gather to look
As the structure stands high

Being newly built it's a great attraction
It's as if birds have flocked to a place
    of better warmth
The people have come to look at this
    wonderful monument
But yet the one boy with his tuba stands out
Playing for the pride of his county.

In contrast to several other poems here, I do NOT like this poem much at all. How slow it is! And full of cliches. The "eager school children," the "sweet melody [that] flows through the street." The whole first stanza could be in a newspaper article. And then, in the second stanza, she tries out a brand new idea... one of her few compelling metaphors of our whole time together: that the people around the monument are like birds gathering in a place of greater warmth. That's good, I said to her. It's a whole new way of
looking at what the monument means to the people of the county (as I've heard even from the kids' comments--they don't belittle it but rather see it as their one source of pride). Perhaps without fully being aware, Holly has here for the first time SAID something. As in her poem about the man whistling downtown, she has made a connection beyond the obvious with the place where she lives! Just like Matt, Holly will be one of the last to ever pick up a book of poems to read for fun, I would guess, but in one line she "saw" something.

**e. One Photograph/Two Views**

Because we used the same photographs in each class, we were able to compare the way two students looked at the same piece, one from A block and one from L. In conclusion, let me consider one of these pairings, illustrating two ranges the students seemed to veer toward in writing about these snapshots of their own historical roots.

The photograph is of the town butcher, circa 1920s, who apparently was nicknamed Sister Vanatta by his customers, possibly because of the apron he wore for his work. It's a posed piece, taken across a spotless counter, with a row of meat hanging along one wall and "Sister" standing before it like some sort of military sergeant presenting his troupes. The photographer's flash has been caught in the storefront window, which is framed with fine oak woodwork and fan-like
decoration. This is a clean shop, more like a living room or parlor than a slaughterhouse (one assumes that the actual butchering takes place in the back room anyway, or some other location). This is a photograph of presentation, a symbol of pride that Sister Vanatta could look to as a confirmation of his labor.

Both students who wrote on this piece picked up on that pride. Sarah McGlynn begins her poem with that point: "He
keeps his shop clean, / even though the freshly / cut meat hangs on the wall." And Corky, in A block, emphasizes the butcher's pride as he ends his poem: "The happy butcher stands tall with his mighty axe / As he chops up meat and admires his meat wall." Both also pick up on small details--Corky speculating on the flies that would likely be found pester ing the meat, Sarah going so far as to record the make of the cash register and the $1.00 sign on its display. Corky mentions "the hooks [that] hang with weight bearing" and includes that there's "a string [that] goes down to where the source [of the meat] is"; Sarah has figured out that we must be facing "the southeastern wall" (she had written at first southwestern, but crossed that out, as she speculates that it's the rising sun that must be causing the glare).

All this says a lot to me about the power of these photographs to help the students pay attention to small things (something, again, I found missing in the most of the students' poems about paintings). Their sense of the physical presence of the meat, the shop, and the butcher himself speaks volumes about the power of a photograph to evoke a world and help us walk around in it. Others had gained such a sense as well (see my comments on Jordan and Shelby in the next chapter). The photographs--as "real" events (versus the paintings we'd worked with earlier)--gave
them a direct world to respond to, one that did not so much help with metaphorical flourish or playfulness as with a visual and/or physical dimension on which to whet their descriptive knives (so to speak). And that's a lot to say. In contrast to the poems about paintings, which were often philosophically and metaphorically engaging but did not evoke much clear image of the painting being written about, these poems can be read without the photograph in front of us and we will likely conjure the scene in our minds. As is the case with Corky's:

Dead Meat

The hooks hang with weight bearing.
A string goes down to where the source is.
You hear drips and drops as they hang off the ground.
With flies buzzing all around.
There isn't just one hanging but dozens in many sizes.
But the number is always reduced as a customer buys another.
The happy butcher stands tall with his mighty axe.
As he chops up meat and admires his meat wall.

Some might ask if this is a poem at all, or if it is merely a prose description. I can't say I care whether it is or not. Corky has written a number of more "inventive" poems before--the one about robbing the bank, for instance. He has shown himself to be quite photographic in his illusions, even cinematic (the blue lights flashing as he is hauled out of the vault...) Now, for whatever reason, he has pulled
back from such surrealistic play and concentrated on "getting the facts right," on making a physical presence of the butcher and his meat. As Heidegger might have prescribed, he's brought back into our consciousness the walls of meat which we collectively consume every day. He gives us the weight-bearing carcasses, the hum of the flies, the (projected) drip of the blood. The poem begins to plod into the prosaic when he feels the need to point out that the numbers get smaller as purchases are made, but picks back up--and comes round to its main point--with his evocation of the "happy butcher [and] his meat wall" at the end. This is a poem that just IS, the way the shop is. It's nearly phenomenological. It's asks us to accept it, the way Sister V does.

Sarah McGlynn takes hers a step further, it would seem. She gets the facts across--i.e. establishes the scene--in the first eight lines or so. She gets the sunlight shining, the cleanliness of the shop as opposed to the unwieldiness of the hanging meat, the ring of the register, the reality of the daily sales. But she stretches it further in the last half...

>Sister Vanatta

*He keeps his shop so clean,*
*even thought the freshly cut meat hangs on the wall.*
*Only two lights to the room,*
*but the sun shines in so bright.*
*You can hear the Dayton National Ohio cash register click on the $1 sign.*
You can almost feel the
chariot engraved in the
southwestern wall.
But what you don't notice
nor does he
is that above the door
is a reflection of
a face, my face,
with my staff and halo.
For I am his guardian angel
that watches a man
with winter hair & floor
patterns of leaves.
I am his watcher.

Is it clear what a difference there is between these
two students' poems? Corky's is competent, even evocative
(as I've contended above). But Sarah...? She has entered the
inner realms of this world, finding more than meets (so to
speak) the immediate eye. At first there is the chariot,
which sneaks up on us. We think we see it in the woodwork or
the fan-like decoration. But where precisely? She's added a
level of mythic seeing that awakes in us another sense. Is
this the chariot of the sun? The winged chariot soon to take
him to heaven? Sarah is a strongly religious student
herself, unintrigued by the rest of the classes' antics. And
quite sure she knows of "other realities" beyond our daily
assumed ones. She wrote on her self-description card the
first day: "It's more important to know what someone's
religion is than to know where they came from." She inserted
a bit of the fairy realm into her poem out at the lake.
Specificity does not come easy to her, as one can tell from
this poem she showed me early on...
My heart cries out to someone I couldn't have.
To someone I can only watch
Whose true thought can't be touched
Whose eyes melt my heart...

She also mentioned in her evaluation that she would have been in favor of students writing poems more under their own guidance, without such heavy emphasis on using detail. Yet here she's made the details carry wonderful "other world" realities into the picture. By noticing that face in the right-hand section of the window above the door, she has conjured a spiritual aspect to this scene that many would never have come to. In such lines as

... I am his guardian angel
that watches a man
with winter hair & floor
patterns of leaves

she makes the spirit world enter "our" world till there's almost a sacred feeling to the butcher shop... which, now that we notice it, was perhaps there all along... a sacrificial ritual, if you will, which the butcher's dignity itself conveys. In such phrases as "winter hair" and "floor patterns of leaves" she evokes a stateliness to the scene. With her invention of "the watcher," she has given us a new way to see even such a "plain" and posed portrait from the world within both the photograph and its "star."
f. Why Write About Historical Photographs?

The usefulness of this day stretches far beyond the question of the quality of the poems produced. The deeper question is whether the students grew more engaged in their world as a result of the experience of hearing about their town's past and constructing poems from the black and white photographs which the Miller's loaned us. I will deal more directly with those results when I analyze the closing interviews (in Chapter Nine). For now, let me take a stab at what happened.

First of all, the day provided a nice spark of excitement. Even if one would have paid attention to body language in the classroom, students were more alert, more questioning, more usefully talkative. Old as our guests were, they had the kids' respect because they know something about this place. We'd been talking ABOUT knowing the area better all semester and now here was a chance to do just that. L block in particular--all along the less involved class--showed marked engagement with the history lesson and the questions afterward. They treated these "elders" with kindness, solicity and respect.

Secondly, they learned some intriguing facts they could carry with them. The railroad history, the oil boom era, the briskness of life on Friday and Saturday night, the loss of that vibrancy to the interstate... all these bits of information have the potential to re-orient the students'
perspective of where they walk, drive and live every day. History of this nature is applicable history. If a sense of time is often missing in the daily lives in this culture, as so many have pointed out, here was a step in the other direction. Students told me in interviews that they now "see" the train station and where it once stood, even though it has long vanished. If even a few took on that new, historically-informed way of seeing, the day had impact, strong poems or not.

Thirdly, the poems that resulted, whatever their metaphorical or playful qualities, are more grounded in detail than nearly any poems they did all semester. Even when compared to the poems they wrote downtown, they make fuller pictures in the reader's mind. Why would that be? They may not be stronger poems as such. They plod in the details too much, they forget too often the elements of surprise we'd worked on so hard. They show a shortage of metaphoric awareness, except here and there. But they have PHYSICAL PRESENCE. And that in itself is a valuable lesson, one that, given more time to build on, could have/might have strengthened the students' abilities to use poetry to engage with visual images and the world around them.

g. Coda: Time Within Time

One last poem. And one last photograph. Here is a poem that, in contrast to the others I've been writing about,
does little to evoke the picture from which it is drawn. In fact, in order to get the insights of Ben's poem here, I will have to set the context of its imagery. Yet I find it one of the most insightful, intriguing poems of the day. Conceptual as it is, it physicalizes time and history in a way that sheds light on the whole day's project.

Ben's photograph was a rather tame one, portraying a group of "historical society" women and men dressed up for a pageant. That he was able to do anything at all with the image is a testament to the work we'd been doing. Seated and

Figure 7.17 Unknown photographer, “Pageant of Time”
standing in a library setting, they stare blankly at the camera, dressed up in Revolutionary and Civil War era gowns. They wear powdered wigs and in a couple cases, tri-cornered hats. All the cliched costuming we associate with "olden times" in America, accurately or not. What WOULD have Ben described and still kept any poetic validity to the poem? He'd written well at the museum, but there he had a wide range of choices to pull from. Here we had an anonymous photographer's newspaper photograph for the July 4th edition, most likely. The subjects are so old, they appear to be barely able to stand.

Yet to Ben, they triggered a thought, once he saw them in a metaphorical frame. For he realized a paradoxical or at the least elliptical connection between what they were doing in the photograph and what he (and we) were doing in writing ABOUT the photographs. As he puts it...

I know of a story of ones before us
But I never knew we would be a story.

Now here we sit, doing things in time
making things for time, acting things of time.

Time.

It helps us, it hurts us, it laughs at us.
It bluffs us, it turns us, it holds all.

This is close to a typical theme in much poetry that high school students would write on their own... the poem about time... that eternal mystery. And yet...
And yet, it carries more weight (at least for me) than the average "time" poem many students would come up with on their own. And it's the photograph that redeems it. For here he has made a connection with some "old people" he might never have done before. And realized his (and our) position within a much longer time-frame than we usually carry around with us. Picking up the photograph on his own, in some antique store or other, while waiting for his mom to be done shopping, he would most likely have passed it over as irrelevant or even silly, joking with a friend perhaps about the old foggies in their goofy costumes. (I would have too, most likely.) Yet in the context of the assignment, what happened? He realized that what they were doing paralleled quite exactly what we were doing. And one step further: he realized that we were a part of their story--or, more significantly, that we were our own story too. His first line hints at as much, suggesting he'd been told some about "the history of the area" before. But that story was always "of ones before us." Could we ever have that experience as well? The "play" of history has suddenly become real to him--and I think for good. When we conducted the interviews, this was the one poem he came back to talk about, the one where some amazing realization happened.

Finally, I look at his closing two lines and marvel. This is no easy list of the "wonders of time" but a honest
admission that time is quite beyond our control. It helps and hurts, it laughs at us (much as he might have laughed at the photograph). But that it bluffs... now THAT's a fresh idea to me. Time holds up mirages and "turns" them on us, holding all but not revealing all. These are lines that are simultaneously insightful, troubling, honest and convincing.

By giving us a handle on time's many roles, they provide a reference point for when life seems confusing or meaningless. As they might at times for Ben, when he goes to meet his dad at the hospital ward. The poem takes away nothing of that confusion, it only, like the photographs and like the visit of the Miller's, gives us a wider context by which to weigh all that goes on.

Summary: In marked extension from the museum visit just days before, studying photographs from their own county's history seemed to awaken both an inventive AND a descriptive nerve in many students' writing. The difference may be that structured the writing process more precisely, asking that they take notes about details, metaphors and "supposes" before they began writing. Similarly, I may have come up with better example poems for them to emulate--poems which made use of exactly those sorts of speculative and descriptive moves. But it also may be that the students responded so positively because this is THEIR area--and they had people before them who knew intimately of its history. They were able to "speak the context" of the photographs, as Berger urges us, 1) because they cared, and 2) because they had details to build on. Then, like plants in good soil, the metaphoric, the physical, the playful and visual components had something upon which to grow.
ABSTRACT: The following (and final) project of the semester took more work and produced more ambiguous results than anything else we did. For it, I canvassed merchants around town, soliciting funds to purchase cameras, hoping to make a stronger connection between the students and the adults in town. I talked about the camera project and my struggle to attain cameras repeatedly with the students over the semester --until I think they were tired of hearing about it. It would have been better had I arranged for the cameras ahead, but time considerations seemed to dictate that this be a "fly by night" project, with minimal support and the briefest of instructions for the students. Even so, the project resulted in raising some important questions about methods of using art to help students engage with their immediate world. It's my belief that a good number of the students who chose to take the photography project seriously--as well as those students who were able to bring the skills of poetry to looking closely at the pictures--gained quite a bit of new insight into what it would mean to attain an "engaged world view." But the results were more mixed than I would have liked.

a. The Photography Assignment

We did manage to attain enough cameras and film for nearly every student to take a roll of shots, if they wanted to. And we did get at least a little interest from area merchants. The State Farm Insurance agent downtown, for instance, was able to give us four cameras from the ones she uses to record accidents and property. Krogers, one of the main supporters of the schools in town, gave us $25 toward purchasing disposable cameras, and we got more from other places, along with buying a few ourselves. Most of all, we got the support of the pharmacy in town, owned by the father of the town mayor, who is something of a photographer.
himself (he sells his pictures as postcards of the area in the store). He offered to develop the pictures at cost. So at least the activities of the classes were broadcast around town.

Eventually, some of the students began to take pictures. Of course they were not receiving any credit for this--what they took was all on their own time. And these were kids who were quite serious about their grades. To spend an evening walking around town with a camera may have sounded intriguing to some, but they have such busy schedules that it was difficult for many to budget the time. Additionally, I was pleased that several of the students tried hard to apply the make-shift "principles" I suggested for giving their pictures a bit more "edge." I suggested, in a handout that we spent no more than 10 minutes on, that they look for patterns, that they look for shots that did more than give us what's "straight in front of your face," that looked down or up, or tried out some other point of view; that they pay attention to small things, giving them a kind of voice; and most of all that they imagine there being poems in the area where they live, poems that might be suggested by the camera.

Finally, in preparation, we consulted five photographs taken from John Szwarski's book LOOKING AT PHOTOGRAPHS,
Figure 7.18  Andre Kertetz, “Montmartre, 1927”
Tina Modotti, “Staircase, 1923-26”
Robert Frank, “Political Rally, Chicago, 1926”
weighing the choices made by photographers such as Tina Modetti, Robert Frank, Minor White, Imogene Cunningham and Andre Kertesz. These Jill posted on the board for several weeks, as reminders of the kind of edgy choices they too could make. All this was not enough, assuredly. And we didn't get a chance to explore such choices thoroughly. Ideally, they would have gone out with the cameras first, and then taken time to critique the first batch. Other problems with the project were many:

- Lack of a chance to work, even for a day, with a professional photographer, who could have extended the list of suggestions I made.
- Lack of any strong incentive to take time with the process--no grade or credit, etc.
- Lack of any instruction time outside the classroom--say in a "camera walk" around the block or the town. By not doing this, we in effect implied the photographs were expendable and not worth one's full effort.

Nevertheless, as I mentioned above, MOST of the students who took a camera out into the community seemed to gain quite a bit from the experience. Many of them:

- Tried some intriguing angles and points of view.
- Looked carefully at small objects and slightly "off center" views (in the same way that they had begun to play with point-of-view in their poems). Even if their poems did
mostly not turn out as strong as their others, they seemingly gained a respect for objects and different points of view to use in future writing or photographing.

- Were quite excited about looking at and showing each other the photographs they had taken. If nothing else they gained something of a respect for "non-family" photographs, picturing them as containing potential poems inside. Which one of them would likely have gone out into their town and taken pictures on a warm Saturday in the fall?--it seems, not many.

- Hence it seems clear that we at least opened up the camera for them as a means of re-engaging the ordinary world around us.

b. Playing with snapshots of the local

I have to admit: from the moment I saw their photographs, I was in some inexplicable way mesmerized. Probably because as a poet I'd never had a chance to give an art-making assignment before. But also because I was fascinated by the naive nature of their pictures, the touching rawness of them. Almost BECAUSE they had had such little training, I enjoyed seeing the results. As in the work of some "outsider" artists, even mistakes, the awkward angles and the blurs suggested to me a poetic potential which more astutely conceived photographs might have not. These were mostly NOT the photographs they would have taken on their own--not family snapshots or vacation scenes; not even exactly pretty. And yet they retained some of the "justness" of snapshot photography. They take on the
ordinary facts of the life of these students growing up in Mt. Gilead--the piano lessons, the accumulated stuff in their rooms--frogs and make-up bottles and fish-tanks, the barn slats, the stairs they walk down from their bedrooms to breakfast every day, the daily bus ride past the horse corral. Without trying for it, their pictures (for me at least) create a kind of self-made ethnographic study of their world. Warts and all. Cliches and all. Had I been able to be more precise in training their photographic eyes--or had someone give them such a lesson, as originally planned--I know the work could have been much better, from an artistic standpoint. But just as with the poetry, that was not the point of the lesson, at least not completely. What they "achieved," I think, was a first step in using a camera to investigate the world from inventive points of view. I'll have to leave it to future teachers and their own maturing process to take them further.

For now, let me take just five photographs that intrigue me as photographs. Each one is blurred or flawed in some way. None is framable. None would warrant putting in a book. But each shows effort to me--or happy accident. Each suggests a world that I can enter as a poet, and that I hoped, at least originally, they might enter too.
Photograph #1: Bunny Crossing.

Here is a photograph of one of the hundreds of little trinkets one might find in any craft or gifts store anywhere across America. It is, I imagine, meant to be cute or whimsical--the sort of emotion highly privileged in such shops one would guess, particularly by women--I cannot imagine a male over the age of 10 thinking this item worth purchasing or giving as a present). It may be produced to place in someone's backyard garden as a miniature token of the world of animals we have so successfully banished from our lives. It's not the item itself, then, that makes me laugh, but the angle from which the photographer (Amber) has chosen to view it. Thumb intrusion and all, including part of the toe of her sneaker. From that "upper" vantage point, she asks us to see a clay model of a bunny propped upon its tiny world of a blue clay rock engraved with the words "BUNNY CROSSING" in orange block letters. From there I sense a grand distance between the viewers (us and the photographer) and that tiny world of this kind of artifact that we so readily fill our contemporary homes with. A meaningless object, really. And yet somehow worth giving to someone we love. Maybe even "loved," if only for a short time by the recipient. Treasured for that very whimsicality. Or because it fits into a collection of "bunnies" the receiver is known to treasure. The world doesn't matter very much, this bunny says. The world of grades and stock portfolios, of college applications and army recruitment posters. It's the "little people" that do, the creatures not much paid attention to in the world of importance swirling all around us. This is Winnie-the-Pooh, Peter Rabbit and Bambi resurrected in a gift item. If it is indeed Amber's possession, she's giving it to us now from the vantage point of a quickly-maturing teen, one who some days--as she told me--takes the night off to gorge on chocolates and watch "chick flicks," who decorates her wall with "hunk posters" of near-naked men. From THAT distance, she gives us Bunny Crossing, an out-of-focus photograph with her thumb intruding. A world she still owns but is quickly separating from. ***
Another small animal shot, this one with the subject alive, if equally contained. Call it "Bird Cage" or "Crossings," it intrigues again because of the view of the photographer, who has chosen to place the lens directly upon the subject, but from a distorted under-angle so that the bird--a white or yellowish canary I believe--is caught within its tiny world.

The horizontal orange-brown stripes of the cloth hanging over the back of the cage blur with the gold and mostly vertical bars of the cage to emphasize a trapped feeling. If this bird ever flies, it is seldom, the photograph says. This is the picture of flight caught within its own mosaic or stained glass window. It is majesty tilted as if it has been poured into a frame. Nothing from the outside intrudes... no foot or thumb as in Amber's picture. Emma, a quiet, conscientious yet critically-thinking student easily missed in the blur of much more demanding friends, has caught this portrait of herself, it seems, in the bird's black pupil nearly obscured by one bar of the cage that
Nevertheless slides down its vertical column as a tiny, valuable bead might. And I am drawn within. Where Amber separates me, making me remember a tiny child-bound world.
she cannot fully return to, Emma takes me in, makes me want
to live here, to see the world from an angle of empathy.

***

Photograph #3: Horse From a Bus Window.

What does it mean that yet a third photograph of an
animal contained in a frame attracts my eye? Maybe it's
because the body has again inadvertently become the subject
of the picture, or rather the angle of the photographer as
she attempts to observe that body via the optic world of the
camera. Here we have another off-angled shot, this one taken
from a bus window, probably stopped to let off a student.
Rachel has leaned over and done her best to place the stark
body of this boldly white and bridled mare. She told me in
passing that they watch it every day on their repetitive
ride home. It's a high point in their routine and she's done
at least a little to bring out the animal's vibrant presence
from within the dark world of the school bus, with its stiff
and bulky vinyl seats. It seems significant that the metal
crossbar of the bus window runs across the forehead of the
horse, almost matching in size and color its restraining
bridle. As with Emma's canary, the dark circle of what we
know is the compelling eye of the mare is nearly eclipsed by
the bar of the frame. Yet not completely. In that framing
something vital wants to emerge. Into Rachel's knowing. Into
ours. And we view its presence from a nearly underwater
world, from a half-chosen submersion--in the half-heard
school-talk, in everyday half-seeing, in the somewhat
repressive and staunchly organized world of the school day--
into a dreamt-of freedom. If Amber's toy rabbit photograph
is saying goodbye, and Emma's bird is calling us in,
Rachel's horse to greeting a world-yet-to-be.

***

Photograph #4: Emma's Sidewalk.

Here's Emma again, this time leading us down her daily
sidewalk out to her driveway and her yard. This time it's US
that's framed, within some structure, perhaps a garage or a
porch. We're caught almost in motion, taking in a gray day
in autumn, with an ill-defined tool shed and a picnic table
straight ahead, and the hood of a maroon car to the lower
right. So far, not much to call us in. Yet I'm intrigued by
two things. First, the thick frame of the vines that hang
from the left of our enclosure. I'm half-blanketed by this
vegetation, brought back into the secludedness of
habitation, where house meets outside world, with truncated
sidewalk forming us our bridge--or our
gangplank--outward. And that's the second intrigue: that sidewalk, laid out in six equal receding rectangles, "imperfect" with tilts and irregularities (one square refusing the satisfaction of the smooth surrounding edge on its left side, breaking the symmetry, the grass here too invading that solid, human realm. Maybe I love it because it is Emma's world and I see her here--almost a model for the way she sees everything--a bit secluded but with a clear eye, comfortable but slightly worried. For where does that sidewalk end? Not, surely, in Shel Silverstein's surreal hilarity. But somewhere richer, far more ordinary, and far more hers.

***
Photograph #5: The Face in the Bus.

This photograph too contains a world, the way all do. But like the others, it's doubly framed. First with the edge of the picture itself, but then with the frame of the bus seats that like some canyon walls allow us but a little entrance into the face on the other end of our tunnel. It is that enclosure that intrigues me. And the face that smiles so slightly and hides so much on the other side. I don't know the photographer this time, but I think I know the student. It's Nate, I think. But it could me nearly anyone. The photograph is so dark, so unprofessional. And so full of mystery. For we need to hide, especially in high school. If we showed too much of our emerging inner selves, how could we keep those selves growing? Too much light, as in too much light from the camera here, would cover it over, maybe burn it out through too-ready exposure. Here it is as if Nate's face has emerged from within the walls of the vinyl bus seats themselves... come alive, born out of sameness and stoicism to open a sad and wondering eye. He could almost be a child, given the way his body is hunched down. It's quite unclear how tall he is. I happen to know he has just recently taken his first car drive by himself after receiving his license. But he could be nine or ten years old here. He could be forty. If the other photographs here lead us down, or in, out, or through, Nate's bus portrait suggests emergence, an opening if enigmatic face first meeting our eyes on the other side of the viewing lens.

***

There are other photographs that draw me in, that make me suppose a good deal about the photographer's intentions and choices, that make me wonder what they themselves might have momentarily intuited in choosing that angle, that subject, that entrance into the world. And as with so many others, it is, again, the very roughness of these shots that makes me rise to this speculation. I believe there is rich poetry buried here. Perhaps too buried (as the resulting poems eventually showed). Yet still, at least to me, representing the kernel of new, emerging vision.
c. Problems with Bland Seeing
(Weaknesses with the assignment)

All of the above might be summarized by saying that these photographs, like their poems, have strong elements of physical/ body awareness, playfulness and twinges of metaphoric meaning. At least I could see those qualities within them. What I was less able to do, it seems, is to get them to see the poetic qualities in their own visual work on the last two days of my writing time with them when we arranged about 100 photographs on the floor and had them invent the poems within these scenes. Interviewing students after the project was over confirmed my suspicions: they found it harder to write about these photographs because they knew the subjects so well. Often when the wrote they chose the pictures they themselves had taken, so of course they were less able to step out of the scene and be inventive. I choose to believe that explanation for the blandness of their first poems about these, rather than to conclude that the photographs had no poetic potential. Rather, it was the set up that resulted in far less intriguing poems than any we'd gotten all quarter. Where they made strong metaphorical meaning from the paintings at the museum, and playfully surreal images from the slides of Magritte, Homer, O'Keeffe and others that we showed in class; where they constructed compelling physical worlds
from the black and white photographs of local history, here they went nearly entirely abstract.

A single example will stand for nearly everything written on this day. I'll have to say that without the title and the mention of books in the second line, I would have no way of picking out this photograph from the 99 others laid out on the floor that day...

**In Between the Books**

I'm hiding from the realm of society, in between two books.
I'm still judged.

---

Figure 7.22  Terry Hermsen, “Books on the Wall”

I see my faith or some of it.
It sees what I think is me.
But it doesn't see what is really me.  
The walls and the people are no different.  
Someone is caring for me for I cannot go it alone.

I don't know the way but it knows me  
for it has seen me many times before.

If these walls could talk that's what they are supposed to say but they won't say it.

All I know is the way.  
I'm to the point where I don't care.

Whew... coming from Ben Vail, who had written so insightfully at the museum and about time in the photograph of the history pageant the week before, this poem is especially disappointing. It's almost like his last line has bled all interest from the rest of the poem. Or rather that the poem itself grows out of a deep lack of interest. I know from the exit interviews that Ben had gotten a lot out the poetry this semester, so why this empty poem here at the end? If it were the only one, I'd chalk it up to his mood that day, but no... nearly every poem written was as flat as this.

Let's look at it briefly, perhaps to find hints as to why it's so weak. First of all, the scene is too loosely defined. Who is hiding? Where? If it's between the books, how are we supposed to picture that? As being squished? And why or how is he or it "still judged"? By whom? For what? Is the speaker a book himself? How can he "see" his faith or some it? What IS really me? Is this some sort of play on not
judging the book by its cover? Who is caring for him--and how--in his life as a book? None of these questions or possibilities is answered or explored. The whole poem is filled with "it" and "its" and "that's" (six instances); bland and passive verbs (seven instances of "is," "am"; four instances of the verb "to see,") with the only other verbs being "hiding," "judged," "know," "say," and "care" (all bland verbs that make nothing happen). All is kept so vague that we as readers are not made to care either.

Once again, maybe I left students too much to their own devices, thinking that this late in the semester, with so much experience behind them, they would find their own way. Not so. Unlike the history-photograph lesson, the ideas I presented for them to pick up on didn't catch. This time I think I gave them TOO MANY choices and they ended up going a generic route, with nothing inventive to prod them into new territory.

I suggested, for instance, that they take on the voice of someone or something in the photograph. I listed on the instruction sheet ideas like:

Be a person in it...
Be an inanimate object... or part of the place...
Be the photograph...
Be the photographer...
Imagine it as a memory of yours, or a place you'd been but forgotten.
Other options were to:

1. Write an ode to something in the photograph.
2. Write a poem of poetic commands to things or people in the picture.
3. Imagine you're writing a novel and this is one scene in the book.
4. Invent a little myth or a legend for what you see in the picture.

These and a few other suggestions appear to me now to be too generic and misdirected. No wonder the students went blank! There was just not enough to go on here, hard as I had tried to give them a wide range of choice.

What also happened is that the students skipped past the photograph itself and went straight into some abstract world within the photograph, forgetting to physicalize their seeing, to build it from the actual relationships within the view. I should have had them list details, metaphors and possibilities first, the way I had with the history photographs. Without such a brainstorming encouraging them to look closely, they made the common mistake of assuming they knew this world. The "strangeness that is our lives," so strong in my reading of these snapshots, could not come through.

4. Efforts at Revision
   (Mixing prose seeing with poetry)

Well, what to do? I went home stewing that evening, having realized already, glancing through the poems done early on, that something was missing in the assignment. Maybe it was Jill being away at a conference. They (and I)
depended so heavily on her to give them inspiration and guidance--maybe without their mentor they were creatively lost. Partly so. Yet clearly we couldn't drag her back from California at this point.

The (or possibly "a") solution didn't occur to me till my drive back the next morning. I'd spent the night--and a good part of the early morning--mulling over possible correctives. One would be to forget about the photographs altogether and just do one last fun exercise to end on. Yet we'd invested so much time in these pictures, how could we let them die without another attempt to dig below the surface of this known-world? Finally, I realized a missing link when I muttered to myself: "They would have done better if they'd just written prose!" Aha--I thought--the missing part was in not doing the image journals we'd planned early on to assign. Without enough chance to write about images ahead of time, they didn't have the natural skills to absorb the specifics of each picture and THEN jump to the possible personal or poetic meaning.

When I arrived, I was as honest as I could be without crushing their feelings. Something had just not worked, I said, good as the photographs were. I wondered if by going back to the pictures themselves and exploring them with prose this time, some new angle might emerge which might be added to the first draft. What resulted was our first
successful effort in revision ... and a good number of much stronger poems. What a stunning shift! From a day of weak poems, we found that by writing prose studies of the photographs first, much stronger poems could emerge!

Here's an example, done by Ben Vail, who had written the generic and abstract poem above. It's not exactly a revision, as he started with a brand new photograph, but he seems to be tackling something of the same feelings. Only now he has found an inventive way of getting at those feelings--through metaphor, inventive play, and attention to physical detail. He is writing about a photograph that I took of a wall outside the math room with algebraic figures painted around the doorway, a photograph where the shutter didn't fully open, so there are shadows closing in around the numbers...

I see a blurb of math. A wall with writing about math. A wall that tells you how to do math. But some of it is absent. Like it felt today. That part of the wall declined an interview. That part of the wall didn't feel like watching again today without doing anything about what it sees so it stayed home sick. Or maybe the taker of the picture was hiding. Hiding somewhere in the big shadows of two upper classmen, in between them, snapping a shot of something it is not allowed to see like a paparazzi or media journalist. Seeing something it is not allowed to see. Something called knowledge. It goes to school because it has to. It wants to learn, but it has to fit in. School doesn't teach it but school impairs its learning ability.
What a stunning monologue to come from a flawed photograph! Here is the "I'm to the point where I don't care..." emotion of his poem from the previous day, but filled in with a "painted" scene and much fuller speculation. When I look again at the photograph he was writing from, I can actually SEE it from his point of view. The "complex interplay" between image and text that WJT Mitchell talks about has come into operation here. Ben has put himself right there,
in the photographer's place, and at the same time invented a little myth that digs into the whole nature of the school experience. A jaded myth, admittedly, but a compelling one.

What is the difference between Ben's first writing and his second? Perhaps we'd come to rarify "the poem" too much by this point, forgetting to look closely at the subject at hand. Perhaps photographs and other images supply too ready a way to construct a poem, without close attention to the details in the visual image first, so that the prose writing was a way for many of the students to really look.

Certainly Heather's two writings would warrant such a claim. Here is what she wrote on the first day, about a photograph of criss-crossing clouds patterns in a late evening sky:

*My eye is drawn*  
*Past the delicate silhouette of the trees,*  
*Past the obvious.*  
*To the depths of never-ending sky.*  
*Soft grays and blues,*  
*Complimenting the orange of a setting sun.*  
*Cream clouds carefully painted*  
*Crossing each other on the canvas of the cold sky*  
*In brush strokes so thin,*  
*So precise,*  
*So vivid.*

To whom shall I credit this masterpiece?
There was no kind way to tell Heather how bored I was by this poem. Admittedly, it's tough to write poems about sunsets without invoking the usual cliches, but just naming the colors and calling the sky a canvas does so little to capture the majesty we often feel when looking at such a sky, or in this case a photograph of such a sky. Yet look what she does when she just writes a straight series of observations about the photograph as such--what she likes about it and what it reminds her of:

I like how the clouds criss-cross in the sky
It seems like a child's game
of tic-tac-toe
Suppose someone has sketched these lines
across the sky
I like how the setting sun looks golden
against the cold gray sky
It seems like there is chilled breeze
cutting through the trees
How did those clouds get there?
Suppose an airplane left them,
reminding all who gazed into the sky
that they too could fly.

What I like is how honestly Heather has expressed herself here, going straight to the photograph itself rather than to some code book of cliches of "how to look at a sunset." The tic-tac-toe reference is accurate—the first specific thing, besides generic colors, that she had written about the picture yet. And in the prose version even the colors gets more precise: the golden sun against the cold gray sky. She speculates on a chilled breeze, which again makes THIS day at least somewhat more specific than the earlier version. And then she comes more touchingly to her question about authorship, by simply asking, "How did those clouds get there?" She herself may have preferred the question of "To whom shall I credit this masterpiece?" I would guess as much, as she asked for this first version to be included in the booklet, rather than her prose revision. But I have to disagree. As with many of the students on this second day of writing from their "photographs of now," the prose takes on their own seeing process far outweighed their attempts to go straight to the poem.
e. Alternative View: Three Other Examples

After writing the above, I looked back at the poems again. And something changed. I still agree that overall the poems are weaker, indicating an inability to "engage" with the photographs in powerful ways. And yet... I ask myself... isn't there something more here than I at first realized? I consider, for example, Tressa's photograph that she took of her family's construction work on her new addition. Even the photograph itself has more intrigue than I was at first thinking. Look how the plank floats off into nothingness, how the crossing boards form a bit of a vague other world for the poem to ride in:

Construction

The narrow pathway goes into the night.  
Sitting there at the beginning of the path  
Wondering if I should go and find where it leads.

Suppose it doesn't go anywhere.  
What if it kept going?  
As I walk down the shaking board  
I listen to the tip tap as the board keeps rocking.

