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## **The Poets of El Sol**



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**SUE A. CRONMILLER**

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“Let us gather in a flourishing way” from *Notebooks of a Chile Verde Smuggler*,  
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*Dedicated to my father,  
Charles Hunsicker Cronmiller  
1903-1984*



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# I

## Bird's Eye View



## *El Sol*

Situated in downtown Santa Ana, California, thirty minutes from the University of California at Irvine, El Sol Academy has been the home and creative laboratory for poets from the university for over eight years. Despite its close proximity, Santa Ana bears little resemblance to the upper middle class, recently developed community of Irvine. Practically a brand new city, built on what was, in 1960, open ranchland, Irvine is made up of an architecturally designed set of villages, each lined with landscaped, wide avenues separating commercial districts from the freshly stuccoed houses, members-only pools and man made lakes. Santa Ana is an older community by Orange County standards; stately buildings from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century still stand on Broadway alongside the offices of immigration abrocos, bail bondsmen, boarded up office buildings, churches and medical clinics. The civic center, county courthouse and jail are all just blocks away from El Sol. The neighborhoods off Broadway, behind the school, house a dense population of the county's poor, living in crowded apartment buildings and aging domiciles. Here, street vendors push handcarts with refrigerated boxes of ice cream bars or an assortment of fresh, tropical fruit. Flocks of wild parrots squawk among the power lines. Mothers push strollers and walk with toddlers and school children in uniform on the way to El Sol Academy, one of only a few dual language immersion charter schools in the state of California. They make their way toward a pale blue, two story Victorian house with a glassed-in vestibule that is the home of El Sol's main offices and entrance. Behind the house, children play in the brightly painted science garden between rows of portable classrooms. The recently added middle school campus is across

the side street. To get there, one must maneuver through two sets of padlocked, ten-foot chain link fences. Two years ago, the middle school area was the school's parking lot. Now, teachers, visitors and school employees must park blocks away or risk parking tickets along the metered street.

## *In Situ*

In an essay co-written by poets Kent Johnson and Forrest Gander, the section on Raul Zurita includes a satellite photograph of the Chilean poet's geographical Atacama text, in which the words *ni pena ni miedo* ("neither shame nor fear") have been bulldozed into the alluvial plane at the base of a Chilean mountain. The words are one kilometer tall and three kilometers long. Gander writes:

His words...are gradually fading away, joining thousands of men, women, and children who disappeared in fear and pain during the Pinochet years. But schoolchildren in the closest desert pueblo come with shovels and turn over the ground inside the letters, refreshing them. And so new editions of the poem are published *in situ*...

Reading Gander's account, it occurred to me that the Chilean pueblo children and their labor to preserve the Atacama text is a metaphor for what we have been doing at El Sol Academy in Santa Ana since 2003. The UCI Poetry Academy introduces poetic text to the school children of El Sol. In our poetry workshops young writers lovingly and imaginatively turn over the words of the great poets to enrich their minds, their lives and their own poems. In this manner, we keep the poetry fresh and alive.

In archeology, *in situ* refers to an artifact that has not been moved from its original place of deposition. An artifact that is discovered *in situ* can provide an accurate picture of the culture that produced it. In art, *in situ* refers to a composition made specifically for a host site, one that bears



a relationship to the physical location and to the cultural context in which it is fashioned and installed.

The Poetry Academy at El Sol is itself a work of art, constantly in progress, *in situ*. The program's practices, lessons, pedagogical methods and curricula have evolved in place and in accordance with the formation and development of the culture of the school.

The story of the UCI Poetry Academy began when I was still a graduate student in the MFA Programs in Writing at the University of California at Irvine. My first exposure to kids learning poetry took place at Heninger Elementary, a public school in Santa Ana, CA, where I would see, for the first time, how happily and fantastically children respond to reading, writing and talking about imaginative language.

At Heninger, I befriended the principal, Kathy Sabine. Everyone in the community knew Kathy for her belief in the creative arts and bilingual education. When I graduated with my MFA, I continued to partner with Kathy through the Humanities Out There Program, or HOT, pioneered by UCI Professor Julia Lupton. As HOT's Director of Programming and Publications, I coordinated a team of humanities graduate students teaching workshops in the Santa Ana Unified School District, developing and publishing the resulting curricula in both academic (history and literature) and creative (poetry and fiction) content. Although Kathy admired the academic units, she could see the unique possibilities creative writing provided her Spanish speaking English language learners. Together we wrote an award winning application to the California School Boards Association, featuring the poetry project, which won for the school a Golden Bell Award.

Years later, when Humanities Out There shifted its priorities to the more traditional academic disciplines, I was able to secure funding to continue my work at the university with kids and poetry. I applied and was awarded a prestigious University-Community Links (UC Links) grant in 2003 offered through the University of California's Office of the President (UCOP). One of the key requirements for UC Links funding is the involvement of undergraduates at the university through coursework closely tied to the practice of serving kids in vulnerable communities. When Vice Chancellor Manuel Gómez, himself a talented poet and native of Santa Ana, matched the grant with support from the UCI Office of Student Affairs, I was on my way.

With a very modest budget, I set up the program and taught and trained the undergraduates who would assist me in the elementary school workshops. I then needed to find a school that would welcome our unique contributions. I knew Kathy had retired from her position as principal at Heninger and had founded a new dual language immersion charter school in the city of Santa Ana, the El Sol Academy of Arts and Sciences. At the time, a fierce battle was taking place in California education generally and, particularly, in the Santa Ana Unified School District, serving one of the largest Latino student populations in the nation. Education leaders and legislators were calling for the abolishment of dual language education in favor of English only instruction. When Kathy established El Sol, it was to offer parents in the community the option of a Spanish-English educational environment for their children. Her view was that too many Spanish-speaking students were completing high school without competent literacy skills in either English or Spanish. She wanted to educate students so they were bilingual and bi-literate.

Kathy's dedication to providing a rich, multi-cultural, interdisciplinary educational experience is at the heart of the El Sol culture and community. Given Kathy's openness to flexibility, experimental and creative curriculum development, El Sol provided the new poetry program an ideal seedbed for educational innovation. Knowing that, along with our world-class reading list, we also brought with us the world of the university, she gladly welcomed the poetry program to the new school site. The UCI Poetry Academy has continued its work at El Sol since then. Through small group discussion sessions, the university poets form close and trusting relationships with the students of El Sol. For kids who may not have others in their lives who have completed higher education, through our program they start to see the university as a friendly, familiar place they too might want to attend one day. In the early years of adequate funding, each spring we would organize an El Sol student poetry reading on the UCI campus during the university's open house. The readings took place on an outdoor stage in Aldrich Park, and afterward, parents and students enjoyed live entertainment and food and discovered more about the university at information booths representing student organizations, university departments and resources. For many El Sol families, this would be their first time visiting a university campus.

And while Kathy is enjoying retirement more and more these days, she still serves on the El Sol Board of Directors, and our friendships at El Sol have deepened and increased. Monique Daviss, the school's Executive Director has led El Sol toward remarkable achievements. Today the school is thriving. With a student population that is 95% Latino, El Sol's Academic Performance Index advanced from 559 in 2003 to 843 in 2009. Also, in 2009, because of its impressive advances in the school's

Academic Performance Index, El Sol was awarded the designation of a “California Distinguished School.”

## *Language Arts*

The California Content Standards for language arts includes teaching the identification of certain poetic techniques in the elementary years, such as simile, metaphor and figurative language. But I did not want to limit our activities to defining and identifying, through reading, the technical aspects of poetry. In developing a curriculum that would enhance the standards, I found a passage in the language arts section for third and fourth grades that, to my mind, articulates an operative definition for poetry writing:

### Writing Applications (Genres and Their Characteristics)

2.2 Write descriptions that use concrete, sensory details to present and support unified impressions of people, places, things places or experiences.

As I will describe throughout this book, activities in the poetry workshop are constantly evolving around an ongoing inquiry into the nature of language and its capacity to describe lived experience. With language as our primary focus, much of what takes place in the poetry workshop at El Sol is akin to philosophy and psychology, a claim I hope to make apparent in the following chapters.

To leverage the interdisciplinary potential for the study of poetry, I often align our lessons with what's going on in the day-to-day classroom. Selections of poetry can easily support and enhance the content standards in history, geography and the social sciences. Our third grade curriculum, for example, offers a five-week study of local native California art and

poetry that correlates with the standards for history and social science. The curriculum includes images of Native American baskets housed nearby at the world class Bowers Museum of Cultural Art in Santa Ana. In this lesson, we make connections between native basketry and a prayer ascribed to the Yokuts, a Northern California tribe, called “My Words are Tied in One.” We ask the students to “read” the symbolism on the baskets and to examine the symmetrical patterns woven into their design and artwork. We ask them how a poem can be like a basket, with images and symbols arranged in patterns of repetition. After our discussion, we take the whole class outdoors to write detailed observations as they face in each of the four directions. The lesson teaches the students some local history, while also asking them to read and interpret their own world on a deeper level, from a place at the center of all they see, hear and feel.

At El Sol, the young writers in our workshop have shown me how to help them create startling images with sensory details. Together, we get down on our hands and knees with language. We play long and hard at synthesizing the sounds of the words they hear and love into meaningful words and patterns of their own. Our mentors are the poems themselves. The skills we practice and learn together extend to all other disciplines—observation, detailed description, specificity, and originality. Through drafting and revision, the children build confidence in their ability to know and express what’s on their minds. For true intellectual and emotional confidence comes from the ability to relax and take risks. It is the opposite of self-consciousness, yet self-consciousness often needs to be confronted and sublimated in order to achieve self-confidence. A confident person knows that s/he will most likely make mistakes when trying something new and is not afraid to make mistakes in public. In poems, it is perfectly

all right to be unsure about what you are trying to say. In fact, uncertainty is an honest stance toward experience. Meaning takes shape in time. We apprehend it. Language helps it to appear.

Take, for example, the simile game I developed in the elementary classroom to model for the students the mental flexibility it takes to make fresh, interesting images-- images that involve and evoke leaps of the imagination, and demonstrate out-of-the-box, risky thinking. The simile exercise gets us all looking very closely at parts of speech and sentence making. What's more, it's really a lot of fun.

The simplicity of the lesson is deceiving, as the exercise elegantly examines the old philosophical dichotomy between the paired terms, "abstract" and "concrete." In other words, it's a mini-lesson in ontology. It may be useful here to note that all lessons developed for practice at El Sol have also the undergraduate student's education in mind. Our practice helps simplify and clarify complicated aspects of studying literature at the university. This exercise exploring the concrete and abstract helps the undergraduates to see more clearly how to strike a balance between "showing" and "telling" in their own writing. To help make plain the difference between the world of "concrete" physical things and the world of "abstract" ideas, the children first explore the properties of the type of word known to them as a noun.

Together we talk about the fact that a noun can be a person, place, thing or IDEA. Ideas are invisible. They exist in the mind. We can't know an idea through our senses, only by definition or relationship with sensory "real" things. Nouns representing emotions, for instance, the words "love," "fear," "happiness," "sadness" are ideas and have no shape or form outside our own understanding or experience until we attach images –

faces, sounds, touch, scent— to that idea or impression. William Carlos Williams’ motto comes to mind, “No ideas but in things,” as a way for the students to think about writing imagistic poetry.

I involve the whole class in the activity by making a list of “thing” nouns on the far left of the chalkboard or dry erase. Without going into a discussion of the universal and the particular, we just jump right in, as I ask the class to think of unusual, very specific (detailed) nouns. For example, if a child recommends we list “dog,” he or she is asked to be more exact by saying what kind of dog—breed, size, etc. Everyone agrees that putting a Chihuahua in a poem would create a different mood than a pit bull, as would to put the two together.

Once we have a good set of five or six things, we start a new list to the left of the first. This list is for adjectives. We make the list separate from, and in-no-relation-to, the first list, though some intuition may inform the choice of words. What I am trying to say here is that the language is driving the creative process as it unfolds, and we intentionally do not want the kids to know where this is going.

For the list of adjectives, as for the list of nouns, the children are asked to be specific and to think of unusual “delicious” words--words they like to say and hear—mysterious, sensational, wicked. When we have five or six good adjectives, we move our list to the far left. Here we choose an idea noun—one of the emotions. A very good word to use here is “love,” for love is often described in clichés and symbols. I ask them to close their eyes and tell me what they see when I say the word love. Hands go up. “Hearts and flowers.” I say those words are symbols. Words like that help to generalize for everyone a broad understanding of love. Poems describe precisely the place; the sounds, the light, the colors present the moment in



which you feel love. There is no one definition for it. The love in your poem will not look like any one else's.

So we next list "love" five or six times, in its own list at the far left of the lists, then add the articles and verbs to make one-sentence simple similes.

The results of this exercise may look something like this:

IDEA NOUN	ADJECTIVE	THING NOUN
Love (is as)	mysterious (as a)	moth
Love (is as)	wicked (as a)	rhinoceros
Love (is as)	perplexing (as a)	wishbone
Love (is as)	electrical (as a)	Chihuahua
Love (is as)	magnificent (as a)	sandcastle

We discuss the simile and its properties of comparison using the words "like" or "as." Then we discuss the merit of each of these statements. Which two things are being compared in the first one? Is love mysterious? How? Can a moth be mysterious? How? What do we know about a moth that is similar to what we know about love? Does the simile *feel* true? Does it have a sense of truth without being literally true? Is love as magnificent as a sandcastle? What do love and sandcastles have in common? What is your favorite of these similes? Which one is the least true or interesting?

The instructor of this exercise must be willing to trust the process--to be inspired by the words the children contribute. Teaching poetry is itself a poetic process in which meaning and connection often come about

through unexpected means. For the poet, it's all about tricking out the literal, linear, common sense making, conventional, tame writing mind to unleash the wild, rich, associative-language-making-animal.

To follow up on our study of parts of speech and how to push language, we focus subsequent revision sessions on how to expand the simple simile into a complex comparison using fresh, interesting verbs. I have prepared a handout that includes a question resembling the type of question asked on standardized tests:

Which of the following sentences is the *least* interesting?

The sunfish is swimming in the river.

The sunfish is burning in the river.

The sunfish is dreaming in the river.

It's not really a trick question, but one that sometimes requires a closer look. We are asking the third graders to identify the sentence that is the *least* interesting rather than the *most* interesting. The simple examples allow for a discussion of the verbs, and how using verbs that describe, literally and commonly, what something is expected to do is not poetry. If a sunfish is burning in the river, we see the sunlight, the reflection and intensification of the light on the water and on the fish, and we feel warm and know it is daytime. But if the fish is dreaming, we are free to take this poem anywhere.

Most of the student writing accomplished in workshop arises from a one-on-one discussion with a student about certain words in a poem and those words can mean in their every possible sense. Inevitably, the child's

mind will light up with ideas and explode with excited talk. Sometimes all I have to do is say, “Write that down, what you just said. Exactly the way you explained it to me.” As a result of these freeing, confidence-building discussions, time after time, the child will take greater pains to express him or her self, using advanced vocabulary and imagined scenarios to describe and reconcile complicated psychological and philosophical conflicts and processes. Alberto Ramirez wrote this stunner while he was in the fourth grade, after a full two years of poetry workshops:

*Rain Shadow*

*The rain sounds like maracas going chik-a-chic-a-chic.*

*The sound makes the world feel like being  
inside a shadow separating from his object.*

*Rainwater coming down from nowhere  
goes into the dirty, slimy streets,  
through the layers of earth and rocks,  
coming clean in the mystery of the well.*

## *Mind's Eye: The Poets of El Sol*

A major component of the poetry program at El Sol is to provide opportunities for the publication of student work, including public reading events, but also via the creation of an innovative online writing and publishing site that highlights professionally designed anthologies of student work.

In June of 2009, we published *Mind's Eye: The Poets of El Sol*, a weighty anthology of student poems written in the first six years of the program. Johnny Chavez, a recent graduate of El Sol, created the artwork for *Mind's Eye's* saturated deep-blue-graphic-novel-cover. To celebrate, we gave every student in grades 3-8 a free copy of the book. For many of these kids, *Mind's Eye* is one of their favorite possessions. It's not uncommon to spot rubbed and worn copies here and there, stuffed into backpacks and under desks. On occasion, students make spontaneous text-to-text references in workshop to poems written by their peers. For instance, I was recently reading aloud to the class a poem by Ralph Angel that had inspired one of the student poems in the anthology, when a girl shouted out, "That's like this one in the book! 'Having a friend is like trying to stop several leaking pipes!'" While I was reading, she had thumbed through the book to find and confirm her good memory and textual connection.

## *These Three Things*

Overall, three key programmatic attributes set the Poetry Academy apart from other poets-in-the-schools projects. First, we have concentrated our efforts at one school site, El Sol Academy in Santa Ana. Instead of expanding across the region for broader programmatic impact (the business model), we chose to deepen our practice and expand *in situ* as the children grew, thereby creating a sustained, incremental curriculum calibrated to engage the student from one grade level to the next (a holistic, whole school model), to fully integrate the practice of poetry into their daily lives and consciousness, and to follow the budding poet as s/he develops a corpus of written work. In addition to the development of a whole school curriculum, the UCI Poetry Academy is unique in as far as: 1) we have our roots in the research university; and 2) we have sought to incorporate into our core mission the research, design, development *and* implementation of innovative methods and tools to advance educational technology in support of the creative writing process.

## *Undergraduate Poet-Teachers*

Unlike most community-based literary programs, our workshops are tied directly to university coursework, engaging undergraduate student poets, and thereby providing teams of poet-instructors in training as assistants in the classroom. The teaching teams, led by a seasoned poet-educator with an MFA from the same university (yours truly), earn academic credit for their facilitation of small group instruction. Having more able bodies in the classroom allows for individual attention to the El Sol students, and a dynamic educational model in which each participant group is learning from the other.

In addition to their work assisting me in the El Sol classroom, enrolled UCI students are required to attend training lectures; to prepare for workshop by studying lesson materials and poems; to read and understand program publications, including websites and the print anthology of *Mind's Eye*; to write weekly field note reports, serve as editors and consultants for the online Writing LAB, produce lesson plans, articulate teaching strategies and other lesson-specific assignments.

For the majority of the six-week session, the poet-instructors learn from watching me teach the weekly workshop lesson. I introduce each workshop by taking the helm and leading the whole class in a discussion of the day's reading and activity. We typically have one hour with each class in weekly workshop. My portion of that hour can run up to, and sometimes exceed, a half hour, depending on what we are trying to cover that day. Midway through the workshop, I turn the conversation over to the teaching poets and their small group sessions. The workshop is structured around a teaching strategy simply described as an "I do it, we

do it, you do it” approach. The undergraduate instructors facilitate, on average, groups of three El Sol students at a time. In groups of this size, the undergraduates glean a sense of each student’s ability as a writer, thinker and communicator.

The undergraduates involved with the UCI Poetry Academy are not recruited from the department of education, but from the School of Humanities’ Emphasis in Creative Writing. Although they are accomplished writers, many of these undergraduates have never taught before. Anticipating their first day in the classroom, many new poet-teachers are wrought with fear and anxiety about teaching. To help them feel more comfortable, I rely on the charm of the El Sol students on the first day of workshop.

