

*From "Baltimore, Maryland" in
Possible Lives: The Promise of
Public Education in America*

1995

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This selection comes from a chapter on a first-grade classroom in Baltimore. I include it for a number of reasons.

It offers a portrait of excellent teaching in science and language arts in the primary grades, the beginning of the educational pipeline. I thought that readers who study writing at the secondary and postsecondary level would find of particular interest the development of children's literacy, which is highlighted later in the selection.

At a time when multiculturalism and race-conscious curricula have become such hot-button issues—and the culture-war polemics around them generate more heat than light—this teacher's work represents the rich and layered possibilities of such an approach. Race is at the center of Stephanie Terry's pedagogy, in the books she selects, in the environment she creates, in her interactions with students and parents. But the centrality of race does not lead to an exclusionary course of study. Ms. Terry incorporates much from a range of sources—Dr. Seuss to Venn diagrams—into her curriculum.

I also include the chapter because it illustrates several core themes of *An Open Language*, again at the other end of the education pipeline: the richness of human language and cognition and the power of opportunity. But it also illustrates a key dilemma, both a political and rhetorical one: how to represent the opportunity opened up by good teaching (or any social intervention) while simultaneously representing the terrible threat to opportunity posed by a history of discrimination and poverty, how to insist on the possible while being clear-eyed about the devastation of inequality. As a nation, we find it difficult to hold both of these perspectives in sight simultaneously, to look on social issues with a binocular vision. Adopting this binocular vision is not unrelated to the task I advocated a moment ago of fashioning an institutional critique that contains both dissent and affirmation. People who study language and rhetoric should be especially equipped for such work.

From *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. 97–109, 112–22.

I

I imagined the tree frog wondering about these kneeling bipeds. Hunched down, hunkered down, faces right up against the glass of his classroom home. "I want some crickets," he might have thought, giving them a dull and sullen look. "Just give me the damned crickets." He didn't move—contemptuous, stolid, the color of the surrounding rocks and dead leaves, looking back at Mrs. Terry's curious first-graders with eyes half closed.

Stephanie Terry's students, thirty of them, were all African American, as was Mrs. Terry, and all lived close by Duke Ellington Primary School in Baltimore's inner city. Stephanie, in her early forties, wore her hair in elaborate braids, had a round, gentle face and a serious lingering gaze. She and her students, half of them boys and half girls, were in the middle of a science lesson on the tree frog, its eating habits and its ability to change skin color in response to the environment. They were about to feed it. But first Mrs. Terry wanted them to look very closely at the frog and its surroundings. "What do you see?" she asked. "Oh, oh, Miss Terry," Frank ventured, twisting around on his knees, "He's real gray now." "Yes, he is, isn't he?" Mrs. Terry said slowly, as if deep in thought. "How could that be?" "Because," Shereese said, looking up from the opposite side of the case, her beaded braids dangling, "he's in with the leaves and the rocks and they're all gray, too." "Hmmm, interesting. Yes. What do we call that ability to change colors?" Frank again, dimples, high forehead, eyes wide: "Ka-ka-meal-e-yon!" "All right. Very good, Frank." Mrs. Terry replied, pausing to let the word settle in the air. Then, "Boys and girls, what else do you see?" "Miss Terry," said Leon, brow furrowed, "the crickets, they're all gone." "No, no," piped up Shereese. "There's one under the cup. Look." And she pointed, tapping, while Leon and the rest of the group scooted around on knees and elbows to get a better look. Mrs. Terry leaned forward in her tiny chair. And there it was. A dead cricket, on its side, under a tilted dish of water. "Why won't he eat it, Miss Terry?" Leon asked, a trace of concern still in his voice. "Ain't he hungry no more?"