This poem comes from "going back" to the work on the second day, where I asked them to remember "supposing" and the senses to get back at what they at first felt in the picture. No, it's not a "great poem." Tressa had written very little of interest the whole semester. Yet isn't she here, at least to some extent? Can we not feel the board
Figure 7.25  Student photographers, “Construction” / “Piano”
shaking as it wavers out into that darkness? It makes me want to reconsider my remarks above. To read these poems more closely tied to the learning process that they represent.

There are others as well. Brian's poem on the field, and Shelby's poem on the donuts, which I will discuss in Chapter Eight. For now, let me comment briefly on three more. First, there's Ashley Slone's, a student who had nearly been missed by me, so uninvolved with the class she became. Her poem below captures some of that boredom she must have felt (that maybe she feels in all of school). Yet at the same time she has at last taken that pervading emotion and done something with it...

I sit in class  
bored and tired  
waiting for this boring  
day to be over

I stare out the window  
at the same thing every day  
It's always going to be there  
and I know the others are staring too.

It changes with the seasons  
bare, full, colored, green, covered, white  
all the same to me

No matter if it's full and bright  
orange and red  
or bare with nothing but branches

It always has the same beautiful shape  
but soon it won't be there  
they want to tear it down  
and put in something new
Although, by then, I won't be here to stare anymore.

"Wow!" I said to her, when she showed it to me. "THIS is your best poem." Intriguingly, it's a poem about boredom! Her first draft was meager--about half this length. It was only by pressing on, by carrying out the emotion, the way Ben did with his math poem, that something true rung out. There's a poignancy by the end that is palpable. Almost a regret. Almost a memory worth remembering.

Bethany's poem about this simple picture of piano keys makes me rethink my judgement here too. For she has become able to do what I was hoping the rest would do as well. Her
skills have advanced to a point where she can see a poem in ANYTHING, not just in well-done paintings and photographs. So many of the kids take music lessons--this photograph is an attempt to "come at" that experience, to did at it over again. As is Bethany's poem:

Piano

Gentle skin stretched across my surfaces
Light, breezy tunes drift through the air
An F# - whoops
Start again.

The song sounds like a light breeze on
A humid, sweltering day;
A quick ballad
Plays around.

See? What else can I ask? I can judge these poems--or I can love them. The same way I feel about their photographs. Let them be what they want to be: little commentaries on a world that these kids know. With, as in this one, just the right touch of reverence mixed with casualness. Here, the words are so pruned that the "quick ballad" of the photograph, the poem and the imagined song blend into one.

Finally, here's Sara Long's "Aging." It approaches a photograph of the back wall of one of the downtown stores. Nothing terrific. Just a "fact" anyone downtown would pass by every day. Here is Sara--again on the revision day--re-touching that wall, wondering what this place could mean. Does it compare to the barber pole poem she wrote in that actual location? At this point, I don't know. I only know
she's reached back into the world we glossed over on the first day of writing about these photographs--and touched something real...

Figure 7.27  Terry Hermsen, "Old Wall"

Aging

Old, grey, ugly
The once new bright orange brick
is now old dull and grey
What's left of the orange color
finding its way back to how it was.
But fails.
It's like the sun peeping out on a cloudy day
But like a cloudy day
the grey will eventually take over.
As I walk up to it

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I gently put my hand on some of the grey.
I pull back as if I just touched a hot stove-
grey just marked my hand like it did on
the wall...

Oh... I'll take it. I'll touch that wall with her, and leave
my doubts behind. Maybe I just wanted these poems to be so
much more than at this point in the semester they COULD
be... More than the photographs themselves would allow. But
to hear that "quick ballad," to touch this decaying wall, to
stare with Ashley's intense boredom and realize that even
this world too will pass and we will no longer be there to
stare... that may be enough. It wasn't great photography we
were after, or great poems. It was a bit of a view on what
it would mean to look at the world with engagement. Which is
what these poems offer me.

Summary: It may be that by this time in the
semester, we were worn out. Maybe we'd done
too many of the same kind of poem. They had
shown off brightly when they wrote about the
history photographs. It was hard to come up
with another approach that would vary the
assignment and yet get them to take on fresh
viewpoints. The more likely explanation for
the weakness of the writing here is the one
that came out of the post-residency
interviews: there was just not enough "wiggle
room" to invent within these snapshots.
Walking downtown, they said, multitudes of
"views" called out to them. One had the
choice of what links to make, what strands to
connect into a full poem. With the history
photographs, there was always the information
to draw on, and the little "suppose" angles I
encouraged them to invent. Here, unless one
was able to leap strongly into supposing, the
way Shelby did (see Chapter Eight), it was
difficult to invent an intriguing "world
view." A strong photograph may be one that encourages multiple views, with a subtlety that lets a range of voices in. These may have been just a little too flat for our skills. Better to write "straight" about what one sees--and build the poem from a strong engagement of emotion.

Alternatively: There is more going on in these prosaic poems than meets the eye. Another half of me wants to read them all over again. To take these photographs back into their world and walk around it with new eyes. The prose writing certainly helped, adding yet another layer to what we were learning about shaping a more engaged world view: sometimes we just have to "go at things straight" to get to the metaphorical or the playful. These two sides of things might not be so divided as we think. In some cases we may need to go through the prosaic or the factual, the discursive and the just-plain-presence of something to draw out for ourselves the more playful or rich associations.
CHAPTER 8

ACHIEVING A MORE ENGAGED WORLD VIEW--

AN ANALYSIS OF SIX LEARNERS IN THE ARTS

ABSTRACT: The vignettes that follow pinpoint the gradual growth in six students over the course of the semester. Each seemed to achieve a kind of "engaged world view" in their own very idiosyncratic manner. Jordan, for instance, forged his own style early, the lessons seeming almost tailor-made for his sort of inquisitive, metaphoric mind. On the other hand, no one would have predicted that Shelby would have gained anything substantial from the experience, if we'd have stopped after the first four weeks. She represents a quite other style of learner in the arts, one who had to break away from pre-conceived notions of "what a poem is" and just begin looking directly at the world (in this case, in the form of photographs) in order to discover her own voice and perspective.

Emma, the second student represented here, took her own trajectory, never quite fulfilling her writerly goals, except in a few key moments. Nevertheless, I came to believe she achieved something magnificent: a deeper conviction than she'd ever had before that thinking widely mattered, was worth taking risks for. That she was not able to fully achieve the grandeur she would have liked to hardly matters (she's only in 10th grade!). I think, based on her comments and the persistence she brought to her writing, that she deepened in herself a "world view" that will not be easily shaken. Maybe her strongest "poem," in fact, is a photograph she took of her pet canary, expertly "caught" in the cross-hatchings of its cage (see my commentary on her photograph in Chapter Seven/Lesson 14).

Like Jordan, Shelby and Emma, each of the students whose portraits-as-poets I paint here is a "whole story" in themselves. Yes, we can draw out certain insights which might be applicable elsewhere. But, for me at least, it is the individual story that matters. Together they show what
can happen when a class of students grapples in depth with the techniques of an art form over an extended period of time, mixing in a variety of approaches that pull on the strands of metaphor, that emphasize contact (both imaginative and actual) with the physical world, that give permission to play again, taking on roles and juggling the "common" order of words, and--perhaps most importantly--that cross the line into close attention to visual imagery, mixing the linguistic side of consciousness with the silent world of art.

No one exercise touched off the same response in each student. Indeed, these students are remarkable for their resistance to easy categorization. If they could "speak" as one, it would be in the form of a symphonic unit, one a cello, one a trumpet, one a slow bass drum steady in the background, each showing the potentiality for art to move us in ways we can hardly pin down, but which we can experience, once the poem begins to speak.

8.1 Nate Smith: Poet as Lawyer

ABSTRACT: This is a study of one student who made use of metaphor and role-playing in quite his own way--not for the finesse of the poem, but to build a larger conceit of meaning and approach to life. Thus, though it wasn't exactly a poetic achievement that he made over the course of the semester, it was an intellectual gain. I believe he came to see the value of poetic technique for achieving his own ends.

a. The Habits of Daily Conversation

Nate is an intriguing case--a student who cares deeply, listens well, yet frequently doesn't get out of ordinary thinking in his poetry. At the same time, I can honestly say I learned as much from Nate as from anyone. Because he listens so well, we had a kind of ongoing conversation from the very first day, when by chance I sat behind him during my time of just "being there," getting to know the classes and listening to discussion. He and two of his friends from childhood--Ben Vail and Phil Shipman--sit in a little
triangle at one end of the room, often kibitzing during discussion, talking about their recent golf games, but knowing just how to "keep it down" low enough to not disturb the direction of the class. Still, it seems they spend about 80% of class time comparing NFL football scores from the night before, debating NFL vs college, etc. When they found I played golf all through high school, I think I was raised up a notch in their minds. Finally tackling the assignment—to write one sentence that speaks of a relaxing time, in the manner of Harper Lee's, they put the most minimal effort into it, something on the order of "having great times in the backyard." IMMEDIATELY I saw what we were up against, Jill and I. Not only huge generalities that stand for significant events (metonymy at its most ingrained), but really a lack of effort. It's so much easier to tag on the generic phrase "great times" than to bother to recall those times.

I asked them: "What kind of great times? Whose backyard?" Reluctantly, they started to get specific. "In Ben's backyard." "Oh, where's that?" "Not far from school." "What do you do there?" "Fool around and stuff." "What kind of stuff?" "Oh, you know..." (By now I was near exasperation. It's been years of training to get this far toward non-committal language. How could I ever drag them out of so deep a hole?) Eventually I found out that Ben's
place is great because he has the biggest yard, because they can hang out in the basement when it's hot (with a pool table, no less) and because they've had years of backyard games. I asked them at last what might make this yard different from any other--and they finally give me a specific: there's a large oak tree in the middle that becomes a stationary blocker for both sides--since they can run their plays around it--as well as an extra defenseman, since its long branches often knock down even the best passes. Most interesting of all: they tell me the story of
throwing the football at a huge wasp nest that formed in the tree one summer and the resulting stings when one pass finally knocked it down.

Throughout my time the **fight for specifics** will be the largest struggle, with some students quietly protesting that emphasis ("why can't we just write what we want?" becoming a code for not having to dig down into details). But that open discussion on the first day with Nate and his friends stands as a pivotal moment in my understanding of what we'd be after. Call it "connection with the physical," call it a continual practice in being able to shift levels of the mind, from the coded meaning ("great time with laughter") back down to the source (the football hitting the wasp nest). This was their yard, their space. A place where they get to practice showing off for girls (Ashley on one side, Jessica on the other) whose yards "serve as ball returns," according to the poem Phil will write later. It's a place of "given meaning" and therefore most difficult to unpack. We live *within* such places--we don't step out and analyze them. Ah, there's the rub. This shifting of levels--the play within levels that Huizinga speaks of (see Chapter Two)--may well necessitate awakening new passages in the brain.

Or so it would seem, based on Nate's struggle with the writing. *The greatest thing about Nate is that he came to recognize this struggle.* In contrast to Phil, who only
seemed to get more and more frustrated and more and more entrenched in his way of being, and also to Ben, who was able eventually to overcome this problem through sheer mental play, Nate stood in the middle, not able to take great leaps but aware that such leaps were necessary if anything resembling a meaningful poem or thought was to result. And for some reason, in contrast to Phil, he seemed to care. Maybe that caring came from his basic good nature--of all of the students in both classes, he was the one most likely to respond to questions that either Jill or I asked. Maybe it's the phase of his life he's going through. All three of these friends seem to be taking new turns--or at least Ben and Nate are. Ben has formed a serious romantic relationship with Bethany. Nate seems to be blossoming with IDEAS (I know nothing about his dating life). Late in the semester, for instance, when they chose topics of debates, Nate decided to argue AGAINST the death penalty, in sharp contrast to so many in the class. In addition, Nate's driving now--and he seems to be looking ahead to adult life with a level of seriousness some of the less mature boys in the 10th grade are not.

b. The Will To Change

Intriguingly, here's what Nate wrote during my second assignment ("My Mind Is Like..."):
My mind is like a thick cement block
not easily changed or manipulated
My mind is like my mother
always getting ignored when it gives me orders...

The spirit of play is not so great here as the spirit of honesty. To know one's mind this well at an early age is actually a plus, even if one has to admit that MOVING it is no easy task. Still, the image itself (of the concrete block) is a stiff one. It would predict the kind of struggles Nate would go through in the weeks ahead. Where Brian would write:

My mind is like a hole. The more that is taken away, the more it grows

showing a level of sophistication even he might not fully understand, or Lauren, with confident ease could proclaim:

My mind is like a restaurant,
Always serving me something new...
Open twenty-four hours

Nate imagines himself hunkering down in a mind that won't do much, though there may be a bit of dissatisfaction with that lethargy.

Call that lethargy the plainness of metonymy, the same sort of dryness we've seen elsewhere. The stalwart plodding that gets the point across but fails to move us or intrigue.

Here's Nate in one of the early persona assignments, taking on the voice of Atticus after he rests his case:
I'm sort of anxious, ya know?
I've never been...
I've never been so anxious awaiting the
verdict of a trial before.
Could I possibly have done it?
Could I possibly have made the jury of 12
white jurors believe the story of a black man
over that of a white one?

It's not that he doesn't care about this moment. He was able
to give a compelling performance of Atticus's final speech
for his project at the close of the book--one that Jill
refers to as a high point in the semester. All were very
moved. And yet, he cannot place his own writing in that same
moment. He tells us only the most ordinary stuff--"I'm
anxious," "I wonder if I've done it..."

All the more powerful then when he is able to come up
with these lines for the "Suppose" exercise:

Suppose stampedes were clumsy
Suppose laughter had a temper

Suddenly a kind of insight has emerged from sheer play.
Stampedes ARE clumsy... but who would have thought of that
before? And who hasn't heard a bit of anger in some sorts of
laughter? PLAY with sound (the m's and the s's of stampede
and clumsy / the -er sound of laughter and temper) seems to
have broken him out of plain thought.

Even Nate was struck when he heard me read those lines
back the next day! I remember him looking up in surprise and
saying, "Hey--those are MY lines..." That's where I see his caring come through. He recognizes when something has flair now--and is happy to see it, even in his self-described "concrete block" mind. Some of the other students, I believe, merely gave up--and invested less energy--when their poems didn't hit the kind of flair they saw others able to achieve. Nate kept at it.

At the close of the quarter, during our interview, to jump ahead a bit, Nate had similar problems responding to paintings. As I will discuss in Chapter Nine, he saw other students around him making incredible metaphor-leaps into the paintings, and commented in a quiet tone of frustration, "I can't DO that..." And he was right: when he talked about Maxfield Parrish's glowing "Autumn Evening," he could barely speak of more than its peaceful feeling, and did not use a single metaphor in trying to get at the source of this response. Yet again, he didn't give up. He merely made the observation of the differences in their seeing-into-the-depths (via metaphor) and his own. Again, he KNOWS HIMSELF, but through the quarter came to see his own lack and the efforts he might put into deepening his thought process.

c. Metaphorical Conceit and Visual Experience

Nate's strongest full poems came within the next two sessions, both, intriguingly, after his "Suppose"
breakthrough. **And they came, most intriguingly, from connecting to physical and visual experience.** As is clear from his Atticus poem above, projection is hard for him to do. But out on the streets of Mt. Gilead, something happened... and I think I can pinpoint the exact spot where it did. We had just re-entered the bus that rainy morning. He'd written a few details on his note sheet and was beginning his poem. By chance, I was sitting in the aisle across from him, also looking around, thinking where to take my own poem. We both looked up at the same time and noticed a woman in a purple shirt and black gloves talking to a man beside her and gesturing. Maybe it was the color of the shirt that first caught our eyes. It was a chilly morning, as we both knew, and a person without a coat stood out. Then it became clear that she was gesturing in order to give directions to the man beside her who owned the truck in the parking lot beside the Cornerstone Cafe. Nate and I smiled at each other, perhaps because of the shirt, perhaps to recognize her kindness in coming out of the restaurant coatless to help a guy in his way. Anyway, the little observed moment found its way into his poem that morning:

*Car parallel parked on the street
one of which is missing its headlight
Pediddle!*

*The traffic lights controlling the movements of the cars, dictating their next move
To my left, Cornerstone Cafe is a small community in itself, with its morning regulars*
A kind stranger helping a lost truck driver
find his way
Hey! I need help finding my way too
Lost, not knowing which path to take next
almost wishing I had someone to
point out all the right choices to make
sort of the way the traffic light
points out to cars their next move.

*Note: "Pediddle" refers to a custom in the
area where the first person to see a missing headlight gets to either kiss or punch the one sitting next to him.

Nothing too stunning here. No strong description. (He even misses putting in the purple shirt!) But I love the way he has made something of a triangularization of the traffic light, the woman giving directions, and himself. I would guess it's all tongue-in-cheek, at least partly. He's not really asking for directions. He says he "almost" wishes for that kind of help. Still, there's a longing here for a sort of connection and assistance. A recognition that it's not all that easy to grow up. As I said earlier, Nate has just entered the driving state of adolescence, so perhaps his eye was drawn to the stop-and-go nature of the traffic light. But he knows life isn't as mechanical as all that and his poem probes that irony. Without the verbal flair of his "suppose" lines, he exhibits here a kind of intellectual flair and playfulness. Guide me! Let life be this simple! Somehow I think he knows he's not one of that small community of cafe regulars. He has a life before him filled with more choices than sunny side up/ hashbrowns or sausage.
Tellingly, it was LOOKING that made this happen, the three-directional ability to sit on that bus and observe until ideas came together. Again, this is not a flashy poem, maybe not even a memorable one, but for Nate it was the grandest of steps forward into letting the world at large into his writing and his thought. I wrote to him in a comment on his paper that he has a "logical mind," one able to more fully grasp intellectual metaphors than descriptive ones. And that this was not a bad thing--that it might serve him well when he entered a real courtroom some day.

The last major breakthrough of that kind for Nate came a couple of weeks later at the Columbus Museum of Art field trip. He'd been given a tour of various pieces in the museum, including Mel Chin's installation piece, "Spirit." Perhaps recalling his "best move" from the bus, he once again made a kind of "leap to a grand concept" to see what can be done. If there's anything he accomplished in our time, it's that: the use of a guiding conceit to give shape to his thought (again--perhaps not a bad trick for a potential lawyer). But I like as well what he does here with the projection of himself into the work. He is more than "Nate sitting on a bus," or "Nate of the concrete mind". He is "Nate the vision seeker" who can see inside of a huge, room-size barrel balanced on a rope of woven prairie grass:
Mel Chin, "Spirit"

I sleep,
I dream
as most men do
But I see things, visions
This mammoth barrel, it's filled you see
filled with the hopes and wants of all kinds of people, men, women, children
All their most secret wants are stored here
and I can see them
I can see them as vividly as the sky on a clear day
Sort of frightening when you consider it
We all want the same thing
Peace
We just have different views on how to get there
Now you must understand this
For true peace will never be achieved
until all of these opinions stored in this barrel are respected
My friends,
that is when we reach peace
Not from wars, but from finding a perfect equilibrium
And living in harmony

Well that's a lawyer's (or a preacher's) poem if I've ever seen one. It represents the four elements of play (in that he's become a seer--the one who can see inside); metaphor (certainly not in "on a clear day" but definitely in the overall moves of argument he makes); physicality (in the use of line breaks to shape the movement of the poem on the page--as well as the evocation of the barrel being FILLED with voices and desires); and visuality (in the sense of the whole idea arising out of Nate's visceral and visual response to Mel Chin' work). It has become a symbol, the way the traffic light and the woman in the purple shirt did. In both of his strong poems, metaphor, play, physicality and
response to the visual world have come together to make Nate a stronger, more engaged student of the world.

**Summary:** There is no one way to take advantage of these concepts, as Nate reveals profoundly. What it took for him was an open mind, some persistence, and an ability to know himself that allowed him not to fake making poems to please me, but rather to find a way for the poems to open up his own thinking process.

There may well be many students--particularly around sophomore year, when it seems a deeper kind of abstract thinking kicks in--who will struggle with making a strongly imagistic poem. Who veer away from ekphrasis and want to make grand insightful comments in the way Nate does. General as their thinking might be, WHAT IS CLEAR HERE IS THAT NATE WAS MOST ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE FRESH BIG-STATEMENT METAPHORS WHEN IN THE PRESENCE OF A PHYSICAL WORLD--the downtown area and the museum, the woman in the purple shirt and the huge statement of Mel Chin's barrel. Where Chin's work speaks loudly, so do Nate's two strongest poems. For students like him, being confronted with "living facts" may be the strongest route to awakening a sense of engagement.

### 8.2 Emma Wehr: Poet as Acrobat

**ABSTRACT:** Emma was quite the opposite of Nate: she was able to play with the poetry concept from the start, having a natural drive to look at things in intriguing ways. She's an acrobat of a writer, willing herself to not be ordinary. Yet there are times when she seems to stop her own progress--to try too hard. Oddly enough, she often made her best poems when writing a kind of prose journal, or else by not trying to write a poem at all, just playing the game, just making lines.

#### a. Of Rollercoasters and Gym Mats

Along with Nate, Emma is one of the sweetest students I've ever met. Does she have a built-in respect for others, a desire to please, or an inner sense of decorum which balks
against the chaos that many classrooms become? My guess is: all three. She is, as she says in the self-definition poem below, an observer, one who doesn't leap out for attention, but one who is always thinking, one I could count on for a thoughtful answer. Underneath her demure nature, however, there is something of a rebel, as several of her poems below will show. She admires the outlandish thought, the person who has found a different way of doing things. I think she would like to be even more courageous than she is--but my hope is that wish will be fulfilled in time, as she matures and enters into her own full individuality.

I have a poem exercise which Emma did on the first of school back in September, well before I arrived. While not the sort of poem I was teaching them, I can glean quite a bit of insight into how she sees herself from it:

I am...
A kid, running around outside, jumping in puddles
A gymnast, starting a running tumbling pass
A sister, going into her room to borrow clothes
A cheerleader, throwing people into the air
An explorer, finding a secret hiding spot in the woods
A driver, trying to impress my parents but always failing
An aunt, playing with my little niece on the floor
An instructor, teaching others my love of cheerleading
An observer, watching my cat chase leaves across the yard
A friend, listening to everyone's problems but keeping my own to myself

This, to my ear, is not a poem, but it illustrates the sort
of poetry students would tend to do on their own without much guidance. For some reason, they seem to veer toward "-ing" endings, often in a list format. Why does that pattern appeal to so many? I think because it's easy: it allows for quick additions without the kind of thought-reshaping a poem asks of us. They can say something with it without revealing too much. There are stories here, but not like the ones they told me on the first day (see Chapter Nine), when Emma wrote: "My dad had an accident falling asleep at the wheel when he was younger--and so he's really bossy to me when I drive." In even a small way, her second attempt to write about her driving frustrations carries so much more zip. There's an edge to that line which is missing in "A driver, trying to impress my parents, but always failing." The lines in the above exercise are all generic. They could be from almost any teenager. But to have a father who fell asleep at the wheel... that's the beginning of specificity and story.

The last two lines, however, begin to dig deeper. As I said, Emma impresses me as both an observer and a listener. And I think those two traits informed much of the strength of her later writing. In our later "My mind is like..." assignment, she wrote:

My mind is like a scuba diver, searching in the depth of a great ocean for the perfect thing
My mind is like a rose, it started off small and grew, with petals falling off as I lose ideas.

Can you feel the honesty here, along with the playful imagining? There's almost TOO much to handle in each thought. I can visualize Emma awash in some great sea, sure she's going to locate one clear object in all the confusion. It shows an awareness that we exist in a vast sea of otherness. To be driven, as she seems to be, requires immense concentration.

Ah--but the rose? Does she feel this old already? A rose that grew and now is only LOSING ideas? It's as is she were familiar with Plato's concept of knowing everything before and education being a process of remembering. Only she's reversed the idea: gradually losing what she once knew. That's the poignancy of Emma: she seems at times to be in the process of regathering a wonder which the world has perhaps tried to pull from her.

Perhaps I read too much into such short lines. Yet, as with others, such seemingly simple phrasing can be telling. So often the chosen image was the "right" one for revealing something important about the writer, as if it were in the nature of the physical image to hold our veiled selves.

Emma is quite conscious, however, of her drive to be more than ordinary. It shows clearly when she wrote her poem about "air," turning the exercise into an expression of her creed to be...
Going up into the air, I could feel my weight being lifted. Maybe that's what you feel like when you die, weightless, going up through the sky. But does it really matter? You won't know until it happens. Until then you are chained down by rules and what's right or wrong. What you should and shouldn't do. All the stress it causes. But for that 15 minutes I was free. I know there's more. It was just an attraction at Cedar Point, but for me it was much more. Knowing what birds get to do everyday. They don't have to deal with school, friends, family, but without those I guess life would be boring. Why? Why does it have to that way? A lot of people are closed-minded, everyone around me in fact. But there's a few exceptions to the individual. I wish there were more.

Is this more journal entry than poem? I suppose so. But I'm to the point where it doesn't quite matter to me. I come away MOVED, the way I'm not with her earlier writing. Yes, there's an over-reaching here to say "big things," as there is in so much sophomore writing. And yes, a subtler writer could have given us more of the scene and feeling of flying --and not just the idea. But for now, this is what she CAN do, and I'm up in the air at last, sensing as well that feeling of release from pettiness Emma so wants to leap beyond.

Perhaps the most telling moment in that wish to "see beyond" came on the afternoon of our field trip downtown, when we had stopped briefly at the cemetery for lunch, but had to get on the bus too quickly, after only a brief time to explore. When Jill counted the students, Emma was not there. So I waited--and eventually found her down near the
creek, looking for her grandfather's grave. Just like Emma, I thought, to be so lost in an activity, not sticking to the
time table. We walked back the short distance to school,
noticing the back sides of buildings as we passed through
downtown, remarking how beautiful they were, even in their
disrepair. It was just the sort of "other seeing" her
rollercoaster poem calls for.

Other moments stand out for me. For one, there was the
day when I wrote on the blackboard, "The Universe is
Playful." Of all the students in the room, Emma is the one I
most remember looking up at this point. And smiling. I think
that this is what she, like me, most wants to believe. For
though she is not always able to do so, her best images
reach upwards, while at the same time recognizing the
natural pull back down. I notice this in her riddle poem
about a sports action:

I stand waiting, like the race dogs anticipating
the right second to go, leaning almost toward
ready. Taking off like running the 100 meter dash,
waiting for the right moment. As my arms go up my
knee does also, like I had a puppeteer above me
commanding me to move. After my hands hit the
ground, my feet come around, over and over again
like a slinky going down a flight of stairs,
until finally feeling ready, my arms go straight
up, as if on a trampoline jumping as high as I
can, reaching for the sky. I turn and stand, with
my feet sunk deep in mud.

This too seems more like an exercise than a poem, much as I
admire the physicality in it. The turning, the push upward
and the pull back down. In not being entirely successful, it
tells me something Emma was not quite able to do with her poems: find the FORM to hold the complexity of her vision. What if she'd been able to shape this motion, sculpting it with more surprise? She wanted her poems to do so much, yet wasn't fully able to make that happen.

b. The Surrealists' Leap

Except twice--and oddly enough, in exercises that were not intended to produce full poems. Here, for instance, are the lines she wrote down during the "downtown game" that L block played that drizzly afternoon in October:

The petals fall on the glass as the summer fades
Clouds across the field lie on the bassinet

The mirror reflects the beauty on the other side
The water shows its beauty underneath

All day he sits watching the cat sleep on the washer
Wondering what house he's going to be at today
Hoping he's with his parents instead of the weird old people

Everybody knows the rain was once colorful
Everybody knows the clouds produced the light

Here she catches the wild leaping she seemed to be reaching toward in her other poems! So much joy, so much depth, so much humor and so much beauty! It's as if the whole world reflects each part of itself--the clouds in the baby's bassinet, the mirror inside the water, the "weird old people" in the baby's face. Here she is not TRYING to
connect things, merely recording the various things she saw around town in clever ways. And the LEAPS are happening on their own!

She does the same thing with her "images to respond to images" poem, when she wrote from the slides of paintings. As with others, maybe the surrealist images were so striking in themselves, she was able to "answer back" with the kind of "exceptions to the individual" lines she'd been seeking weeks ago:

1
When the Faith was gone, the pharaohs were buried. Deep beneath the great desert sand. Turned to stone.

2
Walking the slippery stones at dusk. The new grave resting underneath the tree.

3
What if the house were painted pink? Would the caterpillars still crawl to their window?

4
The black shadow gathered his belongings and traveled out of the classroom into a starry night.

5
The owl's gaze rested upon the baby mouse. As he swooped down from the clouds he grasped his prey scurrying across the mantle.

6
From the shore, the baby candles scurry toward protection, fearing a wave to put out their flame.

What's striking here? The whole thing. "The slippery stones at dusk" paired with "the grave resting beneath the tree."
The exact kind of tensive pairing that Wheelwright says energizes poems (see Chapter Two). And then there's the factor of invention, Emma adding to the Magritte house by having--so eerily--caterpillars "crawl to the window," though there's no mention of them in the painting. Her image becomes a playful, interpretative event and I see the glimmer of that house-in-the-tree that much more strongly. Each of her images suspends a dramatic tension--the shadow packing its bags; the owl swooping across the mantle, bringing the forest into the room the way Uelsmann's photograph suggests but which her poem fulfills; the candles with their urgent sense of danger. In a manner that reflects the nature of these surrealist works, Emma has found here a way for the world to take on an immediacy and a presence. The play of the child which she only mentions in her exercise from the first day of school has blossomed in this poem, like her rose, with new and unfathomable layers.

c. Finding the Image

Finally, let's look briefly at Emma's photographs. I analyze two of them in depth in Chapter Seven/Lesson 14, so I will only briefly recall them now. What strikes me now is that both are CHOSEN points of view. The first places us very directly below the cage, looking up to honor and admire the trapped and singular bird; the second secludes us within...
the garage to peer down the rain-soaked sidewalk. I think I
know Emma well enough to say that neither of these views
happens by accident. As in her two-line poems above, she
seems to have learned something about the condensed and
tensive power of the image to gain our attention and dance
within the world. We can DWELL in her photographs and in her
two-line mythical responses to the downtown sights she took
in, as well as those to the surreal photographs and
paintings. I don't know a stronger argument for concluding
that engaging the actual, physical and visual world--via
games and the CHOSEN seeing of the camera--can provide
students with the means to deepen their engagement with the
world.

SUMMARY: The lesson here is of one student
reaching for surprise in her lines and finding
it where she least expects it: in her engagement
of her "old hometown" in surprising, surrealist
ways, and of reaching deep into some visionary
and surrealist paintings to invent a hidden core
in each. Long dissatisfied--by her own admission--
with a certain "close-minded" attitude in her
circle of acquaintances, she shows that surrealism
can find a way to speak to the small town
experience, deepening without dishonoring it.

Tellingly, like Nate, only when she engaged the
physical, visual world this way, was Emma able to
fulfill the promise of her early poems, bringing
metaphor and playfulness to full measure. When she
was able to CONDENSE her normally prosaic
lines, Emma started to grab our attention. Her
story is a testament to the power of imagery--
poetic AND visual. The two "sides" seem to have
united for her, as the semester unfolded, into a
more engaged poem, a more engaged "view" on the
world.
When I met her again--five months later at a little "end of the year pizza party" I threw for the students--she admitted that her best poems were the two-liners I've quoted above. As to why that was, she commented, "I didn't care so much about those lines when I wrote them--I just put them down." That too says something about how students may need to "step around" their usually explanatory minds to truly experience the arts and the world around them.

8.3 JORDAN NELSON - Poet as Thinker

Abstract: Jordan stands out as the student who took what we did closest to heart. His face wrinkled visibly with interest at each new idea and within a quick amount of time (by Lesson 2) he had metaphor in hand--and could apply it seemingly at will. His work from that lesson on shows a unique combination of physicality dramatic flair, metaphoric aptness, and playfulness involving both role-play and word-play, responding equally well to mental, physical and visual imagery. He is, in short, a "thinking poet."

a. The Physicalization of Thought

When I asked Jill midway to get a sense from the students about whether they were worn out and we should pull things to a close, Jordan's was a deciding voice giving me the courage to continue. He told her: "I like how he makes me think..." Totally unpretentious, with no ulterior motive, he was just expressing something he was getting out of the poetry-writing time. With this and a few other comments in mind, I began to trust that there was more going on than the students were showing on the surface.

As his comment suggests, Jordan likes to grapple with ideas. Maybe it's because he has the TIME to think. In conversation once he told me about long summer days working
on his uncle's farm, waiting for the chance to DO something. His uncle apparently doesn't trust Jordan yet to take on the harder chores, and so does a lot of them himself. Sitting around waiting, Jordan uses the time to think. And it seems that time of generating ideas has paid off in an original spirit that makes him unlikely to buckle under to other people's opinions. He just speaks his mind. And he jumps into most assignments without question, knowing he will find his own way to get at the underlying possibilities.

Take for instance his lines on the first "official" day of poetry, using "My mind is like..." for a starter phrase:

My mind is slow like the snail that is bogged down by its worldly possessions.

My mind is a child - it only sees the obvious and leaves out the details for fear of pain.

My mind is cluttered like my room but I'm the only one who knows where everything is

My mind is sharp and swift but not always accurate as is the ax blade that pierces the cherry tree

Jordan taught me a lot with this response. Yes, I had said to "put a twist" on each line, so it's more than "My mind is slow, like a snail," but he actually DID that. And with such honest ease. This seems to be a poem from a mind that both knows itself well and is willing to play with options. I like the clever social criticism he packs into the second
part of his lines about the snail. Do our minds at times move slowly because of our worldly attachments? "Possessions" could be goods, but what are the mind's possessions? Might they be equally "Favor" or "Prestige"? His line leaves that open. It's self-critical but evocative all at once. As is his line about the child. On the surface, he doesn't seem to be a kid with a lot of pain. Yet this knowledge must have come from somewhere--a knowledge that we often don't "dig down into stuff" but say the obvious so as not to take things too deeply. These two lines in particular tell me that Jordan is a self-reflective person right away. Even as an adolescent, he appears to know the typical flaws of the adolescent mind: generality and a too-heavy emphasis on what people think of you. This expansive mental attitude lets Jordan step through situations that might fluster other people. He is able to PLAY with ideas precisely because he's not so terribly attached to his self-esteem that he fears taking a risk or two.

But there's another aspect of these early lines of his which impressed me: how PHYSICAL the thoughts within them are. Not descriptively so (that's not in the nature of the assignment) but essentially so, growing out of a sense of weight and motion and presence. Weight in the snail's possessions. Presence in the cluttered room--and in the "details" left out "for fear of pain." Motion in the axe
blade, which like his mind is "sharp and swift but not always accurate." Here his knowledge of physical activity has fed his thought process. Yes, it's nice to have an accurate mind, but just as a slightly inaccurate axe can still pierce the cherry tree, the mind that "comes close" can have some power, as Jordan has in this poem. Without background knowledge about cherry trees and axes, his poem would lose much of its imagery and so have nothing to build its insights on. But as it is, he does a lot in it to expand our sense of how a mind works. At least this mind.

So one might ask: did I really teach him anything, if he knew all these things from the second day? And the answer, honestly, is just a little. Perhaps the vehicle of the exercise, coupled with the two example poems (Ted Hughes' "The Thought-Fox" and Patricia Fargnoli's "How This Poet Thinks") which referred so heavily to rural knowledge, gave him a kind of permission to think this way, even if it's a way that comes naturally to him. Jordan kept at it, trying assignments, some less successfully than others, some with more attentiveness than others, often adding flourishes that said "the spark is burning in here," always with an open eye and a willingness to not do things the same way twice.