At the start of every six-week workshop, we begin with a fun, ice breaking introduction and interview session. One at a time, I introduce the undergraduate teachers-in-training to the class. Before our arrival, our partners, the El Sol teachers, brief the class to help them come up with good interview questions. Anything goes, however. The questions range from silly to serious. Last quarter, a student asked Christopher Diaz his favorite animal was, to which he replied, *Humans*. Sharif Shakhshir was asked how difficult it was for him to get into UCI. This question led to an illuminating discussion about community college transfer and how the junior college is a viable option for students aiming for a degree from UC. When Carly Miller was asked what inspires her to write, she explained she often feels inspired while riding in the car. The student’s question led her to realize, there on the spot, that a common theme in her poems is the body and what it can and cannot tell us about who we are.

My approach for the undergraduates is the same as for the El Sol students, to encourage them to take risks, to think on their feet, trust the process, and by so doing, learn how to get out of the way when their students are ready to write. A common inclination is to over teach. They learn quickly that their job is not to simply say what they know about a poem or its attributes, but to bring forth the imagination of the child. It is a very delicate matter. During small group sessions, I roam the room, working with anyone who seems stuck or asks for help, modeling ways to get everyone thinking and writing more freely and openly. After workshop, when we meet to plan for our next lesson, we work together, reflecting upon what took place in the classroom, incorporating suggestions from the team, to make sure we pace our instruction to best support and challenge the individual students in the class.

Overall, through their experience at El Sol, above and beyond what they learn from the students in their groups, the university students gain insight into the educational system as a whole, and, perhaps more important, a personal understanding for families and schools in urban neighborhoods. As a result, many UCI Poetry Academy alumni choose to become teachers or enter graduate programs in writing. Recent graduates from the program, whose field notes are featured later in this book, are working toward these goals. Carly Miller is beginning her graduate work in the Master of Fine Arts in Writing program at San Diego State University. Andrew Beshai is completing a two-year assignment with Teach For America in Las Vegas, Nevada. Christopher Diaz is teaching high school Latin in Memphis, Tennessee. And Juli Caso is enrolled in the EdD Program in Education at the University of California at Santa Barbara.



## *Online Writing LAB and Mind's Eye*

The most innovative programmatic aspect, however, may well be the in-house development and implementation of a unique, innovative, online writing tool that supports our writing activities and also teaches computer literacy. Since 2003, our work has included the development of innovative educational software to promote student engagement with the writing process and to facilitate the publication of student poetry online.

Years after its launch in the classroom in 2005, there is still nothing quite like our online Writing LAB on the web. We developed the site before the world discovered Facebook, but Facebook wouldn't have worked for us, in any case. Because school children need to be protected, both from their own unlimited browsing and from being browsed, we designed the Writing LAB with their security in mind. Unlike Facebook, where anyone from anywhere can participate, our site is restricted to approved users. The only public pages are the publications, featuring student poetry. Even here, the student's last name is suppressed.

The handiest thing about the Writing LAB is a database that archives all student activity, from their first draft in the third grade through all the drafts and poems they have written upon graduation in the eighth. The LAB keeps a history of each incarnation of a student's poem, along with the history of our editors' suggestions and comments. The Writing LAB is a private conversation between the student and our poetry editors, who are the UCI student instructors. When a student submits a draft, the editor responds with suggestions for revision. When a poem evolves through revision to where it is publishable, the student editor passes it

along to my final draft folder. I then check for final edits and publish the student poem in the current issue of the online *Mind's Eye*.

For program instructors and researchers, the site provides a valuable digital archive of student drafts, including the date first entered, and consequent revisions according to comments and suggestions from online editors/writing consultants. Once writing is entered into the LAB, we can track the effectiveness of written editorial comments and writing suggestions provided by Poetry Academy editors. Not only is this data invaluable for research and evaluation, the Writing LAB facilitates the organization of material for print anthologies. From the control panel, the site administrator can create a file of all published poems, which can be edited and reorganized into a manuscript. When editing for publication the print companion to the online *Mind's Eye*, I was able to produce a file of all poems published in the online *Mind's Eye* by accessing data stored in the Writing LAB. The remarkable outcome of the process is this: all poems now published in the print anthology of *Mind's Eye* were first typed manually and submitted for publication by the student poets themselves.

The online literary journal of *Mind's Eye* features student poetry in seasonal issues and helps facilitate the ultimate goal of writing poetry: to write a poem worthy of publication. Because the *Mind's Eye* literary journal of student poetry is housed at UC Berkeley on the UC Links website, publication on this site articulates the program's partnership with the university, while, at the same time, publicly confirms the El Sol student's inclusion in the university community and culture.

Interaction with the online Writing LAB familiarizes the students with the parlance of literary publishing. They learn the terms: *submit, for*

*review, draft, editor, publish, and literary journal* by practicing these actions on our website. El Sol students begin using the Writing LAB in the third grade. When we introduced the tool to third and fourth graders in 2005, it was the first time many had ever used a computer. This meant that we were teaching basic computer skills: the keyboard, Internet navigation, and word processing, as well as close reading and imaginative writing.

*Mind's Eye* and the Writing LAB provide the student a permanent archive of his or her own writing. Years from now, when these students are grown and raising families of their own, poems published in the online *Mind's Eye* issues will be there to revisit, enjoy and share.

The motivational impact of these publication activities cannot be underestimated. When we match written first drafts against first entries in the Writing LAB, we see significant conceptual and grammatical improvements from paper to screen. Factors contributing to these improvements include the clean formal appearance of typed work vs. handwritten scrawl on paper. When students type their poems, they take them more seriously. They revise as they are typing. They see errors more clearly. They sharpen their ideas because they *feel* more important.

And while the original version of the Writing LAB has served us well, with over 2,000 student entries and over 1,500 published poems, the software has become dated and has lost some key functionalities. In this era of rapidly changing digital tools, the good news is that we have partnered with the UCI Department of Informatics and their year-long senior cap-stone course to involve a team of outstanding computer science students in the task of designing a new site on an updated platform that will be easier to maintain while incorporating cutting edge features, design and capabilities. The team will be supervised by Professors Judith Olson

and Hadar Ziv will work in close consultation with me, and the El Sol students, to employ our vision for the new and improved online writing tool.

## *Whole School Curriculum*

Over the past twelve years, I have tested and tried hundreds of lesson plans, keeping and developing only the ones the kids respond to best. I designed the first year of poetry workshops at El Sol for the third grade, because, at the time, the school served children in grades K-3 only. Each year, I adjusted our lessons and practices to serve the students as they grew. Because we wanted to keep doing what we started in third grade, and, at the same time, follow the kids we knew as they advanced in grade, we added new levels of workshops each year, as the school expanded. Now the school serves students from preschool all the way through to the eighth grade, with a strong middle school culture. Likewise, the Poetry Academy now offers poetry workshops to students from grade three up to their eighth grade graduation.

One way to describe our work *in situ* at El Sol is to say that we are engaged in a research-based, longitudinal, interdisciplinary, inter-institutional, technologically innovative educational partnership. I say we have created a vital, thriving community of poetry readers and writers at a U.S. school in a time when such things are on the endangered species list. The students at El Sol may not realize that students elsewhere do not have the foundation in poetry that they enjoy. Not long ago, I was trying to explain something like this to a group of fifth graders. I even went so far as to say that some people are afraid of poetry. I was thinking of the time First Lady Barbara Bush cancelled a poetry reading at the White House for fear of the poets' voiced anti-war sentiments. But I didn't go into that then. I was satisfied that one boy listening cried out, "Why would anyone be afraid of poetry?"

## *Seriousness*

Given that most of the poetry featured in this book, be it the poems we bring to workshop to read together with the students of El Sol, or the poems they themselves write in and out of their experiences with us, is, for the most part, serious, in subject matter and tone. It bears saying, however, that the children themselves are, as is the overall energy of the poetry workshop, seriously fun. Pure piñata busting, balloon popping, here-come-the-clowns style fun. A look through the hundreds of field notes written by undergraduate teaching poets archived on our website over the years is a kind of “50 first dates” in that nearly every student writes about the tremendous fun they have at El Sol. That said, the real life challenges facing these young people are not. And where it is never our intention to purposefully tend to the more painful aspects of their childhood, we do not avoid difficult subjects or gloss over matters of grave importance when they arise. Our success over the years may have a great deal to do with the amount of respect we have for the student poets. We do not dumb down our reading list or the subject matter of our discussions; rather, we invite the student to participate with us on the level of their growing intellectual seriousness and artistic maturity.

Joya, a psychology major who spent a whole year with us at El Sol in third, fourth and fifth grade classrooms writes:

It was one of those days that reminded me why I like El Sol and why I love those kids! They are so awesome – very bright, caring and affectionate and as I realize time and time again, they seal the deal for me – they make me want to be a teacher and some day, a

mother.

Erin writes about the way the kids celebrate our arrival on campus:

Returning to the school felt great because all the kids were really excited to see us, and having the same groups every week helps establish relationships with the kids even though we are only there for such a short time.

In the conversations I have with El Sol Executive Director, Monique Daviss, I often say something like, "Well, the kids are happy to see us because we offer a break from the routine." Monique sees through my faux humility, but reassures me, nevertheless. She says, "Sue, these kids know the difference. If you weren't bringing something they wanted or needed, they wouldn't give you the time of day."

Which leads me to this next excerpt written by Sharif here simply for its total hilariousness:

A funny moment that we had: when Sue was speaking to a student from Christopher's group behind us, Gabriel asked me, "What's her name?" I answered, "You mean Sue?" Then he asks, "Yeah, Sue, is she like a god or something?" When I asked him what he meant by that he told me, "Whenever she tells us that she likes something that we write, we feel really good. Like her words mean a lot." The authority that we seem to have over these kids is stronger than I had anticipated. It both comforts and worries me. I feel as though this is a big reason for us to really encourage these

kids in any way we can.

I had no idea this conversation took place until I read Sharif's notes for the week.

Eleanora, a student minoring in Education who repeated the course at El Sol several times over the years, writes:

I enjoyed this course more than I had expected because it was such a different experience. When I enrolled in the class I had not planned on returning for another quarter but now I can't imagine not coming back. Poetry may not be my specialty but I can help inspire students to love it.

And later that same year:

Returning to El Sol is the greatest feeling in the world, mainly for how excited the students are to see us.

Albert, who discovered the workshop late in his undergraduate career, writes:

This week at El Sol I found that a lot of the students have taken a liking to me. It was not until I told some of them that this was my last visit that they expressed their attachment. I am very glad to have had this experience with the children at El Sol. Moments like



this really make me take a look and think about how these rare but awesome experiences at the university helped shaped my life.

Edith writes about how difficult is it to leave El Sol on the last day of workshop:

As I was leaving the second class I felt myself about to cry. The students kept telling me not to forget them, but how could I? I knew they would forget me faster than I would them. I wish I could see these kids grow. I wish I could always be there for them, but as Ms. Sue said "its all in a days work for a teacher. " I am so happy I had this opportunity to know the students of El Sol.

Linda's account describes quite clearly the students' willingness to take the writing seriously and also how she herself learned to support their seriousness:

They got really into the four directions activity, especially Vanessa. She would actually close her eyes and take deep breaths every time she started a new direction, without my suggesting she do it. Her poem started off really predictably, with lines about flowers and kids, but then turned very dark unexpectedly toward the end. It put me off a little bit because she seems like such a cheerful girl, but she started to write about visualizing graves and her family in trouble. It was surprising, and I tried for a moment to talk to her about keeping her poem in a consistent mood, but she didn't seem to want to change it, so I let her keep it the way it was.

I remember a conversation I had once with the poet James McMichael, a man of enigmatic philosophical intelligence with whom I studied for over six years. In office hours, Jim and I would talk freely, casually and then incredibly deeply, rarely breaking the playfully serious gaze that can connect two human beings in sentient, respectful exchange. That's how much I trusted him. Or rather, how much we trusted the language between us to do what it must. In the time of which I am now thinking, we were speaking, generally, about the aim of integrity in writing poems when he asked me to consider, "What is the poem written against?" From time to time, this question lives again in my mind, leading me hither and toward a theory or two concerning what he might have been trying to help me see. Sometimes I think he meant that when we write, we write from one kind of state—emotionally or psychologically-- about an ulterior one, that is, a state at some distance from the one portrayed through the writing. More plainly, we are more able to revisit sorrow in our writing once we are no longer taken up by it. If we are writing, we are somehow through the roughest parts of what wants to be said. So, to look for what the poem might be written "against" would be to imagine the state in which a particular poem *can* be written, which is not necessarily evident in the poem itself. Or it could mean that we write standing against a wall that is behind us, with eyes facing forward, toward the world. The French novelist Nerval wrote absolutely nothing during his bouts with mental illness. He wrote only when he was feeling well and thinking clearly. Jim's is a question that will remain a question for me. A good one. And one that represents my most lingering memories of being his student, that and the formidable collection of books he has given me to read over the years, by Levinas, Kristeva, and Agamben.

All this is just to say that the poets of El Sol write what they write because they are strong enough to do so. They also write what they write because it constitutes what they have in their lives to write against. The weight of having to refrain from sharing delicate and frightening personal concerns often manifests itself in the elementary students' poems in terms of secrecy and shadow. Take, for example, this poem written in the third grade by Grace Castro:

*Abandon*

*Secrets are weird rivers of words  
where clearness leaves and shadows lead  
where sharing is not an obligation  
where people are forgotten  
and a song is silent.*

Empathetic children internalize the struggles of their community and express this burden through examination of their own felt emotions. Elizabeth Gómez renders an exhaustive description of what this weight can resemble in her imagistic poem “When I Feel Lonely”:

*When I Feel Lonely*

*The feeling of loneliness leads me to thinking  
That the sound of a wind chime sounds like a man  
Made out of bells falling down and endless black hole.*

*A room full of people sounds like confused birds  
Going the wrong way and trying to find  
a path that will lead them to justice.*

*The sound is as loud as Mt. Whitney breaking down  
forming a sandman to come where I am  
and bring me company.*

*I feel like I did something dimwitted.  
I took the dark path that led me where I am.*

Some of the children miss people and places they have had to leave and live without. Divine Luna alludes to a personal loss and how she might be able to live and love past it:

*Song*

*Love is as peaceful as the guitar  
my uncle was playing  
in the driveway last summer.  
It was a faraway song,  
one I want to learn how to play.*

Perhaps their resilience and resourcefulness is in an ability to feel their way through the losses and fear in order to represent moments of pure love and enchantment. I offer, in that light, this reverie by Cynthia Garcia, crafted of living, life affirming imagery, yet never entirely free from

danger:

*My Sister's Eyes*

*My sister's eyes are like little ladybugs  
shining so she can fly in the garden  
and I can go with her.*

*My sister's eyes are brown and black  
like a beautiful bear that lives in the forest.*

*My sister's eyes sparkle like a comet  
shooting across the galaxy.*

Veronica Pedraza, in the fourth grade, describes the writing process as a telepathic exchange between herself and her mother:

*I Depend On My Mom's Eyes*

*I depend on my mom's eyes  
Because she sees all  
the things I don't see,  
like my imagination.  
That's what she sees in my eyes  
when I'm writing.  
She sees tigers playing tag,  
monkeys making banana pie,  
snakes eating ice cream,  
when she smiles.*

The boys are never far away from imagistic play, often describing inner conflicts and their way toward resolution as skirmishes in tight places, written in the parlance of a graphic novel:

*Writing Makes Me Feel Like*

*Writing makes me feel like*

*I am in an underwater cave*

*With a thousand violet green-eyed crabs*

*Hunting for our enemies.*

*The crabs are fighting*

*Giant octopi*

*And their sixteen legs.*

*The crabs are fighting*

*A giant alien*

*And its one thousand legs.*

*The cave covers with*

*Red crab blood,*

*Yellow octopus blood,*

*And green alien blood.*

*Only nine hundred crabs survive.*

*But those nine hundred great crabs win.*

Victoriano Gonzales, 5<sup>th</sup> grade

By the time they are in middle school, the El Sol students want to be taken more seriously and also to write more deliberately, although still

rather cautiously and carefully, about their place in the world. During the recent Poetry For Democracy course described in the following chapters, middle school students read poems written by dual language speakers from several continents, poets writing poems that weave together words and phrases from more than one language, writing while inventing a hybrid tongue. So, it made sense for us to encourage our students to experiment with writing that combines *leur deux langues*.

Here, Giselle Cortez weaves Spanish and English words and phrases to create this sonorous, rhymed praise poem (her ear for the music of the language is incredible), its sentimentality undercut in the last line, made more real by that which we are all up against:

*Strong is the sueno  
flowing in our solemn desperado  
hearts of esperanza.  
My papi is the temprana  
estrella en mi forehead,  
the calm waves of the sunset  
the whole mundo pari mi  
mi jajor vida here, a sea  
of dancing emerald firelies  
glimpsed in the corners of my  
room, memories  
and death. Its face.*

Krystal Gallegos' long poem interrogates the term *democracy*. Written in five parts, it moves through association, a series of moments, written at

first in Spanish, then, turning to English in the final stanza, in a mental move that mimics an attempt at cultural assimilation. Krystal's speaker asks several unanswered and unanswerable questions in a poem that, ironically, arrives at a place of un-arrival:

1.

*The pajaros dance on melodies  
in the morning y unclan bacia  
where the sun gleams. Los rios  
carry wishes and desires of those  
given descaron.*

2.

*Walking with my mother  
home from school, it was hot,  
the sky was clear when I asked her  
what it meant, democracia.*

3.

*We were watching La Isla del Mar  
in Spanish when I asked her  
what it meant, la democracia.*

4.

*My neighbor who works at a nursery  
caring for plants, I asked him in Spanish  
what it meant, democracia.*



5.

*The people, the luggage, the train  
inside and out everyone  
on the train for a purpose.*

*The stores, homes, people walking  
drawing on walls, I wonder*

*What is the real story?*

*I think about arriving but*

*I am not on a train.*

## *Poetry for Democracy*

In November of 2010, I applied for, and won, from the California Council for the Humanities, a grant to fund a new project at El Sol. The California Story Fund (CSF) is a competitive grant program of the California Council for the Humanities. The purpose of the CSF is to capture genuine and compelling stories from and about California's diverse communities and to ensure that those stories can be shared widely. In 2010, the Council launched a two-year, statewide initiative, *Searching for Democracy*, to promote greater public understanding of the American democratic experiment. In response to this initiative, I envisioned a focused poetry workshop for El Sol middle school students in the form of an elective course entitled Poetry for Democracy.

I argued that the voices represented through this project would enhance understanding of the intelligence, spirit, and anxieties of young people growing up in one of California's most vulnerable immigrant communities. Though their stories are largely unheard, the struggles and realities of kids growing up in these neighborhoods are at the heart of contemporary political debates. When the awards were announced in March of 2011, world events would provide a meaningful backdrop for our exploration of democracy through reading, writing, and talking about poetry.

Between the submission of the application in November 2010 and the award in March of 2011, Tunisia and Egypt would rise up in a world-changing surge of democratic action. During the Egyptian uprising, exiled poet and political scientist Tamim al-Barghouti's poetry was broadcast throughout Tahrir Square. When the people erected two makeshift screens

to project Al Jazeera broadcasts, the poet was asked to read his poem “almost every two hours.” In an interview published by Public Radio International, al-Barghouti explained that poetry has always been at the forefront of opposing tyranny. Many poets, including al-Barghouti, have been imprisoned and exiled under Mubarak’s regime. While our goal for the workshop would be to encourage the El Sol students’ individual voices, our immediate task was to make clear the role of the poet in society by offering examples of political poets and their work from across the globe and throughout history.