"That's a very good question, Leon. I wonder if anyone has any ideas. Let's assume the frog is hungry. After all, it's time to feed him, right?" A chorus of "uh-huh" and "right" and "yeah" and lots of nodding heads. "Well, then . . ." Rachel, who was not in the group of five immediately surrounding the case, asked tentatively from the wider circle where she, I, and the others sat, "Is it . . . maybe he only eats alive crickets?" Mrs. Terry nodded. "What do you think of that, class?" Some murmurings, and Dondi, a picture of Malcolm X and the word *study* on his T-shirt, asked how the frog could tell whether the cricket was dead or "just ain't moving cause he's scared." Mrs. Terry thought that was another good question and began to explain how the frog's eye and brain are set up such that he'll strike only at something moving. "In fact," she continued, "a frog could starve to death if we fed him only dead insects!" Almost all the eyes in the room were on Mrs. Terry now. Amazed. Disbelieving. Everyone's eyes but Leon's, who was still down on hands and knees looking at the frog, waiting for a clue. The frog looked back, impassive, waiting for crickets.

The crickets for that day's feeding were in a jar on the science table against the wall by the sink. The wall was covered with information, in big print, on the aquatic snail, the frog, the newt, the hermit crab, the praying mantis, the blackworm, and the tadpole—all the creatures Mrs. Terry kept in her class to pique curiosity and sharpen the eye. On the floor was a case with hermit crabs, the space for Mr. Frog's home (temporarily relocated to the center of the room), a fish tank with newts, a spotted frog, and a tiny African frog. Right by the science table was a box of books, a few scattered out on the rug: *Backyard Hunter: The Praying Mantis*, *Snails and Slugs*, *Pond Life*, *A House for Hermit Crab*, *The Tadpole and the Frog*.

The table itself was small and cluttered with the remnants of experiments past, the messiness of good science. There was a cluster of acorns and orange and yellow gourds, the head of a big sunflower, a bird's nest, some stray twigs, the corpse of a newt—carefully laid out on cardboard and labeled—five or six small magnifying glasses, several Audubon Pocket Guides, and a pile of crisp maple leaves.

Mrs. Terry walked over and picked up the pickle jar that held three lively crickets. She selected three students who hadn't yet had a chance to observe the frog closely. There was big excitement, but contained somehow, giddy seriousness. Shaquente went first, extending her thumb and forefinger into the jar like pincers, her face set somewhere between a smile and a grimace. She missed, oops, then missed again, the students around her watching, twitching their arms and shoulders with each of her failed attempts. Mrs. Terry suggested that she tilt the jar a little more, and when she did one cricket hopped up the side. She nabbed it, pressing its wings to its body. Mrs. Terry opened the lid of the case, and Shaquente gingerly dropped the cricket in and got down close to watch. The frog stirred, finally, dislodging itself from the leaves and rock. The cricket crawled around, over an old potato, over a twig, a rock, and the frog came off its hind legs in a flash and engulfed it in one swallow. The class squealed. A minute or so more, and the second cricket met its fate. The third somehow escaped the frog's field of vision and got a momentary reprieve. The frog went back to its niche and settled in. The students were against the case again. The frog closed its eyes.

Over the next few days, Stephanie's students performed experiments. Rachel wanted to see what would happen if Mrs. Terry put a bright color next to Mr. Frog. Would his skin change again? So Stephanie cut a three-inch-square piece of yellow art paper and placed it inside the case, close to the frog's corner. When the class looked again later in the day, nothing had happened.

"Why do you think the frog didn't turn yellow?" Mrs. Terry asked.

"Maybe the frog has to see the paper," Rachel said, raising a delicate hand.

"Do you think if we put the paper where he could see it, it would make a difference?"

"Let's try it, Miss Terry," suggested Frank in a half-bounce.

Stephanie reached carefully into the case, picked up the paper, and slid it along the glass, into the frog's field of vision.

The next morning, no change. The paper had become moist and dried with a warp. That's all.

"Miss Terry," Dondi offered, "maybe . . . maybe, he has to be *on* it."

"Hmm, that's interesting, Dondi. Let's see. Stephanie tried to slide the paper in as close to the frog as possible, a little under the stones and leaves. The frog stirred, but didn't hop away.

When the class looked again, just before lunch, there was no change.

"Why isn't anything happening?" Shaquente asked, disappointed.

"Well," said Mrs. Terry, "sometimes you have to wait. An important part of science is learning how to wait." Then she asked them to take out their journals and write about the experiment with the yellow paper.

For Stephanie Terry, doing science meant waiting and watching—and writing about what you saw. In fact, writing about Mr. Frog—or the newt or the hermit crab—fostered, she believed, a reflective cast of mind. And having Mr. Frog and the newts and the other creatures to write about fired up the kids to put pencil to paper, to practice print's difficult technology. Science and writing. C. P. Snow's two cultures merging in a primary school in inner-city Baltimore.