He caught, with his usual guileless honestly, his uncle's lack of trust in his abilities, in this poem from
the "earth water fire air" assignment (see Chapter Seven/Lesson 4). It is, I think, about earth and sweat. And frustration in not being allowed to grow in responsibility:

Watching Not Doing

High pitched repetitive call of the machine threatening, not warning.
Sizzling the sweat runs
pushing on in the desert.
Dry brown of the ground
the catalyst that pulls my eyes down
yawning for position.

There is again an economy of thought here. Each line is very physically based, evocative of the moment and the sensory experience of waiting in the heat. I'd like more explanation, I think, or at least some sort of reference to why his eyes are "pulled down," other than from being tired and hot and sweaty. If I didn't know the background about his uncle, I'd be at a loss to explain the last line. But even so, I'd be intrigued. This writing too is "sharp and swift," if not completely accurate.

b. The Power of Condensation

Jordan's mind is a condensing mind--and that too seems to run hand in hand with metaphorical insight. There's a tension in his best poems, a dramatic sense of consequence and decision which corresponds well with Wheelwright's explanation of how metaphor works (see Chapter Two). Take his lines from the day of "supposing," where he makes leaps
of political, emotional and existential power, all in the space of a few lines:

Suppose torture was common
as common as the beat of a horse's gallop
the gallop screaming darkening the night.

Suppose dictation was like the tick of a watch
with each tick it slashes your heart
no longer free.

Suppose you listen to the stroke of midnight
re-evaluating your place
clasping to something you thought you had.
Maybe we shouldn't suppose.

Jordan's mind knows something. Something "of the earth," to evoke Heidegger's terminology (see Chapter Three). Maybe because the earth for him is a known-place, and maybe because he doesn't idealize it--just knows it--he is able to place us within it. But how does he know about "far away" issues like torture and how common it is throughout the earth? His first stanza takes me to Angola, Soviet Russia, to homes of abuse all across America. And he appropriately, stunningly, connects that torture with the gallop of a horse, "darkening the night" with its passing. Had he written no other lines but these, I would still have been impressed with his ability to catch a phrase and turn it into metaphoric and social meaning. Of course he doesn't stop there, he captures something of the inner nature of "dictation" too. At first I'm thinking of secretarial dictation, then realize that the word is fiercer in its context here--the kind of "dictation" that won't let the
heart range free. The third stanza is vaguer, but following the first two continues to add power. The situation is more general now--we're often doing this, in all kinds of circumstances, evaluating who we are, and then, of course, evaluating our evaluation, as he does in his last phrase, "maybe we shouldn't suppose."

Jordan shows himself to have the kind of negative capability Keats spoke of--an ability to not make judgments so fast but rather to dwell within possibilities. He's not afraid to grapple with tough ideas. He doesn't make "the dark side," as in his suppose poem above, sound depressing or full of easy despair. He just makes it real. He seems to dwell within the possibilities of his poems. He shows this best in his "slow motion" poem about deer hunting. And of course deer hunting itself is a slow motion task, full of the kind of waiting and careful "phrasing" of position and approach Jordan reflects in his poems...

The deer walking with ignorance
sitting on the pier of the gullies
fearing its breath of smoke
not to see
I turn and its glory shines of the sun
taking the arrow out of the quiver
no longer feeble
but calm
I wield my stock
pointing, calculating, estimating
stomping at the earth
declaring supremacy
No hesitation
slicing through the air
gravitating towards the defenseless victim
the arrow races over the gully
in
slicing the maple color fur
victorious
Buzz, the morning traffic report blares in my ear

Line breaks... Suddenly I see Jordan's intelligent, intuitive sense of line breaks. All of his poems exhibit an internal, tightly compressed PLAY within the line that pulls the reader on. He must just sense this the way he senses the right point to let the arrow go. We've seen an internal power before, in the line about the cherry tree, where the words drive on with a force of accuracy and surprise. The same with "the gallop screaming darkening the night." Now there's even more pull BETWEEN the lines, as in "fearing its breath of smoke / not to see." I don't say that the syntax is perfect. Here the English student is tangling with the creator of visions, so that subject and object sometimes blur. Indeed it almost seems to me that Jordan IS the deer at times in the poem, sitting "on the pier of the gullies," watching for himself, or even "stomping the earth / declaring supremacy" (is that the deer or himself? I could see them both doing this at once). The line breaks and the confusions with punctuation make such multiple readings fun. Until, near the end, the arrow makes clear who is where, racing "over the gully / in / slicing the maple color fur." That's what I mean about playing with the line breaks. How does he know to place the word "in" on a line by itself? It
makes the previous line stick out like an arrow.

**d. Poem As Playground for Performance**

What I suspect in Jordan's writing is that the poem becomes a playground for performance, a nearly-physical engagement with words so that we in reading return to a thought or a scene and live it with presence again. Not that he's always in control of the full effect. Not that professional poets aren't aiming for this effect every time. But that in these first drafts he has a deep sense of what a poem can do, growing out of the elements of play, physicality and metaphorical envisioning.

Was he able to transfer this same intensity to writing from visual images? To some extent. Looking at a scene from the county's history of a covered bridge at the bottom of a sloping hillside, he once again condensed a full story into a few lines, evoking a dramatic presence.

**COVERED BRIDGE**

Walking in the sand covered pebbles  
milkweed dancing like it was Saturday  
Shade is creeping upon me  
The wind is cool and smells  
Clouds fixated to peak just over the trees  
furious with me I run  
calm in the pathway  
like it was looking for me as a mother would  
Escaping execution I leap into the dark arms of the bridge
Confusing as the scene is here, I love this poem. I like reading it a number of different ways. Potentially as an escaped fugitive seeking a place to hide. Or a kid playing hooky, pretending it's Saturday. Or just someone playing little games in his mind with the sun and the clouds. Give me a line such as "milkweed dancing like it was Saturday" and I'm caught up. As I am in the "clouds fixated to peak just over the trees." Is it "peak" or "peek"? He spells it the first way, but the ambiguity is intriguing. And even if
I don't know exactly who's speaking, I'm caught in a physicalized scene that makes an "event of meaning" out of what might be just a postcard scene from the past. That's Jordan's means of "re-engaging the world." I'm quite sure he always has had this ability, maybe going back to childhood games by the creek and on his uncle's farm. But that he's able to transfer it over into the play of black letters on a white page impresses me, and gives me hope that poetry might survive in him through the years to come--and that, more importantly, he will be that much more aware of his surroundings and his dynamic place within them.

In a small group debate over the efficacy of the then-proposed war in Iraq, he was the ONLY student on the pro-war side to toss metaphors into the discussion. Referring to a sign he once saw about standing up for what one believes in, even if all others are against you, he asked, "So even if France and all the other countries think we're wrong, does that mean we shouldn't do what's best?" In answer to the other side's contention would just make the Iraqis angry at us and hate us more, he suggested that the same thing would happen if a parent punished his or her child for stealing: there may be resentment, but that doesn't mean the punishment isn't justified.

I don't bring these up to say that Jordan was right, or even compelling, in his arguments. Only that he was
"trying them on," venturing into bringing metaphor into a non-poetry realm. There's much more to explore in terms of metaphor's ability to help us argue more effectively in social and political debates. For me, Jordan's effort in this realm shows me that, as a thinking poet, he was able to start bridging disparate realms.

Summary: Jordan exhibits a naturally physical mind-set. His poems come "all of a piece," with sometimes confusing or ambiguous punctuation. They are playful in that they are dramatic--as a reader one is launched often without realizing it into a dynamic, uprooted scene. As I say in Chapter Seven/Lesson 12, concerning his poem about Marsden Hartley's combat metals, he lives within moments, the way a good deerhunter must. He must simply be ready to try what he can.

How can a teacher evaluate the poems a student like Jordan writes? To pick them apart, sentence by sentence, might make them collapse. To ask him to go back and re-write one might, again, cause their intricate structure to unravel. Instead, I suggest valuing how his poems draw him more deeply into whatever he's writing about--visually, physically and intellectually--allowing him to be where he is, in a novel or a painting, in a memory of his own or the memory in a photograph. These are wonderful skills--the kind we (and he) might be able to apply to the whole of learning. I would concentrate instead on heightening these skills and showing him ways to carry such metaphorical thinking onward, linking the visual, the physical and the verbal.

8.4 SHELBY LOUIS: Poet as One-Who-Will-Not-Quit

Abstract: Novelist Ron Carlson has the phrase, "The writer is someone who stays in the room," meaning one-who-will-not-quit. Shelby might turn out to be such a writer, or at least such a learner. She blossomed about as slowly as one could imagine--and only with the
influence of her own subconscious (in the form of a wildly intriguing dream) and with the introduction of visual images as prompts did she grasp a handle on the playfulness of language and her own potential.

**a. The Insecure Learner**

For the longest time, Shelby struggled with the poetry. I remember calling on her one time to see what she thought of a particular poem and her replying, apparently shocked that I had thought she'd have an answer, "Oh--I just don't get poetry." Yet she didn't just shrug it off, the way some might have done, those few students in the classes who faded into the background, trying only a little, remaining invisible in the room (one gets pretty practiced at that disappearing act in school). Shelby, in contrast, struggled **visibly**. She would write at the bottom of her papers, in big letters: "Sorry this is REALLY bad!" or "OK this is really dumb - you won't want to use this." There seemed to be something of an inferiority complex showing up--or was it a call for attention? After the earth-water-air-fire memory assignment, where she had written about skating on the frozen cover of her swimming pool, I praised how specific her title was (it actually mentioned the pool cover!), yet her response was self-deprecating, along the lines of "ya, in a white trash kind of way." I was taken aback by such a weird comment. Only then did I remember that Morrow County and Mt. Gilead has a kind of "backward" reputation in the
surrounding counties (that was the message I got at the OSU-Marion campus when I taught there). I think it's common knowledge that not as many students go on to college. There is more rural poverty (trailers and the like) than in Marion or Delaware. Was she expressing a feeling that maybe some of the other kids had, a sense of the poetry being too sophisticated for them? At that early point, maybe she was not sure whether she could trust me very far (I'm guessing), as in: Can I write about pool covers--or other stuff in my actual life? Here's her poem:

[Ice skating on my pool cover in winter]

    liquid layers turn to solid
    thick and hard sheets of ice
    thin blades of steel slicing my surface
    moving back and forth in a continuous motion
    leaps and hard landings pound against my skin

Not a bad early poem, I'd say. Especially when I catch at last that she's writing from the point of view of the ice itself (I'd tossed that out as an option). In fact, I wish I could have gotten her--and everyone else as well--to write more imaginatively about these little things from their own lives. It's hard to consider such topics worthy, since they're so local and "ordinary." When Shelby wrote downtown on the field trip, she could only come up with the plainest and most generalized observations. She sat in the Cornerstone Cafe and wrote this:
There are still Christmas lights hanging droopily over the front walk in. The bricks on the outside look very old and seem like they could tell a story or two. Friendly faces of our elders walk in and out. Some are with friends, some are alone. They all seem so satisfied and happy. Whether it's the friendly old waitress who was extra nice, or if it was just sitting at the cute little rectangular tables set by the window sill with all of the fall decorations.

Everything is just so great in this little place called Mount Gilead!

"My gosh, Shelby," I might have said to her, "what boring writing!" But I didn't. I commented on the paper that the first two lines had a "wonderful focus" and gave "great detail--especially since it's October!" Then I suggested: "I wonder if: you started with those same first two lines and tried to make the rest of it as full of detail?" Of course she didn't, there being not enough time for rewrites in the semester plan. And she continued to struggle.

What we might have done, instead, is begin to ask: what is it exactly that makes this poem so bad, makes it not even a poem? For starters, the first two words, "There are..." They indicate no point of view at all, just an attempt to be generic and "objective." In contrast to writing from the point of view of the ice on her pool cover (or, as some others did, from the point of view of a cement step or a barber pole), she chose not to invest any particular twist into the assignment--and so, as Coleridge might have told
her, she produced only the average moves that Primary Imagination makes. Yes, there is a tiny flash of intrigue with the "Christmas lights hanging droopily over the front walk in." I love that phrase--"the front walk in," it being what we tend to call such places in the Midwest, not "vestibule," but "walk in." A straight-forward, functional name. And of course, the lights being up still in mid-October, not in anticipation of the coming holiday season but left over from the last. Yet she makes little of either of these flashes. She slides on over into ease: the bricks looking "very old" and seeming "like they could tell a story or two." Here I'm growing sleepier and sleepier. The cafe, which could have offered her so much particularity, here becomes anywhere-at-all.

And doing otherwise would have been such work. ARE there more than "friendly faces of our elders" seeming "so satisfied and happy" in this place? How would one tell if today "the friendly old waitress" was being "extra nice"? These are the struggles that everyone goes through living in--or trying to write about--such familiar territory. The window sill is full of "all the fall decorations" it was full of last year. I can sense that same frustration in myself. Even though others were able to break out of ordinary seeing on that same assignment--Corky with his bank-robbery fantasy, Amber up on the roof, Nate noticing
the purple-shirted stranger--Shelby typifies the group of students who did NOT take up my suggestions and just wrote what they would probably have done had they just gone there to write on their own.

Still, something must have been nagging at her. At the bottom of this paper she wrote something resembling the word "help" with four exclamation points surrounding it. Had I left then, after just three or so weeks at the school, I think Shelby would pretty much have given up on poetry, or her ability to break out of cliched phrases. Luckily we didn't stop. Nor did she. Out of a sincere conviction that she was "not getting it," given more time, she slowly began to settle in to a more engaged way of seeing.

b. The Entrance of Tensive Language
...and the Power of Food...

Maybe the turn-around started the next day at the grocery store. Influenced perhaps by Williams' terse language in "This Is Just To Say" which we'd read on the bus before heading into the store, she got the inkling of how a poem sounds into her head. Where Williams is crisp and sharp in each line, "I have eaten / the plums / which were in / the icebox..." she finds a way to cut away the extra "there are's" and "looks very's" of her earlier restaurant piece and cut to the chase, in a haiku-like style:
Ode to the Bakery

Friendly old ladies
serving hungry girls
giving extra rolls to please

*

Ode to Reese's Peanut Butter

Brown creamy peanut butter
rich with a nutty chocolate taste
smoothly plastered over a warm
piece of bread... mmm...

Ah: does it come down to play? Or is it food? Come to think of it, maybe there's not much difference for her. Food like this is something our society loves to play with. Go into an ice cream shop and note the multiple flavors (and alliterative names) of ice cream, or in the grocery, the constantly expanding array of snack food. It's not "real food," so we can spice it up with a "nutty chocolate taste."
The "friendly old ladies" have replaced the "friendly old waitress" from the cafe, but now they are doing something specific--"making a connection" with girls from the high school. (I found out later that Shelby and her friends had actually pled for extra helpings, given that they hadn't eaten breakfast.) With the slightest detection of a change in the writing here, there's the emerging sense of a voice, one closer to her own.
c. Resistance to Metaphor and Play

Despite these two sweet little poems about food (excuse the pun), looked at from the stance of the four components of this study, Shelby had gotten little from them up to this point. As I've pointed out, the physicality of her ice skating poem showed some promise, little more. And metaphor was almost non-existent in her writing. For the action-as-metaphor assignment, she'd written just these three lines, with the rest scribbled over: "I jump like a fox, and then scurry down like a squirrel. I stroll around searching for 'grub.' Then I groom my fur..." For "My mind is like..." she got down just these two bits, where others had often written a page:

   My mind is like a little pink bouncy ball
   ricocheting off a stone wall

   My mind is like a bug caught between the sides of a jar

I will admit that, like the other lines I've quoted from this assignment by other students, these four are perhaps accurate. Her mind may seem to her like something small bouncing off something vast and unmovable. Or stuck sometimes like a bug unable to move between walls of glass, unable to stretch very far, or play in the air the way fireflies do. Metaphor has yet to lift her out.

Play too has so far offered Shelby limited possibilities. With the "Suppose" assignment, designed as it
was to shake the writing out of prosaic ruts, she manages the most perfunctory and mostly meaningless associations:

Suppose you put the blender in the pineapple.
Suppose a kitten couldn't run.
Suppose kites jumped.
Suppose a bowl looked like a saw.
Suppose your grandma was a building.
Suppose your goal was to become a board.
Suppose your plastic desk collapsed.
Suppose your dog could laugh.
Suppose your shoelace was made from a gorilla's tooth.
Suppose popsicles were scattered inside flubber.

All I can say is: if the rest of the students had written similar things for the assignment, I would have considered the session a immense failure! These lines are not playful. They do little more than fill in the blanks. The only one that made us laugh was the oddity of "Suppose your goal was to become a board." It still causes a chuckle, inadvertently challenging us all to be something more than stiff. How many students in school have, without even knowing it, had such a goal? I have to believe that what kept Shelby going despite all these "failures" was some inner conviction, whether she knew it or not, NOT to become a board. Something kept nagging her to keep trying--and me to urge her on.

d. Enter the Subconscious: Shelby's Dream

Maybe it was something in her unconscious. A week or so after the field trips around town, Shelby came up to the front of the room before class. Students were milling around
in the usual way, off-handedly talking with Mrs. Grubb, or catching up with friends from the other side of the room. She seemed to want to tell Mrs. Grubb something important, but Jill being busy, she turned to me and said, "Oh, I might as well tell you, since you're in it." "In what?" I said. "My dream. You were the bus driver." And she proceeded in her flustered way to relay to me her dream from the weekend (I asked her afterward to write it down). She called it:

Shelby's Dream

We were going on a field trip to write poems about old buildings and I was trying to direct you (the bus driver) to my church. Well I kind of got us lost and we ended up on this road (near Galion) that my family and I take to get to my Grandparents' house. But at the intersection that we were at, there were two old buildings - one on each side of the road.

Well my parents were on the bus and they said that they owned this 'building/house' (which looked like an old school house, so my parents took me in it and showed me around. And the inside was a mixture of my aunt's house and an old Victorian house. So I decided to go around by myself and I managed to get downstairs and it was HUGE! There were like 50 'great rooms' and this bar (which I don't know why it would be there b/c my parents don't really drink) and all this other cool stuff. -Oh, and then when I went out to see the pool, the outside wasn't a school house, it was what a normal huge house would look like. (Yeah, and I don't know what happened to you and Mrs. Grubb and the rest of the class.)

I was stunned. And pleased. I told Shelby it seemed very Jungian, of course having to describe who Carl Jung was. I said maybe she'd run into him if she ever took psychology--
and that his theory of the collective unconscious might have something to say about her dream. I described his dream of seeing ancient Roman soldiers marching through his house, only to find out later that the house was built right on top of what used to be an old Roman highway. Here's what she wrote on the other side of her dream page:

So here are some possible 'reasons' why I had this dream:
1. I'm a big weirdo.
2. We have a pool (there was a pool in the dream - although it was like 10X mine) - and we are redoing one of our living rooms and adding on to our kitchen, garage, dining room and possibly adding a 'mud room'... So maybe this is how I want our house to turn out like? - I don't know.
3. What the guy you were talking about said... I think the answer is #1. ("")

Whatever the "reason" why she had this dream, something amazing had just happened. Maybe several things. First of all, she'd decided to trust me enough to tell it to me, even if I was second choice, after Mrs. Grubb. Secondly, she'd taken the time to write it down in some detail, way more detail, and much more interesting and direct detail, than she has in any of her poems (she'd told me she'd do it in math class, cause she never pays attention there anyway...). Thirdly, despite all her struggles with poetry, it indicates that below the surface a lot was going on. (There WAS. As I found out in the interviews, for instance, she'd felt really strange going into the Cornerstone Cafe--as if she was being
looked at--and so maybe hid behind the easy language of her little paragraph.) I took the whole incident for a sign that maybe much was getting through from the assignments that had to do with more than the "results" of the poems themselves, but was maybe encouraging the students to connect with things below the surface of the world they typically saw around them. If Shelby, who seemed to show so little on the surface of her poems, could be experiencing such a dream, maybe others too were getting more out of the time than I'd thought.

**e. Enter the Visual: Shelby Learns to Speculate**

Had Shelby written ONLY that dream during the time I was at the school, it would have been enough for me, giving me a sense that something vital had gone on which might prove useful to her in the future (if nothing else, for "finding that home" below the surface!). Thankfully, it wasn't the last of her successes. Soon after her dream, we began talking about images. And began writing about them. Looking back, there's a tiny bit more flair in Shelby's two-line images that she wrote from the slides. Though not always. About Winslow Homer's "Fog Warning," she wrote: "ruff deep waters smashing against a capsule / man against mother (nature), who shall win?" Totally generic and unimaginative. Tacks on terminology (mother nature) rather than evoking the boat. Then about Georgia O'Keeffe's "Pelvic
Series # 2," Shelby is more evocative:

\[
\text{Giant pool with sand stretching} \\
\text{with a never ending invitation}
\]

Couple that with her take on Aaron Douglas:

\[
\text{Great strength applied to the sun} \\
\text{reflecting off a little one's dream}
\]

and her questioning of the agricultural accuracy of Hopper's "Cape Cod Evening":

\[
\text{Fluffy wheat up the doorstep} \\
\text{so how far does the combine go?}
\]

and you have, I think, a shift in Shelby from someone seeing generically to a student able to "meet image with image."

I'm not sure exactly how "great strength [has been] applied to the sun" but I like imagining that it has somehow been formed from the reflection of a "little one's dream." Who is that little one? The figure at the bottom? It hardly matters. The originally of her stance is impressing me. As is her question about how they would harvest the "wheat" beside this farmhouse. I personally don't think it is wheat, but since she took it that way, the question becomes appropriate.

What happened next is that we put some photographs in Shelby's hands. I highlight that phrase because, while it might be too much to say that the "visuality" of those photographs triggered something in her mind, the real answer might be that the "handlability" of those photographs gave her a sense that she could connect with her environment more
than the work downtown had done--or anything else for that matter. It may also be that she finally got the point--that one could slow down the mind and "just look." As with her dream, she stopped worrying about what a poem was and began to write...

On the day of the Millers' visit, for instance, she took my suggestion of writing "three supposes," two questions, five details and two metaphors and tried to get them all in. Taking the photograph below as her source, her first version read:

What If
...the reflections on the new Chevy are foreshadow to modern day Zebra Stripes?
...the hydraulic lift uses strength holding life up high?
What if their days have gone bad, but yet they keep going, looking intent?
What if they're old friends from high school reuniting, bringing back memories?
What if they are nothing but kind strangers, one helping the other out?

She called me over at this point and asked what I thought of her ideas so far. I have to say I was impressed by the details she put in, by the extra speculation. And she used her first perceptive metaphor in the form of the zebra stripes! She'd actually seen the shadows arrayed over the hood of the car! Even her idea that the hydraulic lift held life up, rather than just the car, shows an extension she wasn't making use of before. Each line, in fact, was stretching further, reaching for more impact, taking my
suggestion of asking "what if?" and making it her own approach to the photograph, rather than just going through the motions as she had before. Still, I told her, she could be more specific. HOW was one man helping the other out?

Figure 8.3  Unknown photographer, "Car Lift"

WHAT memories might they be sharing? As I moved on to another student, I suggested she draw some arrows under each couplet and add more details before she called the poem done. She added "like when one hit the winning run in during
their championship baseball game" to the next to last line above, and closed out the poem with two more questions:

What if they're finishing up last minute work before their wives call them in for dinner?

What if they're friendly Mt. Gileadeans just doing what they love to do?

Next to "Mt. Gileadeans" she put in parentheses: "I think I just made this word up!"

It's not so much the poem itself as the process Shelby went through in constructing it that most touches me here. For once, there's staying power in her writing. For once, she raised her hand DURING class, rather than just writing "This is really bad" at the bottom and letting it go at that. Why? Had her dream clued her in to feeling there was more importance to this poetry stuff? Or had she come to trust herself more--to put down what they thought rather than discounting it beforehand? Had the previous week's work with responding-to-imagery-with-imagery via the slides of paintings given her new skills? Had the photograph and the information about Mt.Gilead's past helped? Maybe there was just something more tangible for her now--she didn't have to invent something out of her head, or choose what to write about. The "zebra stripes" were right there, as were the men, in a place she knew and cared about. I can only assume it was a combination of these factors. Whatever the cause, it seemed to me that Shelby had turned from a tentative, go-
through-the-motions writer, to a truly speculative one (at least for the course of this poem). Even inventing a term for the people in Mt. Gilead as "Mt. Gileadeans" and reflecting that she "just made this word up" shows a confidence in invention she hadn't exhibited before.

f. Learning To Turn the Photograph (and her mind)

A week later Shelby wrote her last, and probably her best, poem of the semester, the second day of writing about the students' own photographs. As recorded earlier, I'd been disappointed with their first efforts on Thursday. For whatever reason, I felt so many of them didn't look carefully at the photographs at all. Much as Shelby had done at the Cornerstone Cafe, they'd assumed they knew the worlds within the pictures. So I asked them to write prose this time, just noticing things, writing directly about what they saw, and then inventing other possibilities. Somewhere in that assignment, I tossed out the idea (off the top of my head) to "turn the photographs upside down." Only a few did, coming up with fresh results. Shelby went a step further--she turned the photograph four different ways, writing what she thought were prose-paragraphs about each one. And now, the student who had been one of the least inventive became one who could construct "little scenes" from even the most ordinary of pictures:
Blumpy Donuts

It looks like people are serving each other, sharing the 'blumpness' of each doughnut, everyone standing back waiting their turn.

It seems like someone is holding the pan side ways, and will gradually let them slip to the ground. The bakery has been attacked! (flipped/turned)

Figure 8.4  Jill Grubb, "Donuts"

It may appear that the boys will soon be dumping the doughnuts into a backpack and then making a run for it.

They are trying to dump the doughnuts, they won't fall off
The doughnuts seems to have a sweet glue that
keeps them bonded to the tray
Magnetic poles have strengthenly pulled
away form the boy and he uses his strength
to keep ahold

The sweet doughnuts glide down the raspberry
tray and land in the boy's hand
This, this is the chosen tray, hold thee above
all other doughnuts
A tasteful treat heading right to my mouth

Shelby was charged up by the end of this writing! She called me over, all excited, saying: "I think I finally got it!"
Still, she claimed it wasn't a poem yet--until I showed her all the places she was doing exactly what a poem does...
metaphorizing, inventing, describing, noticing small details, imagining alternative possibilities. Frame by frame, as the photograph turns in her hands, she "explains" the new dimensions (and the defiance of gravity) in wildly logical ways. Now she can do what she could not do in the cafe: create, in a few words, a scene in her mind that responds to/interacts with the image in front of her.

Her language itself follows suit, becoming more risky and heightened when she needs it to. Again, as she did with "Mt Gileadeans" she makes up new words when she has to: "blumpness" and "strengthenly." And most magical of all, she borrows from her church experience to make the moment at the invaded bakery a "holy" moment (excuse the pun) with her line, "This is the chosen tray, hold thee above all other donuts." This is a writer no longer afraid of failure, one able to see and create and bask in the possibilities of her
own creation. One no longer worried about "what a poem is," and much more concerned with conveying her original vision. When she stood before the class that Friday afternoon and read her poem to us, she made quite an elaborate point of showing how each section was written from a different angle of the photograph. Others laughed, perhaps thinking she was going too far. I, on the other hand, was proud. Shelby had shown us all a new twist on how to see--and how to connect our words to enhance our connection to even the most ordinary of aspects of the world around us. In a word, she was "engaged." And more than that, I think she knew it.

Summary: The "lessons" here, though obvious, are worth pointing out again:

Poetry, like all art, is not a "natural language" for most of us, most of the time. To step right into it, after days of talking and thinking in other ways, may be too awkward to overcome for some. Shelby seemed to have a particularly hard time just stepping in and trying it. As I point out in Chapter Seven/Lesson 6, she wrote in her journal about one poet's poem about chainsaws: "This poem lists all the questions no one would ever think to write about chainsaws. What sense does THAT make?" If poetry truly is taking words outside of their normal usage, in order to shake up our dulled perception of the world, we must recognize this natural resistance and find ways for students to let-the-poem-just happen.

For Shelby, it took her dream stepping in and clueing her into a deeper life below the surface. Others may have to write about dreams to get there. If, perhaps, she had something of an inferiority complex about her background, or this rural area where she lives, it's appropriate that the house with 30 great rooms in the basement was at first an old shack out in the field. After the dream, her poems opened up. It may take an
acceptance of the powers of the subconscious to "trick" students into a deeper engagement with experience.

8.5 BRIAN DAILEY - Poet as Lineman

ABSTRACT: Like many of the students, Brian started out with only minor flourishes in his poems. After the first week, I would never have predicted Brian's work would deepen as much as it did. But I hadn't read his poem from the first day that he did with Jill as an introduction to himself and his memories. Had I, I might have detected even then someone who was already paying attention to detail and to the subtle complexities within even the smallest of experiences. The poetry and investigation of the world which we did over the semester seems merely have given that natural ability of his a place to grow.

a. A Natural Ability to Observe Ambiguity

On the first day of sophomore year, Brian wrote:

I remember...

I remember waking up one morning with my parents gone. I saw them later, with my new brother.
I remember a birthday party with water guns and balloons, then my dad squirting us with a hose.
I remember walking through the doorway of my house and seeing bare floor and walls.
I remember many dogs, too many to name, and one by one they all left my life.
I remember a funeral, for a grandmother I barely knew, but I still cried.
I remember always trying to stay awake, but always falling asleep before midnight.
Memories could be good or bad, but they are there to cherish.

Others were writing things like: "How to be a kid: Torment your family / Cut your tongue with a curtain rod / Don't eat vegetables / Steal your sister's makeup or your brother's football..." Things anyone could write, at almost any age or
maturity level, which personalize the world hardly at all. Brian, in contrast, seems thoroughly grounded in particularities even here, so much so that we start to get a picture of his family life. How many people have birthday parties with water guns, or ones where your father sprays people with a hose? This is an active, playful, if perhaps a tad nasty way to celebrate. The figure of the father, though left vague, remains surprising enough to keep me wondering. Couple that with walking into a house with bare walls and floors and one wonders what sorts of experiences Brian went through early on. There's a near-poignancy here, at least a hint of it, continued with the loss of "too many dogs." Brian at this early stage of the entrance into adulthood seems to know something about human fallibility: he cries at his grandmother's funeral while all along realizing he hardly knew her. That's the start of complexity--the kind of complexity which would eventually awaken in his poems.

Perhaps more than anyone else, Brian followed the path I would have "ideally" set out. Maybe that just says that he's a good student, able to do what he's been told. Not so. For what he learned was how to be unpredictable. Like a good tackle (or a fullback) he plunges ahead--one can rely on him, but it's the off-slant moves, the unexpected intensity and angle of approach that makes him stand out. So he described his own mind on my second writing session with the
class as being

\[
\text{like a predator, never thinking, just} \\
\text{going, never stopping until the prey is down,} \\
\text{relying} \\
\text{on instinct, until the curious mind returns.}
\]

How telling! Again, although I couldn't see this at the time, the image is one that predicts his own development as a poet--and as a student involved with taking in the world. Until the very last day, he didn't stop adding new "moves," following out an idea as it occurs to him.

But then he goes on, in a second part to that short assignment:

\[
\text{My mind is like a hole. The more that is} \\
\text{taken away, the more it grows.}
\]

Now THAT'S a surprising turn, especially following up on the first nearly boastful image. How like a hole? Who has taken what away? Where his first metaphor of the predator is very active and consuming, this one is more Zen-like, closer to the receptive, meditative side of the mind. And maybe that too is part of Brian's power, as a thinker and a poet. He's able to bring to very different capacities to his thought. One that digs in and another that considers. One that proposes and one that stands back. One that is full of possibility and one that is aware that loss is always a part of all choosing. That's what I love about the kind of thinking young high school students are often grappling with. If indeed there is an "empty home" in some part of
Brian's background, in whatever way, it has not emptied him of purpose--whatever losses he's received, like a good lineman, he's found the courage to turn them into insights.

b. Football and Presence

I have never been on a football field in the middle of a high school game. Like many boys, I had early dreams of catching passes in the endzone, over my shoulder no doubt, or returning punts eighty yards through converging hordes that I somehow avoided. Life took me no further though. To actually get hit, or to sludge through the mud for hours of grueling push and shove, was not something I was willing to put up with for the ounce of glory at the end. So Brian gives me a taste of what I never experienced in his response to the earth/water/ fire/air assignment. At the top of the paper, he'd jotted down this one phrase, under both "earth" and "water": "The Cardington game." As if everyone knew what he was referring to--which many in the class probably would. See then how that one phrase translated into the following expanded memory. His writing here is even more physicalized than his opening "I remember..." piece:

The rain whipping down and lashing at us as we stand together.
The play is called as the brief wind slaps our faces.
My head goes down, patient yet impatient, eager to start.
Finally, the cool mud and dirt flow over the sweat.
Quick as lightning, my body moves,
it hits someone, before I even realize
what I am doing.
The pistons pound as I push the boulder,
back and back.
Then a whistle pierces the air, and my
hearing returns.
I turn, once again feeling this rain and
wind, and stand with them again, to do
it over and over.

One must admit that Brian is only at the beginning stages of
finding what a poem can be at this point. Most of the
phrasing is generic and typical--just what one might expect
about a football game in bad weather. The rain "whips down,"
and "lashes" at the players. His body moves "quick as
lightning." Yet there is a growing ability to convey the
experience. He is "patient yet impatient" for the play to
start; he hits an opponent "before I even realize what I am
doing." I like this inner dialogue, one that is aware of
outside realities, bodily experience and thought processes
all at once. That sees no division. In another common image,
his legs are pistons pounding, yet I can feel something
quite real as he "push[es] the boulder back and back."
Somewhat cliched, this poem allowed Brian to deepen his
ability to convey physical experience, something he
apparently knows quite well.

c. Playing With Roles More than With Words

Brian is not especially wild in his imagery--in some
ways he seemed to resist those sorts of assignments. When he
wrote about the slides of paintings, his lines were competent, but not especially clever. For the Georgia O'Keeffe pelvic bone, he writes: "Alone, / alone in the world of sand." For the Edward Hopper farmhouse scene he contributed: "The stalks of gold / whisper in my ear."

Though for the Winslow Homer, a scene of a physical struggle against the waves of an oncoming storm, he was more pointed: "The smell of a storm throbs in the air / as I push against the beating blue and green." How active the verbs here! The storm "throbs" and creates a particular kind of smell in the air. Here again, as in his football poem, Brian shows off his knowledge of the physical world. But it's not a leaping skill, the way Emma for instance was able to shine, it's a bodily-conscious, motion-sensitive ability Brian brings to his way of seeing the world.

The "suppose" assignment stayed a little flat for him as well. He was able to have fun with alliteration in his first two lines:

Suppose everyone wore a toupee and got it tangled in a tree.
Suppose the distant daylight dawned inside your brain.

But then the next six images from that day do very little to excite either language play or visual intrigue:

Suppose you were a delighted bat, flying free.
Suppose a mad dog touched you and you became good
again
Suppose you lived in a town of mud, and the top was where you lived.
Suppose you couldn't stop laughing, only you laughed so hard you turned into a kangaroo.
Suppose your shoulder dragged through the mud, and changed into flubber.
Suppose your world was turned upside-down, and never changed back.

Like Shelby's suppose lines, these last six lines were fairly awful. They illustrate the assignment but don't engage it. They don't have much ring to them, in terms of word play or sound (as the assignment was intended). And they don't even have the subtle complexities of some of Brian's early insights. I suspect that after the first two lines, he just ran out of steam--and perhaps interest. Brian's mind, it seems to me, is grounded in physical reality and it was hard for him to give this assignment much weight. Still, I love the mouth-triangle of the tree-tangled-toupee and even more the "distant daylight [that] dawned inside your brain." So I'll remember that line most--for I believe a distant daylight was indeed dawning in Brian via the poetry, something he may even have been aware of when he wrote that line.