The project called for a whole new way of doing things for us. For the first time in our programmatic history, we would be teaching our own middle school course twice a week to a self-selected small group of El Sol students. Typically, our group of university poetry instructors, themselves enrolled in a course dedicated to the program, visit El Sol classrooms once a week during language arts and history blocks, seeing over 120 students each day, in three to four different classrooms. All of what we do typically happens as an extra-curricular activity in the classroom of the host teacher; we usually do not issue grades or give homework. For the elective, we would need to adjust our pedagogical methods and strategies to accommodate the new teaching requirements, clearly articulate and carry out grading criteria, in addition to creating an entirely new workshop curriculum based on the theme of democracy.

With the notification of the California Story Fund award, I set up a Tumblr blog to help record and share relevant articles, poetry, audio and video course material and to chronicle the project as it took shape in my mind and in the classroom. For our purposes, Tumblr proved to be the simplest, most elegant blogging platform. I set up the blog in one evening

and was at once connected to both Twitter and Facebook. Before the launch of the new blog, *Poetry For Democracy*, I hadn't felt compelled to participate on Twitter, though I had for some time held an account in the name of the non-profit poetryXchange. Within the first three months of blogging, poetryXchange had attracted over 400 followers and I was plugged into a vast new world of news and information, with extensive literary and cultural connections locally, nationally, and around the world. As I researched for content on which to base the new workshop, I was constantly reminded of the efficacy of poetry and its essential place in a thriving, democratic culture. The formal and conceptual link we were making between the art of poetry and the ideals of democracy was strengthening our programmatic identity, while, at the same time, defining and fueling a more profound sense of purpose and belief in the communal power of the literary arts.

Although I wanted to create a course for the kids at El Sol themed on democracy, I didn't want the class to turn into a lecture on politics, history or economics. I wanted instead to choose, share and discuss selections of poetry that would get us talking, evoke stories, and create a safe, open community in the classroom.

In the March 2011 issue of *Harpers*, Lewis H. Lapham, editor of *Lapham's Quarterly*, declared that, "What joins the Americans one to another is not a common ancestry, race, or language, all of them weighted with the burdens of the past, but rather their complicity in a shared work of the imagination." On a fundamental level, the simple fact of a group of university writers at El Sol, teaching a poetry workshop to kids from one of the most vulnerable communities in California, is, in itself, a democratic act. Interestingly, each member of the Poetry For Democracy

teaching crew represents a different ethnic, socio-economic and cultural background. Of the university students, Sharif's father is Palestinian, his mother Mexican; Jeeae is of Korean decent; Diana's family is from China by way of Viet Nam; Christopher's heritage is Native American, with roots in Arizona. My mother was born in western Ireland and immigrated to the U.S. at age 19 on her own, aboard a steam ship, and entered the country though Ellis Island (I was a late-born child). From the local community, poet Jacinta Kaplan volunteered her time to the project. Jacinta was born in Portugal to a Chinese-Portuguese father and Spanish mother. Together we embarked on a "shared work of the imagination."

**II**  
**Groundwork:**  
**in Action**



## [LET US GATHER IN A FLOURISHING WAY]

*Juan Felipe Herrera*

The UCI undergraduates who are co-teaching the Poetry for Democracy elective with me are all veteran poetry instructors who have gotten to know these middle school kids during previous workshops at El Sol. So, though we are all pretty familiar with one another, I am still curious to see how this group will come together as a community through the work. The middle school cohort is a mix of sixth, seventh and eighth grade students. Mostly girls. Two older boys. While taking roll, I discover that many students who chose poetry for their “elective” aren’t able to join us because the student council meeting has been scheduled for the same time as our class. And there are several students on the roster who are being held out of the “elective” until they can raise their math scores. When they join us, we will have more boys.

For our first lesson, members of the teaching team take their places in the four corners of the room, in effect, surrounding the class of apprehensive students, while I take my place in front. The plan is to jump right into poetry. We hand out a packet of poems so the class can read along while I begin reading aloud the opening verse of Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: “One’s-self I sing, a simple separate person,/Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.” Then, around the room, in turn, each of us reads aloud poems written by poets from Pakistan, Palestine, Chile, Ireland, Africa, Manhattan. Diana chooses to read a long poem by spoken word artist Kelly Tsai titled “By-Standing, The Beginning of an American Lifetime,” which the students really get into. I can tell by the



way some of the students look up from their desks to pay attention that they are drawn to Diana's dramatic reading.

*...We didn't know what was happening  
The train stopped below downtown  
And smoke started seeping in  
We didn't know what was happening  
People cried, kneeled on the ground,  
Kept quiet, started yelling  
We didn't know what was happening,,,*

Ryan, an eighth grader, says he likes the way the poem is divided into sections according to certain years of the speaker's life, beginning in the 1990's. He also likes the repetition of the line, "We didn't know what was happening" in the stanza that describes, as it is happening, the events of 9/11 in the voice of one who was there.

Moving to conclude the first day's session of round robin readings, we ask the kids to read aloud as a group the last poem in the packet: Juan Felipe Herrera's "[Let us Gather in a Flourishing Way]."

After a few quiet groans of ritual complaint, the students' voices fill the room. Faster readers slow down so the others can keep the pace; louder ones soften so that others can be heard. Altogether, it is a beautiful, stumbling thing.

[Let Us Gather in a Flourishing Way]

*Let us gather in a flourishing way  
with sunluz grains abriendo los cantos  
que cargamos cada día  
en el young pasto nuestro cuerpo  
para regalar y dar feliz perlas pearls  
of corn flowing árboles de vida en las cuatro esquinas  
let us gather in a flourishing way  
contentos llenos de fuerza to vida  
giving nacimientos to fragrant ríos  
dulces frescos verdes turquoise strong  
carne de nuestros hijos rainbows  
let us gather in a flourishing way  
en la luz y en la carne of our heart to toil  
tranquilos in fields of blossoms  
juntos to stretch los brazos  
tranquilos with the rain en la mañana  
temprana estrella on our forehead  
cielo de calor and wisdom to meet us  
where we toil siempre  
in the garden of our struggle and joy  
let us offer our hearts a saludar our águila rising  
freedom  
a celebrar woven brazos branches ramas  
piedras nopales plumas piercing bursting  
figs and aguacates*

*ripe mariposa fields and mares claros  
of our face  
to breathe todos en el camino blessing  
seeds to give to grow maiztlán  
en las manos de nuestro amor*

Then, before we know it, our class time of 40 minutes has run out. Time to wrap it up. Kids grab their backpacks and head for home or for the after school program. For us, it is time to meet and debrief. Once outside, Sharif presents me with his printed copy of the Herrera poem on which the Spanish phrases had been translated by his mother—the two of them had worked it out the night before, over the telephone. Sharif has typed her translations in parenthesis at the end of each line. Read this way, the poem opens into an adventure in English and Spanish—a gathering, so to speak, of the two languages. We discussed the fact that although the kids are bilingual and bi-literate, they do not often practice or investigate the art of translation in their regular course work. Together we agree to build the next workshop lesson around the dual language aspect of this one poem, prefaced by a discussion of the title of Herrera’s book, *Half the World in Light*.

## *Half the World in Light*

Before the second session, we meet in the classroom and wait for the class to come in from the playground. We have time to pull the rows and columns of desks together into a circle. We like doing this. While we are rearranging things, Sharif comments that the circular desk idea reminds him of writing workshops he took at community college. When I hear him say this out loud, I silently agree. I, too, started writing in earnest at a community college in San Diego over twenty years ago and this is how we did it. In a circle of desks. The instructor seated among us.

When the kids come in from the playground and take their seats, we turn, once again, to Juan Felipe Herrera's "[Let Us Gather in a Flourishing Way]." We take time to talk about the author who currently holds the Tomas Riviera Endowed Chair as professor of creative writing at UC Riverside and was recently awarded, in 2010, a Guggenheim Fellowship. The only son of migrant farm workers, Herrera is a Southern California native who received his B.A. in Social Anthropology from UCLA, his M.A. in Social Anthropology from Stanford and his MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Iowa.

We then listen to a recording of Herrera reading "[Let Us Gather in a Flourishing Way]" published in MP3 on the Pen America Center website before we contemplate the significance of the book's title, *Half the World in Light*.

What does it mean, this book title?

To which one of the boys replies, "The Earth. When it's daytime here, it's nighttime in China."

Yes. Quite literally, half of the world is lit by the sun at any time of the day or night. This is the condition of the planet on which we live. As Earthlings, diurnal rhythms are a part of our human consciousness, of our animal being, needs and instincts. Dark and light. Waking and dreaming. These grand dichotomies.

But how does our reading of the poem deepen when read in context of the collection's title?

For the reader who is familiar only with either Spanish or English, half of the poem is in light, the other darkness. A reader who is bi-lingual, an El Sol student, for example, will not have the same experience with the poem. For them, the language of the poem is fully illuminated. But for many, living in world that is based upon an unknown language is like living in darkness with another kind of light inside.

How would you describe the language of this particular poem?

This is easy. It's Spanglish!

Yes. It is. Have you ever seen anything like this in writing?

Not really.

OK. Let's take a closer look. Can someone identify the first use of Spanglish in the poem?

Sunluz grains. It's a made up word.

Meaning?

Sunlight.

OK. Switch it around. Exchange the Spanish for English and vice versa.

Solight. Not as good. Different.

The sound of sunluz fits better.

Solight is more confusing. Hmmm. Sol sounds like “soul” or could be taken as the phrase “so light.” Plus, when the luz comes in after sun it is like a lapse into Spanish, into the speaker’s native tongue. In a way, the making up of this word is itself a kind of gathering. The poet is gathering the two languages together, beginning with this one, beautifully strange, warm word.

And we are off into a discussion of how carefully and craftily the poet chooses his words. “Sunluz grains” sounds as if it sprang, musically, from the previous phrase, “flourishing way,” repeating, subtly, the melodious “s” and “l” in “sunluz,” the “a” of “way” in “grain.”

At that moment, we break into small groups led by one of the poetry instructors. The task for the day? To go through the poem, switching out each English word for the Spanish equivalent, and vice versa, to bring the students into a closer reading of the poem, to tap a deeper, more active, appreciative vein. What we cannot finish in class is to be completed as homework.



## *The Flower Song*

We return to Herrera's poem to begin the third session. This time we want to talk about the imagery, tone and overall impression of the work. The kids had spent some time alone with the poem, as they had been asked to translate the English into Spanish and Spanish into English as homework. So when I ask the class how they would describe the imagery, they are ready. They had also formed an affinity with the poem, that is to say, in its imagery and music, they recognize something of themselves and their own cultural identity.

One student remarks that the poem reminds her of Mexico. The images are of the harvest, of farming, gardens and food. They easily identify the tone of the poem as optimistic, strong and soulful.

Previously that week, I had sat with UCI Vice Chancellor Emeritus Manuel Gómez in his backyard garden on campus in University Hills. Manuel is himself a poet and a native of Santa Ana, the city of El Sol. That day in the garden was the warmest of the year so far. Early spring. Hummingbirds hovered and buzzed through the trees. A large lizard inched across the stones. Here, I shared with Manuel the poem. “[Let Us Gather in a Flourishing Way]” and Manuel shared with me his knowledge of the ancient Aztec poetic tradition of the flower song. He searched his library to find his copy of *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World* by Miguel Leon-Portilla. We discussed the representations of mural paintings found in indigenous codices-- images of sound scrolls visually emanating from out of the mouths and instruments of priests, gods and goddesses. The sound scrolls are complex symbolic systems, depicted with flowers and other shapes, such as shells, footprints and animal heads. Some scholars



believe these signs can be read as narrative. Manuel and I agreed that Herrera's poem speaks to the ancient flower song tradition, and that we should, at the very least, inform the El Sol students of this ancient poetic art.

I found online on the website of FAMSA, the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, a superb article written by translator and author John Curl. From the wealth of information and images I found there, I put together a handout for class discussion. We wanted to expose the students to the rich literary heritage they inherit, while, at the same time, underscoring poetry's cultural and historical significance.



Figure 1. Aztec musician-poet-singer. From the Codex Borbonicus, p.4.

## *Alabanza*

The week following our lesson on the flower song, we tap into the wealth of poetry videos on YouTube to share with the kids a politically charged selection of readings by prominent contemporary poets. Classrooms at El Sol are located in portable trailers without computer-connected projectors. So, I bring with me my own Dell projector and MacBook laptop. It takes us a while to set up and get the videos ready to view. We watch Martin Espada's powerful readings of "Alabanza" and "Angels of Bread" from the Dodge Poetry Festival, find and watch a vintage video of Carolyn Forché reading "The Colonel," followed by a video of Seamus Heaney reading Paul Celan's "Death Fugue." Listening, the students take notes, watching and listing words and phrases that summon their interest. After the viewing, we write some of these words on the whiteboard: "nations," "music is all we have," "political imagination," "machete."

After we call on the usual suspects, I look around for a student who has not yet contributed a word and ask a quiet girl for one of hers. She looks up at me slowly and whispers shyly the word "immigrant." I write the word on the board and underline it saying: "Do not be afraid to use this word in your poems. While it speaks currently for your community, it also speaks for immigrants all over the world, trying to find new homes and lives in strange places." Then, another, more outspoken girl raises her hand and says, "Most people don't understand what we are going through. They think they do, but they do not."

The group is opening up, speaking up, and becoming a community. We have with us a visitor today, my friend and fellow poet, Jacinta Kaplan. She tells the class the story of how her family came to the U.S. in

the night, in flight, for fear of their lives. Jacinta's father had been a diplomat who spoke up against the Portuguese dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar. The undergraduates are all from immigrant families, except for Christopher. We talk about the history of various immigrant communities new to the U.S. and how poetry helps represent, document and give voice to those whose voices have been silenced. On the first days of the Poetry For Democracy workshop, we asked the students what they liked about writing poetry. The most common answer from the class was that poetry is emotional. They are beginning to see clearly that writing and reading poetry has relevance beyond the self and the expression of individual emotion. Poetry can, and does affect the emotions. But it is, above all, about the experience of living, and that individual experience can have significance for others.

For the next class meeting, we experience together excerpts from Caroline Bergvall's book length poem, *Cropper*. By all accounts, this poem is a stunner. We find an audio recording of Bergvall reading excerpts from the poem on her website and are blown away. Written in English with Norwegian translations interwoven into the poem, the sounds of the words echo in both languages, rippling in the mind as if sounding off a forgotten lost self from a world one can almost remember.

Before we play the clip, we discuss the poet's biographical information. Bergvall was born in Germany to a Norwegian father and French mother and now lives in England. We guess that the poet knows at least three languages, since the poem we are going to study is written in English and Norwegian. We discuss the poem's title, *Cropper*, which means "body" in Norwegian. We then take turns, around the room, reading the English lines. Afterward, the students do not hesitate to share

their recognition and appreciation for the lines, “Some were never free to speak their body before it was taken up and taken away,” and “Some hoped they had one safely only to find it had to be left across the border or parts of it.”

The experience is more powerful than I could have predicted, as the students openly and innocently recognize themselves in these lines. The undergraduates and I explain that what they realize is a psychological and emotional truth, a metaphor for loss and change, while at the same time, quite literally, the body can be violated, objectified and politicized. I point to Bergvall’s use of the plural pronoun “some.” I encouraged the students to do the same...that they can speak of the personal without revealing particular information by projecting outward, assuming that what one feels to be true can be a truth for others. We looked carefully at the last line of the *Cropper* excerpt: “Some that arise in some of us arrive in each of us,” paraphrasing loosely the statement that what happens to one or some affects us all as individuals (each). We look at the words “arise” and “arrive” and the difference between the two verbs. To “arise” might have to do with speaking, with standing up. To “arrive” is to come to. The outspoken girl asks me to repeat the bit about “what happens to one happens to all,” and she writes what I say in her notebook.

In our next meeting, I open with a poem by Frank O’Hara, “Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets.” Have you ever read this poem? Here are the astonishing last lines.

*the only truth is face to face, the poem whose words become  
your mouth  
and dying in black and white we fight for what we love, not are*

When I finish reading the O'Hara poem, as well as several others, to the class, I ask the students to give me some of the words they remember from the poems. Hands go up. On the white board I write their responses: spirits, jazz, moonfaced, cave, existence. Then I step back to ask the kids to take a few minutes to gather from the cloud of words on the board ones to make into a sentence or phrase that might get them started on a poem. From here, we work in small groups, quietly writing, the teaching poets leading the way.

Within ten minutes, Emily a seventh grader who is new to the school, says, I have one, want to see it? Here is what she shows me:

*Lyrical times as well as fabled ones*

*in our adolescent closets*

*lead into the green*

*alleys of the future*

*seized between our fingers*

*the remembered cries of the paper*

*longing for its branches*

*the cities I had to fight*

*with the spirits whispering in my head*

*the lies I wanted to hear.*

## *The BLOG Session*

Halfway through the Poetry For Democracy class, we meet in the computer lab to explore the blog I am writing for the project. On this day, May 11, 2011, the White House is hosting a student poetry workshop and reading attended by young poets from across the U.S. We write the web address for the White House Blog on the white board so that the kids can watch the event on streaming video. We also give them the web address for the Poetry For Democracy blog.

The kids come into the lab and get busy right away logging in and finding the websites. Some need help finding working headsets, but nearly every one is, in no time, either watching the White House event, reading, listening or watching something posted on the blog.

At their own pace, they browse and graze the site. One girl, Leslie, is watching a video in the link I posted to L.A.'s Inside Out, an arts organization for at risk youth in Los Angeles. Inside Out had sent several student poets to the event at the White House. Youth participants narrate the Inside Out video with revealing personal statements. One young woman speaks of family problems, pressures at school and on the street. She admits from the start that she was very skeptical of the Inside Out folks, thinking, oh man, here are more adults who won't know anything about me and will want me to do things I don't want to do. But then she came around. She began to trust in others through the creative process, and, as a result, the experience changed her life.

That evening at home I bring up the site to see what, if anything, our students wrote in the comments boxes, as they were not directed to do so in any particular way or form. Leslie, the girl I saw watching the Inside

Out video was apparently intrigued by what she saw there. She visited the “About” section on our blog where I had written a brief history of the project at El Sol and bios of all of us in the Poetry For Democracy teaching crew. This is where she left her comment: “Thank you, Miss Sue, for being all these years with us. THANKS A LOT.”

Sarai is probably the most reticent student in the class, though despite her quiet distance, I can see in her eyes a deep interest, respect and intelligence. When she commented on the Inside Out video, I knew she appreciated what we were trying to do:

*Inside Out is a really impressive program. It offers teens in Los Angeles an opportunity to change their lives through poetry. Only a few teens in LA have an opportunity to change thier (sic) lives. By the looks of these teens you can notice that they are now happy by who they are. I hope that they keep on achiving (sic) to being better than they are. :)*

Reading the comments written that day, it occurred to me that these girls had gained a new understanding of what the poetry project at El Sol was all about. I have a sneaking suspicion that we gained a degree of street cred. The El Sol kids identified with the kids in L.A.

I hadn’t anticipated the meta-program effect when planning the blog session. It was a very nice surprise. I am thinking it would be a great to get these kids together somehow, with a partnership project with Inside Out.

Jenny read the article I posted from the *Miami Herald* about Judge Ehrlich, the Florida judge who started a program to help juvenile offenders



shave off community service time by writing and performing poetry—in the courthouse. Jenny wrote in the comments that she found the judge’s practice to be “very interesting.”