Three or four days after the unsuccessful experiment with the frog and the yellow paper, Stephanie read to the students a book called *A House for Hermit Crab*. Hermit crabs inhabit empty mollusk shells, and as they grow, they leave old shells to find bigger ones. In this story, we accompany a cheery hermit crab in its search for a more spacious home. Over the year, Mrs. Terry's students had seen this behavior. The case containing the five crabs held thirteen shells of various sizes, and more than once students noticed that a shell had been abandoned and a new one suddenly animated. But as Stephanie read *A House for Hermit Crab*, she raised broader questions about where the creatures lived, and this led to an eager query from Kenneth about where you'd find hermit crabs. "Well," said Mrs. Terry, "let's see if we can figure that out."

She brought the case with the hermit crabs to the center of the room, took them out, and placed them on the rug. One scuttled away from the group, antennae waving; another moved in a brief half-circle; three stayed put. While this was going on, Mrs. Terry took two plastic tubes from the cupboard above the sink and filled one with cold water from the tap. "Watch the hermit crabs closely," she said, "while I go to the kitchen. Be ready to tell me what you saw." She went down the hall to get warm water from the women who prepared the children's lunches. Then she put both tubs side by side and asked five students, one by one, to put each of the crabs in the cold water. *Plop, plop, plop*. "What happened?" asked Mrs. Terry. "They don't move," said Kenneth. "They stay inside," added Miko.

Mrs. Terry gave the crabs a bit longer, then asked five other students to transfer the crabs to the second tub. They did, and within seconds the crabs started to stir. "Ooooo" from the class. Before long, the crabs were really moving, antennae dipping, legs scratching every which way at the plastic, two of the crabs even crawling over each other. "OK," said Mrs. Terry. "What happens in this water?" An excited chorus: "They're moving." "They're walking

all over." "They like it." "They're happy like the crab in the book." "Well," said Mrs. Terry, standing up, placing her hands on the small of her back, and having a little stretch. "What does this suggest about where they like to live?"

That night the students wrote about the experiment, and the next day they took turns standing before the class and reading their reports.

Miko, whose skin was dark and lustrous, and whom Stephanie called "our scientist," went first: "I saw the hermit crab walking when it was in the warm water, but when it was in the cold water it was not walking. It likes to live in warm water."

Then Romarise took the floor, holding his paper way out in his right hand, his left hand in the pocket of his overalls: "(1) I observed two legs in the back of the shell. (2) I observed that some of the crabs changes its shell. (3) When the hermit crabs went into the cold water, they walked slow. (4) When the hermit crabs went into the warm water, they walked faster." One by one, the rest of the students read their observations, halting at times over their invented spellings, sometimes losing track and repeating themselves, but, in soft voice or loud, with a quiet sense of assurance or an unsteady eagerness, reporting on the behavior of the hermit crabs that lived against the east wall of their classroom.



The frog and the hermit crab and all of the other creatures in Mrs. Terry's class live in multiple domains: they live in their aquatic or blue gravel or leafy habitats; they live in books; they live in the children's discussion of them—"science talk," Stephanie called it—and, subsequently, they live in the writing that emerges from talk and observation. They live in ear and eye, in narrative, in fantasy. Think of Stephanie Terry's curriculum, then, as the overlay of domains usually separated.

One day Kenneth told a story about fishing with his grandfather. Catfish was the catch, and Kenneth dwelled on the details of their whiskers and their gutted innards—to the delight of the boys and the repulsion of the girls. *Oooo. Ugggh.* "That was a real good story," said Leon. That afternoon, Stephanie dug out one of the district's basal readers and read "New Friends for Catfish." In the story, a catfish is ridiculed by a seal and a turtle because he looks funny—a fish with whiskers!—and, in an escalation of nastiness, Seal and Turtle bully their way onto the sunken ship that is Catfish's home. But when Seal gets stuck in a porthole, Catfish swims back to save him, causing a change of heart in the malicious duo, and the last panel of the story shows Seal, Turtle, and Catfish, in pirate hats and striped bandannas, frolicking together on the deck of Catfish's home.