Where Brian most showed himself able to play--and to shine--was with role-taking. Who could have guessed? Like a budding playwright, he discovered the ability to project himself into other voices--first of a parking lot downtown, then of a villain in a novel, next from the point of view of
a valiant woman condemned as a witch in *The Crucible*, and finally of a wheatfield shorn at the end of harvest, written from a rather plain photograph taken by a fellow student. Where did this ability come from? Maybe it was there all along--or maybe the poems helped him discover it. I'd like to believe the latter.

Let's start with our trip downtown. He apparently stood in the old parking lot beside the insurance company (the place where, as I understand it, the Grand Hotel used to stand forty-five years ago) and took these notes:

**Details**: empty / worn down / grass poking through / bottom of a hill / potholes / litter / valley

**Metaphors**: grass reaching for air & rain
a childhood is born and grows

**What if...**: ran back down hill / played football / meeting place for club / rocks thrown in a "war"

That's rather minimal notetaking. Which all the more reveals Brian's inventive abilities. For out of them, given the choice in the assignment to take on the point of view of an object or place, he wrote:

*I've been worn out.*
*Years of football and hard shoes*
*have put potholes in me.*
*I am all but forgotten.*
*The shoots cut through me and stretch towards the sun.*
*The trash clogs my pores, not allowing me to breathe.*
*But I remember races down hill.*

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The victor touching me first.
I was a secret meeting place,
a battle ground for wars.
I've seen childhoods
bloom and grow
and so I shall stay.

Looking back I see that this was the first time Brian had caught on to the flow of the poetic line. All his other writing so far had been in long sentences that just "broke" when they hit the far right column of the page. Now he's able to jump right in with a telling first line and leave it there for a moment of pondering: "I've been worn out." For a moment, we wonder if it's the writer himself--which perhaps it is. The line-break allows him to extend his ability to play with words in a new way. He's learning to pace his thought, the way I'm sure he is on the football field--as in that little moment of pause before the play starts.

Unconsciously here, he seems to know that a line like "The shoots cut through me and stretch toward / the sun" feels right as a long line followed by a short one, just as the grasses are stretching toward their breaking through the concrete. Later, he is able to make us pause again--reinforcing the personification--with three shorter lines like "But I remember / races down hill, / the victor touching me first." As in the best of all his writing, he is able to make a physical reality find momentum on the page.

And then comes the clinching turn--something that until this poem, written on the bus in a chilly drizzle, he hadn't
yet been able to achieve: to push the poem toward a conclusion that extends rather than repeats the previous insights. For by these lines: "I've seen childhoods / bloom and grow / and so I shall stay," we know he's talking about more than the deserted parking lot. It's himself and perhaps all of Mt. Gilead he's pondering. As Bethany, sitting in another seat, would write that same day, addressing her town:

Mt. Gilead, you are like a weed
So strong and standing against adversity
yet not pretty to look at...

You are like no one's possession
No one wants you but we all have you
And we don't mind.

Brian is responding to that same "run down" feeling--the sense that this is a town no one could quite be proud of coming from. Yet through his poem (and through Bethany's as well) we see someone making something of a place they may have undervalued before. When he read this poem aloud in class the next week, we all nodded. This sense of embracing a neglected place comes through in his poem. He and it have a reason to stay.

d. Villain and Heroine

What better test of a budding playwright than the ability to portray the inner thoughts of both a villain and a hero? Not only that, to be able to make us sympathize with
a villain's confusion as he makes choices even he knows he may regret--as well as to complexify the scene of heroism, so that it's more than a generic victory? Brian did both over the course of the next few weeks, gathering finesse with each new poem.

At the close of their reading of Mockingbird, we wrote one more monologue poem in the voice of one of the characters. Most chose Atticus or Scout. No one else chose that most despicable of villains--Mr Ewall--a man able to send one man to his death for a crime he knew the man hadn't committed and then try to murder two children of the lawyer who had gotten the jury to see through his ruse. Mr. Ewall is the epitome of someone unable to face their own weakness and so lashes out at those around him in order not to see. (See my transcription of this poem in Chapter Seven/Lesson 1.)

I think I need say only a little more than in the previous chapter. Isn't it obvious how much more visually accurate Brian's turns-of-the-phrase have become? The speaker does not "move like lightning." No, he twists Jem's arm and "hear[s] a crack, like a branch snapping in high wind." What could be more wrenching as a metaphor for Jem's broken arm--and his nearly broken life? Even the pacing of the interior thought: "I hear some children talking - it's HIS boy" lets us get into the pacing of Mr. Ewall's
thoughts. There's even a brand of humor--a humor close to the tone of the speaker's twisted heart: "This is best served cold!" Such a spark of metaphor even pushes us past the question of wondering if he say such a phrase about himself as I "grin wickedly." After that joke, we almost believe he would describe his own grin that way... Finally, there's such a rich mix of the senses and of synesthesia here: "feeling the cold shine" of the knife, the smell of the whiskey, the nose boiling... Even slicing at the ham takes on a double meaning, a "joke" Brian I am sure intended.

He gets it all wrong, of course. Ewall does NOT fall on his own knife, as the poem contends. That's only Heck Tate's lie for saving the mockingbird--Arthur ("Boo") Radley. That's okay. This is not an accuracy test. We're seeing this climax to the novel through Ewall's eyes, and to him he wouldn't know what killed him. For all he knew, it could have been his own knife...

Brian did an equally good job with Elizabeth Proctor when we wrote visionary monologues from the voices of characters in The Crucible. So many students couldn't do it --invent a scene or a dream outside the scope of the novel. Brian was one of the few who could, imagining a vision Elizabeth Proctor might have had in prison. He'd written it so astutely that we all thought he didn't quite realize that
what he'd visualized was Elizabeth seeing her husband as an
angel coming to greet her. But he intended that--and a bit
more. (See my transcription in Chapter Seven/Lesson 9.)

Notice how carefully Brian has chosen a much thinner
form for this poem, versus his thicker, more descriptive
monologue by Ewell. This is a vision poem after all. It
hinges on a single image of meeting. Halfway through, I feel
the danger of Brian's task here. How to describe a meeting
with an angel? I almost want to laugh as "he reaches / for
me" directs my imagining on the page. Then something truly
angel-like happens--she feels "silk and water, / yet feel[s]
nothing..." How right, I want to say. We are in the realm of
dream and vision. A scene made very real, clearly needing to
not be fully real. It's one flowing moment, with the end
result of majesty breaking away, leaving the subject
blessed. Jill broke into tears when I read it back to the
class the next day. For she saw immediately that it was John
Proctor who had broken through that wall of containment, as
he never could in life. What she didn't see is that Brian
meant it to convey another crucial moment in the novel--the
night where Elizabeth and John have intercourse for the
first time in months, after a long estrangement, leaving her
with the knowledge of her pregnancy as she waits in the
witch hunt's prison. Brian's reached an ability to convey
such subtlety.
e. Conclusion: An Attentive Knowing

Let me quickly close. Brian went on to write a couple other nice portrait studies about the historical photographs and the photographs taken around town by other students. But the point's been made--he grew into a student writer who, whatever he proceeds to do with these skills, is now able to enter physical scenes and imagined situations (as in a novel) with incredible detail and visual imagining. In both these last two poems I am stunned by what the writing does to establish a scene quickly and bring us inside a voice. Is that it? Brian had found a voice? A voice contained within the world as he surveys it, aware as he was on the first day that worlds of complex emotion float within a single moment, contradicting the expected, conflicting even our greatest joys, opening up our sorrows to other kinds of light. As one of his early lines implies, Brian is able to know so much and say more than many student writers because his mind has the ability to become empty--and thus see and hear all the voices that much more poignantly. As such, he has much to teach us in seeking to engage the world.

Summary: Looking back, I see it took Brian longer to reach the height of his powers than I noticed at the time. His football poem is pretty generic, with a touch of flourish in a couple lines. His "Suppose" lines too don't fly very far. It's only when he discovers the playwright in himself that the poems take on the kind of power they do. Was it just one spot when I wrote on the lesson downtown:
"BECOME AN OBJECT OR BUILDING HERE"? He must have noticed that suggestion--and mined it the rest of the semester. His "play" becomes the play of state-of-mind, of taking on roles other than one's own.

But his work is characterized by another key feature as well: his attention to particular detail. His theatrical ability extends to the power to VISUALIZE every scene--from the way a knife would feel in a vengeful man's hand to the sound of a breaking arm to the way a wall might split apart and seal back together for an angel's entrance and exit. His ekphrastic poems were okay; it was his own interior imagery which turned the corner on the semester for him.

8.6 SARAH KEENER: Poet as Equestrian

ABSTRACT: Sarah Keener may be the only student among these six who thought of herself as a poet before we began and who consciously tried to improve her skills in a concerted way. The rest grew, in their various capacities, almost in spite of themselves, tackling the assignments as they came along. Sarah knew how a poem moved already--she'd been writing for several years on her own and keeps quite a notebook of her previous work. The question to ask here is how much did she grow as not only a poet but as a perceiver and creator of vision?

a. Poet as High School Student

I can't say where Sarah's interest in poetry came from. That never came up. All I know is that sometime pretty far into my time at the school, she brought me a selection of her previous work. A couple examples will show what skills she'd already attained--a certain finesse with line breaks and the flow of a poem, and certainly the wish to say something meaningful and surprising. You can see that even in her more typical adolescent love poems, such as this one:
Drowning
Your love touches me
Like water
It pulls me under
Into the current
It's impossible to breathe
Beneath the surface
I lose all control
I am sinking
Into the depths
Then the pull lets go
And I rise to air
Now I grasp
For just one breath
To save this life
And my heart

Generic as this poem is, I admire her early skill at sustaining an extended metaphor. And there's something nicely surprising in that first line-break. In fact, many of the line breaks work rather subtly both directions, holding up our race to finish the poem by asking us which line it follows or begins. "Beneath the surface" is one of those, just as easily ending the phrase "It's impossible to breathe" as starting the sentence "I lose all control." There's a compelling moment when the touch lets go and she's shaken out of this daydream (or love affair). It's nice to see Sarah able to play with these age-old emotions this way. The last line reads well, even as it works with the huge concepts of "life" and "heart."

There's the weakness in the poem and in much of her earlier work: the reliance on cliche and assumption. "I lose control," for instance, works well here, but wavers when one
remembers the many times such language has been used to define the feelings of love in the past. Many such instances could be pulled from the sheaf of poems she handed me:

Pegasus danced with silver manes
As elves were making candy canes
Fairies wished in toadstool rings
As the angel softly sings

or the beginning of this poem:

Her hand fell from his grip,
He'd prayed to god not to let her slip,
She fell and her body began to slam
Against the rocks then to the sand,
Tears began to trickle down his cheek,
Suddenly his emotions became so weak...

or even this single line:

Something about you haunts my heart...

You get the idea. Sarah is trying out all the potentialities within poetic styles, styles she's borrowed from many places, myths she's reshaping to test out her lyre. No doubt she may have continued in these mines--and, especially if she stumbled on more complex writers to learn from, gradually taught herself to find a voice of her own. For our time together though, I'm glad she brought such experience to the table. Had we talked early on, I would have been looking for her to ground her flourishes in more direct perceptions, in greater particularity of image, in the specific and singular versus the plural names. I believe much happened to achieve just that as she challenged herself at each of our assignments, making each one her own. It will
of course be up to her to see how the various lessons can contribute to the poems she does on her own. My main hope is that she keeps her poems grounded in what she knows, reconnecting her elaborate visions to the experience of immediacy.

b. A Mythic Voice Meets the World

I think I first noticed Sarah's skills on the assignment to describe an action metaphorically. Here was someone using the field of the poem to make a statement, rather than relying on description and metaphor alone:

Flying

She stands tall
nature mocking her every step

Slowly turning,
her shadow facing the fence

Whispers become silent,
ribbons ruffle the breeze

Thunder trembles beneath the ground
Gates no longer pushing her turn

She jerks back
gravity pulling her down

Spirit holding her to the sky
She's flying.

There's still a generic tone to this, as if it could be ANY rider. Yet there is much more pointed building of a scene than in any of her work before. It starts with the phrase, "Slowly turning, / her shadow facing the fence." There... I
want to say... hold it right there. Build all the rest of
the scene from that shadow. Of course she doesn't but jumps
out to the audience's whispers becoming silent. In a way,
it's a good move, as it sets up the scene for the gradual
thundering of the hooves, but I'm taken outside of the
rider's view too quickly. Whereas the shadow facing the
fence held me there, the mention of whispers is too easy.
Still, the pacing of the lines carries me on. There's
tension within the phrasings, the way Wheelwright
prescribes. She's held down by the weight of "nature mocking
her every move" but is able to "jerk back," almost using the
gravity against itself to produce the sense of flying, which
for us outsiders seems to be a blending of gravity and
spirit in a fierce union. Like Brian's poem about playing
football on a rainy, muddy field, it's a first step for
Sarah in bringing her poems into connection with the
physical world that she knows.

c. Relearning the Metaphor

Sarah already had a lot of experience with metaphoric
phrasing, so it wasn't my job so much to teach her that as
to get her to refine it, almost to re-learn it after several
years of its overuse. This adjustment seemed to happen
through the application of metaphor to particular moments,
such as those we wrote about in the books the class was
reading, but most of all by playing games with surrealism.
There she broke her habit of making things flow too smoothly--almost to the point where nobody (perhaps including herself) is listening. That's not such an uncommon dilemma for poets at any point: often we've learned enough skill to keep the poem going, but not enough to "trouble the waters" of its development, to shake up preconceptions and habitual approaches.

I love though what happens when Sarah applies her immense skills to particular moments, as her horse show poem above, or this poem about Jem's conflicts in having to read to Mrs Dubose at end of her life. Her metaphoric phrasings are not generic, but rather woven inside a particular frustration--the scene where Harper Lee has laid out the groundwork for her and Sarah can dance within:

At Mrs Dubose's House

It was as though you had struggled with your conscience. Burning inside you were words, her accusations. Seconds pass. Broken stems, petals. Camellias shattered across the town. Longer moments now. Her words slowly fade inside you. One last flower fades away.

It's not hard to see that Sarah is consciously using metaphor in nearly every single line (or maybe not consciously--perhaps it's all just second nature to her
now). But "it was as though you had struggled / with your conscience" is a nice way to weigh the whole situation that Jem is in. And "burning" is exactly what Mrs. Dubose's racist words against his father were doing--coming out in the "fire" of his attack on her flowers. In a few lines, metaphorically, Sarah has reconstructed Jem's action. Even the petals are not just the physical ones in her yard, but the attempt to send his anger out into the town itself. What insights are starting to emerge here, born on the back of her metaphoric mind... There's a pacing of time, just as in her horseriding sequence, as the moment is "longer now" and the flowers scattering before his anger transform into the flower of Mrs Dubose herself, a quite different kind of disappearance. I see all this as Sarah beginning to re-listen to the world of experience, rather than her ready poetic mind alone.

She had more trouble when we went to Mt. Gilead State Park and she sat on the side of a hillside above the water. We're back to an all-purpose use of the metaphoric phrase:

```
Place among the trees
Dead branches torn
Lying motionless

Waiting for time
To pass.

Bitter breeze
nipping the dry air.
Pressing against leaves
as though
```
waving "goodbye."

Lost among them,
branches, trees, leaves
cold breeze, acorns
lost between life
and death.

Leaning back
against bark
staring down
to where
creatures rustle
guarded by
just this tree.

Halfway through this poem, I'm falling asleep. It's not that it's incompetent writing--just bland. What trees? Where are the dead branches? How are they torn? How fair IS it to say they are waiting "for time to pass"? These are the kind of questions one can only ask of a student who already has some finesse with the language. Finesse, of course, is hardly enough. Her poem gets better for a moment when she pictures the bitter breeze "pressing against the leaves / as though / waving 'goodbye'". For it's the BREEZE that's waving goodbye, at least in the way she's phrased it. Though I doubt Sarah meant it that way. Nor did she mean intentionally this amazing phrase:

... acorns
lost between life
and death.

In it I saw for the first time the appeal of these little over-used kernels that litter our forest floor--they are neither in life nor death, but "lost between," either
waiting to decay, or, more uncertainly, to become a tree. Wow--what a thought, I told her the next time we met. My goal being for Sarah herself to begin to listen to the amazing potentialities within the skills she so clearly was developing. She was, I was hoping, learning to use metaphor to say something and to make us pause, not just add flow to the poem.

d. The Power of the Surreal

The second thing that seemed to help Sarah particularize her writing was playing with surreal possibilities. With them, imagery took on new challenges--for instead of going with accepted conventions, she had to make her own. Her poems are still more "meaningful" (and intentionally so) than many others'. It's a tad harder for her, I suspect, to say something without meaning to. Nevertheless, I find quite a bit of surprise in "Suppose" exercise:

Suppose the course of your life
Was rearranged
Instead of silence
Screams could not be heard.

Suppose being proud
Was balanced with shame
Would you be shameful
Or forever dawned with pride?

Suppose life was a paper clip
An endless curve of fame
Counted by every stroke
To where you may arrive

Suppose clouds were at your feet
Cranes would never fall
And raindrops never kissed the sky  
Would you wave a white flag  
Or surrender?

How much sharper the imagery is here! Instead of being in that hazy world of the hillside, or metaphorically "losing control" (how?) in the waters of love, I'm imagining life as a paperclip racetrack, swung around by some looping force of fate or fame--until the momentum stops and you are "where you may arrive." What an intriguing, if fatalistic, view of life. And I like the surprising thought of cranes ever being able to fall at all (much less having to stop doing so), as well as raindrops being prevented from kissing the sky. Here is the whimsy of her previous poetry brought onto a new dance floor. It's not so surprising to think of life being reversed--but it IS a fresh twist to imagine screams not being able to be heard (a commentary on what we repress?). I'm confused a bit by the difference between "waving a white flag" and "surrendering." Perhaps Sarah doesn't know they mean the same thing, but as a reader I let that go and enjoy the whole motion of the poem, which is playful and quite haunting at the same time.

Sarah is equally able to be inventive using the lines we got from the game downtown. She wasn't quite as able to "fly free" with the game as Josh was, in such lines as were quoted in the previous chapter:

All day she drives around, not knowing where around is
Does this number want to be more or less than a stuck-fast shape will allow it?

Everyone knows that the true color of stop is blue
Everyone knows that stop has been cursed

The small insignificant ignorance of that place
It pulled the shades - everyone and even the blind could see better

Did you know, it's true, only small things fall and the large have to hold them up

Josh, in her same class, is able to spin circles around everyone with such word-play. But then he stops--he'd rather not make a poem of it all. In his case, maybe it doesn't matter. The play alone is enough. He has no intention of going further with it all. For Sarah though, she's picking up skills for a reason. And she is one of the few who bothered to shape her original surreal answers into a whole poem:

\begin{quote}
Leaves opposite the trees
where gravity stops pulling at the earth
where the pumpkin wishes to cry
and doors walk.

Everyone knows that a wall can talk here, where the windows stare down to lonely streets.
No, the windows are empty.

No one knows the man
who walks slowly among doors,
or that woman who paces
where bricks fly.
\end{quote}

No judgement here. No need to value Josh's experiment over
Sarah's more refined product. Both speak to their own voices, their own needs to make language their own. I simply value this new found skill that Sarah has applied to looking critically at the over-looked world of Mt. Gilead. Who would have thought that such a surreal exercise to convey the loneliness of those back streets? "No," she says, suddenly discovering the ability to speak to herself within the poem, "the windows are empty." We look up--and so they are.

e. A Blossoming of Vision
(Sarah at the Columbus Museum of Art)

It may be that Sarah was one of the few there that day we went to the museum who was really ready to apply her full skills to the work before us. Others with those same skills stayed back at school--Jenny and Amber, Brian and Emma, Josh and Brenna. Not that it matters, for there was much learning taking place anyways. Bethany, for instance, suddenly discovered a new, specific voice. But Sarah brought that voice to her observation that day in a way others were not quite ready to do. She'd grounded her words in specifics, she'd played with metaphor enough to know what it could do when bent one way or another, she'd tinkered with usual tipping of the poem via surrealism to know she wasn't stuck with one way of seeing only. And most of all, she had that inner drive to make substantial meaning out of her exchange with the paintings she put her sight to.
Here's what she came up with when she considered the museum's tiny Georgia O'Keeffe--"Autumn Leaves" done at Lake George in the 1920's. Consider the stance she's taken even before she touches her first word to the paper...

*Leaves (Georgia O'Keeffe)*

*I am hidden
behind bold colors.*

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Mindlessly forgotten
darkenly concealed.

Constantly being judged
posing in darkness.

For I am the foundation
of the one you admire.

This is a poem, small as it is, one could hold in one's hand for quite a while, picking it up over and over again to admire the hidden values behind the carefully chosen words. Admittedly, she doesn't do much describing to evoke the details of the painting--yet the title and the second line may be enough to get us going. It's a small painting, after all, and one with a lot of depth behind its deceptively colorful surface. Sarah chooses therefore to play with those depths, to be that voice of the "mindlessly forgotten." For it's not the colors alone that bring the painting to our attention, just as it's not the beauty of the world alone that carries us forward. We "judge" the tree, Sarah is considering, not often seeing the beauty in its dark frame, which we allow to be covered up by the gaudily engaging leaves. She speaks, instead, for the "foundation / of the one you admire," a foundation that could be life itself, the trunk of the hidden tree, or maybe God. In these eight lines, bound as they are by O'Keeffe's brushwork, she holds us in this conundrum.
I like less well her attempt to evoke the motion and sound within the stillness of "Woman and Accordion." Yet even here I see her applying her new skills as a descriptive and not just a metaphysical poet:

Woman and Accordion

She is alone
vibrantly depressed
in her salsa gown.
The accordion
lies in her hands
motionless
desperately wanting
a resolution,
some kind of end.
Must be that
she waits for
in this darkened room
untouched, undisturbed.
Just lingering
in that wooden chair absorbing the cold
lonely room.

How nicely this poem starts off, with the first three lines being almost enough by themselves. "Vibrantly depressed / in her salsa gown." For Sarah, that's a nice leap into specific description. I wish she could stay with it, instead of going into larger abstraction. Yes, "the accordion / lies in her hands" but so quickly it is a large concept, rather than a real instrument, "desperately wanting / a resolution." I
just don't want to head there so fast, I want the presence of that woman in her salsa gown to linger, watching us, or staring straight ahead, pondering the spaces between the music. But Sarah is going again for that "big statement," forgetting that it's built on the tenor of the medium
itself. All in all, I'm there, but I want to be more there. Where Sarah is on her way...

Without making too big a claim, I think she got there in her last poem of that morning, a take on George Bellows' painting, "Polo at Lakewood." It's fitting, I think, that she began the semester with a poem about horses and ends up here putting herself into this very real scene. Somehow in this piece she's found, if only for an instant, the mix of play and personality, scene and finesse, metaphor and physicality she'd been hovering around all the time. It's a poem of a moment, just as Bellows' painting is, yet it slides out of that frozen frame into something of an eternal realm. All without seeming to try...

George Bellows, "Polo at Lakewood"

Holding back, then letting go,
Constant movement.

Flaring horses chasing
What is unknown to them.

That doesn't matter,
Keep moving.

Eyes are gazing
Watching, never stopping.

Forward movement,
Riders leaning at the ground.

There, something is moving
It seems to be running.

Maybe that's because
I am chasing it.
Whew: that's a ride. Like her poem on the O'Keeffe, I could live inside this poem for quite some time. For the ending returns to the beginning--and the game goes on. What seems to be working here so well? Maybe a number of things. For one, the control of her lines. She's aptly chosen a two-line stanza, one quite suited to the quick movement of her subject. Each grouping then forms a unit of its own, establishing placement and then guiding us forward. It's a kind of a generic opening, not making clear who is speaking, yet that jarring gets us in, as if we've been plunked smack in the middle of the game: "Holding back, then letting go, / Constant movement." That MUST be what horsemen in such a scene do, controlling the horses and then giving them rein, intuiting what's next, the way Sarah is doing with her poem.

The second stanza holds another mystery all its own, giving us a mix of sudden physicality ("flaring horses") followed by the metaphorical mystery of how they could be chasing "what is unknown to them." Then we are into some other point of view--and we guess there is a presence speaking these words: "That doesn't matter, / Keep moving." An inner drive perhaps, inside one of the riders? Wherever the voice is coming from, it contains an urgency, and as a reader, I want to continue. Fourth stanza gets a big vague--so I start to worry that this elegant movement will cease all too soon. Whose eyes? How does the speaker know they are
"watching, never stopping." Maybe because they are his or her own?

No--we get an "outside view" now--in that wonderfully physical line: "Riders leaning at the ground." At the ground! Ah, Sarah, I want to say, you've found a way at last of putting us inside the horseman's view. You KNOW this world, clearly, even if you've never played this exact game. Your horseback riding experience has allowed you insight into this painting that maybe another could not have. And at this moment in the poem I want you to follow the game you've set before you--that two-line magic which allows us entrance frame by frame, while all is swirling in held motion. Now:

There, something is moving
It seems to be running.

And I'm hooked. Yes--the ball is alive. It has a life of its own, traveling the ground like a low-flying bird, with more momentum than we'd suspect from the last whack. And you've saved the revelation of the speaker's identity until just now. For who could be saying this besides one of the players themselves? There. The word takes on immense power, placed as it is in this context of motion. For "there" in this case is not specifically anywhere, just as the ball is a hazy presence within Bellows' canvas of fierce horses and intense riders. The poem pulls to a close now, but it carries us onward, aware that pursuit is the whole of the game, of the
poem and the learning, aware that it's all set in motion by the inner drive Sarah embodies here for us, the whole mystery made real "because / [she is] chasing it."

Summary: Sarah can teach us a lot about the route of a student who really wants to DO an art but perhaps has accumulated the flourish of it without the interior substance. If she were a dancer, she might know scads of ballet technique, but has not yet, in the beginning, pulled her movement from within.

Intriguingly, it was the same set of exercises that seemed to help her too: first grounding her writing in what she knows--the "flying" feeling she gets when riding a horse; second, touching the surrealists' sense of playful envisioning (where bricks fly); and finally taking her descriptive skills and inwardly projecting them onto the canvas of a painting.

If her poems reveal a "more engaged experience" of the world by the end, it's an experience we all could learn from--mixing inward knowledge with the dance of language on the page, and visual "interplay" between seeing what is right before our eyes and CHOOSING who we are when we begin to see. I feel when I read Sarah's last poems that I myself have discovered how to see again, holding time still in a way that every moment contains the seeds of its own opening.
CHAPTER 9
DIMENSIONS OF THE SELF:
POETRY, ART AND THE LIFE OF THE SMALL TOWN

Abstract: My goal in this chapter is to speculate on the selves that the students bring to their writing, using other information besides the poems themselves. How do they talk about poetry? What do they see in paintings? How does metaphor, play and physicality enter into their reading and their seeing? And how does their discourse--and their sense of their own selves--reflect or relate to their attitudes toward the town where they grew up? I wanted to know better their natural thinking processes--and then try guiding those processes over to looking at what art does.

9.1 Why I Came Here

Abstract: As with all essential questions, I have to start with why I am interested in these matters. Never having had a place that I thought of as "home," I've long been curious about that feeling. How does one find community in a place of limited cultural resources, avoiding the sense of being so limited in choice of topics for conversation, etc.? I think the brightest of these students face that question every day, if only unconsciously. Coming in from the outside, what would I be bringing to the equation? I suggest later: By being a listening ear, and by bringing in an art form that encourages listening to each other, the poetry residency may have helped create a dialogue that might not otherwise happen. The first steps, though, concern trying to get to know them--and trying to define more closely my own dialogue with this place.

It's funny how certain places stick in one's mind. Mount Gilead, Ohio, for instance. I remember driving back up
Route 42, from a playwrighting workshop in Springfield in December of 1983. About five to ten miles south of town, I found myself caught between a wonderfully dark thunderstorm to the northeast and a golden-bright sunset to the far southwest. As the light began to change, I watched, from the window of my gray VW bug, a full double-rainbow arch its way ahead of me, like a welcoming gate to some celestial tunnel. As I recall, I even got out of the car and walked up onto the mound of the railroad track that parallels the road for a stretch, taking in the rain and the sunlight, like two halves of a world.

I didn't realize at the time that the rainbow's arch would have stretched, from my angle of vision, just above Mt. Gilead... as if there really were a balm there, as the old hymn says. Only this year, as I made that same trek, passing that same spot near the railroad tracks, did I remember that moment.

For the longest time, Mt. Gilead was just a stopping place for me as I'd drive back from Springfield, Ohio, where I went to school and had my first jobs, to Shelby, where my in-laws lived, and back, avoiding the expressway. I liked the little home-owned "dairy queen" on the north side of town, and the way traffic took a jag around the monument at the town center. I wanted to imagine this town as a good place to live, the way I did with other towns across the
state and the U.S., having ridden my bike through so many, stopping for lunch, or just a coke, at the local diner, listening in on the talk of the regulars. But to actually LIVE here--that would be another matter. Twenty or so years ago (from 1978 to 1983) I'd lived in a town something like this, trying hard to form connections, stopping in the bike shop to talk, pausing with a teller at the bank who admired our bright-eyed one-year-old daughter, feeling hopeful when the owner of the local gas station asked to come over for a chat (turned out he just wanted to join his Amway team!). Despite these efforts, we'd failed to make the life there we'd wanted. The teaching jobs were being cut back, not expanded. I got to know almost nobody.

The same could be said for all the poetry residencies I'd had around the state for the past twenty-five years. In Shiloh, New Washington, Lodi, Westfield Center, Chatham, Apple Creek, Savannah, Butler. One comes in as a guest--a stranger, really--brining the exotic fruit of poetry. And one connects with a teacher, or a few of the students. But who is left behind? What is sustained? I'd met, several times, students from years back--one as she was doing student teaching in Columbus, one at a music concert at Heidelberg College--and each told me how significant even the smallest of moments had been. One remembered a poetry night-hike in the rain, and reading poems around the cabin
as we dried out; another mentioned that he'd had the poetry booklet we did out and was reading it just a few weeks before (though the poems were already five years old...).

But I began to wonder more than that: who were these kids to begin with? What sort of place does a poet--or any artist from the outside--venture into when visiting a school or a small community?

So the question comes down, perhaps, to what art is about when it meets our everyday lives, assuming that school is as much a little world of "everyday life" as it is an institution for learning. In most places, art always comes "from the outside," for by its nature it runs against habit and everyday practice. We don't sing arias as we walk down the hallways; we don't write poems for a test about the origins of the Civil War, or in response to a query from a prospective client. Mary Austin once said of the Native American tribes she worked with in the Southwest that for them, "prose was the instrument of communication, poetry the instrument of communion" (7). Surely that was not true here.

Communion happens amongst the parents in the stands at a football game, warming up through their talk on cold autumn nights; communion hovers around the school lockers as students pause for a minute-and-a-half between classes, or in the under-talk about golf and pro football and sleepovers that manages to run like a second current under the supposed
main topics of the classroom. And here I was coming to teach an entirely different means of communion... What could it be worth to them? What would guide them to involve their "under-current" lives in their poems? What would we all take away? How would any of us be changed, if at all?

All I can say now is that of these 42 students almost every single one is a presence in my mind now, a rather full-fledged individual whose internal quirkiness, insecurities, bravado, loneliness and pride register in my memory like some sort of ghostly portrait. No, I don't know where each of them lives, how often they fight with their parents about the car, or their dating practices. But I think I know something else: I know at least a little about their thought processes when they work their ways through an unusual idea or an intriguing image. I know their particular styles of laugh, or how they choose to conduct or hide themselves in a classroom. I know tiny little things they know and do--where they skate in the winter (on a frozen pool cover!), where they chase their prize steer through the woods, and how they look at this little town that a wide majority of them grew up in. I know at least a little more than when we began about what poems have told them about themselves and how they see the world.
9.2 The Little Truths

Abstract: By chance, our opening get-acquainted exercise turned into a multi-sided portrait of this community, with its quirky traits, its sense of comradery and style. By sharing stories told by parents and other relatives, by laughing at tiny little "facts" they know, and by exposing our own individualized abilities and experiences, this exercise gave me a chance to consider more carefully those I would be teaching--and, most importantly, established an atmosphere where it was safe and even respected to simply be who we are as we approached the study of poetry and art. That's different than saying: "The art is out here and you have to get there." Without strictly planning it, Jill and I were saying to them: "The art is in here--with what you know well already. You just have to find a means of looking for it."

Figure 9.1 Jill Grubb, "After the Poetry Reading"
From the beginning I thought of this as a school where it was at least a little okay to be different, to have one's own ways and concerns. Three out of the past five years I'd spent a week in two of the teachers' classrooms. More than anywhere else, it seemed to me, eccentricity was tolerated--even prized--here.

So I started out the first day with a little ice-breaking exercise intended to allow those specificities to surface. And this activity, which I thought would take 15 minutes, ate up more than an hour of time. That may be the first telling thing: THEY turned this activity into a chance to show off in front of each other, as well as to listen to each other's backgrounds. On this day, they found out things about each other that many didn't know. What's more, they seemed to treasure that knowledge.

I asked them for three things, jotted down on index cards: 1) A story that someone had once told them--perhaps a grandparent or an uncle; 2) Something that they know how to do that maybe no one else does; 3) Some fact they've come across that interests them. I gave them examples of my own. For #1, I told the story my dad told me, for instance, about choosing between three jobs when he graduated from college, and how he chose the more stable--and less intriguing--one mainly because he had a family to support, with one three-year-old son and another (namely me) on the way. For #2, I
mentioned my ability to juggle, which I learned through careful demonstration by a former student of mine, who taught me to "take gravity out of it," in the beginning, by rolling the balls in a pattern on the floor. And for #3, I gave them the odd statistic that an average-size cloud weighs not "nothing," as many students guessed, but instead a whopping 550 tons.

Through luck or intuition, I'd picked questions that they had a lot to say about. They nearly all had little weird stories, from their parents' or their own lives... They all could do things that surprised the rest of us... They all carried odd little facts in their brains:

- Jenny, whose mother once had a job in the pet department at a Wall-Mart in Minnesota and on her last day let all the birds out of their cages...

- Amber, who knows how to fly a plane... and that each aspirin takes one teaspoon of blood from your heart...

- Nate, who was willing to admit that last year for Halloween he and his friends "painted up and dressed like cheerleaders."

- Ben Vail, who seemed fascinated (even philosophically) with thinking about how "if all the people in China stood in a line it would never end." When asked why that would be, he said there would always be someone being born to keep the line going...

Most of all, they loved the odd facts and confessions:

- Ci'Arra who tells us that it is impossible to lick your elbow -- or that in your life you will swallow an average of eight spiders...
- Julie who admits that "when I was little when I got mad I'd bang my head on the floor..." and that "I can change a colostomy bag."

- Jordan who enjoys relating that when his grandfather was in high school "he was a greaser and had the fastest car in town b/c he figured out how to put 3 carburetors on the engine..."

But I'm just as interested in the less flashy confessions:

- Ryan McCloskey's family runs a thriving family farm of 2000 acres.

- Sarah McGlynn was born on Easter--and writes: "Learning someone's religion is more important than where they're from" and that her mom was a missionary in the Philippines.

- or that Sarah Smith, who doesn't seem "sophisticated" at all, dressed as she is in torn jeans and a basic t-shirt, plays string bass in the Mansfield Youth Orchestra.

- or that David Cook is fascinated by the fact that Canal Winchester, a town down near Columbus has a large parade every year they call "The World Parade."