Stephanie read carefully a detailed account of the previous week’s workshop in which I described the students’ reaction to reading *Cropper*. In the comment box she wrote:

*The poem we read that day, "Cropper" was great. It spoke for a couple of girls story, and made them realize that they aren't the only ones with that feeling. El Sol has a majority of Hispanics and most of them seem to be scared of or embarrassed of their race. But we have great history and have accomplished much. I'm Mexican and I'm proud of it.*

## *Moleskines*

*Never be so focused on what you are looking for that you overlook what you actually find.*

*Ann Patchett, State of Wonder*

For the Poetry For Democracy workshop, I decided to distribute, to each El Sol student in the class his or her own Moleskine notebook, with unlined pages, to encourage and contain ideas for writing. I explain that the notebook is an essential tool for the writer. It serves as a place of safekeeping for thoughts, words and images recorded from the world of lived experience. If used daily, the notebook will contain bits and pieces of their daily lives, including overheard conversations, sounds, thoughts, song lyrics, discoveries, quotes, facts, questions and concerns. They are to write freely, without pressure for neatness or order. What I want them to learn to do is to notice and take note, constantly, the moments that arouse in them a deeper interest, a deeper curiosity, awareness and appreciation for the world. I explained that I have boxes and shelves of these notebooks, filled with bits of lived and imagined life. They are not quite diaries or journals, but, rather, scrapbooks of language, snapshots of experience, quotes, sometimes reverie. Whenever I start a new project, friendship or journey, I will begin a new notebook, and sometimes have several going at once.

The students quietly accept and secretly treasure these gifts. Within a week, each student had personalized the brown grocery-bag paper cover with names and drawings. In previous years, when these students had participated in the elementary workshop, we provided personalized folders to contain course materials and draft poems, but, traditionally, these folders were collected each week for our research and not intended for

writing at home. Like the folders, Moleskins have nice pockets inside the back cover for storing loose papers and handouts of poems read in class. And, although I wasn't sure about letting them take the Moleskines home, for fear they would be lost or forgotten, I wanted to encourage the middle school students to write on their own, outside of class.

The elective meets twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so we plan to collect the notebooks on Tuesday and return them, with comments and suggestions, on Thursdays. That way, the kids will have time to write over the long weekend.

We assign open prompts such as free writing exercises in which the kids are to do whole-page spills. Their instructions are to free write, without stopping, until they fill whole pages. To help the students ponder the theme of democracy, I offer handouts to help frame their entries. We ask them to define democracy, and to ask three people for their best definition of the term. But I am not overly concerned with having them write directly from the handouts. Instead, I want to see them write freely, about whatever comes to mind, whatever is happening or not happening in their lives.

Most of these students have been studying poetry with me for over five years. They all have in their possession a copy of our print anthology, *Mind's Eye: The Poets of El Sol*, featuring poems written by their peers. A handful of these students have poems published in the book. As elementary students, they had created spectacular lyric poetry. I assumed that our in-class reading and discussion sessions would inspire imagistic reveries, or at least, help them generate enough language to pull out sparkling phrases we would later push and reorder in class. This one,

written by Krystal Gallegos, was nearly finished in her first, handwritten draft:

*Familia*

*In la musica ranchera, musica de Puerto Rico y de Cuba  
I hear the light upbeat tune of it all  
in la trompeta, la guitarra, el tambor ah the light footsteps  
of the music, of Mexican delicacies....  
tamales, enchiladas, pozole, menudo, carne asada and pollo  
magic that comes from the mountains and dances with intuition  
memories, fruits, rivers, vegetables, the doorway  
eclipsed by the beauty of an invisible sea.*

I love the movement and mystery of this poem, the confidence of the voice, its rhythm, music, sound and syntax, amplified by Krystal's masterful use of the words "intuition" "eclipsed" and "invisible." The piece begins with the music of her "familia," an experience she expands in a detailed list of instruments, named in the language of origin for *la musica ranchera* and the tastes of familiar foods. The poem deepens as the speaker's gaze turns toward "the doorway" that leads and opens the poem toward its last remarkable line. The doorway is eclipsed, which could mean, temporarily, that the pull of any alternative world is made less powerful by the beauty of an "invisible sea." The sea of music? Of self?

But not all students in the class are at this level of expression. The group is made up of sixth, seventh and eighth grade students, at various levels of writing and reading competency and maturity. Reading the

notebooks, I see personalities emerge. Some write far more than others. A few write obediently to the prompts and handouts. Several write innocently and romantically about friends and first loves. I have to contain my disappointment when looking for poetic language. It appears to me that some of these middle school students have learned to control the imagination, writing instead linear, explanatory or generally descriptive, often purple, prose. In some cases, I worry that the democracy theme is too overly scripted, that by framing the workshop in political terms, we are pressuring the students to discuss aspects of their private lives that they strive to deny or keep hidden. Adolescence for these kids is particularly challenging. Not only are they coming to terms with physical and emotional changes, they are becoming all too aware of what they are up against politically and socially. And they are not sure how much to say about this.

When I collected the notebooks at the end of term, I began to see the writing on the page as part language, part visual art. What I had in my hands were flower songs. Because the notebooks were unlined, the students were free to convert the blank page into visual poetry. Without any direct instructions to do so, the students produced artful representations of their inner worlds, expressively placed upon the page. Did the flower song lesson inspire this work? Or perhaps they were inspired by looking through Carl Jung's *Red Book*, the beautiful, larger-than-life size tome of writing and art I brought to class one day and will discuss at length in the next chapter. Either way, the question for me remained, "How was I going to record what happened here?" My intention, from the beginning, was to return the Moleskines to the kids so

they could fill them with writing over the summer. Then it occurred to me. Take photos of the pages.

Here are some of the most astounding visual poems taken from the notebooks:

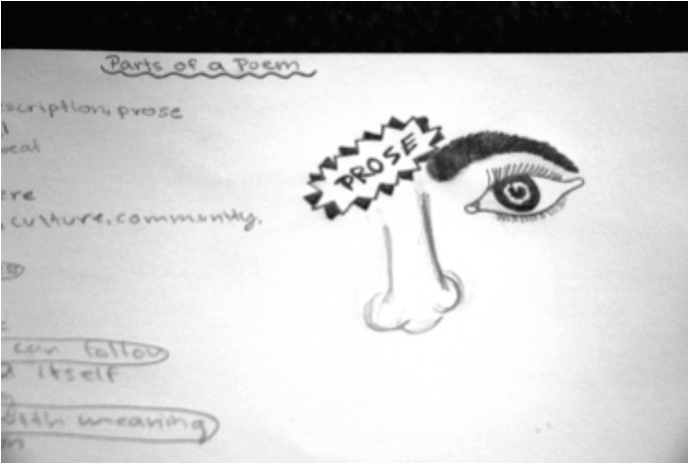


Figure 2. Giselle Cortez

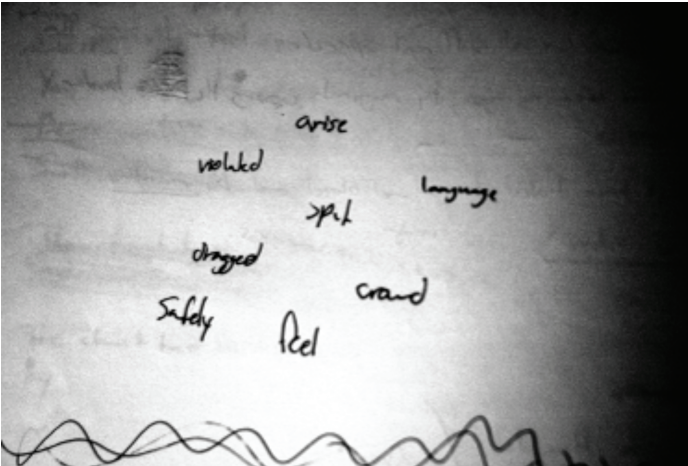


Figure 3: Krystal Gallegos









## ***The Red Book***

*I know too much not to see on which swaying bridges I go.*

Carl Jung, “On the Service of the Soul” *The Red Book*

When I titled my first published article about our elementary poetry workshops at El Sol, I was not consciously aware of the reference I was making to Carl’s Jung’s “active imagination.” The article was published in 2007 under the title: “Essential Poetry: Activating the Imagination in the Elementary Classroom.” To activate is to set into motion, I thought, to make happen, to animate. It is the antithesis of rote, standardized learning. The word served well to describe what we are trying to accomplish in the classroom, which is to catapult the child’s imaginative and critical thinking abilities beyond grade level or state standards. Only later, in 2009, after the publication of Jung’s *Red Book*, the long suppressed and mysterious record of the psychologist’s imaginative journey through his own inner world, would I understand how the Swiss researcher’s contributions had influenced my learning, writing and teaching.

In 2010, when I learned about *The Red Book’s* release through an exhibit and series of lectures at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, I purchased a copy of the beautiful reproduction of the original for my private collection. The book itself is huge—nearly two times the height and width of an Encyclopedia Britannica—rich with creamy, thick paper pages covered with handwritten calligraphy and vibrant scans of Jung’s colorful, original artwork depicting his dreams and darkest visions. Indeed, much of this book is fantastic, irrational and strange. The thing is wildly impressive.

Carl Gustav Jung and Sigmund Freud are widely known as the fathers of modern psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, I discovered, many years

ago, when studying critical theory at the University of California, Irvine, back in the day when Jacques Derrida was on faculty lecturing on deconstruction, that Jung was not that well respected in academia. Among his cultural offspring are the foundations of Alcoholics Anonymous and the New Age Movement. Perhaps this popularization of Jung's somewhat spiritual approach toward understanding the human psyche has led some biographers and critics to doubt his respectability while others have gone so far as to question his sanity.

At the height of Jung's career, he and Freud had a falling out that led to Jung's retreat into the making of *The Red Book*. One of the rifts between the two men arose from Jung's belief that all analysts need also to be analyzed, so that they do not colonize the patient's psyche with projected issues of their own. In an effort to isolate his own mythologies, Jung set himself to the task of exploring, through writing and drawings, the masks and personae dwelling within his unconscious mind.

Because Jung was looking for a personal "mythology," he was, in a way, consciously guiding, even manipulating the map of this journey. Or perhaps his "intoxication with mythology" was a drive fixed deeply within his personality. In the years preceding his work in *The Red Book*, Jung studied obsessively the literature of world mythology, folklore and religion: "I went about with all these fantastic figures: centaurs, nymphs, satyrs, gods and goddesses, as though they were patients and I was analyzing them." Like the modernist poets of his time, (i.e. Wallace Stevens in "Sunday Morning,") he openly confronted the legacy of the Judeo-Christian mythology he had inherited and inhabited in European culture. The result is the creation of whole new cosmology, heralded by the title of the first section of *The Red Book*, "The Way of What is to

Come.” When announcing its release in 2009, 38 years after his death in 1961, *The New York Times* referred to *The Red Book*, edited and translated by London based historian Sonu Shandasani, as “The Holy Grail of the Unconscious.”

In the opening pages of *The Red Book*, Jung writes:

The spirit of this time would like to hear of use and value. I also thought this way, and my humanity still thinks this way. But that other spirit forces me nevertheless to speak, beyond justification, use, and meaning.

The spirit of the depths took my understanding and all my knowledge and placed them at the service of the inexplicable and the paradoxical. He robbed me of speech and writing for everything that was not in his service, namely the melting together of sense and nonsense, which produces the supreme meaning.

Most contemporary poets, no matter the school or camp, would probably identify with Jung’s wish to resist the spirit of our time, which is, by and large, taken up with a material and economic sense of “use and value.” Most of us keep a self penetrating, if cryptic, daily “book” and attempt to translate dreams (waking or sleeping) into language through writing and drawings that bring to the surface the evidence of a deep inner life.

“The spirit of the depths” may well be the muse of poetry. The practice of reading, writing and speaking about poetry in workshop at El

Sol helps acquaint the student with “the inexplicable and paradoxical.” When we look for meaning, it’s often through description. And as poet Lyn Hejinian points out, description is not to be taken as definition. A poem written in the language of description is not *definitive*, that is, not pointing toward a definite meaning, reality or fixed identity, but rather, *transformative*. This is what Jung is getting at when he refers to a “supreme meaning... beyond justification, use and meaning.” Language of this caliber changes you. Description, according to Hejinian, “is a particular and complicated process of thinking, being highly intentional while at the same time, because it is simultaneous with and equivalent to perception, remaining open to the arbitrariness, unpredictability, and inadvertence to what appears.” Similar to poetry, Jung’s *Red Book* is not autobiographical, but rather infused by and with personal energies and perceptions.

In her essay, “Strangeness,” Hejinian equates the dream terrain to the terrain of an unknown wilderness or *terra incognita*. For the writer, describing an encounter with either of these strange realms presents similar difficulties and results. She contemplates a “similarity between records of dreams and the records of [sixteenth and seventeenth century] explorers—the same apparent objectivity, the same attempt to be precise and accurate about details.” And that “the very writing down of a dream seems to constitute the act of discovering it...but is also and problematically an act of interpreting it.” In that sense, the “description or composition” of a dream is akin to a map drawn of an encountered wilderness. The map is not the land, no more than the dream narrative is the dream; the written description lies somewhere in between-- an entirely separate system of knowing with its own ways and attributes, rules and

exclusions. Jung's grandiose *Red Book* is one such "description or composition"—part map, part self-induced vision, part illuminated manuscript.

Allusions to classical mythology appear often in contemporary writing, as in celebrated poet Louise Glück's *Meadowlands* in which the dissolution of a marriage is intertwined with meditations and representations of characters from *The Odyssey*. Glück cautions against poetry written toward a staid and traditional conclusion, that a poem must instead "retain myth's helpless encounter with the elemental." (Glück, 1993) This is what is at stake in poetry, unprecedented twists and weather on an old ship.

British poet, novelist and re-mythmaker Jeanette Winterson has this to say about reprising traditional myth: "I like to take stories we think we know and record them differently. In the re-telling comes a new emphasis or bias, and the new arrangement of the key elements demands that fresh material be injected into the existing text." When the contemporary writer unconsciously identifies with a mythical character, drama or series of ironies, the story can be reinvented, brought into recognizable, everyday terms for the modern reader. In its constant reinvention of the commonplace and common vision, poetry is iconoclastic. Winterson describes the intentionality behind her myth based lyrical novel, *Weight*: "*Weight* moves far away from the simple story of Atlas's punishment and his temporary relief when Hercules takes the world off his shoulders. I wanted to explore loneliness, isolation, responsibility, burden, and freedom too, because my version has a very particular end not found elsewhere."

Anne Carson, acclaimed classical scholar and poet famous for her

reinvention of ancient myth, has redefined the line between scholarly research and the poetic text. In her introduction to *Economy of the Unlost*, “Notes on Method,” she confides: “I have struggled since the beginning to drive my thought out into the landscape of science and fact where other people converse logically and exchange judgments -- but I go blind out there.” Carson describes the “creative pressure cooker” from which writing of her kind can emerge. She sees the task as a “dashing back and forth” between the “world of facticity” and a “vibrating” inner world of “strong attention.”

Research in any academic discipline claims to strive for objectivity and fact. Poetry, on the other hand, is said to be subjective and therefore unscientific. Nevertheless, I have long felt that all writing is driven by a keen and undeniable subjectivity. The writing mind is steered by its own design. Writing requires choice and judgment on the part of the individual imagination. The actions of the imagination are difficult to divorce from the subjective self. Much can be said about the biases of an individual researcher simply by examining the topics of his or her chosen lines of inquiry. Any new insight is, by definition, a departure from existing facts and reasoning. If we train the youngest among us to hear that driving, inner “strong attention,” they will be more available to hear its call when the time comes to weigh and choose the substance of their life’s occupations.

When I brought *The Red Book* to the Poetry For Democracy workshop, I simply wanted the kids to see it and to explain to them, briefly, its significance in history and to Jungian psychology. I explained that Jung did this brave work privately so that he could know himself. That even though this crazy, beautiful book was kept secret from the

public during his lifetime and afterward kept in a vault in Switzerland, according to the editor, *The Red Book* served as the “nuclear reactor” of Jung’s research and life’s work. What happened on those pages helped Jung formulate his greatest contributions to the science of psychology. He drew Mandalas, large circles enclosing dream figures or intricate pattern systems as representations of the individual, whole self. One painting in particular, (Jung, 169), contains a vibrant, flower-like sun to the left of a sea of faces sketched in ink and painted in with greens and blues, the most distinct of the group detailed in red and darker colors-- 50 or 60 different kinds of people—some of whose roles are obvious—a monk, a preacher, cavemen in various stages of evolution, men with powdered wigs, some bearded, some with eyes open, others closed, a row of skulls and bones. I explained to the class Jung’s theory of the masks--that our identity, our personhood or personae is fluid, evolving, something to explore, inhabit and enjoy. Walt Whitman, in *Song of Myself* exclaims, “I contain multitudes!” Seeing the “self” this way, it is easier to imagine the speaker of our poems to be anyone we imagine them to be—the hero, the mother, the son, the ocean that is us.

With the luscious *Red Book* in the classroom at El Sol, the undergraduates took the opportunity to explore its pages with their small groups of middle school students. Diana and her student Emily spent time looking closely at the images. In one, Emily pointed out an eye in the sky, an angry fish with sharp teeth, the letter E for Emily in the waves. Diana wrote about their conversation in her field notes, and, although the two of them had not spent time crafting these observations into a poem, their interaction has encouraged me to include a more formal exercise involving



*The Red Book* into the undergraduate training and our middle school curriculum.

When I asked Sharif, a graduating senior at UCI, about his previous knowledge of Carl Jung, he replied, “I didn’t know anything about Carl Jung.” And that’s understandable. I hadn’t deliberately called his work to mind in many years. But I do feel that the appearance of *The Red Book* in its current form--painstakingly rendered, introduced and annotated, is a significant event, as the text offers any artist or arts instructor a useful framework from which to contemplate and communicate to others the creative process.

*The Red Book* represents a tangible exemplar for the student’s creative work. In a far more humble way, the students are doing the same kind of thing. Beginning in the third grade, all writing created in the poetry workshop at El Sol is collected and kept in the student’s writing folder and in the online Writing LAB. These folders do not go home with the student. This way, a student is able to revisit draft material s/he created in a previous session, even previous years, to revise and rewrite. Bringing the folders we save for the kids to class is like handing out presents. They go through everything, saying “I remember this!” When they graduate from the eighth grade, we give them the whole thing to keep. The development of a body of work, beginning in grade three, serves as a kind of *Red Book* for young learners. I want the kids at El Sol to have this engine of creativity.

At the conclusion of our Poetry For Democracy workshop, I announced to the class that I would be collecting the Moleskine notebooks so that I could give them a final grade. This led to a discussion about the difficulty in returning the notebooks to the student poets. Graduating

eighth graders would not be in class during the final class meetings. They had field trips scheduled and other ceremonies that excused them from attending the elective. I promised to bring the notebooks to campus and either drop them off with their teachers or with the office. This arrangement was fine with the eighth graders except for one. Ana, on the day I had planned to collect the Moleskins, did not bring hers with her to class. I was perplexed for a moment then realized what was happening. I said: “Ana, you don’t want to take the chance that I won’t get it back to you.” Ana lowered her head, blushed and smiled. Keeping her Moleskine notebook safely in her possession was more important to her than her grade.

I had seen enough of Ana’s class participation and writing in previous weeks to give her a sound and favorable assessment. I knew she had been doing the work. But if I had held her accountable for not turning in her Moleskine notebook, she would not have fared so well.