After getting the class's reaction to "New Friends for Catfish," Mrs. Terry recalled Kenneth's story from the morning. What did the class think of these two catfish stories together? As the boys and girls began making their comparisons, Stephanie reached over for an easel that held a large sketch pad. "Kenneth's Story" she wrote on one side of the page. "New Friends for Catfish," she wrote on the other, and drew a line down the middle. "OK," she said. "Let's start thinking about the differences between these two stories. What should I put here?"

"Miss Terry, Miss Terry," Frank volunteered. "Kenneth ate his catfishes, but nobody ate Catfish." "Good," said Stephanie, and she listed the difference. "Kenneth examined the catfish," Rachel then noted, recalling Kenneth's talk about those innards, "but nobody did that to Catfish." And over the next ten minutes, the students observed that Kenneth's story involved thirteen catfish, while "New Friends for Catfish" was about one, and that Kenneth and his grandfather cut off the catfish's whiskers, but Seal and Turtle did not cut off Catfish's whiskers. And so the list grew.

A few days later, Mrs. Terry read a story called "The Magic Fish." A poor fisherman catches but tosses back a magic fish, which, in turn, grants him a wish. The fisherman's wife, though, is greedy and makes the fisherman return to the sea over and over, asking for greater and greater wealth, finally breaking the magic fish's patience with a request to be "queen of the sun and the moon and the stars." When she finished the story, Mrs. Terry dragged her easel over and, on a fresh sheet of paper, drew a big Venn diagram. The Venn diagram is a simple logician's tool, two partly overlapping circles that illustrate shared properties—those listed within the area of overlap—and properties not held in common, those within each circle's unshared space. Over the circle on the left, Stephanie wrote "New Friends for Catfish," and over the circle on the right, "The Magic Fish."

The children, already familiar with the use of the diagram, started in. They noted shared properties: there was one fish in each story; the magic fish lived in water and so did Catfish; each story had a not-so-nice character. They noted differences: the fisherman had to go back to the sea, while Catfish had to go back to his boat; the fisherman's wife wanted to be in charge of the sun and the moon and the stars, while Seal and Turtle wanted to be in charge of Catfish's home. The children continued—Catfish is a catfish and the magic fish looks like a goldfish—and Mrs. Terry's neat script crammed against the borders of the circles. Kenneth's adventure with catfish had led to a comparison with a story in a basal reader, which led to a logical analysis with a further story: critical thinking emerging from personal experience, logic from fiction—all boundaries crossed in the service of the development of free-ranging thought.



"She just walked into the kitchen and asked me if I had anything to make a circle, so I gave her the coffee can," Rachel's mother told me as she opened the large sheet of paper with the two overlapping circles. Over one side of the homemade Venn diagram was "Harriet Tubman," over the other was "Sojourner Truth," the subjects of two books Rachel had checked out of the school's small library. "Both were slaves," she had printed with a little waver to the letters. "Both earned their freedom." For distinctive properties, she noted that Tubman was born in the South, while Sojourner Truth was born in New York; she noted that Tubman died at ninety-three, but that Sojourner Truth didn't know exactly when she was born. What Stephanie Terry had set in motion, Rachel continued, crossing the line, using in her home what she had learned in school, incorporating an academic tool into a personal exploration of African-American history.

II

Every morning Rachel Ortiz's mother walked her to school. They walked past old brick row houses, some of them boarded up, condemned, or burned out. They avoided the corner where lost men stood around the porch of a dilapidated crack house. They walked with purpose and in the presence of Jehovah, talking about home, about church, about school. Duke Ellington Primary School, P.S. 117, occupied the second story of a long brick building on the west 800 block of North Avenue, near the Pennsylvania Avenue intersection of the Old West Side. The Old West Side was once the locus of vibrant small businesses, professional offices, an art scene, and jazz clubs, but deindustrialization, fractious and discriminatory city politics, and middle-class flight—the forces devastating so many of our cities—have left the area poor and dangerous.