I like knowing that Sara Gruber remembers that cows have four compartments in their stomachs; or that Jenny has studied (and seems totally intrigued by) ant colonies which make slaves of other ants; or that Sarah Keener knows the names for the little white spots above horse's hooves ("socks"), that "blue eyes on horses are called "glass eyes," and that she can neigh "and used to call [her] horse" that way.

Some were less willing to share (or had less to put down)---and, oddly enough, these usually proved to be the less involved writers as our time went on. Four of the
weakest writers from the whole experience were Garrison, Holly, Matt and David Fuller. Looking back, I see that their cards are about 1/3rd as full as most of the rest, with only the skimpiest of details. In fact, the entire information from the SUM TOTAL of their combined four cards barely equals what other students wrote individually:

Garrison:
1) When my mom was in labor with me she went to Krogers and walked around to try and kill time.
2) I play sports pretty well.

Matt:
1) whistle very loudly
2) My grandfather told me when his dad was in WWI he killed someone and was never the same.

Holly:
1) My grandpa almost drowned when he was young and now he's scared of water.
2) Cheerleading

David Fuller:
1) I jumped off a bunk bed into a dresser corner and all my bottom teeth went through my lip.
2) Good swimmer.

That they have far less detailed and intriguing "stories," that they put down only the most cursory of information about themselves, and that all four cannot come up with a single interest "fact" that they know, is telling. Does this mean that the roots of poetry go deep into the stories we're told, with taking on the idiosyncracies of personality (versus the bland, general facts, such as "good swimmer" or "cheerleading"), and a rich curiosity about the small stuff
of the world? Or do these students always invest less of themselves in school work, especially when there's no grade involved? Small interest yields small investment: why think of a story or a personal fact when something generic will do just as well? And yet another possibility could be that writing such things down doesn't intrigue them. Jenny, who carefully spelled out how ants can enslave other ants, might naturally veer toward enjoying writing. Maybe these students "knew things" or had stories, but didn't see the value of sharing them or writing them down.

I've come to believe that it's not that they're hiding stuff--it may be that they just don't have the resources to draw on (and mind you, these cards were not intended to test sophistication or academic knowledge--merely some signs of involvement with the world, from the familial to the personal to the global). My only "proof" for this contention is the thoroughness of so many other students' answers. Compare, for one telling example, David Cook's card, a close friend of the three guys listed above, but one who "broke out of the group" to join the field trips and to put quite a bit of original effort into his poems:

1) When I was four, my dad bought me a video game for Christmas. Before Christmas I woke up early one morning and found him playing it in the basement.
2) I can shoot under 40 consistently in golf.

3) Canal Winchester has a large parade once a year called the World Parade.

Not a BIG difference... Not many more words... But just enough flair and particularity to hint that there's already more engagement with the world than indicated by the four lists above. It seems possible, when we compare the poems these five students wrote, we can find the roots of David Cook's poetic engagement and depth here in these jottings from his own life, just as one might have predicted that his friend Sarah Keener, who filled a whole side with tightly packed details, would grow even more over the course of the next 12 weeks.

All this sharing brought me closer to them from the very start. Maybe it just became a way of saying: poetry is a place for the idiosyncratic and the personal, along with the mysterious particularities of life. We weren't writing a poem that day (although I'd intended to, I threw out that plan as soon as I saw the rich material that was emerging). Instead, we were opening up a territory. We were forming a community. We were saying: it is okay to be you, with just your background, just your odd interests and knowledge. The table of literature, poetry and art is one you can bring your full self to. And it's okay to laugh.

I'm struck now too that the little confessions and facts they put on those cards frequently reference the
physical world of their growing up, or the playful side of their ancestry. Apt preparation for all we would be exploring over the next dozen weeks.

9.3. The Students' View of the Area: How Accepting Is It of Difference?

Abstract: Here I consider the students' answers to questions about growing up in Mt. Gilead and the surrounding county. These were volunteer students, but they covered the range of those who "got" poetry and those who struggled with it. THEY were the ones who turned the discussion toward a consideration of self--of how one presents oneself within such a tightly-knit place, of closed-versus-open-mindedness. As I say elsewhere, questions such as these must be in the back of their minds much of the time: "How much can I really show about what I really think?" "These people seem friendly--but what if I had a different idea?" "When I grow up, will I think about things just like my parents?" And the most hidden of all: "What does all this poetry and art stuff have to do with actually living here?" My feeling is that the answer to the latter question may help clarify the former ones. If they could find a way to make the residency time work on these essential questions of identity and freedom, then our time together would be seen by them as valuable.

At the beginning and at the end of our time together, I conducted a number of interviews with volunteer students. As I say above, one of my main goals was not just to "get good poems" from them but to find out what I could about their lives, what they thought about, and how they themselves view this town and this area around them that I find so beautiful. How much do they treasure its peaceful streets? How much do they resent its smallness? How much time did they spend outside--either now or when they were younger?
Would they themselves choose to live here? And how do they think this area influences how they see the world?

Their answers, although often predictable and far too sketchy, told me a great deal about their attitudes toward themselves and the world around them. Most of them recognize that there are severe limitations in growing up in such a small community. Their parents and grandparents, they believe, have seen little of the diversity out in the world that they themselves will likely have to negotiate, as the world gets smaller and more transient. Even if many of their elders grew up in this same town or area, it's unlikely that trend will continue. "We live in a bubble," Shelby put it, a typical phrase. As is Heather's: "It's the middle of nowhere ... I don't know what I like about it at all, actually."

Many feel that way. Josh, who spends his summers at his father's place in Las Vegas, would choose that gambling city over this little town as his ultimate home, when he grows up, if he has to choose, he says. Brittany also finds the area boring. But the biggest question they raise is: How does one discover one's own self and way of doing things in such a bubble? Is it easier or harder to be a bit different or odd? Do outsiders get made fun of or are they accepted and even prized for their differences, the way I had always perceived things here? On these crucial questions the answers varied widely--and tellingly so.
Ben Benson, a devout Mormon with a fairly serious demeanor, said, "I've been a social outcast for my whole life here ... I have no friends in Mt. Gilead - and frankly, I don't care about anybody's opinion here any more." The seven or so others seated around the table, all quite congenial and comfortable in their roles, it would appear, were shocked and try to comfort Ben. "We're sorry, man," said Nate. "We love you..." They try to joke, but Ben is determined to continue: "We moved here because of my dad's job -and frankly when I graduate, I'm gone... Because of what I've been through ... Once I just stopped caring about other people's opinion about me, things just got a lot easier..." The next spring, at a follow-up pizza party, I try to raise Ben's reaction with him--and he doesn't remember a single bit of those feelings, which only goes to show the transience of the adolescent mind.

Others have felt some of these same things, but apparently in a much milder form. Amber, for instance, who moved in two years ago (8th grade is never an easy time to break into an established social milieu), finds that if she just tries things--"Midnight Madness," for example--she finds places where people start exchanging life stories and come to know each other more. In the beginning, she says, "I got high grades, but no one took the time to know me. [But] the more things I got into, the more people came to know
me." Brian Dailey said the same thing, though he came in 5th grade. He moved in from a bigger school and "felt accepted right away." Still, I have to record my own sense that neither Amber nor Brian seem to be much in the "in" crowd--I don't see people milling around their desks, the way they do with a number of the more popular students, most of whom have lived here all their lives. So I think the issues are more complex than these short answers allow for.

Ben Vail gave me a hint of that when he said, "When we were younger, we accepted people more. ... Now that we're older, we're in our little groups." Bethany added: "When I was younger, I didn't have any enemies," implying that she does now. Some people, however, continued to insist there's great acceptance here. Mention was made of the three black students at the school. In the same breath, students said, "Everybody likes them," followed by admissions that people made fun of them after Christmas because they came back with new clothes that were just not right. "We're more plain," said one student. Still, she likes their style, she contended. "Everyone makes fun, but they don't let it bother them..." Hmmm... some underlying, unmentioned realities poking through?

Mention is made of one new student--a white male--who moved in just this year and just seems not to be accepted. Perhaps, they suggest, because he tries too hard. "He brags
too much," says Ben Vail. "He talks a lot." And Bethany adds: "He doesn't talk about things we know about." He went to an inner city school before--and his experience (or his style) is not quite in sync. Ben confesses, "In our class, there are one or two styles." Those who might be louder or more bragging, a style that might be quite necessary in a larger city, may find themselves out of place.

How to get out of such binds? How to become yourself and not take on the resentment Ben Benson feels? Sarah Smith, a student who does not "dress up" to the styles of the most popular students and remains quite comfortable and at ease with herself, offered this advice:

When I first moved here I didn't like how I was. I eventually wanted change. And if you're in a small town situation, sometimes it's like they have a more closed mind. But not all small towns. This town's not all that bad. There's a lot of racism going on ... like with some of my friends ... But ... like ... if you try yourself out ... and you really want to be how you're acting ... then you should be able to stand up for yourself when other people are criticizing you ... Like a small town, if they know you and what you should be, and you act out and are different, if you stand up to criticism you're more likely to find yourself.

While not supplying a definitive answer, Sarah gives me some hints as to what I've noticed in my previous trips to the school. Whereas, like anywhere, most people will try to fit in--hiding behind a mask of similar dress or behavior--some will find their own ways of behaving, and perhaps be
accepted here, if the right atmosphere of acceptance prevails. It depends upon the parents, said Sarah McGlynn. If they accept who you are, you have a kind of permission. In addition, because the town is smaller there are some people who will appreciate your differences, just for the sake of variety.

Josh Somerlot, from the beginning, impressed me as one who is able to negotiate just that kind of "accept me because this is the way I am" sort of style. He does, as he admitted, have a bit of the Las Vegas influence, from spending time out there at his dad's in the summers, but he's managed to merge his longer hair and huge ghetto jeans, looping chains and all, with a joking Mt. Gilead personality and an interest in wrestling and football (where he's center on the team). He's got artistic abilities--and a wild, quirky personality that can be both serious and sarcastic, in turns. He can be given detention for excessive talking out in class and the next day or so win his debate on drug testing in schools with what Jill says were the most carefully thought out debate points of anyone in either class. He's the kind of student I've found to be a bellwether in this particular school environment, whatever the cause of such acceptance. Every time I've come to the school, I've found students like him in nearly every class, much more frequently that in other locations, which may just
answer the underlying questions I'm saying the students face on a daily basis in this town: There IS a way to be here--and it may well be through the arts, in a combination with other physical exploration.

Summary: What does all this have to do with poetry and with finding a more engaged experience of the world? In some deeply significant way, the answer seems to be this: Where the students themselves are more likely to be acknowledged and appreciated for their divergence from the norm, so it seems that their use of language--and thus their poetry--will be also. We might even be able to turn that equation around: Where they are able to--or given the chance to--experience a deep sense of language and visual play through poetry and art, so might a deeper respect for individual development and differences flourish as well. But such a reversal statement might require evidence from this study as a whole.

9.4. Students' Connection with Play and the Physical World

Abstract: All along, I've been deeply curious as to how much the students' different experience of this somewhat rural, definitely small-town environment, influenced their poetry and response to art. If they had a more active, physically-based play life as children (versus being "contained" in small yards and in front of screens), how might that influence their willingness to imagine scenes (a form of projected physicality) and to play with language and various points of view? Their answers might not be conclusive, or simple to interpret. Nevertheless, they offer a place from which to begin.

Halfway through each interview on "place" (two before and two after my time in the classroom), I admitted my bias to the students: my sense that our connections with the natural and physical world around us influence strongly our ability to appreciate and to write poetry. Short of
explaining Heidegger and Mark Johnson's theories on thinking as it relates to the physical realities of the earth and our bodies, I had to just say that "all my reading points me in the direction that poetry has a lot to do with connecting with where we are..." I wanted to know, I told them, how much they themselves did things out-of-doors, either when they were younger or in their current lives. What sorts of games did they play growing up? What sort of natural places did they have now--and did they value those places?

Some could only go so far with this question. Heather, for instance, who could think of very little that she liked about the area, spends most of her free time on the internet and shopping at the mall. When she was around five, she was fascinated with horses--so her parents moved to the country (as good parents these days are wont to do... changing their own lives for "the sake of the kids"). Ironically, she soon stopped caring about horses, especially about feeding them in the middle of the winter and cleaning their stalls.

Others were more immediately involved with the question. Amber, for instance, readily told me of a "bend in the stream" where she and a number of her male friends go to fish and "just hang out and talk." Sara Gruber never wants to leave the area. She's planning on training to be a physical therapist--but she'll work in area schools' sports programs and continue to live on a farm and take care of
animals. Nearly all her spare time is spent raising her calf—now a young bull. Disappointingly, Sara's poems about her bull are rather shallow and predictable. Though her poem about staying at her grandfather's house and hearing him walk down the stairs in the early morning to light the furnace could not have been written without her family's close involvement with the natural, physical world. The evidence gathered from simply comparing these two very diverse students, Sara and Heather, would point several different directions in answering this question. Sara, who is more deeply involved with the land and farming matters than any other girl I know at the school, wrote not so well when directly writing about the steer she's raised, but much better when considering her farmer-grandfather; Heather, one of the most sophisticated (fashion-wise) students in the classes, wrote not very well about her "vision" of a beautiful sunset, but strikingly when dealing with digging out the muddy foundation of her family's house. Might it be not so much liking the area that matters here as much as the plain experience of it?

More intriguing still are those students, like Sarah Keener, who were involved with the land earlier on and have since adopted a more interior life-style. She admits, "I'm on the phone or the internet 24/7 talking with my friends" and she's been doing that pretty much for five years or so
now. Yet she admits that her experience of living out in the woods has indelibly marked her. Sometimes in negative ways. "When I'm in the city, I follow my parents around the store like a puppy dog - maybe I have crowd fright -" She chose the woods, when her parents asked her where they should build, "because that's what I loved at the time." They had horses for a good while--and one can see from her writing that they have given her a rich knowledge of another way of being. Now she's not so sure she loves the country, but it's in her anyway. "I don't really have a choice," she says. "I have to walk down the driveway (2000 feet through the woods) every day." When she sits down to write, those experiences are there. "One of the things I like to write about is my driveway. Every time the season changes my driveway is pretty... I mean in the fall, the whole thing is yellow with leaves." So even if now she's latched onto a interior internet world, she has that rich exterior landscape to draw from. It's like she's tapped into both worlds.

Even more telling were their answers to where and how they played growing up. Over and over, the students whose poems stood out in the semester were the ones who responded most readily to the question. In contrast to Kurtis, who merely shrugged his shoulders, unable to think of much that he did, other than hang around in the yard, Nate spoke excitedly about building a nine-hole golf course in his
rather small backyard. "The fifth hole, par five, is my personal favorite... you have to hit the ball over the house (don't worry - it's plastic) to the 'green.'" When there's not much to do, you have to invent, he says.

Others talked about building "forts" with blankets, or pulling each other up and down the driveway in the wagon. Or making a pulley to try to get to the highest tree in the yard. These are all mentioned by Bethany, one of the students whose poems blossomed as the time went on. Can I "prove" those childhood experiences fed her poems? Probably not. But I can record that she had much, much more to say about her experiences growing up than Kurtis, for example. She and her friends would camp out at night in the yard, playing cops and robbers with flashlights. Like Ben, who would use sticks from around the woods to fight a war against dragons, or Shelby, who spoke of creating imaginary places all summer long with her sisters. Clearly other students, such as Kurtis, might be simply hiding more, unwilling to share personal details with a stranger. But I choose to believe the opposite: that the rich detailed childhood play of the other students was a strong reason that they were able to put so much personal energy into their poems.

"What's the connection," I asked, "between poetry and this kind of childhood play?" Brian, who had proved himself
so adept at **role playing** in his poems, taking on the voice of a villain, a parking lot, a heroine, and a field, predictably jumped right in:

> It's like with that parking lot poem - it all came from imagining what I would do with it the whole time. I just kind of sat there and imagined: if I had that lot in my backyard - what would I do with it - I could picture it perfectly - how it would look the first time I saw it - and then how it would look now.

Ben added: "Most poems are just imagining things, aren't they? Like those pictures you gave us - you had to imagine - what would you think if you were there in their picture... It was fun to put yourself inside..."

**Summary**: In their minds, at least, poetry had become synonymous with play. And by their own admission, the sources of their early play had been the woods, the creek, the yard that became a golf course or a field for flashlight tag. From them, I don't conclude that one must grow up in the country to succeed at poetry, but that ANY physical environment to explore as a child would be extremely useful as a psychological/physical backdrop to the sort of playful exploration that poetry and art encourage, perhaps even to the kind of thinking and supposing they foster. The two may be intricately (though not simplistically) linked.

### 9.5 The Reading of Poems

**Abstract**: After all our time together writing poems, I wanted to know if they were able to READ poems more carefully and insightfully. How do they make sense of complex imagery or ambiguity? Did they visualize poems as mental pictures, the way I'd hope to encourage them early on--or did they hunt for meaning first, jumping straight to situations instead of pictures? None of these questions is crucial to the study at its core, but they form an intriguing subset of concerns.
Our discussions were very much informal. I was aiming for more the tone of a casual conversation among friends than an indepth probing of their thoughts. That approach has its strengths and weaknesses. Its strength is that the ideas that do come out are likely to be "just what they feel," without embellishment. The weakness is that the casual atmosphere does not draw out as much thoughtfulness as in the classroom sometimes, where there are more expectations with the teacher around. With that in mind, we began to talk, as friends might talk, about some poems and paintings.

The group of A block students was nearly the same as in September, minus Ben Benson, who had gradually become less interested in the poetry, though he showed signs of flair from time to time. Heather, Amber, Jenny, Nate, Phil, Tressa and Rachel and I sat around a lunchroom table in the just-opened new cafeteria. We started by reading a poem by Ira Sadoff called:

My First Two Wives

My last two wives loved everything
about potatoes their ugly color their hopeless
shape they even loved the joke about potatoes
"What has a thousand eyes but cannot see?"
they loved to mash them
fry them boil them until they cried out for help
they loved to cut them open
just to see the cold cup of starch
lying still in it skin like a snowdrift

they could not live without potatoes
it was amazing like a bad habit
they could not stop
from grabbing potatoes off the counters
hiding them in their pocketbooks
and dreaming of endless tables of potatoes
weeping out of all their eyes
caressing them into sleeplessness
making them eat their own dirt

it is a wonder I could not love them

I chose this poem because it took us off in a new direction. While still playful and full of detail and metaphor, the way most of our examples had been, it takes on a new tone. Ironic and somewhat sarcastic in nature, it invites us into a strange world of personal entanglements that is hard to pick one's way through. Hard to tell: is he just joking, playing around with a bad dream? Or is there an undercurrent of commentary on marriage, or perhaps on our materialistically obsessed culture? The tone is just ambiguous enough that I hoped student would have much to say about it, debating the various possible interpretations.

This they did--to a degree. Jenny, for instance, picked up immediately on the last line, saying that she loved its ambiguity. Amber, on the other hand, took it all more literally, responding that "I think the details are kind of disgusting... I mean, I can picture them slicing them open and laughing..." Jenny agrees: "If it was anything but a potato it would be vicious." Heather chimes in that it reminds her of Henry the 8th. So far, we're not making much progress. They all seem to get the joke of the poem--all but
Phil, who minutes later FINALLY points out that "he doesn't explain at the end whether it's the wives or the potatoes." We let it go that Jenny said that already. (And I begin to wonder if one reason Phil had such trouble with the poetry is that he picks things up more slowly--and wasn't able to maintain the pace.) But past this obvious point, I had to push a little to get them to consider there might be something bigger going on here.

Jenny, again, does the first speculation: "He picked two people who look exactly a like. If the first died, that's kind of understandable, but if they were separated, then that's kind of weird." Amber, again, builds on Jenny's thought: "I think he might be wondering that himself..." Heather, following suit, offers: "Maybe he's trying to find another version of her ... but then that last line is weird... if he didn't love the first one anyway..."

So it's a three-way conversation, with me pushing the talk further along when necessary. Back around, Jenny asks, "Why are the potatoes weeping - and not her?" Amber ignores this, and considers: "I think they're (the wives) kind of fun-loving." Heather: "They're crazy..." Things are getting rambly--they're not building on each other's ideas anymore. And it almost seems like we're going through the motions, that the associate-talk we had before has degenerated into "doing Terry's exercise -- we have to say something or he
won't like it..." Still, or maybe because of that pushing further, eventually something of significance emerges.

Amber's really digging now (excuse the pun): What if the potatoes aren't really potatoes? Her question leads nowhere, nice as it is to consider looking at them on a symbolic level. Heather tries out a weird idea: "It reminds me of a serial killer..." Again, Phil is five minutes late: "I think the wives are a bit malicious..."

Then Nate jumps in with the first insightful challenge: "I think they have an obsession with control." Someone jokes that he (Nate) does too... Then Jenny concludes it all for us, stumbling over this rich idea:

I think I'd be annoyed with someone who could not love the potatoes when they meant so much to me....

Wow--the first strong interpreting of the whole time! Instead of just calling them crazed or obsessed, she's taken the other side for once, considering what the women themselves might feel. That's a twist her mind is starting to make. She's playing with this poem, as Michael Ann Holly says we do with interpreting paintings (see Chapter 4). Well, they ALL are. But she's jumped out on a limb to give us a brand new idea. The wives are not hurtful, crazy or merely obsessed. They are individuals who have come to "love what they love" and he... he stands on the outside, unable
to show enough interest to keep the marriages going... It's a comment about himself, according to Jenny, as much or more so than the women and their odd habits.

Were these students able to dig out the meaning of this poem, after 12 weeks reading and writing in that genre? To a degree. They certainly didn't balk at discussing its unusual twists of language. Or that it discussed situations not personally familiar to them now. They liked the playfulness of it. But their readings weren't very complex. They were less able to turn things around on their heads than I would have liked. Until Jenny's comment, no one had said anything that surprised me. After many times of reading the poem, I'm so glad when someone unpacks it freshly from reading it for only the first time. This Jenny has done. And perhaps Jenny alone.

In L Block, the interaction was more spread out, though perhaps because we read a more complex, enigmatic poem, there was more potential for finding our way in. Here's the first poem in Pablo Neruda's book, *Residence on Earth*:

**Dead Gallop**

Like ashes, like seas peopling themselves,
in the submerged slowness, in the shapelessness,
or as one hears from the crest of the roads
the crossed bells crossing,
having that sound now sundered from the metal,
confused, ponderous, turning to dust
in the very milling of the two distant forms,
either remembered or not seen,
and the perfume of the plums that rolling on the ground
rot in time, infinitely green.
All that so swift, so living,
yet motionless, like the pulley loose within itself,
those wheels of the motors, in shot.
Existing like the dry stitches in the tree's seams,
so silent, all around,
al the limbs mixing their tails.
But from where, through where, on what shore?
The constant, uncertain surrounding, so silent,
like the lilacs around the convent
or death's coming to the tongue of the ox
that stumbles to the ground, guard down, with horns
that struggle to blow.

Therefore, in the stillness, stopping, to perceive,
then, like an immense fluttering, above,
like dead bees or numbers,
ah, what my pale heart cannot embrace,
in multitudes, in tears scarcely shed,
and human efforts, anguish,
black deeded suddenly discovered
like ice, vast disorder,
oceanic, to me who enter singing,
as if with a sword among the defenseless.

Well now, what is it made of, that upsurge of doves
that exists between night and time, like a moist
ravine?
That sound so prolonged now
that falls lining the roads with stones,
or rather, when only an hour
grows suddenly, stretching without pause.

Within the ring of summer
the great calabash trees once listen,
stretching out their pity-laden plants,
it is made of that, of what with much wooing,
of the fullness, dark with heavy drops.

A much tougher poem, assuredly. And a richer one too. One
could put one's finger down anywhere and find intriguing
lines. My first question to these four students--Josh, Emma,
Brittany and Sarah McGlynn--is simply, "What is going on?" A
not so obvious question when a reader has as little place to
stand as in this poem. Or maybe it's more that the reader
has TOO MANY places from which to view what is going on: we are in a swirl of locations and possibilities. Appropriately, their first guesses are outlandish and rather off the mark. Josh says he pictures an old painting of an Indian hunter on a horse, his head down, his spearpoint touching the ground. Emma sees an old country house, with people coming up the road from the fields. Brittany, perhaps because of the opening lines about seas, imagines someone sitting on a beach, with a boat out in the water. Are these "wrong"? Maybe not. They may indicate how each reader brings to the poem what he or she can, but as yet there's little in their comments that seems to come from the poem itself, from more than a superficial immersion in the lines.

I ask for lines now, wondering which ones they find intriguing. Josh, always the first to answer, loves the phrase about the bells, "having that sound now sundered from the metal." Emma, true to her own style, chooses: "Like an upsurge of doves." That more lines don't fly out more readily tells me something. It doesn't seem, from their demeanor, that they dislike the poem, but they may be having trouble with it. There are too many stunning lines--and without me pulling teeth, they only pick out a few.

Maybe it's the meaning of the whole poem that matters to them more. That's understandable, especially given their age. Sophomores, as far as I can tell, love the "big
picture" more than the tiny detail. Their minds are now at a stage that they can see the massive currents sweeping through the mind at last and they are fascinated by that movement--and not yet the small triggers of that movement, the crucial but often unnoticed results. Coming closer to the meaning, Sarah says, "Either he doesn't understand life - or he's dead - and now he sees everything." Josh says, "He can't understand the beauty - or the place that he loved. And so he feels overwhelmed." That's all so intriguing... and I marvel at how they get those insights WITHOUT looking closely at individual lines. Maybe it's more of an intuitive process: they know this without knowing how. A younger student would likely be lost completely, able only to give me a few pictures (the ox dying, with its horns still struggling to rise; the plums rolling to the ground); a slightly older or more mature reader might be able to pin-point where the insights are coming from. These kids mainly HAVE them--those wonderful intuitive insights they seem to reach on their own. Sarah says, "He's looking at stuff from a different angle now. He's trying to find the meaning of life through these different things." Accurate but too general as yet, for my tastes.

Emma says it seems like he's talking about war, with all the confusion. Brittany notices that everything seems to slow down--the ox dies slowly, the leaves are listening.
Josh comments that the last lines sound like a rainforest (aha! Malaysia, where the poem was written... though he doesn't know that). Then he concludes: "To me it seems like he's looking at things and becoming less hard-hearted - like he's going to open up - He can't take in all the beauty - in the beginning - and there's a big change in the end."

NOW it seems the depths of the poem have begun to be reached. Just as with the group from A Block, it took quite some time--and we only made a little progress, but this idea that Neruda is opening back up to life is a stunning revelation. It changes the poem for me the way Jenny's comment does the Sadoff poem. Yes, I too would pull away from a spouse who could not sympathize with my deepest interest, quirky or otherwise. And yes, Neruda here has made some big change where all "the too distant forms" of the world come closer, where "within the great ring of summer / the great calabash trees once listen..." Josh can't supply us with the source of that change, at least not yet, or not in this casual discussion. But he got there anyway. And that's a start.

**Summary:** Without comparable opening interviews, I can't claim any change in these students' reading of the poems. That's not the point here anyway. I have to believe they have jumped in further than they would have had we read these challenging poems at the very beginning. Their interpretive skills don't seem overwhelming to me... yet that too was not the point of my time with them as such. I would have liked to have seen more finesse.
in their being able to take a line and show me its impact on the whole of the poem. To VISUALIZE the text, give us more of what they see in their minds as they read it. But that would have taken probably more formal training in the unpacking of a poem. What's more important, it seems to me, is what the kids from L block told me at the end, when I asked them if they would have bothered to read such a confusing poem on their own, if I weren't there asking them. All four said they would, as Emma put it: "I would want to re-read it, to keep trying to pick more stuff from it." Sarah McGlynn said, "Even small poems can be hard to figure out. This one keeps me thinking." I'm not sure, given the scope of my project, what more I could ask.

9.6 Metaphoric Readings of Paintings

Abstract: A further demonstration of these students' tendency to leap to grand--and often insightful--conclusions, as against insights grounded in particulars, happened when we turned our attention to some reproductions of paintings I brought in, mostly taken out of THE AMERICAN ART BOOK. But something else happened as well: both they and I noticed that without metaphor we could hardly talk about paintings at all, not at least for the kind of meanings we wanted to make of them. All of their talk was couched in "it seems as if's" and "it could be's". Especially when they discovered something significant to say. Whether that was the result of our time with the poetry could not be said, not at least without preliminary interviews about their readings of paintings. But it's an important insight nonetheless.

In A block, Amber started off. Seeking that same informality of discussion we experienced with the poems, I had merely asked them to pick one of the paintings and say what they saw in it. What attracted their eye and what meaning did they make of it--what did it say to them? Amber had chosen a painting by Joseph Stella.
Figure 9.2 Joseph Stella, "Tree of My Life"

About it she said:

At first I just looked at the details -- flower here, flower there -- yadiyadiyada -- But then I asked myself, 'Why did they put this one purple flower right in the midst of the picture? -- A lot of wonder why questions --I chose it because it was kind of eccentric - the more different it is, the more my mind likes to work with it - I saw this strand across the top - it starts off as something rather small - gets darker as it goes on - Then I looked at the title, "The Tree of My Life" and figured this column was like his life - getting darker as it went down or lighter as it went up - I don't know which -

Amber assumes the painter has one thing to say, rather than that she can make something from what the painter has put
before her. Her mind can only focus on the center of the picture, where she assumes the painter has put this one flower on purpose. That's a common enough attitude. Once she can grasp onto the title as a "savior," a way to place meaning on it all, she feels she has accomplished something. I'd say she's just begun to grapple with it, while she thinks she is done. Her interpretation is metaphoric, to an extent. But it stops at accepting the title at its word, rather than making its word her own.

Phil can do less than that, taking a photograph by Berenice Abbott, a night-view of New York City (1939), and saying that he likes it because it reminds him of New York. "It's bright and it's pretty" is literally all he can come up with. I ask him if he could think about it metaphorically, since we'd been working on that with the poetry and his off-hand comment is: "I flunked that part of the class." And he's right. Looking back at Phil's poems, it's ALL metonymy and prosaic description. What's telling then is that he can't do that "move" when he looks at paintings either. But I admire his honesty in first of all coming to this talk session at all, since he never expressed much liking for the poetry. And more bravely, in having the courage to state right here what he had trouble with. Maybe it means that that inability in some students to do metaphor is something that could be addressed more directly.
I tossed the idea of reading the photograph metaphorically to the group as a whole and several were able to come at it right away. "It's an 'X' to a treasure map," Jenny said. "The golden lights are the treasure--and these streets here where they meet are the giant X..." I asked what would happen if you turned it upside down and Amber began to see it all as the workings of a computer. Heather just had to call up the image of an ant hill... but that too is in keeping with her more cliched use of metaphor.

Nate, as one might have guessed, chose the most idealized painting in the group--Maxfield Parrish's "Riverbank Autumn." Out-of-favor as Parrish has long been, I have to admit I'm drawn to this scene as well: a huge oak tree, nearly split in two but still splendid with its overhanging branches, spans over a glistening river, in golden autumn light, its roots gnarled, the land wrinkled with crisp age, all decay brushed over with idealized glow. And Nate? Like Phil, he just "likes it." "I chose it because it's real peaceful - I kind of like it I guess - all the others there's too much action - this one's different - kind of quiet - a place where you don't have to talk over giant machinery" (this was a joke--as there was a man on a fork-lift-type machine changing lightbulbs just ten feet away from us at the time). When pressed to say whether he saw it as a "real" place, Nate said, "It could be... there's maybe
places like that - I hope it's real..." I pushed him on this, citing Parrish's reputation as an idealizer of reality, and Nate was willing to admit it has that air, but on his own, it would seem, that never would have occurred to him. As I've noted in his poems, he sees things on a grand scale, hoping for a perfect world to save us from "too much action." And now I begin to notice that the students see themselves in these paintings as much as they see the work itself. And I realize there's so much more we could have learned from a more indepth study of paintings.
Some works seem to lend themselves to simplistic readings, at least in the hands of certain students. Josh, who in L block was able to see the unreality of the Maxfield Parrish right away, was mostly just mesmerized by photograph of the lights in Felix Gonzales-Torres's installation, "Untitled (Lovers - Paris)". To his credit, he doesn't write it off as "not art," the way some would, being that it's just lightbulbs strung together on the floor. But for him it's "just cool - bright colors - not so clear - fuzzy a little bit - bright but confusing." Asked if it's art, he says: "You wouldn't usually look at lights like that - you'd want to untangled them." Meaning because it's "not how you would usually look at them," it's art. "Any meaning here?" I ask. And he says, "No, it's just that - the lights." Now for Josh, who has no trouble with metaphor at all, to come up with nothing of meaning for a piece he likes, just as Phil had with Abbott's photograph, is telling. Some works, at this age at least, speak only with their presence, even when the students enjoy them.

At this stage, it appears that students need human figures in the works to take their interpretations very far. At least that's what happened with these two groups. Rachel, a student who also struggled with metaphor, picked Clarence Carter's "War Bride," and while unable to go very far with interpretation, seemed more moved by the work than any of
the other students thus far. She at first states the obvious, "It kind of looks like a bride on her wedding day - but it's like she's going to meet her doom - like she's trapped - brides are often quiet on their wedding day -" She's clearly troubled, trying to work this out.

Jenny says, "It's a foreign country - she's been set up." And I admit that "it is an ominous country." To our surprise, at this point Phil throws in: "The machine looks like a little platypus - see - there are its eyes -" And several of us call out, "Metaphor! Metaphor!" And it may be
his first time... Nate then makes up his own: "It's a metaphor on death - she's just kicked the bucket - and it's heaven - like judgement day." Jenny says, it "kind of gives me a Wizard of Oz effect." But then Rachel gives us the most compelling, most ominous interpretation of all: "It makes me think there's more of them [meaning the brides] being made...

Now, as with the two poems, we're in fresh territory. And we could easily, given more time, taken that interpretation further. Playing with metaphor, the way a basketball team might work a series of passes between each other and around the defense, Rachel has scored a goal here: she's given us a way of seeing it that transcends the easy (she's been set up... she's died and this is judgement day) to the complex where the root of the fear we feel when looking at the painting is that hidden sense that this a planned factory, with more and more of her being made each day, for the good of the state. With more training, Rachel may have come to such depth by herself, writing out her interpretation for a paper. But this was "informal discussion" time, resembling (I had hoped) the sort of talk that might take place among friends in an art gallery. Rachel had given us some nice photographs of her own to write about earlier in the semester. Now she has handed us an idea to chew on, to carry away.
Our talk about Lee Friedlander's eerie photograph, "Galax, Virginia," also hovered around a bit of mystery. Why is this baby's face on the screen? Who is watching? For what reason? Emma is able to do less with it that I might have hoped, saying only that it reminded her of a movie called "The Ring" that she saw. She says she picked it because it's eerie, but that's about it. Josh is able to muster the thought that maybe it's trying to get us to look more honestly at babies' faces, to recognize how weird they are,
not so pretty as we'd like to pretend. He notices how the
dark panels on either side of the screen might be doors into
another dimension, like space just starts to trail off
there.

In A block, we get a little further. Heather picks this
piece and simply notes that the tv screen is not centered.
We relate this to Mrs. Grubb's advice not to try to center
your subject when taking pictures. Heather expresses Amber's
same openness, saying, "I picked it because I didn't know
what it was about - and it's interesting to think about - I
could sit here and wonder all week - and come up with
different answers -" Jenny just has to contribute: "It's
like some old baby monitor - maybe it's their way of
watching their kid - to feel more secure as they sleep."
Heather continues: "It's paranormal - it doesn't seem like
the rest of the room." Nate says: "I thought of a
poltergeist." This off-the-cuff listing of metaphors is both
intriguing and disappointing. Fascinated as they are by this
picture, they can find few words to interpret it, beyond
references they might borrow from movies.