The kids who enjoy writing poetry do it for the pleasure of creating something of and for themselves rather than for the grade. They are motivated intrinsically, by how it feels to write something they are proud of and by what they are able to show as the result of their hard work. They are willing to edit and revise and then revise again to get it right, to feel that sense of personal achievement, self-esteem and value. Along the way, they learn the skills to edit their own work. They do it, if they do it, because they want to. And when they write something unbelievably beautiful, they show us and we say, “Yes. This is incredible. Would you like to share it with the class?”

## *Active Listening and the Word Bank*

Each and every poetry workshop at El Sol is built around a poem or series of poems read to the class aloud. The poems change, depending on the lesson, but the way we ask the students to listen remains the same. Whenever we introduce a new poet, we first discuss the poets themselves, their lives and careers, including relevant historical background and literary context. Before we begin reading, we make sure that each student has before them two or three pages of clean, white paper and a pen or pencil. Pencils must be in hand before we begin. While we read, the students collect words or phrases that they find striking or interesting and write them down. During the reading, the undergraduates stroll through the room, making sure that each student is writing.

The middle school students in the poetry elective have been doing this activity in workshop with us since the third grade. The first poem we bring to the students in the third grade classroom is a rather lengthy surrealist ballad by the Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, “Romance Somnambulo.” or “Sleepwalker’s Ballad.” After a brief discussion of the poet and his life, which begins by finding Spain on the map of the world and concludes with facts regarding the poet’s violent death during the Spanish revolution, we read the poem aloud in its entirety. Because our students are learning to read and write in both Spanish and English, we read the poem in both languages.

For third graders, this is probably the first time they have been asked to take notes in class—to listen closely and discern importance or value from what is being said. In the lower grades, we de-emphasize the importance of spelling correctly. It is more important to capture their ideas

than to be precise about spelling. Third graders at El Sol have been learning, up to this point, all of their subjects in Spanish. These kids do not start reading and writing in English until the third grade. Often, there are several students who do not know what to do the first time, but for the most part, the class is busily writing throughout the reading.

Hearing Lorca's poem read aloud activates the students' imagination. They picture the rich sensory images, the color of silver and green, the scent of mint and basil, archetypal themes and symbols, such as horses, swords, the moon, sons and daughters. and are compelled to collect them on paper. When the students have collected a working list of words and phrases to mine for ideas, we direct them towards writing their own original poem, crafted in detailed sensory images. The students grasp the poem's sadness and danger and adopt the tone for their own poems written in this dramatic style.

Some student poems written after listening to Lorca's "Romance Somnambulo":

*White shadow, green stars, and who  
will come dreaming, leaving  
a trail of blood  
and a thousand compadres  
green the night  
closed closer like a closet  
and up high the green  
silver icy cold moon.*

*Victoriano Gonzales*

*In the winds of the shadow,  
the dream of your eyes,  
the whisper in the dark night,  
the love of the forest,  
the strange ways of life,  
my lost friends.*

*I only think about them  
when the wind blows  
and the door opens.*

*Joey Madrid*

*I Can See Possible Things*

*I say it is possible to see the shadow of the moon  
when I look in my horse's eyes.*

*I see the dark night and the silver covered stars  
a gypsy in the wind, water dripping  
from the roses like crystal tear drops,  
an iron knife on the balcony floor.*

*I can see possible things.*

*Jessica Lincoln*

## *The Sand Play Theory*

When my daughters were younger, we used to visit a dear friend of mine, Dr. Karen Hawthorne, in her rural offices in Santa Isabel, California. Dr. Hawthorne is a Jungian analyst whose practice involves working with children in the local public schools. Her office is on the second floor above Dudley's Bakery in Santa Isabel, a tiny town situated between highways 78 and 79 on the way to Julian in San Diego County. To get there from where we lived then, in Irvine, the road would take us through miles of open country, over mountains and into the valley of Santa Isabel. You can see the bakery from miles away. It, a little art gallery and a garden nursery, make up the downtown.

Karen has arranged, in her offices, several comfortable, art filled rooms and a modern kitchen. She has stored art and art supplies for projects carefully on the shelves and tables. In one room she has completely lined the shelves with objects, figures and animals, from the mythical and fanciful to the commonplace. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of these things inhabit the shelves of the room from floor to ceiling. In the center of the room she has placed a table and on the table, a clean, handcrafted sand box.

My daughters would spend about 20 or 30 minutes alone in the room, collecting objects they were drawn to from the shelves and then arranging them into a scene in the sandbox. When they finished, Karen would take a Polaroid snapshot for us to take home, and one for her to keep. When we left, she would examine and analyze the sand box scene according to her knowledge of Jungian psychology, noting the

significance of the objects chosen, and the manner in which each child had placed and arranged them into a scene.

In thinking about the way we encourage writing in the workshop by reading selections of poetry, while the students choose words that interest them, it occurred to me that we are practicing a language version of Jungian sand play. The room for sand play is a bounded space, as is the text of a poem, but within that space, the unconscious is free to roam and create an infinity of possible worlds. When students select their words and phrases and then arrange them into an original poem, their poems present a snapshot of the child's inner world. In this manner, unconscious material is brought to light on the page.

Many times, the practice of writing poetry helps children express the inexpressible. Young people often have difficulty describing their feelings or speaking directly about what's going on in their lives and minds. They are afraid to get into trouble or to embarrass themselves and/or others. When asked what she enjoys about the poetry workshop, fifth grade student Elizabeth Alvarez replied automatically, "In poetry I can talk about things without really talking about them." The methods we have perfected in the poetry workshop act quietly and indirectly on the child's unconscious, offering a safe and playful place that encourages equilibrium between the inner and outer worlds.

As poetry instructors, we do not claim to be trained in clinical psychology or the therapeutic sciences, but rather in a practice toward mastery of a language that best approximates the speed and fragility of perceptual attention. As a primal human art form, the signs and ways of poetry transcend time, culture, society and the categories of modern science. "The language of poetry," according to poet Lyn Hejinian, "is the

language of inquiry. It is that language in which a writer (or a reader) both perceives and is conscious of the perception. Poetry, therefore, takes as its premise that language is a medium for experiencing experience.”

As poets we listen with a deep attention, a vigilance and appreciation for the forms of our expressions and impressions—for the strangeness and signification of the deep life’s language and the music of its making. The poet Li-Young Lee has said, “A poem is like a musical score for the human voice.” Through serious and sustained practice, we break through layers of superficial, super-imposed thinking, cliché sayings and commonplace responses to encourage language that challenges the imagination through compression, comparison, association and juxtaposition, forever turning the world on its side so we can see and say it another way. Language is the medium for articulating possible truths, and therefore, the sharing of creative and innovative discovery depends on its manifestation through language. In the poetry workshop, our first task is to engage the imagination; the second is to connect that imagination with the infinite and generative power of language.

Quite possibly, the poet’s talent lies in an ability to recognize language that arises from a curious, distinct and mysterious self—the mind in the act of making the present appear. We urge our students to say what only they can say in a way that only they can say it. Overheard conversations, bits of lived life, memory and imagined futures can be spliced into lines and phrases so long as the voice is strong and clear. Sometimes a student will write whole pages before a line will emerge that can carry him toward a poem. This type of language grabs our attention, and we try to encourage the individual toward its source with a gentle, open hand.



I've seen a child reach for a word and build a world around it.

It was a high-energy day. Our plan was to have the three fourth grade classes we taught that day work with the online Writing LAB by entering new poems they had written the week before. The school uses a traveling laptop cart we bring into the classroom for online writing workshops. Just getting everyone set up with a live computer, logging in and getting started takes a good deal of our time and effort. We were all set and writing, when, out of the blue, the power went out, apparently throughout the neighborhood. The undergraduates and I quickly switched gears, gathering the kids into small groups to work on their writing the old fashioned way, with paper and pencil, while we waited for the power to be restored.

At the time of the outage, I was helping a particular boy get situated online. This boy noticed Ralph Freedman's biography of Rainer Maria Rilke *Life of a Poet* in the handful of books I had brought with me to class. When he picked up this book and started looking through it, I figured, why not have some fun? "OK, this is what I want you to do. Open the book to a random page, and skim through the paragraphs until you find a word that grabs your attention. Let me know when you find one. We'll take it from there."

Within minutes, he had his word.

Diminish. Wow. Good one. What does it mean?

He guessed correctly.

When something vanishes.

Disappears? Good. Give me an example.

It's like a boat out on the water.

When he came up with that image, I knew he was on to something significant but I didn't want to probe deliberately. Nearby was his writing folder full of words and ideas from previous weeks. I suggested he look at his word lists and see what other words might work with this concept. He had been working on the idea of the phoenix, the mythical bird, and wanted to get that into his poem. I suggested we look up the definition of "phoenix" in the dictionary for ideas. So the phoenix is something that dies and is reborn. 'Why don't you think about how a boat leaving can be like a new beginning?' I let him work alone for a while and when I returned he'd written this:

*For my mother*

*The boat that leaves Mexico*

*leaves faces*

*diminishing*

*on the shore*

*far, far*

*individual*

*like the phoenix that dies*

*to live again.*

*Alan Corona*

By the time he was finished, the power was back on. Alan had time to enter his poem into the Writing LAB, and I published it in the online literary journal, *Mind's Eye*, before the day was through.

## *The Clearing*

*In the middle of the forest there's an unexpected clearing that can only be found  
by those who have gotten lost.*

Tomas Tranströmer

Teaching poetry to kids depends, for the most part, on trust. Trust in your art, and trust in the intelligence of the student. If a teenager slumps away from you during a conversation, it is because he does not feel you are listening to him. He feels you do not see his intelligence, the wealth of what he knows. All day long the child is pressured to conform to the requirement of the school day, to his peers, to his family. These conformities put pressure on the individual personality and often underestimate the student's informed and vast inner world. If the pressure is continual, with no outlet for inner knowledge, thoughts and their verbal expression, he will keep retreating into his core. Inevitably, if his considerable knowledge and ability is not recognized and nurtured, what he knows will either atrophy or implode.

But sometimes there are extraordinary pressures on the child's ability for self-expression.

Midway through a recent workshop in the fifth grade, we had made a breakthrough. The entire class was thinking and writing excitedly.

At El Sol on Fridays, in the winter of 2011, we taught two fifth grade workshops, back to back--the first one in the honors class, the second in the "regular" class. One particular week the first session was so cleanly presented and went so well that I had turned the second session over to the team of undergraduates. The story I'm going to tell takes place in the second session while I was sitting back, observing the whole class, the undergraduate presentation and the fifth grade student participation.

The lesson opens with an introduction to the poet, Tomas Tranströmer. We explain that Tranströmer is a world-renowned poet from Sweden and that English-speaking poets translated the poems we will be reading from the original Swedish. Tranströmer is still living, is in his 80's, and was recently nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. We locate Sweden on the world map and discuss the process of translation, underscoring for these students their own potential as translators of literature, either written in Spanish or English.

Before we read aloud our poems for the day, we made sure each student had before them two clean sheets of loose leaf and a pencil. The poems for this lesson are, "In the Open," "The Clearing" and "Standing Up."

The reading begins, and the room is soon quiet while the students listen, allowing the language to fill the room, fill their minds, each in their own imaginative space, writing, pausing, writing. By the time we are finished reading all three poems, every student has a list of words from which to craft a first line, and, from there, a direction for their own original poem.

Some students collect their words in vertical lists. Some in horizontal lines like paragraphs. Many have separated their words into sections, numbering and organizing them into groups 1, 2, 3, corresponding to each poem we read. A look at these impromptu lists says quite a lot about how each child's mind receives and processes information in different ways. I like to see this. It helps me know how they think, and gives me clues into how I might start a conversation with them about writing. You don't have to know what you are looking for, but it helps to know that it's there. You just have to look for it.

When the reading is complete, we bring the whole class into discussion.

OK. Who wants to share one of their favorite words or phrases?

Hands everywhere. The undergraduates write on the white board in random order:

“cool as blueprints”

“trickle”

“squints”

“splintered silver”

“shadows sitting on shadows”

“solitary branches”

“hollow street”

“thick with taboos”

“creep over the glass”

“swell in the sun”

Can anyone see a sentence here? If we piece the words and phrases together?

We write the following suggestions on the white board:

The autumn labyrinth trickles shadows sitting on shadows.

Thick with taboos their shadows swell in the sun.

Splintered silver shadows creep over the glass.

During this part of the exercise I notice two boys seated side by side in the far right of the room. One of the boys is so excited I have to say to the

undergraduates, “You’d better call on this one before he has a stroke!” Amused at this observation, the teacher, at her desk behind them, quickly smiles.

The other boy, seated next to him, is quiet.

In a “we do it” now “you do it” scaffolding process, we then turn the activity over to the students for private, individual writing. During this part of the workshop, the students write while the four of us (three undergraduate writers and me) cruise the room giving suggestions, answering questions, encouraging the writing. We look at the lists the students have created and help them choose words for their first line. From that word or words we try to elicit the significance of the word to the student. The classroom is organized into four-desk-clusters, side-by-side, and facing one another. When we dialog with one student, the other three are guided as well. Some students write independently with little help. Others need more attention.

I wandered over to the two boys seated alone in their four-desk arrangement. I looked at the enthusiastic boy’s paper and saw that he was well on his way toward writing a new poem. The other boy had crumpled his list into a little ball and was hiding it under his desk.

His head was bent. His shoulders tight. His body stiff and bracing.

When I asked to see his list, he couldn’t make eye contact. I gave the teacher a worried look. Quietly, she came over to see if she could help. “Now why would you want to do a thing like that with your words?”

No answer.

After a few long minutes, both of us hovering, the boy surrendered the list.

Uncrumpling, I saw scribbled 10 or 12 indecipherable words. The boy lacked the ability to write the words he heard in English. He understood them, of that I was certain. He just couldn't process what he had heard into correctly spelled words.

I looked him in the eyes and said, "OK. I understand."

Without saying too much, I did the following.

I moved the enthusiastic boy to another side of the room so that the quiet boy and I could be alone.

I found the printed copy of the Tranströmer poems from which the undergraduates had read and came back to sit down with the quiet boy. "OK. I'm going to read these poems just to you. While I'm reading, you read along and circle the words you like here on the page."

"OK," said the quiet boy.

And so I started reading, paying no attention to the fact that the quiet boy was now quietly crying.

His shoulders relaxed. He leaned over the page. "That one," he said. And later, "That one." Carefully selecting the words he wanted to keep.

When he had six or seven words of his own, I looked at him in the eyes again and said, "Looks like you're ready to get writing. Would you like me to sit here with you, or are you ok on your own?"

I'm ok on my own.

All right then.

So, I went over to work with another group that was busily chatting and writing. One boy had written several lines that made more sense once we reordered them. A girl needed help pushing her descriptions toward more specific terms, making her extraordinary words even more

extraordinary. When I felt this group was on the right track, I returned to the quiet boy who was quietly working. “Let’s see what you’ve got there”

On his paper he had written, in the most precise, careful script, four complex sentences in correctly spelled English. The most startling of these:

Nocturnal moths creep over the room’s blue lamp.

The palace of the abandoned fills with ghost hounds.

Shadows sitting on shadows where people die or move away.

This boy was seriously interested in the activity. If I hadn’t intervened when I did, we would have lost him. If we didn’t have a full team of poetry instructors, I might not have had the opportunity to intervene. If I hadn’t trusted my instincts and the power of the lesson, I wouldn’t have been so flexible. Because I was willing to do things another way, the quiet boy quietly found a way to participate. At the end of the day, he was the first to read his lines to the class when we asked for volunteers.

And there he stood. With a shining face and a strong, clear voice.

After workshop, the teacher and I had a moment to discuss the day’s events. She confided that she had never seen this side of her students before. She was astonished at what they “had in them.”

We view the results of this lesson, within the framework of a six-week workshop at the fifth grade level, to yield perhaps only the first lines of what could be a complete poem. In the following weeks, fifth grade student, Joshua Perez, drafted, expanded and revised a magnificent unified piece with a final twist:



*Day after day  
hard thoughts  
cross the sea  
The sun scorches the horizon  
reminding me that I  
have new memories  
big as stones falling  
asleep in terror.  
Day and night  
lightning breaks the sky  
all the way to space.  
It happens every day  
no matter the season,  
no matter what day,  
the whole world in a war  
of thoughts and motion.  
But for me it's Monday  
and I'm late for school.*

A month later, Joshua Perez read his poem, “Day After Day” at the fourth annual High Hopes Luncheon at the Hyatt Regency in Irvine for over 350 guests, including UCI Chancellor Michael Drake and local businessman and philanthropist Paul Merage. The Merage Foundations, the Orange County Community Foundations, and the Children and Families Commission of Orange County organize the annual luncheon. Funds raised support the development of a Children and Families Center on the El Sol campus to provide health and educational services to the families

and community of El Sol. As my guests, Joshua's mother and his teacher, Ms. Griselda Ramirez, accompanied him at the luncheon.



III  
**Empathy**

## **Empathy** –*noun*

1. the intellectual identification with or experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.

In an interview we conducted for the purposes of program assessment and impact, Elizabeth Alvarez, then a fourth grade student at El Sol, when asked what she liked most about the poetry workshop, replied, “It helps me understand what other people are thinking and feeling. Like when my little sister is using the computer when I have something to do on it. I think, well, let her have her turn. I can wait. Before all the poetry, I would get upset and try to make her stop.”

***A poem is like asking a group of birds a question.***

*Elizabeth Alvarez*

Inside the cover of *Mind's Eye*, before the table of contents and before the editor's introduction, I placed this quote printed across the binding in the surrounding white space of two full pages in 28 point font. The quote is taken from the last line of a poem Elizabeth wrote in the third grade during one of our lessons in comparative images and the simile:

A poem is like blood inside a shell.

A poem is like observing a frog  
drinking water from the blue pond.

A poem is like asking  
a group of birds a question.

When I was completing the final edits of *Mind's Eye*, Vice Chancellor Manuel Gómez suggested we pull quotes from the student poems and foreground these lines on pages of their own. Elizabeth Alvarez is the same young woman whose response led us to conclude that one impact of our poetry workshop is to heighten the student poet's capacity for empathy.

For the fall workshop session following the print publication of *Mind's Eye*, I wanted to experiment with using our own book in a workshop for middle school, as many of these students are themselves published in the anthology. I was excited about the possibilities of teaching close reading and literary criticism to the older kids using their

own poems. For it is one thing to teach poetics to kids using grade level appropriate or even adult selections of poetry. It is quite another to demonstrate to middle schoolers the function of simile and metaphor using a poem they themselves wrote in the third grade.

In designing the lesson, I thought about Elizabeth's quote and asked myself to explain why I placed it at the front of the book. What is so striking about this simile? What does it help me know? And so this is how we began our seventh grade in class workshop in fall of 2009.

On the first day, we made sure the kids had a copy of *Mind's Eye* in their hands. Then we turned to the quote inside the front cover. After a brief discussion of the many decisions one must make when editing, organizing and designing a book, I asked the class, "What is so special about this line? What poetic device is contained in the sentence?"

It is a simile. OK. What two things are being compared?

Poems and birds.

OK, those are the objects being compared, but think about it. Isn't she saying that the *experience* of a poem, either writing it or reading it, is like the *experience* of asking a group of birds a question?