Duke Ellington housed prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade. The first floor was a market—hand-lettered signs advertising neck bones and chitterlings and money orders were spread across the wall facing the street—and Rachel and her classmates reached the school by ascending concrete stairs at the rear of the building. At the base of the stairs was a sign reading DRUG FREE SCHOOL ZONE. On the landing another sign warned ATTACK DOGS LOOSE IN THIS AREA FROM DARK TO DAWN, a German shepherd, teeth bared, lunging from the rusted script. To the west and just behind the school was an asphalt area belonging to an adjacent apartment complex; it served as a playground for Duke Ellington. There was a hopscotch grid, worn from missteps, a diagram for a volleyball court—but no poles, no net—and a basketball backboard with the hoop torn away. When the teachers used the area, they avoided those places where broken glass from the night before lay scattered in the snow.

But once Rachel and the other children walked through the pitted metal doors of P.S. 117 and into the lobby, a different world opened up—and you were struck by it right away, felt it almost before your eyes could register the particulars: a feeling of warmth and invitation. The wall to one side of the lobby was an abstract mosaic of Duke Ellington's band, a geometric splash of African color: radiant diamonds, zigzagging swirls of triangles, bright saxophones and drums. The wall to the other side had a row of photographs of Ellington and company, black-and-white, neatly spaced, precise. Straight ahead were some small ferns and bromeliads, an American flag, a glass case displaying the children's art, and a long sign in bold computer script announcing DUKE Ellington is a school that reads. The place was immaculate, and you were usually greeted at the door by Mrs. Thompson, who worked with parent volunteers, or by one of those volunteers, like Mrs. Ortiz.

"The school encourages parent involvement," Mrs. Ortiz told me. "At first, some parents may feel intimidated, but we really try to bring them in." Moving through this school, turning right or left from the lobby to one row of classrooms or another—separated by partitions rather than walls—you'd see mothers helping teachers prepare art materials, putting children's work on display, or reading a story to a small group of kids. It was all this you were

sensing when you stepped into the lobby. On the way to Duke Ellington, you occasionally saw a window in those row houses that had a lamp lit behind lace curtains or some flowers on a table. The school gave you the same feeling. It was a good place to be.



Her students would start appearing in Mrs. Terry's room fifteen or twenty minutes before class officially began. The parents often lingered, talking to Mrs. Terry about their kids while the children put their coats and boots in the crowded wooden cabinets along the south wall. Then they would find a book, or take out their journals and write, or check out the creatures in tanks and cases amid the science paraphernalia. "I want our classroom to be an interesting place," Stephanie told me when I first arrived. "I want it to be a place where children *want* to come . . . and where *I* want to come, too." She spent a lot of her time and money to make it a place that children enjoyed.

There was a table full of math games, the whole array of science materials and displays—and, of course, the African frog, tree frog, hermit crab, and all their associates. Alongside them were three reading carrels stacked with books: from *Green Eggs and Ham* and *Curious George* to fairy tales recast with Black characters—*Jamiko and the Beanstalk*, for example—to books on Native Americans, *Buffalo Woman* and *The People Shall Continue*. At the front of the room, Stephanie's blackboard looked like a paper mosaic: word lists, which the children consulted when writing in their journals; alphabet strings; work from the previous day, taped up for the children to examine; and checklists of the books the children were borrowing overnight. Past the next corner was the half wall of shelves separating Mrs. Terry's room from the first-grade classroom. The shelves were packed with district-issue basal readers, writing paper, art paper, scratch paper, scissors, glue, pencils, and crayons. Along the top shelf, Mrs. Terry had opened up for display a row of alphabet books: Lucille Clifton's *The Black ABC's*; *The Yucky Reptile Alphabet Book* (B is for *boa*, G is for *gila monster*); *The Calypso Alphabet* (C is for *Carib*, Y is for *yam*); Dr. Seuss's *ABC's*; and Margaret Musgrove's Caldecott winner, *Ashanti to Zulu*.