Our most productive discussions happened about the last
piece we looked at in each group. In L block, Brittany had
chosen Kienholz and Reddin's "Portrait of a Mother with Past
Affixed Also," a wonderful installation piece featuring a
mannikin of a stocky-legged woman standing in aluminum
doorway of her miniature home. This one they look at pretty closely for all that the details might say. Brittany notices

![Figure 9.7 Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin, "Portrait of a Mother with Past Affixed Also"](image)

that she's looking down at the picture herself, perhaps "looking at a child that died." Josh--true to form, honing in on the metaphor--notices that the woman in the piece
doesn't seem to have a head, but has instead a head reflected in a mirror that shows the image of the picture she's holding. He says, "It's like she can change her head - and look in the painting - like she's looking for another head".

Brittany notices how cluttered it all is inside, and how clean on the outside. Josh, again adding on to someone else's point, contributes (or should I say interrupts): "It's just like our brain -it's all different -inside- we might look plain on the outside -" And Brittany agrees: "We never really know what's going on inside." I'm irritated that Josh has to direct the discussion all the time in this group (it's the way he is everywhere). But I'm pleased that between the two of them, Josh and Brittany have built a little meaning from this work... and all in the form of *metaphoric dialogue*...

It's as if the person choosing the piece offers it to us in the form of an opening point and we build the interpretation as a group. In A Block, our last piece is chosen by Jenny, who starts off with a rather astute observation about Alfred Maurer's cubist-like piece, "Woman with Curlers":

I like this one - and I don't know if the artist meant to or not - but with the curvature of her neck it's like they're sharing the same eye - like they're a shadow of each other -
with that one comment she's gone a ways beyond Amber's effort to get to know what the artist thought by looking at the title. Jenny writes that option off right away by taking her own responsibility for seeing. She apparently has no background in cubism, so she's working with these faces here, on first glance, as if they are several different people. That allows her to make the stunning decision that they ARE just that - but sharing the same vision, looking through each other's eye. That's a very physical stance to take, built on her noticing that the curvature of the neck is tilted just right (there ARE two necks, after all). And I love this reading: that there are three eyes here trying to look as one. Amber adds in: "People often say we're two faced - but look at all these lines on the outside - as if there's a lot of motion going on...-" And I'm prompted to ask, leading us unfortunately away from the painting at this moment: "Do we have more than one face? Are we in some ways more than one person?" Misdirected as that question is, it leads us to a fascinating discussion which is equally reflective of these students' views of art and poetry.

Rachel gives an immediate "I think so" and Nate is just as quick with his comment, "I think we are but I don't think we should be - the way you act in school isn't the way we act around our parents ..." Again, looking for absolutes, he
Figure 9.8 Alfred Maurer, “Women With Curlers”
implies we alter our attitudes too much... that, in contrast to the painting, there might be "one person" inside us, not many looking from one set of eyes. Heather has a richer view:

It seems like we are - it seems like we're just complicated - like any person - I mean you can't be the same all the time -

Rachel has thought about this too:

I think everyone is themselves and if they try to be like someone else then they're not themselves - but if it is your personality to try to be like someone else - then it's fine - Like say I want to be like Jenny - but I might just do it in my own way -
That's a pretty subtle--and honest--view of how we become who we are, certainly the age-old pursuit of adolescents at this age in any era. Jenny, who brought us to these understandings with her reading of Maurer's painting, says:

You may think you're different - but your personality might [just] be showing or shining in a different way - if you're in a room with all kids versus being in a room with adults - so many different elements affect your emotions and actions - so you're always yourself, it's just a different part of yourself is showing -

Although they may have forgotten that we began with talking about the "Woman with Curlers," I had not. I saw each of their comments reflected back in Maurer's mirror, the way Josh and Brittany had seen the old woman's face coming back to her from the painting she's holding. In both of these last works, it is the SELF that is at hand... who we are and how we are seen, as youths or as older people. Maybe that's always the struggle: in how many ways are we seen - who sees us - and how do we know what we "really" think? For these students at least, that would seem to be art's most essential role: to reflect back what Heather calls is that "complicated person" each of them is becoming.

Summary: Out of a rambling discussion, three things became clear:

1) They were only novices at making meaning out of art, at saying more than the obvious. Even when they really liked a piece, they had at first few words for saying why. This made
me long for more time within the semester for working on the interpreting of images.

2) When they DID find words, those words were--without being requested to do so--metaphoric and frequently inventive or playful. One can only speculate whether the poetry helped here. Those who had a more fluent time with the poetry--who didn't balk at metaphor the way Phil says he did--had a much easier time interpreting the visual work. Whether the time with the poetry helped them do this better is something I can't prove.

3) When they touched on questions of meaning, their questions and insights were frequently questions of the self. The metaphors they were able to create showed them "ways out" of simple or one-dimensional readings of the art work, and what's more, pointed to a more open-minded, accepting understanding of "what is a self?" and "how do we know who we are in this world?"

Perhaps all this leads to the most intriguing speculation of all: That giving students in-depth experience and practice with writing about and interpreting images may be one of the best ways to help them open up their thinking processes and make sense of who they are. More work would need to be done in this arena, but the hints are at least there.

9.7 What Did They Think The Poetry Was For?

Abstract: Indirectly, I hoped some insights would emerge about "What did you get out of our time together?" without putting the students on the spot. So I let such overall evaluations happen naturally. What they told me, as the above discussion about paintings suggests, is that the poetry residency gave them a way to see themselves--and most of all, each other--in very different ways. Where before they would hide some of their most inner thoughts, the poetry gave them a chance to bring these to the fore and even to honor them, recognizing that what they were experiencing, in terms of metaphoric associations, for instance, others were as well. When they realized that connection between themselves and the rest of the members of the class, I believe, the poetry and art became places we
could exchange "more essential things," a festival where our full selves could be involved.

In two other group interviews the topic shifted naturally to this same point of "the self": who are we - and what does poetry have to do with it? Sara Gruber, for one, saw it all as a process of learning about ourselves and each other. "Other people's poems made me think about what I take for granted," parts of other students that she doesn't always know are there. Sarah Keener joined in, admitting, "I'm only sharing my stuff with David when he's away from his friends - then I'm able to show him my poems. The class changed that - now I don't feel so stupid for showing him my stuff because I realized, 'Hey, you can actually write..." I suggest that it's a tough thing for boys to reveal too much of that side of themselves. "Except," says Sarah, "when he's away from everyone."

This leads to another typical--and important--concern of these students that hinges on our entire discussion: popularity versus being one's self. Both Sarah and Sara here see a falsehood in the attitudes of many popular kids. Says Sarah, "I can sit around a bunch of kids who like to be popular - and I just listen - yet when it's one to one they're so different to me." There's a falseness she notices, but it's not something people are always able to detect. "I have a friend- she thinks that's how they really are - but you know they're hiding something - they can't be
that shallow." She says there's a fear of depth - and that causes a problem for poetry. "In poetry," she says, "you have to look deeper - and they don't want to -"

Poetry, say Sarah and Sara, allows you to talk about these matters indirectly. "You make a personal connection," says Sarah Keener, "but you substitute something else in - like I wrote about my guitar as if it was one of my friends. Sometimes I find something that doesn't matter as much to me - but then I substitute to give it an edge." I don't tell her that "substitution" is one version of the theory of what metaphor does--theory is not especially important here. What is important is that she's found her own way, after writing a good deal of abstracted poetry previously, to say what poetry does. That suggests she might be able to do it even more so on her own, after our time is over.

Ben Vail, in another group, said something similar when asked what he had learned. He said he'd learned that "poetry is looking at something in a different way and then expressing that view to someone else." Brian disagreed, saying you shouldn't think too much about what other people might get from it, but just write it for yourself. I hold with Ben's position--that the "other" ear is a big part of the writing... it's an invited conversation, a dialogue within at least an imagined or projected group, and as such it touches greatly on this question of "self" and "group"
that was raised in a number of the interviews. In regular life, we have to get by—as Sara Gruber hints—and we assume a lot is there or not there. Poetry allows us to put ourselves on the line, even in the form of "substitutions," to use Sarah Keener's phrase.

To illustrate his point, Ben gives an example: "We went to the museum—and I wrote about the Jewish museum—and I looked at it in a different way—and it's like saying, 'Come over here and look at it this way.'" Maybe that's the strongest effect that any of our work together could have: seeing poetry as a way to put ourselves before each other, seeing greater depths, allowing greater possibilities. Beyond individual insight then, "engaged world view" would mean little without this strengthened community of viewers exchanging views toward a more engaged world as a whole.

**Summary:** The insights to be drawn from the information in this whole chapter are many, but revolve intricately around the central themes of this study:

1) As the exercise with the cards showed us: it seems that the more students are aware of and connected to the tiny little facts and stories of their worlds, the more they are likely to enjoy playing with poetry to interpret and value those worlds.

2) When the most engaged students talked about paintings they inevitably used metaphor to explain what they thought was going on. In addition, they quite naturally engaged in playing around with the material offered by the artist in order to create meaning from it. This is not to say that the writing
of poetry necessarily **increased** their ability to view paintings metaphorically, but it does seem to indicate that the stronger the student's poems, the more likely they will engage in metaphorical interpretations of the world.

3) The same could be said for their reading of complex, open-ended poetry. When faced with that kind of poem, it seemed to help if students were able to withhold judgement for a bit, letting the images and details of the poems sink in. This seemed to be a slower process than talking about paintings. In Mieke Bal's terms, they seemed less able to visualize a text than to textualize a visual image (see Chapter 5). Nevertheless, this is precisely what they did with both--and the stronger they did both, the richer the "engagement" with the artwork at hand.

4) It seems that having a rich play life in early childhood, one that is actively engaged with the physical realities of the world, forms a strong basis for the writing of poems. If poetry is play, as a couple of the students brought up on their own, a strong sense of play in childhood, involving not necessarily the "natural world" but at least some physical, explorable environment, would seem to enhance one's openness to what poetry and perhaps art itself has to offer. Those who played in such environments as children seemed more ready and eager to explore the many sides of poetry and art than those who expressed a far less rich play-life in earlier years.

5) Ethnographically, students seemed to frame their worlds as a struggle to create a self in the context of the community in which they find themselves. This particular community appears to be nearly equally closed and open to them. Closed in the sense of a "bubble," as one student put it, fairly removed from the rest of the country. Open in allowing a person to fight their way into being who they are--if they have the courage to do so.

They related this "self-making" process to the writing of poetry and the study of art as one way to come to see themselves, learning, as one student put it, to "see it your way and then
asking others to 'come over here' and look at it from this angle.'"

Thus they themselves made a unity of our whole "conversation," linking--in a multi-logue--our discussion about the community, our interpretation of poems and paintings, and the writing of poetry we'd been doing all semester. An "engaged world view," as I see them framing that concept (albeit indirectly), would be to them a process of awakening the self to view everything, from a painting to a parking lot, with fresh and open eyes.
CHAPTER 10

THE GENERATIVE CYCLE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE FINDINGS

Abstract: Overall my study points to the conclusion that the four elements I have isolated as key factors in writing poetry have an interactive role to play with each other that, when operating well, can form a kind of "generative cycle" for students to more dynamically engage the world, whether that world be a memory, a physical perception, a written text, a visual image, or a social environment. Metaphor necessitated a physicalized engagement with language and the physicalization of metaphoric language seemed to trigger a more playful connection with perception which allowed students to visualize each given "world" in a more personal, original way. In short, I can point to case after case of students learning to visualize a text and to textualize vision. That dynamic interchange I will claim is one we can readily teach students, through the arts, toward the goal of giving them tools to more immediately and productively engage with their own learning, the world of art and visual imagery, and ultimately the places where they live.

10.1 Introduction: The Festival of Time

First of all, anything we achieved over the course of the semester was a result of the TIME we took to engage our learning and the FESTIVALS which we built around that expenditure of time. That Jill was willing to devote nearly a quarter of her contact time with the students over the semester (approximately 18 sessions out of an overall total of about 85) to working with the poetry is a gift of time to us all. With the block schedule at Mt. Gilead, we were able to take time to explore ideas more thoroughly--to take, for
instance, 45 minutes to hear about local history from the Millers, then to set up a writing idea for another 20, and still have 25 minutes for writing poems about the historical photographs. We could go downtown in one period, find our nooks and crannies for taking notes, and have time to sit on the bus to synthesize our observations into full-fledged poems.

Seldom does a visiting artist or a classroom teacher have such luxury. For an artist, often in a school for a few days or a few weeks, if a "product" is to be achieved, aspects of the creative process have to be short-changed in the interest of time. For a teacher, there are seemingly insurmountable curricular constraints and testing achievements to be considered. Both sides of the time problem work against building the sorts of interactive generativity I believe we were able to create. One way we were able to end-run the time dilemma was my merging our two agendas together and tagging the early poetry exercises to the reading of their "regular" assignment of the novel. Thus the usual situation of having a visiting artist "do his or her own thing," after which the class returns to "regular school," was undercut. Our experience of art-making (in our case writing poems and taking photographs) became less of a distraction from "regular" learning and more of an aid to reading literature at a deeper level, as well as to seeing
literature as a part of an overall exploration of "what does it mean to be alive in this place (or any place)?" In turn, our early explorations of the novel through poetry gave us a base to branch out toward digging into our experiences and the community at large in similar ways. Like some sort of organically-emerging crystal, united from self-contained yet interrelated segments, we got to a point where the divisions such as those traditionally built between poetry and literature, metaphor and perception, invention and knowledge, blurred. We'd been given enough time to let the strands blend--and to learn ways of choosing to see how they blend, perhaps each in our own way.

As I admit in the last section of Chapter One, this experience of TIME fostered in each lesson an expectation of FESTIVAL which had more importance than I ever would have thought in the beginning. What else could entice us to play with metaphor the way we did? It was as if art said to us: you can do this... you can play this way and something valuable will come out of it.

Our festivals (our lessons), like all such events, had a kind of ritual pattern. Of course we would begin with greetings--since often it had been several days since we'd been together. I would then remind the students of what we'd been working on last time, nearly always reading back examples--often on typed sheets--of some of the most
intriguing responses. Jill has told me that this is one of the most useful things I do for the students: allow them to hear their own words back with a bit of extra power and attention. As I have said elsewhere, we don't usually talk the way poems bid us to—not in the lockerroom or the hallways or the classroom. For the power of poetry and artistic seeing to build over our time together, we had to enter back into a sense of the beauty of this language EACH TIME.

Correspondingly, once the groundwork of metaphor, physicality, play and visual imagery had begun to be built, we had to keep renewing those sources, now emphasizing one, now another. Our "festivals" required new elements of play, new physical sources for applying our skills (the grocery, the museum, the photographs). Little did we feel that we were repeating the same skills—but indeed we were. It's just that those skills were couched in the cloth of our overall games, in new contexts each time. Each game had new rules, but those rules were variations and extensions of what we'd been working on all along.

Sometimes I would remind us of our overall scheme, sometimes just imply it. "What is it like to SEE anything?" I posed to begin with. "An old piece of metal. A slinky. An action in a sport. Or a town..." These were festivals of vision and because it is so intriguing a question—how does
our perception operate anyway?—we were carried along. We saw aspects of ourselves we might not have become aware of otherwise. We honored the artistic within our capabilities—as if we were temporary playwrights, actors with words, painters of scenes via black marks on a page.

As with most festivals, our time was temporary, fleeting. And what remains afterwards—beyond the poems we created and the reactions we recorded—is difficult to say. Will Josh play guitar better later on? Will Nate actually be a better lawyer, constructing a metaphorical analogy in his closing argument to undo the death penalty? Will Heather look at her not-so-appreciated home-in-the-country differently next year than she did last? Will any of them give a "weird" painting in a museum more than a second glance next time they go to one? Will they be more, or less, likely to even step into a museum in the future? Will they be more inventive or critical in the way they respond to ads or products in the grocery? Without a more extended study, one can only speculate on these longer term results. What I think DID happen is that for a brief time we were given the chance of experiencing the world in more engaged ways, more open to chance and wonder, more metaphorically rich and out-of-the-grid of staleness. More our own.
10.2 "Engaged World View" Re-Defined

Based on our time together, I now define an "engaged world view" as the ability to readily make use of the following eight skills. Because the lessons were so various --now delving into metaphor, now playing with images from slides of paintings, now scavenging for surrealistic, poetic snapshots of downtown--it almost seems like each one opened up a new way of formulating what "engagement" might be. Overall, they come down to one skill: the ability to not be stuck in how we visualize the world. To CHOOSE one's point of view. To be able to build that view from knowledge and direct perception, but to recognize that that very building process is metaphoric in itself, quirkily redefining what we first thought we saw. That recognition of "quirkicality" might be the way out of the image-colonization that Bryson and Mitchell talk of (see Chapter Five), for once we see that our world-views are constructed, in arbitrary and immensely changeable ways, then we are not stuck... we HAVE to choose... and the active engagement with our own experience is that much more possible.

Obviously, looking at a poem, or a group of poems, from one student, or from a whole class, is a tiny arena from which to extrapolate something so huge as the achievement of a "more engaged world view," even when supplemented by interviews. But that's exactly what I think poems allow us
to do, at least to some extent. Being small, they compact a lot into a space that can readily be walked around in, weighing one student's choice versus another's, or the development of vision in a poem written by a single student in one assignment versus more expansive development in subsequent lessons. Being built from metaphor, being playful at base, being grounded in physical detail, being a mix of verbal embellishment and nearly-painterly writing, poems are tiny crucibles for reading growth in perception. Limited? Of course. We can only see so far through them into a students' inner processes. They are mirrors, nonetheless, tunnels into our own re-linking of our experience of the world.

So let me spell out more specifically the sorts of development toward an "engaged world view" I saw in the students' responses to the poetry assignments. Some students will be able to give evidence of some of these skills more often than others, but they will likely be present in nearly any strong student poem, as well as in how students approach the larger questions of their perception.

An Engaged World View implies:

1. The ability to add something new to, to rearrange or to re-enter any situation or subject, in order transform it, if only in one's mind or one's choice of words. This is the playful skill we fostered all semester long, "breaking up" how we view anything. It is, of course, important to keep such "breaking up" or "adding" connected to what is there in the first place--to stay in relationship with what we experience and what we see. To more fully engage that experience,
however, means bringing something of our own to it.

2. The ability to apply associative thinking, to reframe a situation by combining aspects of some other arena. Closely related to #1, this skill equates to Jakobson's concept of metaphor as the associative tool of thought (see Chapter Two).

3. The ability to project oneself into a scene, whether it's a remembered situation, a read-about scene, a physical or social environment experienced more directly, an object, or a visual image. Such a move need not be solipsistic—it can, indeed, be an embracing of the Other (as in writing a poem in the voice of the villain in a story, or the voice of a step, or a barber pole). Such projection can indeed be a way of stepping OUT of one's limited view.

4. The ability to visualize a text, walking around a scene or an idea in one's mind. This skill is closely related to and grows directly out of the projective ability listed under #3, adding the crucial aspect of picturing what one experiences and what one writes.

5. The ability to conceive of a place as an inventive space, to take what is often passed by—the ordinary—and give it mythic, personal, playful, metaphorical or historical possibilities, applying knowledge, memory and emotion to perception, and perception back into re-formulating knowledge through invention—that is, to make it, at least temporarily, extraordinary.