I explain to the class what I like best about Elizabeth's comparison. It both grounds us with an image—of a group of birds—and also tells us that poetry is about asking questions . . . questions with imaginative answers. Elisabeth knows that if she wants, in her poems, she can have a meeting with the birds at which they give her audience and response. I also see how she might view the work we do in the workshop . . . the students are like a group of birds, vulnerable, musical and capable of

flight. The question one would ask could be anything. “What do you think a group of birds could tell you? What question would you ask?”

At this point in the classroom discussion, I turn our attention toward literary analysis. For this purpose, I have prepared a handout with a timeline indicating the major movements in Western literature, beginning with the ancients, up through the post modern. We explain that just as in history, literature has periods that can be identified by certain trends and attributes. On the timeline, the Romantic Period is in caps, to locate our discussion of birds, as a symbol and trope in poems.

In class, I explain that Romanticism is a movement in literature that began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and has little to do with a love interest between two individuals. The Romantic Movement is typified by an interest in the imagination, in idealism, intuition, and an attempt to capture and convey metaphysical properties of nature, the wonder in the familiar. Romantics privileged individual emotion and inspiration over the rationality that had, before them, characterized Neoclassicism or the Age of Reason. Rather than simply holding up a mirror to nature in an attempt to define it, the Romantics explored the individual’s experience in and with nature, examining that region of contact in which humans project metaphor and meaning onto the natural world. While Romantic lyric poetry often locates itself in a landscape or description of the natural world, the primary purpose of these locations is to stimulate the mind; the beheld images inspire imaginative thinking. Samuel Taylor Coleridge held that poetry was based on “intellectual intuition.” The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in



1792 marks the beginning of literary Romanticism in Britain.

Romantics were concerned with the epistemological problem of how we know what we know. When the poet, William Blake, poses the question, “How do you know but every bird that cuts the airy way, is an immense world of delight, closed by your senses five?” he is encouraging the perceiver to imagine themselves *to be* the bird, and not simply to observe its movements, size and color. Blake suggests to us that this type of knowledge is more open, more full of possibility, than the “closed” systems of empirical knowing derived from observed and reportable facts and measurements. Blake’s understanding of the relationship between imagination and science is encapsulated in this statement from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “What is now proved was once only imagin’d.”

When he coined the phrase and literary concept, “negative capability,” John Keats aspired toward a style of poetry that is unapologetically comfortable with ambiguity: “That is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” In a state of negative capability the poet is unconcerned with objective facts or reality, but, rather, with a transformative, unflinching sense of life as it is experienced. The poet is not trying to prove a point or win an argument, but rather, to open perception to a mode of inquiry, and that inquiry can lead to many roads at once. The poetic imagination explodes with possibility when faced with beauty, suffering and transcendence.

Birds figure prominently in the work of the Romantic poets. In

Keats' "Ode to the Nightingale," she "singest of summer in full throated ease" her immortality against the speaker's meditation of time passing and death. In this case, the bird's song calls him to imagine a life everlasting, singing the same song to others long before and continuing long after he is gone. Keats' rumination is very much like asking a bird a question. In the final stanza, the bird flies off, the song is gone, and he asks ""Was it a vision? Or a waking dream? / Fled is that music, Do I wake or sleep?"

Keats was an acutely tuned empath. In a letter to his friend Richard Woodhouse, Keats would confide that "A Poet...has no identity---he is continually...filling some other Body." To Benjamin Bailey he writes of this heightened attention and sensitivity: "If a sparrow come before my window I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel." And, further, to Woodhouse, Keats describes the terror of over-identification with others: "When I am in a room with people, the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated."

"Empathy" and "sympathy" are words with very subtle differences in their meanings. Both are of Greek origin with the same root: "pathos," which means feeling or emotion (passion). The Greek prefixes, which serve as prepositions when translated, describe the difference in the words. The prefix "sym-," as in "sympathy" and "sympathize," means "with." To sympathize is to share the same feelings as another towards a particular event or situation. It's a kind of agreement. The Greek prefix "em-" means "into," which, in the word "empathy," implies a deeper, more active identification with the feelings of another. To go "into" is to be immersed, within. Empathy is a function of the imagination and therefore possible

across great divides. To empathize is to share an awareness of what someone or something very different from us may be feeling or experiencing. It is the ability to imagine the other.

## *Rilke's "The Panther"*

The Romantic Movement didn't die out so much as it was absorbed into subsequent movements and styles. Much contemporary poetry owes a great debt to writers of the Romantic era. Following the discussion of Elizabeth's simile, "A poem is like asking a group of birds a question," and an introduction to the Romantics based loosely around the theme of empathy, we choose to do a close reading of Rainer Maria Rilke's "The Panther." Rilke was a German-speaking poet born in the latter part of the 19th century in Prague. Before we look at the poem, we talk about the poet's early life and how he was being groomed for a life in the military, when he chose instead to devote himself to literary study. We discuss his work in Paris with August Rodin, the famous sculptor, and show the class images of Rodin's "The Thinker." To help Rilke push his art into new terrain, Rodin suggested that the poet simply observe an animal in the city zoo, Le Jardins de Plantes, to see if he could derive a poem from that observation. Our reading begins with close attention to the title and the epigraph, which give us the location, occasion and subject of the poem. Everything that follows, takes place empathetically, in the mind.

The teaching crew assisting me in this workshop is made up of eight undergraduates: six graduating seniors and two juniors from the University of California, Irvine, all of them students of creative writing. Before the first workshop session, the teaching poets have discussed the day's lesson plan with me in our training session. My goal is to encourage and enable them to work with the children not simply as my students, but eventually as my colleagues—as teaching poets themselves. In the course of their intensive training, the undergraduates acquire a range of skills and

knowledge, including: how to prepare for and carry out the workshop with the children by studying lesson materials and poems; how to observe and encourage the children as they work; how to write weekly field note reports that document both their struggles and their progress; and how to produce their own lesson plans, articulate teaching strategies and other lesson-specific assignments. Field notes are posted to our course web page so that the teaching poets can read and reflect upon one another's reports. To facilitate the in class small group reading and writing sessions at El Sol, we make handouts for the class containing a print copy of the poem, a brief biography of the poet and a copy of the following discussion questions (Below, I've written possible answers that do not appear on the handout):

### *Technical Questions—Poetic Terminology*

1) How is the poem organized? Define stanza.

Rilke's "The Panther" is written in three stanzas. "Stanza" is the Italian word for room or chamber. In poetry it refers to the organization of lines in multiple line blocks. The separation of lines into stanzas contributes to the poem's organization of thought.

2) Locate, define and discuss hyperbole, simile and metaphor in the poem.

The form of this poem is highly structured and moves through three stanzas. The first stanza of Rilke's "The Panther" contains the use of hyperbole in the line, "It seems to him there are/ a thousand bars; and

behind the bars, no world.” The second stanza provides an example of a simile: “The movement of his powerful, soft strides/is like a ritual dance around a center/ in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.” The third stanza contains metaphor in “The curtain of the pupils/ lifts, quietly,” speaking of the eye as if it were a stage on which “an image” is a performer that “enters in, plunges into the heart and is gone.” Some students read the line as if the eyelids were the metaphorical curtains.

Such technical questions help break the ice in this first study lesson, because the answers are rather straightforward. It’s when we dive into the more philosophical and probing questions that the conversation requires more intuition and creative teaching. The following open ended questions lead toward a deeper understanding of the human condition, have a variety of responses and are meant to be more exploratory, to push both the undergraduate and their students toward deeper inquiry.

### *Open Ended Discussion Questions*

- 1) If a poem is like asking a group of birds a question, what question is the speaker asking the panther?
- 2) Discuss the poem’s overall metaphor. (Small subject/BIG SUBJECT). Does Rilke’s **particular** description of the caged panther stand for **general** truths about the human condition? Can you relate to the panther? What “cages” exist for human beings? How might a person be similarly trapped?
- 3) Discuss “the image” that enters “into the heart and is gone” and how the

poet might be speaking about writing and creativity and a lost ability to live according to one's instincts and nature.

4) Examine vocabulary and word choice, especially the use of "vision," "plunges," and "arrested muscles"

5) Is the poem about the panther or the poet? Discuss.

This last question leads us into a discussion of the possibilities and limitations of empathy. As human beings, we can try to imagine what the other is thinking or feeling, but what we see or feel has more to do with our own perceptions and projections. We can only perceive of that which we are capable of perceiving, given our mindset, world view, expectations, mood, etc. Our vision is clouded with self.

The foregoing activity brings to mind, for both the undergraduate teaching poet and the El Sol student, a subtle yet poignant awareness of the creative process. The in class activities that follow build upon that awareness, grounded in a close reading of the poetic text.

For a fuller understanding of what happens in the poetry workshop, it makes sense to include the fresh perspectives of the teaching poets, as their field notes reveal the workshop experience as it takes shape over time, through the details.

## *First Week, Day One: As Seen through Weekly Field Notes*

The prompt for weekly field notes helps the undergraduate teaching poet to organize his or her weekly field report into four areas: General Observation, Narrative, Reflection and Conclusions & Recommendations.

How this process works out in practice varies from quarter to quarter, as the experience of the participating undergraduates and El Sol students varies. For instance, at the beginning of the current session, all but one student in the crew are new to the program, to Santa Ana and to El Sol. In their field notes from the first day, two out of the eight students admitted to an uncomfortable apprehension and anxiety before workshop. These students had never taught before and weren't sure of their ability to teach poetry. Erin, a graduating senior, writes, "The first day I must admit I was very nervous. I have never done anything like this before and I wasn't entirely sure what to do." And Meg, "I was a bundle of nerves on Friday morning as I headed down to Santa Ana. I had spent a great deal of time that week wondering if I'd be any good at teaching them about poetry. I've always been on the receiving end of the teaching and never on the giving end."

It is interesting, however, that students' initial feel for the site can vary considerably. While some students focused on unfamiliar dimensions of their first week at El Sol and expressed initial apprehension, several students were calmed and felt welcomed by the warm, creative vibe of El Sol. Erin writes: "I found the school very easily and was so charmed by the atmosphere. The school was split into two sections on either side of the street, and despite not having actual buildings to teach in, just the trailers, it was adorable. The energy at the school, the paintings, and the time that



has been taken to decorate it were all on another level of any public school I have visited. All of the children were so happy and genuinely thrilled we were there.” Sharif made comparisons between Santa Ana and Irvine: “Despite living in Orange County for a year, I had never been in Santa Ana before. It looks like my hometown of Pomona. I actually felt more comfortable walking those streets than the ones in Irvine.” He compared El Sol to the schools he had attended at home: “El Sol just seemed better than my high school. The tables were painted with artwork instead of graffiti and bad words. The only limitation the school seemed to have was the size of the real estate, but once we entered the classroom it just seemed like any other classroom, except on the shelves were volumes of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.” Sharif was hooked. He could see something of his own childhood in these rooms and gave tremendously in terms of insight and practical advice to the kids. As a graduate from a failing high school and a community college transfer student to UCI, Sharif is one of the ones who made it. He returned to the poetry program and to El Sol for his entire senior year and was part of the teaching team for the Poetry For Democracy workshop that would take place the following spring.

Despite her initial anxiety, Meg “left with a feeling of accomplishment that first day.” She captures the gradual inter-personal connections she made with her group while discussing Rilke’s “The Panther” in the narrative section of her first field notes:

In my first group there was one girl who was very quiet and unwilling to talk, but she did not strike me as a shy person. Here, my fear of not being able to relate to seventh graders rose up again and I began to think that she had already decided that she just did

not like me. The other two girls were very eager to talk and share their opinions and I really wanted to have the third girl participate as well. I thought if I tried to find common ground with her then she would be more willing to open up. I asked them each to share an example of a time when they had felt caged like the panther in the poem. I shared an experience with them first and then they eagerly shared theirs. The quiet girl and one other girl both said they felt like this when their school made them practice Folklorico in the basement and would not allow them to go out or use the restroom for fear of dirtying their dresses. I mentioned to them that I had seen Folklorico dancing in the past and I found it really entertaining. I think by showing appreciation for something they consider to be exclusive to them made them warm up to me.

This particular workshop takes place on Friday morning for six weeks from 8 a.m. to noon. During this block of time, we visit all seventh grade classrooms at El Sol of which there are two. We teach and repeat the same lesson in the two classrooms back-to-back. As in the fifth grade classroom situation described earlier, the school has designated one group as the honors class, the other as the “regular” class. Because the teachers made this distinction clear to us, and for the simple reason that we are employing the same strategies to the two groups, one after the other, it is difficult not to see and record differences in group performance, behavior and dynamic based on these categories. Mostly, the undergraduates are uncomfortable doing so, as they are highly skeptical about the means and results of these classifications and wrote deeply about this feeling in their field notes. Because I am focusing in this section on the undergraduate

experience and their role and contribution at El Sol, I won't go into this problem for now. The discussion of what happens in the two-tiered, hierarchical middle school classroom, based on what I've seen there, and on years of undergraduate field notes, could be the focus of another book. But I will include here some general observations and reflections made by the undergraduate students.

Juli Caso, a senior in English and Latino Studies, describes the differences she sees between the two groups as early as the first meeting:

We all seemed to enjoy the writing part the most. I could see what each child had understood from the discussion of "The Panther" (as far as simile, word choice, and expressing what it is to feel trapped) and could work with them individually on what they hadn't completely grasped. The conversation we had about what made them feel trapped had two main answers: 1) school work and home responsibilities; 2) home and school restriction. By the first I mean all the responsibilities that come with wanting to do well in school and in pulling your weight in the family. By the second I mean the general feeling of being trapped in a place that you don't want to physically be; it lacks the sense of obligation included in the first. The first group I had leaned more towards this second one. The second group more towards the first. Why did this interest me? The second group was the honors class. I found it interesting that the largest difference between the groups was a difference in attitude, not necessarily ability and intelligence. The honors group had a larger sense of spiritual restriction under the weight of academic pressure and the pressure of home

responsibility that added to it. The other group had a larger sense of physical restriction not necessarily created by a sense of responsibility, but of literally being restricted by their parents to go out and walk around in the evenings, etc. The honors group took longer to write their similes. I'm thinking this is because they have been taught to write and analyze at a different level than the other class. More is probably expected of them as far as depth and interpretation go in their creative and analytical writings—digging deep always takes more time. There was definitely a lot of overthinking going on in the second group, especially with Giovanni. I have thought about Giovanni a few times since. First glance would tell you he didn't understand what we were doing. However, the fact that just about all of his writing was crossed out indicated otherwise. Clearly he knew he was doing it incorrectly, and he did know what a simile is. The problem I think he was having was expressing what he wanted to say in the form of a simile, putting that kind of structural restriction on his feelings. So it wasn't that he didn't know what to say or that he didn't know what a simile was; it was putting them together.

Juli recognizes and begins strategizing ways that poetry can help diffuse the perfectionistic tendencies of the honors students, while helping the non-honors, deemed-regular-kids recognize the creative genius she sees in their fearless ability to express themselves creatively. Of the non-honors group she writes: "They were writing similes with strong verbs (like "The Panther") about what it is like to feel trapped in whatever it is that they feel trapped in. The first group I had was Ana, Itzayana, and Stephanie.

They had so much fun with this!” In the honors students, Juli discovers strong analytic and critical thinking skills, but wonders if their performance anxiety might be interfering with their creativity. The discussion questions help her focus the group discussion on creativity and its obstacles, but it is her ability to empathize and relate to their responses that leads to her insightful observations:

Jaylin, Giovanni, and Elizabeth are the students in my second group. They were a little more challenging when it came to discussing the poem because they understood it faster than my first group had. They also showed a deeper level of analysis. It got particularly interesting when we started talking about why the writer might feel trapped in relationship to creativity. It was decided that perhaps his own creativity was trapping him. We came up with two reasons for this: 1) There are outside forces putting pressure on how and what he writes—so the restriction of creativity by outside forces. 2) There exists in his abilities a sort of internal restriction of creativity in the sense that he is not able to fully express the images in his mind and heart. This group took much longer to compose their similes. Elizabeth wrote about 10 in paragraph form comparing one thing (feeling trapped by responsibilities) to a list of other things (being without various senses, not having friends/a support system, etc.). Giovanni had a more difficult time, what he wrote was beautiful, but it wasn't a simile. Roughly it read like this: ‘my heart will never be free, forever shackled...’ and about here he cut off because he realized he was not writing a simile.

Juli succinctly articulates the self-reflexive quality of the lesson and the discussion that it engenders. Her honors students were able to discuss, with objectivity, through literary analysis, their own inhibitions in the creative writing process--inhibitions that were soon made clear when the kids tried to write creatively.

But this was only the first day. We had made great strides. In discussion, Rilke's poem has proven to be provocative in the ways we had hoped it would be. The undergraduates are feeling confident and excited, and the seventh graders are engaged. Although Rilke's poem is perhaps intimidating in its formal perfection and somber tone, it is beautifully written and translated from the German by Stephen Mitchell. At any rate, our ultimate goal in the workshop does not end in literary analysis, but rather to inspire, with poetic language, original poems. And we still have five more workshop sessions in which to accomplish this.

## *Week Two*

### *My Heart Broke Loose on the Wind*

In this seventh grade workshop, we base the second meeting around a reading of Pablo Neruda's long, associative, image-packed poem simply titled, "Poetry." Neruda's poem, in tone and structure, is a far cry from Rilke's melancholy, tightly organized "The Panther." Neruda's poem lightens the mood, opens possibilities for the reader. The images in "Poetry" journey through time, city streets, waterways and rivers, and far into the solar system. It is a very positive poem, as it approximates, through imagistic language, the creative forces of inspiration and epiphany. In the first stanza, the speaker tries to locate the beginning of his poetic occupations, while acknowledging, the impossibility of knowing precisely when or why, what or where:

*And it was at that age ... Poetry arrived  
in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where  
it came from, from winter or a river.  
I don't know how or when,  
no they were not voices, they were not  
words, nor silence,  
but from a street I was summoned,  
from the branches of night,  
abruptly from the others,  
among violent fires  
or returning alone,*

*there I was without a face  
and it touched me.*

To begin our discussion, we look at these lines and find a place to start. We talk about what it could mean to be “without a face,” by referring to Keats’ notion of negative capability. According to Keats, the poet is able to imagine a state in which he has no identity. To have a face is to be conscious of self. Rilke, in his prose poem/lyrical essay, “Prodigal Son,” describes the self-consciousness of being looked upon and adored by family as a boy with: “all the shame of having a face.” To be “without a face,” for Neruda, is the condition in which one can be “touched,” or moved, toward poetry. The speaker in Neruda’s poem inhabits the “mysteries” of experience without what Keats would consider to be “irritable reaching after meaning.”

Neruda’s narrator is humble, open, resembling the wise philosopher in Plato’s *Last Days of Socrates* who is wise because he knows he knows nothing:

*and I wrote the first faint line,  
faint, without substance, pure  
nonsense,  
pure wisdom  
of someone who knows nothing,  
and suddenly I saw  
the heavens  
unfastened*



It is an intelligence with which anything is possible.

Both “The Panther” and “Poetry” infuse the wild forces of nature with creativity. Rilke’s panther is trapped and on display in the zoo. Neruda’s speaker finds poetry everywhere and in everything: “My heart broke loose on the wind.”

In their field notes for the week, the teaching poets report that although my lecture ran a little long that day, and they were not able to get into the depth of group work they had been anticipating, they were nonetheless acclimating to their roles and forming bonds with the students. Juli writes in her field notes from Week Two:

The children were a lot more comfortable this week. They were more willing to show me what they had written, not that they weren’t last time, but this time they weren’t shy or hesitant to show me. In the same sense they were also more willing to share their work with one another.