This skill may be formulated in the following diagram:

```
Knowledge <-> Perception
   /               /
  /               /
 /               /
 /               /
 /               /
Metaphor <-> Invention
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What we have knowledge of (as, say, in knowing that a photograph we are looking at is of "the old
jail," we write about and respond to differently than something about which we have no background.

At the same time, our knowledge can get in the way of more directly perceiving, which, without inside information, can help us notice details because we’re not sure what something is.

As this study has shown, metaphors almost immediately enter into our perception, causing us to slant our view once we discover, invent or hear them. A strong metaphor will grow out of knowledge and perception--but can also send us back into what we think we know or see, with new lenses.

Finally, we can learn to invent ways of looking--to imagine a hole in the window, for instance, even when none is there and none has been suggested.

An engaged world view would imply knowing how to move and interact within these four cornerposts, mixing them all into a "space of invention."

6. The ability to change one's view within a piece of writing or situation--a radical ability to "get unstuck" by asking a fresh question or even to question one's own response. This is no doubt a version of #1, but adds an internal reflective process that seeks out the ambiguity even of one's own inventions.

7. The ability to turn the body, involving the body deliberately with sight (or sight with the body) so that we can step out of our usual "stale vertical view," at least at times. In other words, to "physicalize sight," along the line of the theorists Martin Jay and Rosalind Krauss trace out in Downcast Eyes and The Optical Unconscious, respectively (or of a student turning a photograph upside down to see it from another view). Such moves might whimsically be framed as "living the prepositions": what would be like to be under, inside, beside, above, etc., instead of just always "in front of..."?

8. The ability to textualize vision as Mieke Bal would put it (see Chapter Five), inventing or detecting narratives and metaphors within what we see so that what we see becomes more our own, more a part of how we engage the world.
Admittedly, all of these skills are closely inter-related. As I say above, in many ways they are part and parcel of the same basic skill, which is a metaphorical re-engagement with the world. (I say "re-"engagement not to imply that we once engaged it fully and now are doing so again, but to allow for re-experiencing our first experience, as art is often a re-visiting of what we sometimes pass by but don't really see.)

I would like to believe, based on the evidence of the poems the students produced and the comments they made in interviews, that a good number of them achieved at least some element of the above at least some of the time. Based on comparisons with poems they did on their own, as well as their development of skills over time, I think some rather dramatic transformations happened. The best I can do, however, is to speculate from the texts I have available. NOT to weigh, simply, whether the poems are any good, but to consider what elements of "an engaged experience" they reveal. I believe those texts reveal substantial grounding for the argument, especially when we see growth in these areas over time, that student after student touched on, if only briefly, what an "engaged world view" would feel like. Only a longer range study could consider whether these skills evidenced over these three months could be sustained over time and in other situations.
10.3 Theory Applied: The Metaphoric Prediction

As predicted by the work of Mark Johnson, George Lakoff, Paul Ricouer, Roman Jakobson and others (see Chapter Two), metaphor proved to be the key to the students' understanding of poetry and their abilities to apply poetry to deepening their connections with the world around them. For one thing, getting more adept at its use made them far more able to draw from their own memories when approaching a new topic or arena—to notice the stripes of shadows on an old car and call them, in contemporary terms, "zebra stripes"; to study a picture of horses in a polo match and project within that scene the student's own experiences with riding. Just because this is precisely what both Jakobson and Ozick (see Chapter Two) would have predicted, the results are no less deeply satisfying. Without this ability to connect one's previous experience into new situations that metaphor provides, an engaged world view would seem nearly impossible.

Even for those students who consistently hung back and wrote less exciting poems (I'm thinking here of about seven or eight kids), metaphor helped them make more sense of what they read or what they were seeing.

Here, for example, is Matt's poem depicting the moment when Dill and Scout accept a drink from Mr. Dolphus Raymond under the willow tree during a lull in trial:
The Brown Bag

I feel dizzy
My head is turning
Mr. Dolphus offers me a drink from his sack
I had thought it was whiskey
He had been stumbling around like a newborn deer
I thought to myself it couldn't hurt
Scout was rambling on like a chatterbox
I couldn't understand her
I took a drink
It was warm and tasty
It fuzzed in my mouth like pop rocks
It was Coke.

I, as one reader, don't find this poem very moving. It rather "flatly" sums up the scene, without adding much in the way of new slant or insight. That could be a matter of taste. It may be that Matt preferred this "plain" language to anything more dramatic, whereas my feeling is that reading his poem drains the book of meaning rather than enlightening it. Those metaphors Matt does employ seem stilted as his haulty-legged deer image--BUT THEY ARE NEVERTHELESS METAPHORS. And in a basic way they get the point across. Comparing Mr. Raymond to a newborn deer is a cliche but it does start to develop a picture of how he might act. As far as I remember, Mr. Raymond did not exactly hobble around town--he merely gave the impression of being sunk down into his paper-bagged bottle. But Matt, as the film-directer here, COULD decide to make him out that way. Just as he could decide to have Scout's personality "ramble on like a chatterbox." Perhaps that is how Dill might see
her as they escape from the confines of the courtroom. Once again, Matt is trying to convey the scene through metaphor. The same "yes/but..." analysis could apply to his use of "pop rocks" for what the soda pop tasted like. It IS, of course, a stab at metaphor. And of course pop fuzzes "like" pop-rocks. That, as I understand it, is what the candy is supposed to be, a metaphorical presentation of the "real thing," to waste a pun. I can taste the drink at the end of Matt's poem, but I know nothing or little about his perception of Dill or Scout or Mr. Dolphus Raymond. To a large extent, I'm left standing drinking pop in the middle of a cartoon.

Strange as it may be to say this--to take what I consider a weak poem and praise it--I think Matt's poem illustrates something that was "proved" overall. For even in what may be a less insightful poem, metaphor was doing most of the work! Remove the metaphor from Matt's poem and you have little at all to go on. Read it as a somewhat effective portrayal of Dill's mood at the time, or read it as a stilted attempt to convey Dill's surprise when he accepts the offer of a drink from a suspect town character, it is still "a poem" and it carries its imagery in the form of metaphoric moves calculated to make comparisons between one situation and another.
For a stronger example of the same "move," take Brian's poem written in the voice of Mr. Ewall, from the scene after the harvest festival show when Jem is leading Scout home from the school across the dark field. I have analyzed this elsewhere, but for the sake of drawing the distinction, let me include it one more time. Like any strong poem, it's worth re-reading!

MR. EWALL

The cool drink is like a morning dewdrop to my tongue. But I don't taste it. The smell of fall rushes through my nostrils, but I don't smell it. My mind is focused as I can, here with this bottle in my hand. I hear some children talking - it's HIS boy. My nose boils and I start following them in this blue-black darkness. They stop, I stop, I feel the cold shine of the metal on my thigh. I pull it out, and grin wickedly. This is best served cold! I race at them, but the boy hears me. That ain't right, he has a ham? I twist his arm and hear a crack, like a branch snapping in a high wind. Someone else is here, I hear them, I turn but trip, I put my hand out, but this cold, hard metal was waiting... I fall, never thinking, but I feel something hit my stomach. The knife was waiting... for me.

What's the difference? I'd suggest trying a test as a reader: take one and say the poem out loud, then take the other and do the same. See which one makes your skin "raise up" or the hair at the back of your neck shiver. Though I've analyzed it extensively in Chapter Eight, re-reading it now makes me shiver again with the power of Brian's writing:
• The way he offers sensory details in the first four lines, but then "takes them away," thus adding tension (offering the cake but not supply it);

• The sweet sound of "can" and "hand" in lines five and six, setting up a kind of ballad-feeling, without heading into sing-song;

• The way we get inside the speaker's head when we hear the emphasis on "HIS boy" and the emotional power such knowledge would have on Ewall's sense of righting his own shame;

• The synesthetic elements, where Ewall's nose "boils," and he physically feels the shine of the knife on his thigh, along with the subtle wickedness of comparing the knife to a drink;

• Even the humor, when Brian conveys Ewall's surprise at figuring out what the "ham" is. More than being a pure villain here, we gain a touch of sympathy for Ewall's drunken stupor (and perhaps his confused sense of life);

• The sparing yet powerful use of metaphor--especially the line about the breaking of Jem's arm--"like a branch snapping in the wind";

• The slow-motion fall of the last stanza or paragraph. With no slo-mo camera to help him out, and no catch-all phrase like "in a moment that felt like eternity," Brian lets us feel the fall upon the knife. And even, as I say in Chapter Seven, he "gets it wrong" (those who had read further knew Boo Radley had stabbed him), we get a powerful "alternative reading" that lets us as readers re-live that dramatic moment.

A rather stunning achievement: to take a moment of high drama by a fine writer like Harper Lee and bring us back into it anew, not making us feel like we're hearing the same thing rehashed! Brian has made the book his own, with metaphor as his guide.
So consider the range of Matt's and Brian's examples here. Both are out to show: metaphor guides our memory, our recreation of any moment, fictional or personal, invented or recalled. It welcomes in the "stranger," as Ozick attests (see Chapter Two), in the examples of Mr. Raymond or Mr. Ewall, both to be re-seen from a new angle, to be better known as people who inhabit this fine novel--and now, our minds.

10.4 The Physical World as the Ground of Metaphor

I believe as well that the theories of Mark Johnson and Martin Heidegger which I outlined in Chapter Three concerning the physical world of things and bodily/spatial experience as the source of art and meaningful thought proved essential to these students making use of the poetry lessons we engaged in. Whether they were writing about To Kill A Mockingbird or The Crucible, their own memories of fire or of jumping into a pool, about sitting on the street corner downtown or in front of a painting, there was a "slowing down" process the poems required which allowed them to pay attention again to the senses and the physical world of experience. A rushed poem tends to be an abstracted poem; a closely-attuned poem tends to ask us to dwell within the experience the way Heidegger says art does (see Chapter Three). To adapt his famous title, being requires time.

In this case, let me simply pick out a series of strong
lines from various poems and assignments which may give evidence for the power they were able to often achieve in their poems through attention to precise physical detail—and how often that detail led to or grew out of effective metaphor.

Here's the closing of Micah's long descriptive poem written in response to a fellow student's photograph of an old farmhouse. Each line of the poem adds another detail rather nicely, but the best buildup happens at the end:

Figure 10.1  Student photographer, “Old Farmhouse”

Rusty Red, the nickname of our shed
outback, its leaky room was the best
place to play hide and seek
Inside the living room the old blue couch
still sits, many nights spent reading there
The basement just underneath, with windows
to watch the rain

While not a stunning poem, this is a satisfying one. Mainly through the accumulation of inventive detail. Most of these things are NOT seen in the actual photograph, yet--probably due to the assignment's instructions to include something about what could be outside the boundaries of the photographer's choices--Micah has made them seem as if they belong there. You CAN barely see the old shed, but certainly not the color of the couch inside the living room. You CAN take a guess that there are basement windows, but it's pure, physicalized invention that makes us believe there are strong memories of the children who grew up here of being down- stairs playing, watching and hearing the rain. This is nice physical projection, if you ask me (closely related to #3 in the attributes of an "engaged world view" cited above).

In nearly any poem included in the booklet that we produced of the students' poems, one finds these factors at work: metaphor and the physical presence of the world to give the metaphor a place to ground itself and grow. Here are, for instance, the middle six lines from Julie's poem about smoking, in what I take to be an anti-addiction statement:

A whirlpool of smoke engorges your mouth
and tortures your lungs
coughing and hacking out this thing
fire has given us.
Yet you light up again,
seeing that same burdening flame.

Writing from either memory or active imagination, she's made smoking (to this non-smoker) seem both tempting and appalling--all through active, physical metaphor. What better way to get at its momentous appeal but as a "whirlpool of smoke [that] engorges your mouth"? Like Heidegger, she can hardly name its powerful forces, can only call it "this thing fire has given us." Normally that all-purpose word thing would seem empty. Here, within the presence of the other metaphors, it stands for much more. Perhaps the Unnameable. She's found here a power of tensive language that Wheelwright says poetry contains at its essence (see Chapter Two). It would be easy enough to write a simplistic anti-smoking poem or essay, mouthing all the "just say no" cliches we've been taught. Here, instead, Julie has ENGAGED that experience, in metaphor and physical detail, so that we live the choice.

The effect of this sort of physicalized language was not lost on the students. I remember quite clearly reading this poem back and feeling the hush in the room, partly no doubt because of the forbidden subject matter. But we were also able to weigh it for the strength of the language it uses. The very fact that such language continued to sprout up in more and more students' poems provides evidence to me
that they were listening—and learning about engaging the world on physical terms.

Take as a small reminder of that these lines from the poem that Ashley Sherbourne wrote at State Lakes:

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Parts of dead trees buried under the water
reveal themselves
as if trying to take one last breath of air
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Ashley did even stronger lines than these, such as the ones written the next day in our downtown exercise:

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What if pavement was the opposite of people?
Would it open the doors of bricks?
Everybody knows the bricks can sing and dance.
And whisper among themselves.
And the man that goes through the doors of bricks-- Who is he?

All day he pushes a cart full of pieces of cardboard...
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Maybe it's the quirkiness in them that makes me find these lines even more engaging than her State Lakes ones about the drowned branches. One might trace, though, the beginnings of this sort of playful language in Ashley (who'd shown little signs of freshness in her writings before) to that physicalized, inventive, and metaphoric invention she did while sitting on the shore of the lake: it is AS IF those dead trees where not just "lying there," the way we would so often say. No, she's physically imagined that they are breathing.
Neither Micah, Ashley nor Julie stand out to me as students who thrived on the poetry. They clearly got something from it, but didn't stand out or show tons of enthusiasm. Maybe because they're essentially shy. Maybe because they had other things on their minds besides poetry this fall (oh how could that be, how could they care about other things... silly me). I could have chosen many other poems, perhaps some more powerful, to illustrate the merger of the physical world with metaphoric flair that so often would make or break the exercises. That slant would, however, be less accurate. It was the vast majority of the kids who were applying these skills, not just the few. These poems matter. They make me think too that no matter what was going on for these students during those months, some part of them was listening and involved.

Early in this study I dealt with students' natural tendency to "go abstract" with their writing, DIS-engaged from the direct world of experience, from detail and specificity. Recall Nate, Phil and Ben talking about their "good times" in the backyard, without being able to supply any specifics to convey those times. One of the successes of our time together is that student after student became able to zero in on THE PARTICULAR and the PHYSICAL in a way that made it shine with meaning.
10.5 Training an Ingrained Playfulness

Looking back, I believe that even more than physicality and metaphor, playfulness kept us going as a group of experimenters-in-the-realm of seeing and writing. Yes, metaphor was effective--and physicalization of detail and presence made the poems "ring true," in a way that I think even they were impressed (as they told me in the interviews) by each other's abilities. Play, however, was FUN. It did exactly what Huizinga and Gadamer (see Chapter Four) might have said it would: it kept us in the realm of "making art" versus just "doing assignments." Gradually, as our time proceeded, I discovered that we needed to keep the edge on--for us as a class to play with what we'd learned in ways that we couldn't predict, just as I'd been saying we needed to play with the lines of our poems. Play in the sense that I outline in Chapter Four: play as the shifter of possibilities; as play-with-words, sound and line breaks; as playing with roles (which of course we'd already been doing with the Mockingbird poems, and out on the streets of Mt. Gilead); but most of all, playing with poetry as a game. Not a game as in "opening up the box and reading the rules," but a game where we invented (or transformed) those rules together.
I came to be more and more convinced by Hans-Georg Gadamer's argument that art functions primarily as symbol, festival and play to keep our worlds in motion (see Chapter Four), to keep us on our feet, so to speak. At least, that's what I look to it for. I think in some ways that our classes more and more became "festivals," in which we were something of a celebratory community, building the lessons together. I was the ringleader, certainly--that was my "role." But without their active and playful participation, not much would have gone anywhere. There was no grade-as-incentive carrot here. Yes, Jill was giving them credit for what they did, but I put no such tag on their poems. They got them back with comments only. Instead, we became to some degree a group of writers who would delve into a task and then hear back what we created (via their voices or mine), laughing and pondering as we might.

Reading back the poems was part of this "play" or "festival" we were enacting. To test this assertion, I try to imagine NOT reading back the poems in the session following each writing assignment. How ODD that would have felt. In the beginning, I read back as many of the good poems as we had time for, often typing them up on sheets so we could discuss the different approaches people took to the idea. Little did I realize at the time that this was part of the "play," not a reward system so much (as in, "Look what
Johnny did") but part and parcel of our on-going exploration of what the poetry could teach us about seeing. We would often pause and ask the writer what he or she was thinking at a certain spot, in order to gain a better sense of the various "moves" people were making within the assignment. One could compare the process to watching video footage after a particularly important football game to see what a team could take into their next engagement. Reading back the poems was our informal time to critique, to say: what we are doing matters, is fun, and can grow over time.

Perhaps I first saw the value of such "reading back time" when Josh called me over to guess what the scene was in his poem about Jem reading to Mrs. Dubose as punishment for destroying her camellias. Although I explore this poem elsewhere, let me delve into it again for the sake of "summing up." I'd asked them to try the assignment as something of a riddle--not revealing the situation too clearly. Me listening to him became, I think, our first trial at taking on "poetry as a festival," a festival of riddles we could put our minds to. He showed me it near the end of class--and I failed completely to detect who it was:

Knocking on the chamber door
An answer
Skulking, hit by a breeze of dragon's breath
Dark, gloomy, a hint of courage or death
Holding my sentence in my hand
I enter
Wretched visions
I start to slay

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Now that I know what it is--after he told me--it makes perfect sense. But in front of him, at the moment of truth, I couldn't get it. And it made us kind of a team, not poet and student, but poet and poet, writing and taking in lines. Rather than losing respect in his eyes, as I'd feared ("this guy can't get a metaphor when it hits him over the head"), I think I gained more in making our exchange one of a dialogue rather than purely a "lesson."

That riddling event continued as we tackled the sports-riddle poems, which I've covered before (see Chapter Seven, Lesson Three). They were not the strongest of the semester. Looking back, though, I believe they set a similar tone as in the Mockingbird pieces, lending a conviction that poetry digs at unsayable things, the way riddles or proverbs do (see quotes from James Welsh in Chapter Two). So much so that as we preceded people continued to do riddle-like poems from time to time. Sara Long's poem, for instance, on the barber pole:

Why do I have to turn?
I'm getting so dizzy
After all the years I've been here.
People act like I'm not here
But I wouldn't look at myself either,
Seeing my red white & blue skin go
Up and down, up and down.
But the people who walk in the Door beside me never come
Back out.
I see their bodies, just not Their heads.
Though I quoted this one before, I think it belongs in this section as well. It is probably only one of two strong poems that Sara wrote, but it's a marvelous job of combining physicalized metaphor, attention to "true" detail... and good humor. At this point I had not asked them to do metaphor and riddle, but several did. Corky writing about a bank robbery but not exactly telling us so. Jenny writing from the point of view of a step. It sounds silly, just listing their "topics". But so would Italo Calvino's marvelous inventions in *Invisible Cities*. Until you read them. Can art be fully experienced without tapping into this kind of childlike play? **That we came to trust each other to be silly this way is one of the "tests" of my time there.**

Riddling and the conscious play of the assignments made us re-value the child side of our minds again, but from a more adult point of view, just as Donald Hall speaks about metaphor adding a "third thing that expands human consciousness" (see Chapter Two). Thus the metaphor fed physicality, and play/riddling led us back to metaphor. So did just plain trying out the sounds of words, as in the "Suppose..." assignment. In that case, as described in Chapter Seven (see Lesson Five), the little card game so broke down our defenses that words began to take on new relationships. Then, under the influences of Pattiann Rogers' playful but biologically accurate inventions, we
found ourselves in the midst of a sea of invention. A few examples will suffice...

Zach: Suppose your temper was like the happy heart of a dog
The tension just flows away like water in a river
The tower of anger that you are perched on is reached and
Relieved by a bird who takes you down to
The calm swaying of the trees and your
Anger is put into a tomb...
Suppose your mind was like a burg, spontaneous
Like the ever changing sand.

"Finished" as this poem seems, and all of a piece, would Zach have written it if we hadn't played the game first? I don't think so. The rhythm itself is stronger than anything else he wrote this semester, the imagery tighter; even a tad cliched in spots, it swoops into an energetic turn like a strong shift in a sonata.

Just about everyone was able to work within these guidelines, trusting the words to say more than they might consciously do on their own. Here's Matt:

What if a pond arrived at your doorstep
What if a hair brush could play the violin

and Kurtis, whom I also pointed out as struggling with the poetry overall:

Suppose the bard had orange hair
The horse's name was Shadow
Your bedroom wall screams at you
Suppose your head was smaller than your dog's

And David Fuller:

Suppose Dakota could stroke,
Blackboards could breathe
Suppose doors had names.
In David's, sound dominates the first two lines--and prepares us for the more conceptual surprise of the last. What a wonderful thought: to place names on doors... as if each could lead us into different worlds. Which of course they do.

The GAME carried us. It gave us permission to speak in music, as if we could now trust poetry at last, like Jakobson says, to break the words from their regulated patterns (see Chapter Two) and still bring us back down landing on our feet. Because the rules said each word we put down needed to be a concrete noun or active verb, the cards stacked us toward being less abstract. And because there was a mix of mute-sounds, alliteration, assonance and consonance, along with touches of half-rhyme, yet with no demand to use these in any strict linkage, the sound-links could fall where they may, unforced but shimmering, like rain on very receptive piano keys.

I won't try to trace out the carry-over effects of this exercise. Did the students continue to use alliterative or mute effects in their subsequent poems? That would take more careful tracking than I'm prepared to pursue. And might well be pointless. What matters is that they continued to be more playful in their lines than I think they might otherwise be. We've seen this in their poems at the grocery, where Kelley plays with mock effects in her "I'm Sorry" poem:
I'm sorry,
I snatched the candy corns that
The bad boy wore as a dunce cap.
I'm sorry,
I scarfed down the Pez that
Were your once burning candles
On your miniature dining table.

And in Jenny's imagining a single grape escaping from its "clan":

What a brave
Purple grape,
To wander
So far from home.
Sitting in front
Of bread products galore...

Jenny's play is not in the sound of the words. As with her poem about Atticus shooting the rabid dog, it's in her conception of the whole scene--her playful imagining that one little grape might dare to escape. How silly can a 10th grader be? The same could be asked of Ben Vail's "Ode to Pudding," which closes:

The pack is through,
Such a lonely spoon...

I have to believe that having done the "Suppose" poems before we did the grocery store, or went downtown to play the mapping game, was a great help. Play was now a built-in part of poetry in their minds. No great step from that to playing with perception and changing points-of-view in the grocery or their own hometown... They saw--or invented--a playful aspect to even the most basic of moments.
Such a moment is conveyed in Holly's strictly observational poem of a man she observed on his way to work:

**The Tune**

Walking down the street with really no destination.
He's all by himself, maybe a little lonely,
Whistling a tune I've never heard before.
He's whistling sounds like that of a bird,
It draws your attention to it.
It's so pretty it could almost put you to sleep.
Suddenly the clock chimes as it turns 8:00.
The man looks up.
He looks a while at the peeking tower of the building.
He moves along still whistling his sweet tune.

No stunning metaphors here. Holly's own language isn't very playful. And maybe there's been no "carryover" from all we'd done before, with supposing and the like. There's simply this: just enough of a sweetly-conveyed moment to make us care. It's almost as if the "momentary stay" lesson of Frost, which we'd made so much use of in our Mockingbird poems, had joined with Holly's attentive watching to capture a "moment of play" all her own. It is, I admit, her one shining moment in our poetry of the semester, but enough to make me believe some fresh "sweet tune" soaked into the way Holly sees the world.

Others, as I've mentioned in Chapter Seven, found even more playful ways to view the scene: Amber up on the roof, imagining an old rug strung out a window could become a red carpet for a queen; Tressa visualizing the "sidewalks [as]
deserted islands"; Brian role-playing the viewpoint of a
deserted parking lot, remembering children

...rac[ing] down hill,
The victor touching me first.
I was a secret meeting place.

Kelley saw a rose in a antique shop window and spun off
this reverie:

Does This Rose

Does this rose in the dead of
the night wish to drip
down the stem and seep
beneath the cracks of the
earth?

Does this rose ever wish
to fade upon the clouds
while leaving a trail of
glitter?

Here is the "suppose" turn all over again, without making
direct use of the word. I never asked her to do that.
Rather, the "suppose" or "what if" move we worked on during
the in-class game added a "third move" to noticing physical
detail and playing with metaphor, so that the outside world
was transformed. It seems that if enough of a habit of
invention is formed, the cycle of generative thought can
take over. Not always, certainly, and not always to the
same effect (that too would become predictable or cliched).

We often think of poetry and art as emotional ventures,
a place to "spill our feelings," as so many student writers
and artists treat it. Ask most classes "What is poetry for?"
and the answer 9 times out of 10 will be: "To express yourself. To get out your feelings." What we discovered in our poetic games was that the route to fresh emotions and insight frequently came through not going at the feeling so directly but through NOT trying to make sense, through standing things on their head, the way the surrealists bid us (see Krauss and others, Chapter Four). As these poems and the work detailed in other chapters, I believe, show, greater depth is often achieved when we let the words themselves take over. The field of play then becomes rich with inferences and connections we could not have planned.

Would Ben Vail have written his marvelously insightful poems about the way time "helps us ... hurts us ... laughs at us ... bluffs ... turns us ... holds us all" or his evocation of the Jewish museum as a monument "dirtied by my own clean blood" and a "soldier in the wind / over a battlefield of no victory" without the kind of play with perception he gained in his pudding poem? I suppose it's impossible to say. One can guess, though, based on our time together, that the various strands of play--the speculative and the silly, the projective and the inventive, the rule-based and the rebellious--go quite hand-in-hand.

10.6 Metaphor, Physicality, Play...and Visuality

A similar cause-and-effect relationship could be considered to be at work in the move from writing about our
own experience and into taking in the larger, visual world around us. In student after student, the poems expanded in range and power as we went outside to view the world beyond the classroom--and once again, when we introduced writing from visual images into the equation. One could conjecture that the poems would have gotten better anyway, no matter what we did, simply as a result of increased exposure to the medium. I think not. I think the visual world--of the park, the downtown streets, the grocery store (see Lessons 6 - 9) and then the paintings, photographs and architectural models (Lessons 10 - 14)--gave the poetry skills a place to dwell, and further, let us grapple with the very real dynamic of image-text complexity which WJT Mitchell and others have defined (see Chapter Five).

Without such engagement, I believe, growth in the poems would have quickly reached an end point. With such visual stimulus, we began to see how poetry--and the perceptual skills we'd been working on--might breathe out in the "real world" beyond the school. Student after student "awoke" when these features appeared within the assignments. Kurtis and Garrison when I showed them surrealist paintings; Brian when he really "looked" at the downtown parking lot--as he said, as if he were a child considering it as his playground; Shelby when she asked all her "what if" questions about the men standing beside the "zebra-striped car"; even Ashley
Slone when she revisited her poem about a photograph of the tree outside the classroom window which she's learned to so closely associate with the blank-eyed boredom of school. Looking back, I began to see all these break-throughs as the fulfillment of an ekphrastic habit of engagement we'd been building all along.

10.7 Ekphrastic Variations

a. Image-Based

What we achieved in the area of imagery and of bringing the visual and verbal worlds more closely together was a sense of the possibilities within the ekphrastic move in poetry. In many ways, nearly every assignment we tackled had ekphrastic potential in it. One might divide these into two categories: the image-based and the narrative. Image-based ekphrastis would include about five of the exercises we did:

"My mind is like..."

"The 'suppose...' game"

"The downtown game" with L block, with kids writing a series of tiny two or three word stanzas, lines from, looking for a more physical and direct engagement with the objects and the streets.

"Odes to Food" done at the grocery.

The "image-to-image" game, with students seeking the most apt and surprising two lines possibilities from looking at slides of paintings.
Why are these ekphrastic? Quite simply because they evoke pictures in our heads. Just as W.J.T. Mitchell categorizes Wallace Stevens' famous "Anecdote of the Jar" as basically an ekphrastic piece (PT 166-168), for its overall evocation of a visual image, the main function of these poems is the same. Whatever "meaning" they have is not stated directly, but, as with a painting, is suggested by the visual elements conveyed. Thus even the "My mind is like..." exercise is one that leads mainly to tiny evocative images rather than full-fledged thoughts. One has to "work at it" to create the full picture, just as with a proverb. Tressa, for instance, gives us this interpretation of her mind:

My mind is like traffic
It goes every which way

It's a tiny ekphrastic poem because it is taking a phenomenon (the mind) and giving us a tiny scene by which to experience it. Would it not be the same if Tressa had been creating a metaphor of a painting by Mondrian? She's layering an image over the top of her subject, doubling our involvement. The same with Brittany's:

My mind is like a door,
it's always being pushed into knowing things

There may be a sense where all ekphrasis is body-based, as these two lines are. We conjure at least some picture of a
door—and even more, we feel that door being opened against its will. An idea, but more than an idea. An idea contained within an image. Here is Wheelwright's tensivity at work (see Chapter Two). Here is metaphor and physicality, as connected to an abstract life-feeling. Here is the "bringing across" function of figurative language, transferring from one arena to another a feeling hard to convey in any other way (see Jakobson in Chapter Two). Here, most of all, is the PICTURING function that poetry brings to our usually bland language.

What I am saying is that I don't see much difference between these terse two-line poems and "short takes" like Emma's reading of Van Gogh's "Starry Night":

The black shadow gathered his belongings and traveled out of the classroom into a starry night.

Or Bethany's metaphoric reading of Georgia O'Keeffe's "Pelvic Series #2":

A treasure hidden in silk floating yet resting

Each short poem gives us a new tool from which to imagine an experience, an avenue by which to enter it (be that "it" a painting or a feeling of the mind) and to carry something fresh away. A way of "making meaning through imagery" out of where we've been. Building on Mitchell (see Chapter Five), I
will call this move "imagistic ekphrasis." To do so no doubt is to muddy the waters, but it's also to make clearer what a poem is often doing. Poetry, this research has taught me to believe even more than ever, is more akin to a VISUAL ART than to typical argumentative or informational prose. Like painting, it gives us a way to dwell-again in the world. It holds up the mystery of our experience, in the sense of visualizing a world... and letting us walk inside.

b. Ekphrastic Variations: Narrative Based

More frequently, the poems that emerged from the assignments were narrative-based, moment-based writings. Even so, whether they were drawn from scenes in the novel and the play, the students' memories, physical environments downtown, or on visual imagery, their main function, I would contend, was to set up painting-like settings for the reader to enter, mimetic versions of primary experiences that "mirrored" and extended them in order to better connect with the world of those experiences, connecting each to a wider, more intricate world of possibility and mystery. That is, in Heidegger's terms, returning us to being by ekphrastically allowing us to re-experience our experience (see Chapter Three). This sort of ekphrasis took a number of forms, each based in the phenomenon itself:
1. **Adapted**: as in our poems about *Mockingbird*, where the "scene" was re-filtered through the poet's lens, reinterpreted as it were, made to stand again—a visual piece evoked in words.

Example--from Bethany's poem, "Scout in Front of the Courthouse" (the mob scene):

"I'm standing here, clutching Atticus, eyes are boring into me. Light illuminates my surroundings, and beyond me is dark, sleepy Maycomb..."

2. **Inventive**: as in our "visionary" poems about *The Crucible*, where the job was to reflect on a moment or a character in the play through writing "outside the story," inventing a dream or vision that fit that person or the moment—in other words, conjuring one image to reflect on another.

Example--from Heather's poem in Tituba's voice:

They come to me for help  
Ancient spirits speak,  
Connecting with another world.  
In wispy shades of white  
They dance with the trees...

3. **Remembered**: as in poems about earth, water, fire and air. The difference between writing about a scene from memory and one from direct observation is one of approach, not of end goal. In neither case was our job fictional (to tell the full story), it was rather, imagistic: to conjure or visualize a scene.

Example--Corky's poem about falling asleep:

...A field of warmth flows from my feet to my neck until a warmth covers my body. Finally, the shining light begins to fade until there's nothing left but a solid darkness...

4. **Riddled**: as in our poems that took sports actions and tried to evoke them without giving the answers away. These are tiny movies, without commentary, tiny visual experiences that convey a motion.

Example--Ci'Arra's riddle for diving into a pool:
...I grip onto the edge, resembling a scared child at his mother's side. I quickly fade into the sun's horizon and leap into the world as if I were a tadpole entering the stream.

5. **Physicalized**: as in our writings at State Lakes or downtown. Here, we were able to be a full part of the scene we wrote about. Students mentioned in particular finding this easier because you weren't limited by someone else's chosen frame--you could make your own.

Example--from one of Kelley's two poems "painting" the world of the lake...

The trees's roots are hollow with cobwebs
Purple, tiny flowers line the path
The icy cold water ripples the reflection of what it is lined with
Lined with the muddy banks that drift up to the vertical every-colored trees and fade up into a clear, thoughtless sky.

6. **Invested (projective)**: as in our poems at the Columbus Museum of Art. Here we mostly tried to enter the work, making our own worlds out of the worlds of the art.

Example--Kelley's take on Mark Tansey's "Waterlilies":

Ice is shattered, drifting on the dawn of tomorrow's fate upon the peaceful, wild, chilling waters. Two worlds collide. The cluttered sky has fallen into broken lilies...

7. **Historical (knowledge-based)**: as in our poems written after the tour of the architecture exhibit--or the Miller's local history slides. Here, in contrast to many of the paintings, we had "information" to draw from in approaching writing about a given image.
Example--from Amber's poem taking the point of view of a prisoner led into the jailhouse, where she keys in on what all the windows in the photograph could mean, if looking from the inside. If she didn't know what this building was once used for, she'd not have the inside information to look at the windows in this way.

I'm shown to a cell
a barred chamber awaiting me
   Nothing but a small cot
   and a light blanket to keep me warm
Really, this place is not so bad
except...
   all the windows
mocking me, teasing me
   Showing me the world I love
   but destroyed...

8. Reflective/prosaic: as we found when writing about their own photographs, sometimes it could be just as--or sometimes more--successfully "ekphrastic" to write directly about what we noticed in a photograph versus "climbing inside" or "mythifying" too quickly and missing the details of the world we've entered.

Example--from Ben Vail's prose-poem about the shadowed "wall of math". Note how he just begins with stating bluntly "what he sees," then goes on to reflect on the possibilities of "what it could mean..."

A Blurp of Math

I see a blurp of math. A wall with writing about math. A wall that tells you how to do math. But some of it is absent. Like it felt sick today. That part of the wall refused an interview. That part of the wall didn't feel like watching again today without being able to do anything about what it sees...

This is not to say that these poems are "only" ekphrastic, doing little more than mimetically imitating the world. Instead, it was through that very imitation, that re-construction, if you will, that they made the tiny mysteries
of the world available to us once again. It is through ekphrasis that they fabricate meaning, a power of presence for each of these phenomenon we can only be grateful to receive and re-enter.

10.8 BEYOND THE POEMS--ETHNOGRAPHIC IMPLICATIONS

In my study, just as in Howard Nemerov's poem, "The Blue Swallows," "poems are not the point, / finding again the world, that is the point" (89). The poems are just the most ready evidence I have that "something happened" for the students toward developing what we've been calling an engaged world view. I'm not, however, so much weighing the issue of were-the-poems-any-good as whether they suggest that the writers had gained greater abilities to apply metaphorical, physical, playful thinking to take charge of their own perception. In answer to the questions raised under Chapter Five concerning the problems with imagery and image stereotyping, my greater hope is not so much whether they continue to love or write poetry as much as that they have come, through the poetry, to experience their world and their minds as capable of change. When they walk down the street of this town many of them have lived in all their lives, is everything "all the same," or do they see it with fresh possibility? If Norman Bryson is right and our real worlds are in danger of being "colonized" by outside representation (see Chapter Five), might these students have
opened up some channels of thought for re-claiming their own ways of seeing?

My goals, as stated in the first chapter, are as much ethnographic as artistic, as much a matter of getting to know the students and their connections to this area as in analyzing their poetic abilities. First to ask: what do they know, what do they care about, what did they play growing up, how do they connect to this community that surrounds them? And then to consider: how might the intervention of the writing have helped them discover or re-discover their own perceptual, emotional links back into the world?

Any "results" in this area are more personal than definitive, more anecdotal than analytical. If Rachel tells me that she'd never really LOOKED at the town before--never had occasion to do so until we went out to write poems in the square--I tend to conclude that there are others who felt the same way. Judging by their poems, and the hints that they gave me in their interviews and evaluations, they came to VALUE THE LOCAL in many of the ways I wanted them to when we first began. If a moving, intriguing, humorous or beautiful poem can be written about this often disparaged or at least overlooked town of Mt. Gilead, how can we NOT stay changed? If the poems were honest, in that they included the blemishes--the boarded up windows, the emptiness of the sidewalks--that's all the more convincing. This town doesn't
become a "postcard" through their poems. It merely becomes more real. And that, I would conclude, is a major step in de-colonializing their own experience (again, see Bryson in Chapter Five). If the poems were "representations" of this place, they were OUR representations, filtered back through our separate awareness. As much as is possible, I would contend, their works were not clichés. They were re-engagements, not idealizing growing up here, but not belittling it either.

One more thing I can conclude is simply this: I know these students better than I've known any students before—and because of that knowledge, I came to teach them better. As they gradually came to accept me as something of a participant in their classroom, as well as a teacher, an artist and a game-maker, we were able to be something of a community that connected to their regular learning but also added a different dimension. And as I became more able to see them a rounded human beings, with knowledge and cares beyond what is readily available during a poetry lesson, we became a stronger community of learners.

Being a "member of the class" was important. I found what they did have to say often striking: it was fun to see them work their way through interpretations of a character in Mockingbird or The Crucible. And to see them act out sections of the play gave a much stronger sense of their
willingness to do more than just sit in their seats. Indeed, it was often the kids who didn't stand out in the poetry who were the first to volunteer to act. But then, there were others who excelled at both: Emma, who cared deeply about reading her part well; Ci'Arra, who seemed able to take on the voice of one of the possessed girls, Mary Warren, you'd have thought she'd been there in Salem. Matt too has acting power, a projective ability he may have been less successful at in his poetry.

This was, after all, Jill's classroom I was a guest in. And they clearly love her. They like her passion for the literature, her sense of ethics. (One day when she told them she just couldn't use a certain promotional stamp from the post office because the money from its sale had gone underhandedly to reward contributors to the President's campaign, Jenny spoke right up: "It's good that you care that much.") We didn't transcend the school day much--no one signed up for my proposed poetry night hike at State Lakes, and it was hard to get them to commit to doing a reading for the community (until Jill agreed to give them extra credit for coming). But in the classroom, we were our own community, cognizant and appreciative of each other's quirks and abilities.

Sara Gruber and Sarah Keener were the ones to point this out. They noticed, for instance, that in the "My Mind
is Like..." assignment people could use the exercise to reveal sides of themselves "without saying too much." Said Sara Gruber, "I liked [that] exercise because you could kind of describe yourself but not make it obvious - make a personal connection if you wanted to." In all the poems, they said, they came to see sides of their fellow students that are mostly hidden. "I hear David Cook's poems," said Sarah Keener, "and I tell him he's got good things to say." In the past, she "only shared my stuff with David when he was away from his friends - [then] I'm allowed to show him my poems... Well, the class changed that - now I don't feel so stupid for showing him my stuff because I realized, 'Hey, you can actually write...'

Through the class, and through the interviews, I came to find out at least some things about their world beyond the classroom. That Julie, for instance, rebellious and bitter as she sometimes seems, takes care of her grandmother--and "can change a colostomy bag," as she wrote down on the card on which I asked them to introduce themselves to me and record some facts they know or some things they can do that others might not. I know about Jordan's uncle, for whom he works in the summer, and who he wishes would give him more responsibility. I know Nate's considering a career in law (adding a particular poignancy to his fine portrayal of Atticus giving his defense speech).
I know, as mentioned in an earlier chapter, that Sarah Keener spends hours on the internet, but at the same time loves her long and eerie driveway which changes colors so beautifully through the summer; that she used to neigh to her horses, before they sold them, to get them to come home. I know that Amber can fly a plane. That the fondest memories for Phil, Nate and Ben Vail are the games they played in Ben's backyard--and about the hornet's nest they hit with a football (intentionally or not) during one game. I know that Justin takes off a week each fall to go hunting with his grandfather. I know that Shelby lives down a side country road pretty far north of the school, that she goes to the same church as the Millers, who presented the history slides, that she has for years worked to overcome a bad stutter (which she showed absolutely NO signs of on the final night of the reading). I know that Josh spends a good part of the summer staying at his Dad's home in Las Vegas. That Jenny's mom told her about letting all the birds out of their cages on her last night working at a Wallmart pet department in Minneapolis after college. I know that Ben Vail's dad has been diagnosed with a terrible degenerative disease, and that he sees him mainly in a nursing home.

When we know these things about each other (as they know about my mother dying in August, about my bike ride experiences crossing the country), the writing takes on
another dimension. At least for me. I can guess better about where a particular line or poem is coming from. When Josh writes about his love for guitar,

Swirling around me
I'm the center of the being, the happening
The little child's glistening gaze of the beautiful noise
like the whirl of dizziness, blended with joy...

I know he means it, that his mother's friend who'd come over to play guitar radically altered his life that summer years ago. I can picture Sara Gruber's grandfather coming downstairs to light the fire, because I've driven past the type of isolated farmhouse where he might live:

My Dream of Fire

As I lie awake
I dream of those wonderful days and nights.
The old farm house
Scary as it may be.

I think and wonder,
Wonder when the person will crawl out of bed
And start it all over again.

The stairs groan when walking down them,
As if they were old and feeble.

All at once you hear the furnace moan
Like it is hungry and wants warmth...

For I have lived and stayed in houses like that too. Heard that aching creak of the stairs ("as if they were old and feeble" too). Our assignments were a way of valuing those worlds that the students already knew, as well as of me
coming to imagine those worlds more fully. They allowed us
to link the world of the school with the world of the home--
and connect both into our study of "ways of seeing."

My approach to the study, then, was not just
participatory or strictly observational. It was directly and
heavily interventionist. I like to call it a study based in
"creative ethnography." I wasn't just asking them to
"describe their world" in their own natural language
(whatever that might be). I sought to offer them a secondary
language--the language of poetry--and tried to show them
ways to go back into the world of their experience with that
new language as a guide. Because that language is the art-
language I've come to know, it is perhaps more possible for
me to "read" what they've done, to see in what ways they've
come to apply that language, and to conjecture as to how far
that new language has "opened up" a fresh viewpoint or two
in these young writers.

So when Bethany, quiet and insightful as she is, writes
what a couple of the secretaries thought was a "put-down"
poem about Mt.Gilead, I read it as far more a poem of honest
love:

Mt. Gilead, you are like a weed
So strong and standing against adversity
yet not pretty to look at.

You are like a cluttered landscape
with old bricked buildings reaching for the sky
and signs sprouting like trees.

You are like a sleepy child
reluctantly waking up to start the day searching for something to look forward to.

You are the extent of life
to the lonely, tranced people
sitting on the barren benches.

You are a decaying hallway
Rows of bleak animosities
Slouching and falling.

You are like no one's possession
No one wants you but we all have you
And we don't mind.

Okay--I can see Donna's (the secretary's) point. Bethany's definitely rubbing up against some of the weaknesses of this sometimes neglected place. Bethany is a very careful dresser. Not a hair on her head is out of place. And one can tell by her vocabulary--as well as her study habits--that she cares deeply about "doing well." So I come to see the poem (and the town) through her eyes. And the last line "redeems it all," taking in this place that she seems proud of, or at least deeply attached to, embracing it despite her misgivings.