I found that it was easier for me to guide them not only because I was more comfortable, but because they remembered the guidance I had provided last week. This was very, very encouraging and exciting for me. For example, when I read Ana’s simile I said something to the effect of, “This is a great comparison, now I want you to . . .” and before I could finish she cut me off and said, “Show how it works” and went straight back to writing.

I mentioned last week that my first group (my second group this week, I don’t really like distinguishing them as my “non-honors group”) was very clear about their feelings of being trapped

and stuck. Their freedom fixation continued into this week and we discussed all the language that suggested freedom. I asked them to imagine the feeling of being a bird and possessing the freedom that must certainly come from flying. My second group really ran with this. Estefania's poem uses association to communicate the feeling of freedom through imagery:

*Colors are free, flying in the air  
with balloons, a beautiful bunch  
of flowers dancing in the sun or  
the t-shirts around me on the dance floor  
shuffling and jerking hyper like  
a handful of melting candy.*

Estefania's poem went through a decent amount of revision for the time we had, however Jaylin finished with only enough time to read his. Every member of the group went around and read what they had.

Jonathan discovers that it is easy to over prepare (and over teach):

I enjoyed the Neruda poem and armed myself beforehand with material enough to last an hour, so overall the day felt less stressful. Sue's presentation ended up cutting into half of the hour and the extra interpretation and literary devices I prepared were unnecessary. Nevertheless I learned a fascinating poem and felt much more relaxed while teaching.

Natina and Erin are thinking on their feet and getting the students writing.  
From Natina's field notes:

After having the group read through "Poetry" one more time, we were able to bang out some useful close-reading conversation over the words or lines the two students had been especially drawn to. We talked about the images in the text, their implications, and how they worked with the overall piece. They were especially talkative about moments of "mystery," so we used that as a launching point for them to write a few of their own lines based on a simile.. Off of the page, they were able to verbally compose a few extra similes based on what we discussed whenever we came across a particularly striking phrase. The second group required a complete change in tactics. I could not generate any interest in "Poetry," so we instead compared some of the themes to similar poems in *Mind's Eye*. The kids were more receptive to discussing what was in their peers' poems, so we chose a few and talked about similes, images, tone, and using specific words. Fortunately, the more we talked, the more focused the group became - until it came time to write. Then I barely managed to scrape a simile out of each student before we ran out of time. That needs work.

From Erin:

Instead of going through the poem line by line I decided to use the poem as a tool to get them writing. We wrote poems like the poem

“Poetry” about what poetry does for us. Grace took to the poem very quickly and spent most of the time writing. She would ask me questions and I tried to help her, but for the most part she was on a roll.

Meg is watching what the other undergraduates are doing and learning how to teach more creatively.

I have seen how the other group leaders inspire their kids to start writing and I would like to mimic their methods. Having seen some of the poems and the similes that these kids have written, I know they are capable of writing amazing verses and I would like to help them write more rather than keeping them confined to just poetry analysis.

As the undergraduates acclimate to their role as teaching poets, and as they learn to observe and write their field notes, the results are revelatory. In the poetry workshop, everyone is learning from everyone else. The experimental thrust of trying something new each season creates a dynamic in which expectations are held in suspense. Most of what we do we learn by doing. And we don't want to keep something remarkable from happening by playing it safe or over controlling the outcome. The consequent anxiety works as a tool for methodological refinement. Meg could see what she wanted to try with her group from watching what worked for others. That kind of discovery is more valuable than any lecture or hour spent planning ahead. It is a very fine line. If I go into the classroom with an overly strict set of activities and expectations, I will out

the possibility of surprise. Frost has said of writing poems that the poet must be open to the unexpected: “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.” This is the same force and spirit that informs the teaching of poetry. I strive to keep alive the surprise. In practice, I too am learning not to over-train the undergraduates or override or underestimate their instincts. I want them to come into their own as teachers of writing.

At the same time, I am watching to see how well the El Sol students respond to certain poems and lines of inquiry. What happens in the small group session happens organically and depends on inter-personal communication. The opportunity to give the children this kind of attention is exceedingly rare. We want the kids to have a say in what happens. This is the whole point. The expressed task of the undergraduate is to connect intellectually with the day’s reading selection in a way that will likewise connect with what the kids bring to the table. As I write this paragraph, I am reminded of Theodore Roethke’s “The Waking” and think of including his great poem in this unit the next time around:

*I wake to sleep and take my waking slow.*

*I see my fate in what I cannot fear.*

*I learn by going where I have to go.*

This formal poem, a villanelle, would be useful to the undergraduates in their understanding of what I ask of them in the workshop. Later in this session we do read “One Art” by Elizabeth Bishop, which is also a villanelle. “One Art” works well in helping the El Sol students get in touch with feelings of loss. A pairing of the two villanelles would round out the lesson. I am seeing in workshop that Sharif, in particular, likes to bring

more of the formal aspects of poetry to his group, teaching the sonnet, scansion, and the highly structured, circular villanelle. I wonder if Sharif has read Roethke.

## *Week Three*

### *Forget About Me*

Knowing that my introductory lecture in Week Two took far too much time away from the small group discussion and writing sessions, I decide to keep my introduction to a minimum in Week Three. Building on the open energy of Neruda's "Poetry," I open with several readings from Neruda's book of seaside meditations, *From the Blue Shore of Silence*. Before I read, however, we take a minute to talk briefly about Neruda's home country, Chile. Geographically, Chile is a lot like California, with high mountain ranges and miles of coastal beaches along the Pacific. We find Chile on the world map. Then, while I am reading, the students—undergraduates and seventh graders alike—write words or phrases they admire from the poems. One of the poems I read is titled, "Forget About Me." The emphasis today is on writing new poems. When I finish reading to the class, we break quickly into groups and I step back, out of the way.

Meg, who in the first two weeks was a little anxious and unsure of her teaching ability, this week turns a corner:

I had an interesting moment with the girl in my second group who was having trouble writing. I suggested to her to pick four words out of her list that she really liked and I helped her come up with a few sentences that she could use to start her poem. The sentence that she liked was, "I carelessly washed the secret in the sand." But to her it had meant something different that what I had in mind when I said it. She still couldn't find anything to write about so I asked her what she thought the secret could possibly be. Then she

said that she wanted to write about a family member who was headed down a bad path and she really wanted him to come back. This was a very serious moment and I had not expected it at all. I feel like sometimes I forget that despite how young they are, these kids have lived through things and understand more than I give them credit for. This was the poem she ended up writing:

*I carelessly washed the secret in the sand.  
I fought for the light but shadow won.  
Its weight hangs from my neck  
like the jewels my mother wears.  
The will of the wave over comes his own.  
I search the shipwreck and run out  
before the remains sink.*

Erin writes about coming into her own and developing deep, insightful relationships with her students:

This was my third visit to El Sol and I find that as I continue everything makes more sense, but is not easier. It makes sense in the way that I am beginning to understand my role in the classroom and how to best utilize my time there. It remains difficult because the children are so unpredictable, and like most rewarding things it is hard work to get through to some of them. I think the kids are genuinely pleased to have us there. I think every time we come they are excited to see us. They are excited to tell me what is happening this week and over their weekend. In our first class



there was an interesting switch. One of my girls, Grace, who normally writes a lot was very distracted or simply uninterested in the morning, but as a result the other girl, Isabel, who never writes much was on a roll. I suppose some days are better than others. The same thing happens to me. The past two weeks we worked more as a group but because Isabel was on her own mission, I worked with Grace giving her small exercises to keep her pen on the page. I always make sure that I do the same things I ask of them so that they can feel like we are all making the effort to write, and they can use my sentences as examples. I think seeing me writing also inspires them to keep writing.

This is Isabel's poem that she wrote on her own with the help of her word bank from the Neruda poems read at the start of class:

*The voice that lives among the chocolate trees travels  
to the edge of time where weather is lost, mixed  
with the red waves of love. It has waited so long to  
become the only pulse left in the world. The fire  
at the door scratches  
and the wind waits for an answer.*

The most interesting thing I found in Isabel's poetry was her line breaks. In the second class of the day my group included two girls and one boy, Andrew, who was absent last week. The girls like me very much, and they like poetry; they respond very well to every discussion we have. I did the same thing in this class as the other

one. I had them focus on their word bank to write new poetry. Andrew went off on his own tangent and I figured so long as he was writing I should leave him be. Whenever he seemed to slow, or get stuck in his poem I offered him some new words from my word bank, and then he would be off running again. This is one of Andrew's poems:

*wearry white eyes full of tears  
so salty the ocean  
of burning shipwrecks  
sands of celestial ash  
ocean skulls of fish  
death is the color of shadow  
the debris beneath me  
just forget about me.*

Andrew wrote another poem that day titled, "Remembering."

*I can't remember  
the last time  
my poem slipped my mind  
I can't remember  
the minute I was born  
or the last time I lost  
forgetting you  
It hurts  
too much to remember.*

His poems are much darker than any of the other kids in my group,

but they also come more naturally to him. Like most talented writers I think there is more depth in this child than I have seen in many others. I think he has very much potential. The other two girls in the group relied more on my mini exercises to produce their poems. Xoxhilt wrote her poem from the p.o.v. of a fish because most in her word bank were nature words and ocean words. I told her to continue with what she already naturally liked. In general I think as the weeks go by I am much more accustomed to my role in this situation.

Carly, who has been in the poetry program with me all year, is still amazed at her students' ability to write startling lines of fresh imagery. She sees the ways in which her work at El Sol enriches her own writing process:

In the second hour, I was really impressed with how much the students were writing. Getting started was the toughest challenge for this group. We looked at books for inspiring images, and began to look at our lists of nouns and verbs to label them. One of my students, who was very shy about reading (but she did!), seemed troubled that she was going to “get something wrong” in her writing. I explained to write everything, and how one can always go back to edit. She create the line:

*The universe is like a shadow crying over burning bones  
embraced in disorder*

which I just found extremely daunting from such a young mind. Another one of my students created a beautiful set of lines, of which I will only extract a few:

*The blue bones plump the faint white bird*  
*The ashes of war left my heart on an autumn night*  
*Silence trains time by counting sand as petals from the sea*  
*sing with the air*

Reflection: Truly, the sounds they made amazed me. Once I was able to engage them, we discussed how one should just write from how the words sound no matter how random it may seem. It made me think on own process of writing, and where my inspiration comes from, about how important it is to write unfiltered and free.

As the undergraduates became more attuned to teaching as a creative process, their students write more intuitively, and are more authentically tuned into their own music. I suggested to Carly that she work with the girls to write these lines into poems broken down the page, so they could practice line breaks and how the breaking slows the reading and pushes meaning. William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" is a good poem to use as an example.

## *Week Four*

### *One Art*

For our fourth workshop meeting, as planned, Andrew Beshai, one of the undergraduate teaching poets, arrives with his arms full with professional cameras and sound equipment. He plans to film and edit a short video about the poetry program at El Sol. Andrew's initiative is but one example of the learning and career opportunities available to undergraduates through the UCI Poetry Academy. For creative, motivated students, their involvement can, and does, extend to engage skills they are practicing in other disciplines and areas of interest. In turn, the undergraduates' various talents bring new resources to the program. Andrew's completed short film, with interviews, is available on YouTube and on our Poetry For Democracy blog in the "About" section.

For the lesson, I open with Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle, "One Art." Once again, I restrict my time with the whole class so the groups have time for the business of writing. I do, however, speak briefly on the form we know as the villanelle, its varied and repeated end words and how this circling creates a kind of obsession, driving the writer deeper and deeper into a set of statements. "Disaster" is one of the key end words repeated in Bishop's villanelle and is worth a closer look. I write the word on the board and break it into its prefix and root. The prefix "dis-" is of Latin origin, meaning "no, not, or the opposite of." I ask the class for other words with this prefix. I hear "disease," "disagree," "disobey," "dismiss," etc. The word "aster" means, "star." An archaic meaning for the word is "no star, or sick, bad star." We think for a moment what the

stars are, in matters of fate, astrology and astral navigation. Bishop alternates between the end rhyme “master” and “disaster,” beginning with the line: “The art of losing isn’t hard to master.” I merely bring this to the students’ attention and don’t pursue it. That’s their job. At this point, we quickly break into groups so the undergraduates can take over.

Erin writes about how her student, Grace, opened up about a loss in her family:

In our first class Sandy from Andrew’s group joined our group while he was filming. It was interesting to have a new dynamic in the group, and she was nothing but a joy to work with. I had encouraged the girls to follow the idea of loss and try to start with a memory. I had them sit for a few moments to conjure this memory in the most intimate details they could. I had done an exercise like this in my poetry 30 class this week and so I shared with them my piece. After hearing my own work both girls went on diligently writing for most of the period. Below I would like to share with you Grace’s poem, which I found particularly touching, and brave of her. She explained to me afterward that it was about her cousin who was born underdeveloped and died, but who would have otherwise been her same age and playmate.

*I felt alone,  
holding the baby’s breath,  
struggling to help it live,  
taking his heart on my tippy-toes  
wondering how it would have been*

*If I had a companion,  
a long-time best friend,  
a cousin.*

*Would I still be lonely  
moved aside by my sister,  
Would I?  
If only I'd been there,  
to give him my breath  
my heart, my brain,  
the one his small head needed.*

*Now he was never there  
or here.*

Jonathan writes about the insight he's gaining into his own writing process through teaching:

Through teaching other students how to occupy the particular mindset of writing I am learning about how I begin to write. I care extensively about imagery and detailing environments within my fiction and this bleeds into my teaching. Whether or not the students walk away with a polished piece of work is less important than teaching the skills to expound more upon the ideas that interest them. I try to impart these writer skills so that they will be able to write not only poetry, but to have the creativity to write anything they must for school or during their free time. Writers are

not made from the finished work, but what they learn about themselves through the writing.

And Carly's student, Cindy Gonzalez, writes an emotionally charged prose poem:

Cindy is very independent when she works. She will chime in when I conduct lessons but she usually begins writing on her own. She showed me her first draft of a prose poem, and I helped her with edits and phrasing, explaining how important it is to show emotions versus telling them (such as, "I felt like"). Below is her work, which just blew us all away.

*I was once lost at sea, so isolated. It was like being the last pea in your dinner plate never once touched. It looked like months or years had passed, my face starting to wrinkle, my hair turning white, my soft face slowly turning pale. I was forever wet in that sea never once dried. I bet no one knew I was gone. They probably thought that I was dead. In the sea all alone, so soggy like a cracker being dropped in water and left there for a week. That's how I was, and there was nothing to change my mind of how I saw myself.*

Children are capable of profound sadness. What Cindy has achieved in this masterful little poem with such a strong voice, those strange images of uneaten food and being marooned, is what Frost would consider "Grief without grievance." Cindy's speaker is not complaining about whatever it



was that caused this inconsolable sadness; rather, she's telling us that she knows how it feels.

## *Week Five*

### *Pearls*

This week, I assigned each undergraduate teaching poet the task of designing and submitting a proposed lesson plan for pre-approval and implementation in the workshop. I could see that they were all developing strong skills and a feel for the kids in their groups. They wanted to choose poems they knew and admired, and to teach in a way that felt right to them. So, without any introductory lecture or exercise from me, we break immediately into groups and get to work. While the groups are talking and quietly writing, I roam around, modeling here and there a conversation that helps someone start writing. Now and then I say things like, “If you’re talking, you’re not writing” if I see too much carrying on.

In leading his group, Andrew chooses to focus on the symbol and on Frost’s poem, “Fire and Ice.” To help him out, I bring to class several illustrated books on signs and symbols for his group to thumb through for reference and inspiration. Although Andrew, at the time, probably had never heard of the term, through this experience he came to employ, articulate and appreciate a practice well known to teachers as “scaffolding.”

This week, I realized one of the most important strategies in teaching, which is bridging new material with prior knowledge. If a teacher can introduce new material by building off what the students already knows or have been previously taught, the learning is much more effective because the kids already have a

reserve to activate in their understanding. I came to this conclusion especially after this week's session because that is the approach I used. I built on the students' previous familiarity with symbols to pave the way for them to comprehend symbolism in poetry. I feel that they grasped the concepts and were able to even emulate the literary device in their own writing.

Erin wanted to push her students toward sharper imagery and associative meaning:

I had the girls try and write an associative poem since they had already been working with strong imagery. I had them think of a memory and then write down other images, places, and things that would evoke the same sort of emotions that their memory evoked, so as to create an analogous situation without actually telling the story itself. These girls are so smart and always willing to try out whatever sort of exercises I give them, and they always do it with a smile. Below is Grace's poem based on the moment her mother and father recently told her she would be moving to Mexico next year. She wrote the poem as if it were a car accident she is describing because that is the way it felt to her:

*And as they chit, and chat, and chattered,  
the car came to brutish stop.  
A silence came from the pain  
binding their lips.  
splattering their dreams.. unknown*

*the future gone, poof and their  
lives left along with their struggles  
their long life so close and yet so  
unexpected and far away.*

I think Grace did an amazing job creating a situation that for her expressed the same sort of emotion that her own moment had. I was very impressed with the outcome. When the second class tired of this exercise, I wasn't sure what to do, so I improvised by pulling one of my own poems from my notebook. I recently wrote the poem I showed them in writing 30 through an exercise on hands in which we received deliberate instruction on the phases of the poem. We were to describe the hands, then have the hands do something, then have the person ask a question, and so on. I mostly just made it up because I couldn't remember how it went. I was very impressed though with what Karina came up with, and her choice of words far surpassed anything I have seen her do so far.

*Hands*

*For centuries  
the squared pink nails  
the ruff and rusty palms  
of hands they dream  
of flying  
to broken smiles.  
Rubbing through thick black hair,*

*warming cool sensitive souls,  
holding burned hearts.  
tossing selfish brains,  
saving soft bones.*

Carly used Emily Dickinson's "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" to explore personal identity in times of change or crisis:

My lesson focused around the concept of self-identity, which both Dickinson and Whitman in comparison to society (as in, the individual versus society for Dickinson and the individual within society for Whitman). Afterwards, I asked for the students to write poems that were focused on creating a voice, and going back to a time where they felt like either the outcast or the hero within a social setting.

The honors students focused on the outcast aspect from Dickinson's "I'm nobody! Who are you?" One of my students wrote about being teased at the age of five, which led into a discussion about using inappropriate words within poetry. I wanted to try to move her away from using the actual words due to being in a classroom setting, which led to the sentence, "I've been called the worst names an African-American, five-year-old girl can be called". Although it moved into a powerful place, it was left "unfinished". The other student I work with in the Honors class discussed her first day at El Sol. Her writing needed to move away from the "telling" aspects (I felt, I feel, I want) to produce this:

*Scared and afraid  
What is this fenced school?  
My home feels more welcoming.  
Invisible as a ghost,  
There they go and here I am...  
...all alone.  
Please say hi.*

Cindy, in the second class, has been writing without much guidance. She wrote two pieces that I will share below due to their strengths in exploring persona and sound. The second piece, which includes a direct address to the reader “you” was written within the last few minutes of class.