The poems are my guides, as they have been throughout this dissertation. They are my stepping stones by which I walk the halls of the school. More than any interview about the town, they are the portrait I form of this place now. Like an array of their photographs we laid out on the classroom floor (and which I can still see in my mind), they are the collage that in a multi-voiced portrait I carry around and can say: this is Mt. Gilead, in the fall of 2003,
from the eyes of the class of 2005, the young people who will grow up to stay here, or else to venture out into the wider world. They show me ways of seeing, reminding me, as Rachel and a number of others pointed out, how easy it is to never really LOOK at where we are. Jenny reported having a kind of deja vu experience pulling her car into the CD store along the strip mall just west of town and suddenly "seeing" the old train station before her instead. Nate, I imagine, will always remember (as will I) the moment of the woman in the purple shirt and black gloves "helping a lost truck driver find his way" in the chilly rain of an October morning. The poems took us there. They are the points of condensed worlds that paint a portrait for me, not just of the assignments, not just of student poets honing their newfound craft, but of 42 teenagers making use of the arts to take back their world, making it at least in some ways more their own.

10.9 IMPLICATIONS FOR CROSS-DISCIPLINE AND CROSS-CATEGORY RESEARCH IN THE FIELD OF ART EDUCATION

It is my belief that some of the findings brought out by this study have relevance for future research in the field of arts education. Indeed, one of the major arguments I would make would be for the inclusion of the “s” in that field—not art education in the sense of focusing on the visual arts alone, as has traditionally been the case, but a
new call for bridging the gaps between all the arts as means for helping students engage more directly and meaningful with the emerging cultural, historical and environmental worlds within which they will live their lives. To do otherwise is to maintain divisions that are no longer useful within our highly interactive world. As a number of the theorists gathered here maintain, from Mieke Bal to WJT Mitchell, from Mark Johnson to Martin Jay, visual realities are hardly separate from verbal ones, just as our physical interaction with the world helps to structure our mental concepts making sense of that world. Art education is in a unique position, here at the beginning of the 21st century, to speak in a wholistic way to the deepest needs of students, teachers and the curriculum, but only if we gather our forces and frame our mission in the widest manner possible.

This study, then, might provide something of a test case, if not a model, for building such an interactive theoretical base. By focusing, first of all, on applying the theory gathered into Chapters Two – Five, it can offer an example of bringing some of the vast insights into the workings of visual and verbal learning to the educational table, from the substantial insights into metaphoric and analogical reasoning which emerged in the latter part of the 20th century, to the cutting edge currently work being conducted into the effect and implications of visual/
corporate culture. My contention is that, although much has been written on the crucial concepts of metaphor, physicality, playfulness and visuality, not enough has been done to make these concepts useful for teachers, students and the curriculum as a whole.

Secondly, the study might be considered as an example case in the way that it hinges on the interaction or juxtaposition of the key theorists in ways that might facilitate fresh application of their ideas. The following chart traces out some of the central tenets of the 21 major theorists on which this study is based. It provides a visual model for the kind of conceptual interaction I've been proposing, with any number of combinations resulting from the juxtaposition of closely-related or even rather diverse branches of thought. What follows the chart is a sampling of some of the interactions which inform the study. Many more might be possible, simply by placing the basic tenets of two or more writers together into a fresh formulation. Any number of these "couplings" of theoretical frames could be employed, I would contend, toward helping students create for themselves a more active and conscious engagement with the world. (Please note: each of these formulations has been condensed into the most manageable phrasing possible. For more expansive summaries, see the related theoretical chapters.)
### a. An Interactive Circle of Theorists

**VISUALITY**

1. Johnson
21. Sontag
20. Bal
19. Mitchell
18. Gadamer
17. Sutton-Smith
16. Coleridge
15. Bateson
14. Hall
13. Stewart
12. Huizinga

**METAPHOR**

1. Jakobson
2. Ricouer
4. Wheelwright
5. Frost
6. Nemerov
7. Cobb
8. Heidegger
9. Jay
10. Bryson
11. Kraus

**PLAY**

**PHYSICALITY**

### b. Sample Interactive Connections for Linking Diverse Theorists

The following summaries encapsulate the key theoretical insight(s) from each theorist and then speculates on one of the possible theoretical links that could be made between that person's work when juxtaposed with another key theorist from the study. The choices for connection are partially random--just to test out what would happen if we began thinking of their work in tandem or trios, in the light of some of the findings within the case study. None
of these connections are strictly "proved" by the study, only suggested as new ways of thinking about each person's body of work and of opening up connections for future cross-category research.

METAPHORIC THOUGHT

1. **MARK JOHNSON**: The Body in the Mind
   *Metaphor as the structure of thought*
   *Metaphor based in physical experience*

   **Possible links with Roman Jakobson:**
   Combining Johnson's ideas about the physicality of metaphor with Jakobson's formulation of metaphor as the route to associative thinking can result in a curriculum emphasis on re-engaging with the physical world in order to open up richer associative thinking.

2. **ROMAN JAKOBSON**: Semiotics of Art and Thought
   *Metaphor as link to associative realm*
   vs metonymy as combinative tool

   **Possible links with Samuel Taylor Coleridge:**
   Jakobson's split between metaphor and metonymy can parallel Coleridge's division of Secondary and Primary Imagination, creating a stronger theoretical basis for involving poetry and art in widening students' conceptual abilities.

3. **PAUL RICOUER**: The Rule of Metaphor
   *Metaphor (as freedom of thought)*
   vs Semiotics (as culture-based associations)

   **Possible links with Hans Georg Gadamer:**
   Both Gadamer and Ricouer raise the question of how free are we--how much do we tend to repeat associations we've learned by rote through social roles, etc? Both argue for a sense of freedom via the channels art and metaphor release.

4. **PHILIP WHEELWRIGHT**: Tensive Language
   The inner workings of metaphor reflect the tensions within experience
Possible links with Martin Heidegger:
If, according to Heidegger, the strongest tension is that between Earth and World out of which art emerges, then perhaps the strongest "tensive language" would parallel that interaction, arguing for involving students in that same original dialogue.

5. ROBERT FROST: Education By Poetry
All thinking as metaphor
Persona: Poem spoken on a stage
Poetic work as "play for mortal stakes"

Links with Brian Sutton-Smith and Josef Huizinga:
If we put play at the center of how societies structure themselves, as Huizinga argues, and if with Frost we visualize play at the center of poetry, might our "education by poetry" connect to playful (and quite serious) re-shaping of social spheres?

PHYSICALITY (THE BODY AND THE OUTSIDE WORLD)

6. ALEXANDER NEMEROV: THE BODY OF RAPHAELLE PEALE
Analysis of Peale's paintings as embodied seeing
Interior/body-based vs. distanced/encompassing seeing

Possible links with Rosalind Krauss:
Nemerov and Krauss confirm each other in a view of painting as immersion of the body in seeing. If, as I have argued, poetry is something of a visual art, it too could flourish by such an immersion.

7. EDITH COBB: THE ECOLOGY OF IMAGINATION IN CHILDHOOD
Stresses the need for kids to ground imagination in compassion and the knowledge of place.

Possible links with Donald Hall:
Recovery of a child’s sense of language play in poetry may be a means of recovering essential connections for thought and invention.

8. MARTIN HEIDEGGER: THE ORIGIN OF THE WORK OF ART
Earth as the unsayable surrounding (vs World as center of language and civilization)
Art as the conduit from World to Earth: the place of their meeting

Possible links to Susan Stewart:
Combining these two very different thinkers, one might consider the notion, born out by the students' poems in this study, that nonsense may be one way of experiencing the unsayable interplay of Earth and World, of re-exposing what we daily (in our functioning "World") take for granted.

9. MARTIN JAY: ANTI-OCULARITY IN 20TH CENTURY FRENCH THOUGHT
Dangers of over-ocularity placing a distance within experience
Call for a recovery of the fullness of the senses

Possible links with Mieke Bal:
The reading of paintings and the visual world may be a way of adding texture to our seeing beyond the purely optical--of deepening/recognizing our sensory experience of the visual.

10. NORMAN BRYSON: THE COLONIZATION OF THE REAL
Over-dominance of representation
Art claiming back the body (e.g. Cindy Sherman)

Possible links with WJT Mitchell:
WJT Mitchell's concept of living media stereotypes fits with Bryson's concept of the colonization of our lives by representation's powers, calling if only indirectly for a de-colonization of experience by students reclaiming their own hold on imagery.

11. ROSALIND KRAUSS: THE OPTICAL UNCONSCIOUS
Necessary surrealism: slipping out of the grid
Seeing from within the body

Links with Josef Huizinga and Gregory Bateson:
Krauss's emphasis on the surrealist tilt may work well with what Huizinga and Bateson have to say about the play element built into language, thought and society. By playing with sight we can come to see differently what is set in place by other rules and roles, including the way we use the language of poetry.
PLAYFULNESS

12. JOSEF HUIZINGA: HOMO LUDENS
Play as one of the central factors within human civilization

Possible links with Philip Wheelwright: When poetry touches on the tensive factors in language and experience maybe it also uncovers/re-discovers/returns us to some of the play elements that structure society, helping us engage our place in it anew.

13. SUSAN STEWART: Nonsense as a social tool
Nonsense and play cut away at the expected (and quite arbitrary) boundaries of civilization

Possible links with Roman Jakobson: There might be some value in playing with the nonsensical as a route to opening up language out of the metonymic.

14. DONALD HALL: GOATFOOT MILKTONGUE TWINBIRD
Poetry releases us from the bonds of too-strict civilization--
Word play begins in the crib

Possible links with Brian Sutton-Smith: The connections between poetry and the learning which takes place in the playful exchange between parent and child can open up both realms. The language-play of poetry can help us recall the roots of language and how we first experienced the world.

15. GREGORY BATESON: METALOGUES
Watching monkeys, he saw language and thought being shaped and fostered by playfulness

Possible links with Rosalind Krauss: Connect Bateson's concept of the beginnings of language as "playing at what isn't" and Krauss's evocation of the surrealist tilt (the body moving out of its typical verticality) and you get ways of tilting the body's views to open up new dimensions in poetry and language.
16. **SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE: PRIMARY AND SECONDARY IMAGINATION**
Primary Imagination: shaping daily language and experience
Secondary: taking apart language in order to recharge staleness

*Possible Links with Susan Sontag:*
Primary Imagination may be related to the way we assume so much about a photograph; Secondary may provide means (ala John Berger) of breaking apart those too-easy assumptions and seeing the photograph anew.

17. **BRIAN SUTTON-SMITH: PLAY'S ORIGIN IN PARENT-CHILD INTERACTION**
Play is a means of establishing relationship--the taking on of roles as a step to thought

*Possible links with Edith Cobb:*
Is it possible that Sutton-Smith's central, playful mother-child learning dynamic parallels what Cobb has to say about connecting early in life to the physical textures of the world? If so, we might recover some of our ecological/physical engagement with earth by learning to play with what we experience.

18. **HANS-GEORG GADAMER: THE RELEVANCE OF THE BEAUTIFUL**
Art serves the functions of symbol-maker/preserver, playful outsider, and culture-generating festival

*Possible links with Martin Jay:*
Gadamer's idea of art as festival may be a way of culturally re-physicalizing our sense of sight--transforming our sense of space into more than a distancing ocularity? (We can't, for instance, see a festival from the outside and know what it's about, but as with a poem we can experience it from within.)

**VISUALITY**

19. **W.J.T. MITCHELL: THE PICTURE TURN**
History as tracing out of the complex interplay of visual and verbal strands

The current "picture turn" in which we find ourselves deeply shaped by visual imagery
Possible links with Susan Sontag:
The distancing of photography that Sontag speaks of may well contribute to the living of image stereotypes WJT Mitchell notices—we become the images we see. By writing from within a photograph, we make a step toward making the imagery we experience more our own.

20. MIEKE BAL: A SEMIOTIC FRAMING OF ART
Reading images and visualizing texts: how we engage the visual world

Links with Josef Huizinga:
A semiotic reading of art parallels Huizinga's play-based reading of society: the subtle ways society passes on messages through semiotics warrants a curriculum aimed at learning to read the signs beneath a painting or any work of art.

21. SUSAN SONTAG: ON PHOTOGRAPHY
Considers the difficulties involved in the way photographs decontextualize vision—desensitize us /merely frame experience (vs. John Berger, who agrees but argues for the need of language to contextualize /create connection)

Links with Alexander Nemerov:
What Sontag sees as a distancing in the way we use photographs is countered by the embodied seeing Nemerov posits characterizing Raphaelle Peale's work—a kind of seeing we might teach students via an immersion in poetry and art.

c. “Learning Moves” and Patterns of Interaction

Some of these pairings might be expanded into triads that suggest patterns of interaction between theorists which might help us shape “learning moves” to guide students toward in using the arts to re-engage their world.
a. MOVE #1: OPENING

By combining the parallels suggested above between Martin Heidegger and Philip Wheelwright, with those that could be made between either of these writers and Coleridge and Stewart, we get a kind of “move” which students in the arts could make that can open up the world-shaping interactions which often lie hidden beneath our daily choices and responses.

Hidden interactions
between Earth and World
(Heidegger)

Tensive Language:
Involvement with poetic language as if touches on life-tensions
(Wheelwright)

Secondary Imagination:
Learning to take apart the daily signs and metaphors that structure our world
(Coleridge and/or Stewart)

b. MOVE #2: RECLAIMING

Linking connections described above between Mitchell and Bryson with insights gathered from Coleridge, Stewart and Jacobson, among others, we might define a second “move” in which student actively unpack all sorts of roles and expectations present by literary and visual culture to reclaim their own experience, visual and otherwise.
c. MOVE #3: SEEING FROM WITHIN

Combining parallels described above between Sontag and Nemerov, with those possible between Gadamer and Jay (or Gadamer and Nemerov) we might help students regain a sense of the participatory sight, a kind of festival of experience that’s always with us, uniting the senses, plus verbal and visual understandings.

Confronting the seductive distancing of photography (Sontag/Berger)  

Art as festival: engagement with a contextual and interactive view of art (Gadamer)

Phenomenological sight: seeing-off-the-vertical grid (Jay and Nemerov)

These would be some of the triangulations of theory possible to shape new paradigms for future arts education research.
10.10 IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND THE ARTS

This study argues for placing metaphor (and the whole arena of sign and symbol) at the heart of the way we conceptualize learning and thought. If, as the theorists gathered here would contend, metaphor is our bridge to engaged meaning, then we would do well to treat it as such. Teach students how a metaphoric phrasing drives some of our best sentences. Teach them how to take apart our daily metaphors and how to create new ones. Teach them to question the suggestive dynamics and symbols behind ads and products and commercial environments.

Secondly, this study argues for a re-physicalization of education. It argues that the body and the physical world weigh upon and slant our thought, and how rich our memory and invention are in giving us ways into subjects. It suggests that we might regularly TAKE STUDENTS OUTSIDE, into the environments in which they live, not just for time off, but as a part of a multi-layered investigation of the workings of the world. To NOT do so, it would seem, based on the results of this study, is to continue to feed a sense of disengagement in students where writing and learning are more tasks to "get done," rather than keys to discovering life.

Such learning would by nature be active, exploratory, question-centered, student-driven, interdisciplinary work.
It would begin with the familiar, the known, and dig within that known for the unfamiliar, the ways such knowns stretch far beyond ourselves. The visual would inform the literary, the written word supply us with means to open up the silent image. The transparent, taken-for-granted sides of our own culture would be open for questioning and renewal.

Were this study applied in larger ways, play and festival might become central features of the learning environment, not something left for when we are so exhausted that we need a "break." To step out of our comfortable ways of approaching subjects--or even just walking down the street--would be a principle we would keep reminding ourselves of. A sense of learning-as-festival could re-invigorate in us a feeling of community, reminding us that there's little we come to see that our community-stance doesn't "allow for" or make possible. At the same time, this study argues that the most ideal community, like the most diverse festival, allows us to break out of rigid ways of seeing ourselves and others. If metaphor shapes culture as well as language, re-engaging metaphor through festival and play may let students see themselves all over again... which would seem to be the first step in establishing a more engaged world view.

Deliberately applying some of the insights from this study would mean, additionally, that the role of the artist in education would evolve to more than one of the "assembly
provider" or even of "guest from out of the blue." Rather, let the guest or outsider link his or her expertise with that of the teacher so that both may guide the students toward their own art-within-learning and learning-within-art exchanges.

Finally, this study argues that we move the experience of school outward into the community and environment as a whole. Our work together was intricately tied to an effort to try to understand what made Mt. Gilead what it is, both from a past and present viewpoint. My guess is that nearly every community across the nation exists within such a territory of wonder—a natural or a human habitat of significance and worth exploring, through poetry, art or other investigative methods.

Perhaps most importantly, this study may be evidence that "there are many folds" within any classroom or set of teaching plans. The teacher's voice and self-monologue mixes with the students' writing and sense of themselves. What poetry and art allow us most of all to do, perhaps, is to mix those identities, leveling out the playing field for at least part of our educational time, offering students ways to see themselves (and each other) which they might not otherwise find, opening up a dialogue (or multi-logue) of many voices within and between each other.

There are certainly many more ways to apply the principles explored in this study, and many limitations—see
below—that could have taken it in other, perhaps more satisfying, directions. Yet it would seem that, with careful adjustments, the four principles—of metaphor, physicality, play and visual imagery—set into a generative cycle, might well be useful for setting up similar studies in vastly different communities, and perhaps using other art forms.

10.11 Limitations of the Study

a. Time-Frame Limitations

We cannot know what’s next for these students. Will they continue to value what we did together? I only know that a good two-thirds of them showed up (with much coaching—and the promise of extra credit points) at our evening reading in January, enthusiastically conveying their own and each other’s poems to a gathering of about 50 parents and community members. And when I returned to the school in May to extend my thanks and invite them for pizza at lunch, about 32 of the 42 came and crowded around the lunchroom tables to talk one last time about what we’d achieved. What could I say? I looked out at all their faces, known to me by heart now, and could say little more than "Thanks for all you taught me." Will any of them continue with poetry? Or return to it in college? I cannot know. Nor, more importantly, can I know in what ways they will apply the "engaged world view" I'm claiming their poems reveal. Jenny noted on her evaluation that she "learned as much
about myself as I did about poetry," but when I asked her to jot down a few extra notes as to what she meant, there wasn't time. Kelley, who had dropped out to be home-schooled in mid-December, declined to attend our evening reading. When she stopped in to see me during one of my interview sessions, she said she "couldn't do it" any more, that only the poetry lessons we conducted drew that out of her. I could only shake my head and wish her well. With all that rich vocabulary, she says she doesn't read very much. I can only hope she remembers sometime all that she created. Her poems move me still. I trust she'll recognize that in years to come.

At Jill's suggestion, I read section of what I'd written about Emma to a smaller group of students who couldn't make the first lunch gathering. And there Emma was, sitting across the huge cafeteria table from me. Beaming. She agreed with my analysis--that she'd been wanting her poems to LEAP all along, yet only truly achieved it in the goofy ones she'd written from the two-line assignments. "I didn't care what I wrote about those," she said. Yet she saw that they were indeed her best work. Then, inside me, I recalled meeting her, back near the end of November, feeling sick, waiting by the front door of the school for her parents to pick her up. She was more wan at that point that I'd ever seen her. And seemingly a little depressed. She spoke then about her one-time wish to be a writer, hinting
that it was indeed now a "one-time" thing. I remember having the feeling as I was getting into my car that I should tell her: she might still be... Even if her poems hadn't turned out as well as she'd wanted. And I did--heading back to catch her just before she took off for home. "That might still happen," was all I could find the words to say. By May, watching that enigmatic, open face of hers across the table, it seemed a new face to me... one almost ready for anything. That "anything" is beyond me. As well it must be.

b. Limitations Concerning the Visual Arts

Just as I can't know where Emma will take the poetry, I can’t know what would have happened if we'd spent more time writing about visual images than we were able to find.

- What if the kids would have kept the "image journal" I'd concocted but never found time for them to do?

- What if we would have had a professional photographer work with them as we'd originally planned, or taken more time for them to critique their own photograph--then going out to take more?

- What if we'd spent more time with visual culture writing in Krogers? I'd wanted to do poems from album covers, magazines and ads, to compare them to the historical scenes we'd approached earlier.

c. Limitations for Poetry and Other Arts

Poetically, I would like to have had more students jump head-long into their "poetry notebooks," reading, responding to and visualizing that reading. I got to know only a little
of what they thought about the nature of poetry. What would have happened if we'd made the time more of a workshop, with students discussing "what makes a good poem?" or spending time testing out different revisions on each other, deciding for themselves what went into the booklet? As it was, I was the only voice of decision for the book and the reading. Might they have learned more if we'd taken the time for that kind of reflection? And how much would we have lost of the simple spontaneity to be found in these poems? Would there have been too much of a tradeoff with investigating community versus discovering a personal poetic criteria? My guess is we would have lost a good number of the kids. Like me, it wasn't poetry they were after, it was the world. Still, I don't know where that fine line might have been differently drawn.

Similarly, I can only speculate how the lessons here might be adapted to suit other art forms. I would like to conclude that the factors I identify in Chapter One concerning art conveying metaphor and symbol, physical re-engagement, playful off-centering and verbal-visual exchange can be adapted to other fields, but can't say for sure how. How, for instance, might someone working in experimental computer-animated films apply the lessons of physicality we discovered here? Might grappling with clay and digging in mud be something significant they could take back to the
pristine computer screen? And if not, what becomes of our human connectedness to the earth (Heideggerian or not) when their art comes out of the computer? Shifting fields, what about dance? How much can the body play with perspective, shifting levels, and metaphoric suggestion? This seems more immediately applicable, but this study can do no more than open up the questions.

This study stands only at the edge of how metaphor might function beyond words. How much different is a visual metaphor from a verbal one? Is it freer? Less confined? More visceral? More suggestive? By grappling with visual media (striking a line of paint across a canvas or filming piles of broken glass at a factory) are we more likely to stumble on effective metaphors rather than plan them? Indeed, are verbal ones more thought-out (as in, "Ah, a nice metaphor would be useful here")? The luckiest moments for poets is when "like" and "as" fall away and metaphor sinks its way into our verbs and turns our phrases without our intention. Could it be the same in visual media? Those questions are as open as this afternoon's sky.

d. Limitations of Place and Participants

This study is limited by the place and the people involved. Who can say how the results would change with a teacher less knowledgable about and committed to poetry than Jill Grubb? If the students were older, or younger, or came
from far more scattered backgrounds--having moved, as many I meet elsewhere now have, five or six times in their young lives--instead of the more stable locales of these Mt. Gileadeans, would they have been as intrigued by place? It could be MORE so, as something you haven't had can seem alluring. Or less. Inner city kids have equally rich places to explore, if we can find the means to energize that discovery. Suburbs seemingly offer less in that regard. How does one investigate "place" when all the streets look the same, and wavy street leads you to another? And if we dealt instead of "how do we see this place?" with some other vital question to tie the whole semester together, how would the results change?

Along those lines, I cannot be sure how the results would change for teachers not involved with a visiting artist. In what ways might it be possible for teachers to step outside of curricular constraints and create "festivals of vision" on their own? I know it happens--know of teachers who have done so, Jill include--but detailing that development lies outside the limits of this study as well.

10.12 Implications for Future Research

a. Implications for Exploring Metaphor

All of the above suggests many directions for future research, particularly along the line of applying
theoretical findings to actual practice. I'm convinced that the groundings are out there to open up a whole new shift in education, particularly for high school students. Only recently have I discovered work by people who have taken the insights into metaphor of Mark Johnson and George Lakoff in compelling new directions (Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconier, for example, in the field of cognitive science--see their 2002 publication, The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities; Douglas Hofstadter for another who titles his epilogue to the anthology The Analogical Mind, "Analogy as the Core of Cognition"). The work that remains to be done is in how to make such critical insights available to teachers and students. If this work provides our strongest argument for infusing the arts more thoroughly into the whole curriculum, then let's get on with it!

Such a battlecry comes with a warning: let's not become so single-minded in our pursuit of metaphor's significance for thought and meaning that we neglect the rest of our experience too. If there is one thing I'm sure of after this study it's the mercurial nature of the arts. The learning in our tiny festivals came often indirectly, by hunch and by luck: planning a lesson on interviews, I switched intuitively over into one about sonorous and surrealistic word play--and then that lesson fed in a far richer way that
I'll never fully comprehend the way students began looking at the town. If we'd stuck with interviewing, we'd have had more memories to draw on when writing about the town, but perhaps less flair to open up our seeing.

b. Implications for Exploring Place

As implied in the previous two sections, I'd like to see us put our research behind a culture-wide effort to reclaim the places where we live, helping students and teachers find the means to be more than colonial subjects of forces "out there" (mostly economic) that drive our thinking, consumption and value patterns. The arts are about so much more than their individual mediums alone. I want to discover ways that the particularities of each art, from dance, to painting, from poetry to video, can be honored and at the same time brought more into unison to help students re-value their lives. Much research, in and out of the university, remains to be done, to help such a grand shift in thinking come to fruition.

c. Implications for Honoring True Playfulness and the Surreal

How free are we? Does play function in the way I'm claiming it does--and as Gadamer says it does in the field of the arts--to open the boundaries of how we see ourselves? On the other hand, play-as-sport, in rigid competitive patterns, seems to dominate our social and school environment, pedestaling some, excluding others, to the loss
of so many resources and energies for more playful exploration of what makes us fully human on an endangered planet. How can we use our knowledge of play and our research initiatives to "free up play" from its current status as game alone? My sense is that students would welcome such a shift in emphasis--but research would have to build that case.

Along such lines, this study indicates that the surrealist tradition (if it's not an oxymoron to call it such) has yet to be fully tapped for its power to transform students' visual and verbal re-connection with the world. As we strive to "make the arts meaningful" in our schools and communities, it would be good if we didn't also try to make the arts "safer" and less risky. If so, we in danger of taming a beast that better feeds us with its wildness. The unconscious remains unknowable, linked to Heidgerrian awareness of the unsayable. My study would encourage research that would help us recognize this fact: that we can't pin down or codify inspiration too much, less we back it into stale corners. I'm quite sure that people in Mt. Gilead would have difficulty getting the full joy and energy from some of the wacky poems written by the students. (Donna, the secretary, for one example, who was supportive of my time in the school but frowned at many of the poems; the Millers, for another, kind-hearted as they are, who said
after our January reading, "You sure got a lot out of those kids--of course we didn't understand it all.") Surely we can't "make the world safe for surrealism" but we can speak for its energies in a cultural climate that allows faces to speak out of mirrors to sell us aftershave lotion, or Spongebob Squarepants to push slippers and mousepads, but generally disallows a non-logical thought to be expressed by a student's pen. Work needs to be done to help students claim the power of their own unconscious.

d. Implications for Studying Visual Art

Research should continue to investigate the "complex interplay" (see Mitchell in Chapter Five) between verbal and visual experience. Hardly do we know how that dynamic plays itself out in our ever more visual environment. I've yet to figure out in any definite way whether the poems students write about paintings actually reveal that art work any more than they conceal it. I know that insight emerges, and often intriguing poems, but I think more needs to be done to open up and explore that process. Why did the students seem to write weaker poems from their own photographs of the town? That's fascinating territory to step into further. Their prose seemed to enrich their poems and their connection to the photographs. Would the reverse be true?

Though this study has much to say to how we perceive anything, more could surely be done. How might the
"perceptual square" outlined earlier in this chapter (knowledge <---> perception <---> metaphor <---> invention) be explored more fully to help students gain a better sense of the way they take in the world? Put Mt. Gilead at the center of that investigation and you get one focus, put "the ocean" or "cubist art" there and you get others. Might political understandings be illuminated by placing something like "the death penalty" into that frame? How does our knowledge or memory of crime influence our perception of the law?

e. Implications for the Study of Schooling

I began this dissertation by claiming there are four disengagements which sap the energy of much schooling--a disengagement from the mind's basic properties of analogy and metaphor; a disconnection from the body and the physical environments in which we live; a lack of playfulness, outside of sports, in our approach to material; and a disregard of the vast and expanding visual world in which students find themselves immersed outside of school. My study suggests that the arts can do quite a bit to reconnect us to these sides of experience, opening up for students ways to think, feel, wonder and see. But how far? What factors influence more effective collaboration with other subjects to re-connect students to learning? If art is indeed a function of festival, how do we make it happen more
in our schools, without skimping on academics? Can festivals in fact strengthen learning? I know many schools have found ways to make that happen. How could we use research to enhance such redirection?

Further work remains to be done on how the lessons of the "artists in the schools" movement could be more thoroughly integrated into the daily curriculum. How can teachers and artists actually collaborate in making use of the arts legitimately in the full-year's study, without watering down the art and without short-changing the rest of learning? Some conclusions can be read from this study, but much remains to be considered.

Finally, more long-range studies could be done to "test" students' abilities to make use of the skills outlined here over time. Much could be done to track the carryover effect of poetic metaphorizing and physicality into prose assignments, or even into argumentation. Metaphor is often at the heart of political persuasion--in everything from political cartoons to the thesis statements in major congressional positions. How might the study of the metaphorical aspects of poetry and visual art prepare students to more easily identify the roots of such arguments--and to create more effective thesis statements of their own? If it doesn't--and it may not--then where does that leave art? As something that operates outside of the
"argumentation and analysis" side of learning? Or as an irrelevancy in a world where we are constantly in need of making decisions and taking directions? Can art be a part of re-directing lives without becoming art therapy? Can it energize the thinking and meaning-making process, in the way I'd like to believe this study suggests, deepening students' aesthetic sense at the same time it brings them into a more compassionate connection with the world?
APPENDIX: A TRIBUTE TO JILL GRUBB, TEACHER
10th Grade English, Mt. Gilead High School

The previous pages frequently mention but do not quite do justice to Jill Grubb's role in the unfolding of this dissertation. I say things like, "As Jill informed me the next day.." or "After talking plans over with Jill, we decided..." We daily considered the progress of the residency, how students were responding to certain prompts, which ones were expanding their range of risk, which might need a little nudge. For instance, at one key point in the semester, when I was feeling frustrated with the sluggishness of their response to questions I was asking, she suggested I just call on people to see what they thought. That one hint gave me a clue that much more thinking was going on than I'd imagined--it's just that sophomores in high school are loathe to admit that brainwaves are crossing through their cerebral cortex. When I began asking individuals for their ideas directly, I got much more varied and insightful comments.

As you can tell from the above example, I was in something of a student teacher role. Jill, after all, established the atmosphere of these classes early on, one of
inquiry, attention to detail, enthusiastic embracing of literature, personal connection to the text, and world awareness. It's lives she's molding here, not just the ability to write coherent paragraphs and essays. Her husband says she "kills them with love," showing so much caring for their ideas and their perceptions, for who they are and where they are going, that only the most callous are not moved to do their strongest work.

For a guest writer like myself, one cannot ask for a stronger milieu in which to direct poetry lessons. Kids come into Room 109 expecting to be challenged, to hear words that matter, to read poems and novels, plays and stories with depth. Top that off with the fact that hers is an active classroom, a place where students act out plays, put on hats to suit their personalities or their "mood of the day," draw, debate, building projects that matter to their lives, and one can see how easily they adapted to my presence. Oftentimes she has students respond in poetry to a scene in a novel or a play. ALWAYS she writes along with them, willing to share her efforts with them when the class reads around. She's told me about taking kids on exploration trips out into the world at large, including a time when they went to the elementary playground a few blocks away and just felt their senses running back into memory.
Along with the powers of the mind, Jill deeply respects the senses. When she reads literature aloud, it's often hard for her not to come to tears, not because the reading is always about sad events but because good writing evokes such a visceral, palpable world, which she enters and sees, feels and touches. What a lucky coincidence that such active, physical participation in writing is exactly what I was trying to teach. Not so much an accident after all--I CHOOSE to come to her classroom partly because of that very reason. I want words to be heard aloud and felt with the whole body. Jill is already teaching that, from the start of every year. My luckiness comes in simply knowing her and being able to add my own part to the flow of one semester in her room.

Our overall planning was looser than either of us would have liked, I admit. When I asked if I could conduct research in her room, the previous spring, she said yes; then we realized, as the summer progressed, how hard it is to get two busy teachers together to jointly plan a semester. In the past, I'd come into her room three other years, for one week residencies each time. These lessons were pretty much left up to me to structure and conduct. Now we needed to back up and try coordinating efforts. But how to predict, so far in advance, where a group of students would be two or three months in the future?
Nevertheless, we met twice. Perhaps the one most significant outcome of those two meetings was the concept of a kind of unfolding "Mt. Gilead Project" which we hoped would give coherence to both her work with the kids and mine. For a number of years, her semesters have hovered around the topic of place and community: reading *To Kill A Mockingbird* and considering how individuals are shaped, empowered, or thwarted by the atmosphere, location and times in which they live; acting out "The Crucible," "Twelve Angry Men," "Our Town," or "Spoon River Anthology" and seeing how lives are distorted by accusations, haunted by reputation, redirected through careful reasoning, or opened by honest, probing reflection. Similarly, for me, even my college classes had dwelt on the theme of "place," reading books such as James Kunstler's *The Geography of Nowhere* and Scott Russell Sanders' *Staying Put*. Now we would get to exchange ideas, through our mutually unfolding lessons, about how one finds a community within undervalued places like Mt. Gilead. And we'd start with "sleepy Macomb" of Harper Lee's imagination.

Both of us have fond associations with Scout's tale of her formative years. I, because of one summer when my oldest daughter Isa and I read it out loud on the porch every morning. She, because of its strong moral lessons, so applicable to students in this rather similar northern town,
where racial prejudice and insularity flourishes. Because of our mutual connection to the book, it proved a great place to start combining our ideas. She launched them into reading it, and I was able to step in quite naturally, taking the tests and listening in on discussion. As I've stated earlier, it was then I realized all the under-the-surface points I was missing in my own reading. Had I not been a part of that discussion, and had my first lessons not linked up with such an engaging, poetic novel, it's hard to tell what might have emerged as my time in the school progressed. Jill got them reading closely; because of that, I could ask them to write more precisely than I might otherwise have. She convinced them: literature asks moral questions, along with giving us lives worth considering (emulating, in the case of Atticus Finch; being wary of, in the case of the elder Radley, or Mr. Ewall). In that atmosphere, how could one aim for anything less?

Jill brings several other qualities to her teaching which help expand it beyond the ordinary English classroom. For one, she too is committed to the concept of being connected to one's place in a critical, loving way. She's been at Mt. Gilead for nearly 20 years and the kids and community know her values. Doing the yearbook, she's seen the place unfold over time. Having students graduate and stay in the town causes her name to be a familiar one. They
are aware she's one of the few teachers to take her classes on field trips to see plays in Columbus (for many, the first live professional drama they've seen). They know she stays after school every Friday afternoon throughout the year to help conduct "Philosophy Club," a place where students know it's safe to express ideas and discuss issues that concern them. (I've been to some of the sessions with 20 or more students attending, actively discussing everything from U.S. military policy to the ethics of contemporary cartoons.)

When I stopped uptown to order a slice of pizza for lunch one day, the daughter of the owner asked what I was doing at the high school, brightening considerably when I told her I was working with Jill Grubb's classes. "She's cool," this 19 year old commented, "she cares about her teaching."

Yet Jill also brings a heightened political awareness to her work. Having been raised as a diplomat's daughter, spending a good portion of her formative years in Pakistan, she's aware of the prejudice and limited attitudes students growing up in a place like Mt. Gilead can have. They may not always be aware of her background, but they sense and respect her wider knowledge and concerns. As mentioned in a previous chapter, when she refused to use a certain postage stamp because money from its sale went illegally to support presidential appointees who were mainly cronies and insiders to the current administration, a number of students
commented on the way she lives out her convictions. This is a rather conservative community. For Jill to make her political convictions known is not easy. Yet, like Atticus, what else can she do and still live with her own face in the mirror? She is a living example that one can care about one's own community and still bring in values from the rest of the world. As I commented in my closing remarks at our poetry reading in January, she's out to make them nothing less than productive citizens of the world, not only out for their personal gain but seeking the betterment of humanity as well.

Finally, Jill brings a fine-tuned sense of language herself to the study of poetry. Attuned to the subtleties of metaphor, yet deeply connected to the sensory aspects of the physical world, she provides an incredible model for the students to emulate. They hear her poems read aloud and can't help feeling, one imagines, "Wow... so that's how it's done." Never pretentious or wordy, she gets right to the heart of her own writing in a very personal yet crafted way.

She can be quite silly in her writing, when given the chance, as in this short exercise based on the use of half-rhyme, mutes and alliteration:

Let badgers drag their blossoms
blessing dragonflies of mirth
Soak your silken sandals
in stagnant pools, soft petaled probes
Tether pampered, lavendered, lichened pagodas
Crypts, tanks, blocks, sticks, kilts,
mockers, dirt

Free cheetahs lost in melancholy, dirges,
surges, urges, arguments
Seize comfort by the horns, & chortle

Here is a writer who is not afraid to have fun with words, to risk silliness in order to investigate the possibilities of sound.

Here is another example, with that same sense of humor and language, heading in quite another direction. It comes from a couple years ago, when I was working with one of her classes on an assignment called "My First Two Wives," based on a poem of that title by Ira Sadoff (see Chapter Nine for the text of his poem). Jill took it her own direction:

OUTDOORSMAN

My first three husbands loved
Being outdoors, wearing insulated boots,
Carharts, foul weather orange, rabbit hats,
Gloves, woolen socks, long underwear.

They'd sit in February woods, looking
For great horned owls already warming eggs
Or hoot and start the singing 'cross the creek.

In early spring they'd stand by marshes
Mud caked, mired, enraptured
By spring peeper's courtship songs
Or lie on permafrost, face turned to frozen stars
To catch the wanton whistles of the woodcock,

Clouds covering the moon, the trunks of trees
imagined darkness
Transfixed by rustlings, monsters, bears.
Just worms dislodging last fall's leaves.

My fridge filled up with meal worms, frozen birds,
A vial of stomach oil and little tubes of blood.
The laundry rife with burrs, clay, feathers.
Garage festooned in nets, sticks, shovels, tarps,
a cage.

And smells! of mildewed oil cloth
Boots with soggy felt
Regurgitated squid and mouse entrails
And loam, spruce gum and powdered leaves.

Cool moonlight, feathered strings,
Dawn robin warming up the orchestra.
And I?
I'm wearing oilskins, sifting through debris
of pellet, bird bands, smells,
Our pockets filled with time.

Notice how cleverly Jill turns the tenor of the assignment
on its head, making it not so much an investigation of obsession, the way Sadoff's model might encourage, as a statement of love for a person quite different from herself: her actual husband, Tommy, a biology professor at Ohio State. Sure, she plays the game of imagining having married several men, all with the same behaviors of collecting animal specimens and standing in the swamp to record birdsongs. But it's not the risque nature of the assignment that concerns this poet--it's the nature of nature, the way we fall in love with what intrigues us, with what teaches us to be and see more than we otherwise would from our necessarily petty perspective. THAT is the kind of writing one would not expect from the average English teacher, consumed as he or she often must be with grading charts, rubrics and correct sentence structure. Jill has all of those responsibilities too--but she's managed to keep an
open connection with the playful and physical qualities of metaphor and language: again, precisely those qualities I wanted to convey to the students. What better situation to be in than to conduct writing lessons in the classroom of a teacher who already has a strong intuitive sense of how poems move, of how language reconnects us to the world?

Look at what she wrote when we sat at the edge of the lake at Mt. Gilead State Park, following the simple directions of "stare out and stare down" (which became her title):

Find a spot, stare out, stare down...

A grey tipped pine cone, layer on layer of frosted skirts
Fire leaf, green veined, luminescent
Aster, purple hearted with lavender arms, vibrates stiffly
   Sun dazzles a single strand
A flick of movement where the small grey spider rocks & spins
   repairing where a twig fell through
The lake is flowing, rushing background for the leaf fall
   Drifting arcs and plummetings
One crunching oak hacked down by chickadee
   The traffic noise blends into wind & church bells in the town
Racked shafts of flaming feathers stab the trees
   Green veins w/bursting fingers
Lilac skirted
   Rustling in the sun
I crush leaves, bring back pitted burrows
Leaf mold, a country to the north
   No longer crisp, but pliant, strong
   A web of memories
The spider rests, repaired
   Sun sifts through leafy fingers, intertwined
   & dapples me
I don't get tired of this writing! I feel myself shifted back into another way of seeing, more meticulous, closer than I myself usually allow my eyes to go. I like how phrases here spill into sentences, pull back into further phrases that draw our eyes on, one sense blending into the other (traffic noise and church bells leading into "racked shafts of flaming feathers") till they form a synesthetic whole. Any poet visiting a classroom knows that having the teacher write along with the assignment (and writing his or her own poem as well) adds credibility to the event, showing the students that we're all in this language game together. When that teacher brings us back poems that teach--that extend what the assignment was laid out to do--it becomes a learning experience for us all. As Jill's work shows.

Along with the ability to play with language and to write movingly about nature, Jill seems to see incredibly well into paintings. In fact, I think it's Jill's multivarious ability to be silly, descriptive, emotional and incisive--and still see her way into the heart of a painting--that gave me the cues of how important it was for students to address visual scenes in their poems, along with physical spaces. I'll close with one of the poems she composed at the Columbus Museum, tackling a far less pretty topic than any of the above poems address--the murder of scabs by striking Unionists in the 1930s in Paul Cadmus's
"Herrin Massacre." Even her title stretches boundaries few teachers would be willing to broach, just as her eye for the horrors of the story do the same:

I Pull My Red Dress Up  
(Paul Cadmus, "Herrin Massacre")

Red fist upraised, a crimson pipe  
A flame of orange hair, now drenched in sweat  
A pitchfork's fang marks in pale flank, white shirt,  
the bleeding eyes  
A cross of faded roses by a naked knee  
Red splattered tombstones framed in lilies, white

Looking on, hands stuffed in rusty pockets  
Cigar emerging from the lurid cavern  
of his mouth, he smiles  
Another dribbles beer down his red sleeveless tee

Behind, where one man washed in blood lies silent  
underneath a hanging tree  
That woman hikes her red dress up  
Checks out her stockings  
Rests her foot upon the corpse, & laughs

This shows me a rich ability to not cordon off certain subjects, not to prettify or deny the realities right before us. How to do that, when 15 or so students are wandering around the museum, perhaps gabbing too much, perhaps not concentrating, perhaps stuck for a place to start? I wish I had half of Jill's ability to just be consumed by an assignment, in the midst of class, a state park or a museum. Does she have a huge dose of "negative capability," an urge to not choose sides but just to absorb and consider? To be able to change viewpoints at will, and yet remain committed to a moral center? To not condemn or pre-judge, but to know?
That presence of mind, that precise listening and opening and interior voice may be the greatest gift she brought to our days together that. I know it gave me courage to try out new ideas with the students, to risk having things not go perfectly. For I could always turn to Jill and get insights as to where to head next. Sure she had her constraints--the books she needed to cover, and the prose-writing skills so necessary to high school sophomores as they move toward college preparation. Where I wanted to devote a week to merely writing about visual images, she had to scale my grand design back to two days. But she opened up a door by offering up time for writing about historical photographs--and the students' own snapshots--so we ended up with the same number of days for visual imagery anyway.

Presence and persistence. Overall commitment to making of meaning from literature--and awareness that students learn about life in so many different ways. Precision of language use--and a willingness to play with words until they start to sing. A merger of outside knowledge with interior calm. Microscopic, scientific vision and macroscopic, political scope. All these complexities which Jill so deeply prizes and exemplifies soaked like kerosene into the cloth of our days together--and made them burn that much more brightly.
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