*The dead rise for one day.  
Not to attack  
but to visit us..  
Memory fades so deeply and so long and so quietly.  
One forgets about the loss  
the dead forgive and heal you  
with a sweet faint echo.*

*Spring's Dawn-like Night*

*The night blooms 'til dawn.  
fog separates individuals  
from cool water-like-air ‘*

*til the last drop from a rose.  
Listen quietly. Do not make a sound  
or you'll ruin the moment.  
The sound of a tulip blossoming  
in the sound of the grass swaying.  
So shhh for now.*

The exploration of identity becomes especially remarkable among those students who are multilingual, as their explorations often blossom into explorations of language. Juli is fluent in Spanish and English, and well versed in Chicano literature, and wanted to explore the students' voices across the two languages.

This week we did a "lesson" on Chicano poets who use both Spanish and English in their poems. I wanted to show them that they could use both languages in their writing. We talked about our families and cultures and how they define us and help to create our identity. We talked about what a beautiful thing language is and what a treasure it is to be able to speak two languages. I read them several examples of Chicano poetry in which the authors used both languages to help write about their culture and their identity. The poem I felt best accomplished what I was trying to explain to them was "Turning the Times Tables" by Gustavo Perez Firmat. Firmat's poem really captures dual language identity as a hybrid. I think the students really connected to it. I loved every single poem I got this week. There were several that stood out above the others:

*If you are born in the U.S. people think you're American  
Están equivocados*

*Yo me siento orgullosa de venir de una descendencia  
Salvadoreña,  
and first consider myself Salvadorian.*

*If you live in the U.S. people think you need a lot of money  
to be ricos.*

*Están equivocados.*

*Money no compra nada, no ganas nada siendo una niña  
rica.*

*I feel proud of my parents for supporting my brother and  
me.*

*Ellos vivían y viven todavía una vida muy difícil  
pero ellos son rica.*

*They are rich in love, independence, and honor—  
nosotros somos ricos de amor, en independencia, y en  
honor.*

*I am a Salvadorian Americana.*

*Ana*



*I am a Chicano,  
a half Mexicano  
with a side of Americano.  
Talking the same game of any American.  
Viendo el fuego de un juego!  
I lie both ways.  
I prefer the differentials of both essentials.  
Its okay, this way of life;  
it makes me a half of a laugh.  
Its good for the mood.*

*Giovanny*

*I am Mexicana. Siempre lo seré.  
I am Americana even though no Americans like me.  
Vivo en los Estados Unidos where  
Mexicans hate the Americanos  
and Americans odian a los Mexicanos.  
I don't know if I'm truly both,  
but I know that my culturas  
son los mismos,  
esencialmente.*

*Izayana*

Next week I want to do something similar except I want them to know that they do not have to restrict their bilingual poetry to themes of cultural and personal identity. This week I did not even

know what I was getting myself into. I wasn't sure if the "lesson" would take or if they would want to combine the languages, let alone write about their identity as it is connected to their culture. What I got were these wonderful poems showing insight and maturity far beyond their years.

## *Week Six*

### *La Botella*

At the conclusion of every workshop session, at all grade levels, I ask if anyone would like to share their draft with the class. We do this from day one, when the kids have written perhaps only one line that stands apart. The activity gives the kids something to work for, a chance to show off, and the confidence that comes from practicing speaking in front of the class. When we make handouts of these “great starts,” the selected peer writing samples help the kids see what we are looking for in terms of imaginative writing and that this kind of writing can be done. It reinforces our standards and sets a realistic bar for grade level work. The ones who do not see their poems in the handouts are disappointed and work harder on their writing. I’ve also seen students who were reluctant to write suddenly become prolific once they are noticed in this manner. Their poems look professional—and clearer--when typed and printed on the page. I read in the field notes that this practice also gives the undergraduates a sense of accomplishment and pride in their students, when one of their own stands before the class and reads.

For our last workshop session for the quarter (our sequence of sessions coincides with the UCI quarter system to accommodate the undergraduate academic calendar), I make a three-page handout of promising drafts written in past weeks. This would be the last chance to revise the drafts and end in a celebratory, culminating activity.

To start the day, we distribute the handouts to all students and ask the kids to read their poems to the class. The listeners spontaneously

applaud at the end of each poem. Everyone feels exalted, proud and a little sad that this is our last day.

To make the most of the “great starts” handouts, I turn everyone’s attention to the drafts on the page. We talk about what is working and what could be improved in each of the draft poems. We talk about line breaks, and how breaking the line with different end words can either deepen or flatten out the poem. We talk about enjambment and how ending on a word with many different meanings and connotations gives the reader a moment of pleasure, suspended in possibilities before landing once again on the next line. Robert Hass has reckoned at least three ways to break the line: at the phrase, that is to attend to grammar to break where the punctuation would command; at the image, which would add depth and surprise as the reader forms pictures in our mind, or with language, to push the meaning of any end word. We look at Cindy’s prose poem and consider breaking it into lines.

*I was once lost at sea, so isolated. It was like being the last pea in your dinner plate, never once touched. It looked like months or years had passed, my face starting to wrinkle, my hair turning white, my soft face slowly turning pale. I was forever wet in that sea never once dried. I bet no one knew I was gone. They probably thought that I was dead. In the sea all alone, so soggy like a cracker being dropped in water and left there for a week. That’s how I was, and there was nothing to change my mind of how I saw myself.*

Here it is broken at the phrase:

I was once lost at sea,

So isolated.

It was like being the last pea in your dinner plate,  
never once touched.

It looked like months or years had passed  
my face starting to wrinkle  
my hair turning white,  
my soft face slowly turning pale

I was forever wet in that sea never once dried

I bet no one knew I was gone.

They probably thought that I was dead.

In the sea all alone,

so soggy like a cracker dropped in water and left there for a week.

That's how I was,

and there was nothing to change my mind of how I saw myself.

Here it is broken to push the images and language:

*I was once lost*

*At sea, so isolated.*

*It was like being*

*The last pea*

*On your dinner plate*

*Never once*

*Touched. It looked like*

*Months or years  
Had passed, my face  
Starting to wrinkle,  
My hair turning  
White, my soft face slowly  
turning pale. I was forever  
Wet in that sea  
Never once dried.  
I bet no one knew  
I was gone.  
Probably they thought  
I was dead.  
In the sea all alone  
So soggy  
Like a cracker  
Dropped in water  
And left there  
For a week.  
That's how I was  
And there was nothing  
To change my mind  
Of how I saw myself.*

Playing around with the line breaks gives the poet an opportunity to tighten the language, cut extra words, and tune the music.

Also in this final session, we take another look at the simile and its capacity for metaphor. Dropping the comparison tightens the language and amps up the image. Here is one of Grace's better similes:

*Poetry is as pure as a white winter night behind my hands.*

Made metaphor:

*Poetry, this pure white winter night behind my hands.*

We remind the students that they are not tied to making similes, and that images can be made in a variety of ways: choosing an object to examine; a sound or overheard dialogue; the setting and scene of a memory or imagined event.

Juli's group continues to read and write poems in both English and Spanish. I brought with me that day the beautiful hard-bound *Loteria Cards and Fortune Poems A book of Lives*, by Juan Felipe Herrera, illustrated with linocuts by Artemio Rodriguez for her group to look through. Here are two poems by Juli's students written that last day in workshop:

*La Llorona*

*She is a beautiful young woman*

*with a white gown*

*wet from when she threw her three boys into the river*

*and jumped to save them.*

*She died because of love,*

*love for her husband who abandoned her.*  
*Her sons that she drowned.*  
*Her three ninos pueden ser ustedes.*  
*She will come at night.*  
*Tears fall from her shiny blue eyes*  
*y llevarte porque ella piensa que tu eres su hijo.*  
*“Ay mis hijos, ay mis hijos!”*

*Don't worry she is not here yet,*  
*with her hands shaking*  
*and searching for love.*

*Izayana*

This is her second draft. I think it's a haunting and spooky piece and I love that about it. I also think that it is empathetic toward the humanity of La Llorona. On one hand, La Llorona only wanders because she is searching for her boys, because she loves them and wants them back. On the other hand, she steals young children and she may be coming for you. However, you can be sure that if she does snatch you—which she will—with her hands “shaking and searching”, she is only doing so as a sort of accident. I like that La Llorona in this poem is not entirely “misunderstood.” No, she is still a child murderer and snatcher to be feared. However, this poem captures that she is misunderstood on some levels. La Llorona in this poem mistakes regular children for her children. She is not vindictive or malicious, nor is she soft and a figure to pity. This poem is fresh and nicely done.



Ana also had a really good concept for her poem. The title she chose from Herrera's book "La Botella," but the poem is wholly her own:

*We use la botella to keep our money,  
our money that we are not able to put in a bank account,  
our money that we keep  
in case of an emergency,  
in case of our future,  
in case of a funeral.*

*We use la botella to keep our secrets  
since we don't have anyone to tell them to.*

*We write them down  
and shove them in.*

*We write our anger. Our depression.*

*Our sadness being alone.*

*The waves of the river take it home.*

## *Recap: Empathy*

Poetry can expand in us a capacity for empathy by first fostering the relationship we have with our selves—by providing a model for intimacy with the self and with others that can be internalized and practiced through the use of language.

And language is, after all, all we have. Or, at least, it is our primary, most immediate mode of interpersonal communication (compared to others such as numbers, charts, dance, music, visual arts, etc.). According to recent U.S. Poet Laureate W.S. Merwin, “We humans want language to express things that existed in us before language did. The utterly singular. Who you are: who you can never tell anybody. And on the other hand, there is what you can express. How do we know about this thing we talk about? We talk about it. We’re using words. And the words never say it, but the words are all we have.”

Psychologists consider empathy to be one of many crucial life and character skills linked to quality interpersonal communication and emotional intelligence, including respect, sharing, friendship-making, leadership, social skills, conflict resolution, listening, compassion, tolerance. Relationships are woven into the fabric of our inner world. We come to know our own minds through our interactions with others. With so much pressure on the child to perform academically and on standardized tests, with few opportunities to express themselves or discuss matters of personal importance, it is no surprise to me that today we are seeing a rise in bullying and social abuse in our public schools.

Stanford Professor of Comparative Literature David Polumbo Liu sees literary analysis as a way to understand our lives, deserving of a

better investment of time and resources and freedom for creative, insightful thought: “More than a ‘skill’ to be taught in ten weeks, literary reading, and the humanities in general, is to me something conveyable and teachable only after establishing the proper environment for this kind of thinking and reflection on the human condition. Students come to Stanford doubly handicapped in this respect. They are taught in science to find the “right” answer (and there is only one), and in English they are taught to find the answer that lands them the best AP score.”

Perhaps academics and administrators at U.S. universities should be more proactive in making the argument for the study of literature across the disciplines. While the humanities suffer, law, medical and business schools are well funded and expanding. The online business encyclopedia maintains that findings from studies show that “Empathy is positively related to intrinsic motivation and effective problem-solving, supporting the view that empathy is an important aspect of effective leadership. The need for empathy is increasingly important in the workplace as the use of teams and self-directed work groups, where social competencies are a critical factor in success, are on the rise.” It should go without saying that a person who is skillful at empathizing makes others feel respected and worthy of attention. Yet, our current political, economic and social environment does not promote this kind of human behavior.

One institution that is known for making great strides toward innovative education for social change is Babson College in Massachusetts. Ranked first in entrepreneurial education by U.S. News and World Report for 17 years running, Babson includes a Creative Stream for the MBA, coordinated by poet Mary Pinard. Babson attracts students who see themselves as tomorrow’s leaders in economic and social

change with “a commitment to people, profit and the planet.” Profit fits somewhere there, in between. This is the future, if we are to have one.

While still a senator for the state of Illinois, President Obama identified what he called an “empathy deficit” in his 2006 commencement speech at Northwestern University:

There's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit - the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us -

...we live in a culture that discourages empathy. A culture that too often tells us our principle goal in life is to be rich, thin, young, famous, safe, and entertained. A culture where those in power too often encourage these selfish impulses.

In May of 2011, the same week the White House hosted a poetry workshop for youth from across the nation, the White House Committee for Arts and Humanities published a report in support of arts education in the schools, *Winning America's Schools Through Arts Education*. Reported in the summary of recommendations is this realization:

The value of arts education is often phrased in enrichment terms-- helping kids find their voice, rounding out their education and tapping into their undiscovered talents. This is true, but as President's Committee saw in schools all over the country, it is also an effective tool in school-wide reform and fixing some of our biggest educational challenges. It is not a flower, but a wrench.

In many ways, my work in creative writing, from those early years at community college, served as the “nuclear reactor” for my success in other areas. Although not directly related to my other coursework, reading and writing poetry deepened and enriched each and every class I took along the way. Likewise, coursework in geology, astronomy, literature and history informed and enriched the poetry I write, as well as my teaching practice at El Sol.

Jay Parini, in his book *Why Poetry Matters* (2008), argues that the poet’s value to society is in his/her facility with language, "because they have spent a long time thinking about the connection between words and things." According to Parini, poets should take up the sword and speak out on political issues, as "Poetry provides a moral standard for expression, one against which political rhetoric must be judged." If poetry does provide a moral standard, it is perhaps the habits of heart and mind that can be engendered through a familiarity with poetry, such as empathy and an appreciation for the subtleties of language. Poet Robert Hass asserts that “A taste for poetry, an interest in the liveliness and eloquence and impudence and sometimes the sorrowing or wondering depths of the mind as it emerges in the rhythms of our language, must be at the core of any effort to give our country and our children the gift and task of literacy.”

The poet Shelley also described empathy in terms of morality nearly 200 years ago: “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own.” Shelly unashamedly considered poets to be “the unacknowledged legislators of our time.”

## *Manifesto*

*How many poets does it take to change a country?*

Michael Ryan

*Crossing State Lines-54 Writers, One American Poem*

Since the 50's, creative writing programs at U.S. universities have multiplied exponentially. Gradschools.com currently lists 306 creative writing programs in institutions of higher education across the U.S. Typically, the MFA in writing is considered a studio degree, providing writers time to devote to the development of their craft. Applicants to these programs are advised that their study in an MFA program will not guarantee a job or career; positions at universities for creative writing professors are coveted and few; and the overall practicality of earning an MFA in poetry is a subject of much debate.

What often goes unmentioned in these discussions is the quality of skill sets students acquire through a creative writing program. MFAs have been trained to communicate with one another on the basis of a strict and keen attention to written language. In workshop, they read with close sensitivity the expressed word of fellow writers. Through this discipline, they acquire an intimacy with language that provides insight into human consciousness. They learn to analyze and decode the workings of the mind in the act of making meaning and more. They learn how to communicate, in person, to their fellows, what they see on the page. I personally do not think these skills can be overestimated in terms of helping students acquire intellectual and interpersonal maturity. I'd argue further, that to submit to such scrutiny requires a supra-normal degree of humility. Likewise, to advise another regarding the products of his or her mind cultivates in the advisor an equally sharp and supra-normal level of incision, tempered with

tact, empathy and compassion. These abilities are the unacknowledged by-products of an MFA in writing.

The kind of attention poetry demands of us helps us learn, in turn, to pay more attention to the patterns of energy and information that unfold in the worlds around and within us. Reading widely works of poetry helps us to develop a more accurate vocabulary to describe these sensations. More to the point, poetry teaches an appreciation for the limits of language, for how truly difficult it is to find a way to convey properly personal experience. Perhaps this is where empathy is truly tested. When we know not to take what someone says at face value, to give freely the benefit of the doubt, to know that any act of speech is an ongoing experiment and that the same word rarely means the same thing for different people. Revision teaches us that our poems are rarely ever finished. We are all trying to make sense of things as we go along.

Institutionalized into the MFA programs at most universities are opportunities for students to serve as editor for the writing program's affiliated literary journal. And where I would agree that this experience is worthwhile, it does very little toward advocating and sharing with the general public an appreciation of the literary arts and poetry. Almost exclusively, literary journals are read by other writers and editors. If writers in the arts desire a wider following comprised of a more literary and literate general culture, we have to do more.

While, in many ways, the MFA in writing may be the antithesis of a traditional MBA, the creative spirit fostered in the former prepares the student with an equally entrepreneurial worldview. Above and beyond the classical argument in defense of poetry, I venture to say that, as a resource

for society, the trained poet possesses a heretofore universally underutilized power to transform the community.

The university students who serve alongside me in the classrooms at El Sol learn more from the experience than I can possibly relate on the page. But I can say, generally speaking, that having been exposed to this invigorating work, and thereby watching what I must do to keep the ball rolling, they see how programs like the UCI Poetry Academy can be created, developed and sustained. During our time together, I discuss with the students my endeavors to write grant proposals, and to build community partnerships. I provide for them programmatic information and networking contacts throughout the UC Links statewide initiative. In the draft stages of writing my funding proposal to the California Council for the Humanities for the Poetry For Democracy project, I shared with the undergraduates, for their information and perusal, both the request for proposals and a copy of the award winning application. To help prepare university student writers for the world after graduation, these practical experiences should be made more available to undergraduates and to MFA students across the nation.

Possibly, there could be no better time for a rise of community poetry programs than the one in which we are currently living. After decades of corporate growth and dominance over our daily lives, our identity as individuals, neighborhoods and communities has been compromised by a collective consumer culture achieved through marketing and advertising. The conservative business model has taken over public higher education and has forced the study of humanities and literature into the poor, far corners of the research university. Independent bookstores and places where people might gather to discuss ideas with one



another in person are disappearing, particularly in places like Orange County, Ca. At the same time, we are facing issues of mythic proportion-- climate change, financial crisis, fundamental religious fervor, and the breakdown of civility in Washington, Sacramento, Fullerton, your town. Even so, change is upon us-- economically, ecologically, culturally, politically, personally and communally. We know we are missing something, something we can't find at the mall or on the Internet, even if we don't know exactly what it is or where to find it.

In her introduction to *Blueprints: Bringing Poetry into the Communities*, Editor and Inaugural Director of the Harriet Monroe Poetry Institute, Katherine Coles reported findings from a recent research study undertaken by the Institute to assess the needs of the poetry community. Surveys revealed that “People who are already passionate about poetry—and our numbers are large and growing—feel powerfully that poetry fulfills an essential human need, that it provides a source of richness and pleasure that nobody should be without, and, therefore, that poetry should be readily and widely available to everyone. Which, as many... rightly point out, it is not.”

Over 150 years ago, the Civil War Era gave this country the defining American voices of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Out of the self-reliant, self-fashioning, individualistic Transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, came a new poetry in search of the music and beauty of the individual American voice.

It is not farfetched to say that *we are* in a time of civil war. If there can be such a thing as a “civil” war. The phrase itself is an oxymoron, as incongruous as the “war on terror.” What we need, what all of us need, are civil, honest, compassionate and empathetic conversations beyond the

sound bite on the campaign trail. At a time when this nation must think creatively, innovatively and courageously, our real hope rests in the individual and a reaffirmation of community. Writer Walter Mosley, speaking about how to get American on the right track says “everything depends on the individual...very often... what our elected officials end up doing is not in our best interests...we have to know this and be involved everyday.”

I make this argument as much for myself as for others. I entertain a fantasy that each and every university and college offering a creative writing emphasis for undergraduates and an MFA program in writing can and should partner with community organizations to offer opportunities like the UCI Poetry Academy for its students. While I realize that every student writer will not be inclined toward community service, those who would and could *should* have the chance to try. This fantasy of mine is tempered by the challenges I’ve faced in keeping the UCI Poetry Academy alive. To do so takes nothing less than steely perseverance in a landscape of indifference and even opposition to the creative arts. Ironically, the current political climate has done more to fuel our aspirations that it has to extinguish them, though the forces (for the lack of a better term) are great from both sides. Resistance is yeast for the bread. The yes, and no, and yes.



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