From the point where the full wall began again, all the way around to the edge of the wooden coat cabinets, Mrs. Terry had fashioned a big comfortable corner. There was a piano, scratched and dinged from years of service, several large pillows and corduroy backrests, a piñata shaped and colored like a rainbow, a box of books, mostly on prominent African Americans, a tape recorder with a box of tapes—airy instrumentals, gospel, and peace songs by Pete Seeger and Holly Near—and a wall display, decorated with colorful kente cloth that featured snapshots and sketches of African peoples: Egypt, Mali, Zaire, Mozambique. "We Are Beautiful People" it read across the top. Mrs. Terry and the children spent a lot of time in this corner: she read stories here, the children read their stories here (a little chair was labeled "Author's Chair"), they listened to music here, they shared experiences—like Kenneth's catfish expedition—here. And if a student wanted to be alone, spreading out a math game or leaning against a pillow to thumb through a book, this was a choice spot. There were no open windows in Duke Ellington—temperature

was centrally regulated—but right behind the piano were two translucent, partly covered windows, and warm light suffused the pillows and rug.

Every morning Mrs. Terry would begin class by sitting on the rug by the piano and gathering the children around her in a full circle. With thirty students, the circle—the Morning Unity Circle, she called it—extended out past the coat cabinets and close to the math games and science displays. Mrs. Terry and her students would close their eyes and take a few deep breaths. Though there was the sound of the children in the class next door or a little late movement in the hall, the room would get very quiet. A calming, pleasant silence. Then Mrs. Terry, in a hushed voice, would begin reciting some variation of the following, and the children, softly, would recite along with her:

I am a special person.
My teacher knows I'm special.
I can do great things.
I shall do great things.
I will learn all that I can to become all that I can.

Another pause, the children sitting cross-legged, eyes closed, one or two taking a peek or squirming into a more comfortable position, but meditative, serious. Then Mrs. Terry would say something like, "Let's think about all the good work we're going to do today," and lead the children in a further recitation:

I will become a better writer.
I will become a better thinker.
I will really be ready for school today.

The children would turn to those next to them and say, "Good morning, I'm glad you're here today," and shake hands—lots of smiles and giggles, a few exaggerated pumps of the arm—and either go to their desks or gather in closer around Mrs. Terry to do science or share experiences or hear a story.



One of the books Stephanie read during my visit was *Amazing Grace*. The title character was an African-American girl who loved good stories and enthusiastically acted them out: she became Joan of Arc, Hiawatha, the West African trickster, Anansi the Spider. So when Grace's school announced a production of *Peter Pan*, who else but Grace was expected to try out for the lead? But her desire was crushed. "Peter Pan's a boy," announced one child; "Peter Pan isn't Black," proclaimed another. Fortunately for Grace, the two strong women in her life came to the rescue. Her mother said a girl *can* be Peter Pan. Her grandmother, incensed, said Grace could be anything she wanted to be, and took her to see the Black ballerina Rosalie Wilkins in *Romeo and Juliet*. That did it. All weekend Grace, enraptured, leaped and twirled around the house, and when the auditions came, everyone agreed that only Grace had the moves to be Peter Pan.

The children loved *Amazing Grace*. Romarise was up on his haunches beside Mrs. Terry as she read, peering over her arm at the illustrations. Both

Kenneth, of catfish fame, and Rachel thought it was unfair of the other children to tell Grace she couldn't be Peter Pan. And Miko, the class scientist, pointed out that Grace practiced very hard, and that was why she got the part. In Miko's line of sight, on the wall just to the side of Mrs. Terry, were photographs of two Black NASA astronauts, Dr. Mae Jemison and Dr. Guion Bluford, Jr. Underneath the photographs was the crammed box of books that held the stories of Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Ida Wells, Paul Robeson, Thurgood Marshall, Dr. King, Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks. And on display or tucked away on the shelves and in the carrels and piled on the floor were folktales and alphabet guides and serious books about science and lyrical books about words—books written by Black Americans. Books and books. Evidence of achievement was all around the room. Not contested; no polemic; present in the deed. Present in what the children accomplished each day, present in the history of accomplishment that was part of the surround.

Right at the entrance to Stephanie's room was a sign:

Each child is sent into this world with
a unique message to share . . . a new song to
sing . . . a personal act of love to bestow.

Welcome to Grade I.
I'm glad you're here.

There was no other way to think about yourself:

I can do great things
I will do great things



Stephanie Terry taught, by paradoxical logic, at the intersection of hope and despair. There were a host of probabilities that could lead one to believe that the academic future of her students would not be bright: the danger and seduction of the streets, the limited resources her students' families have for education, the overt restrictions and hidden injuries of class bias and racism. Yet Stephanie knew how profound was the desire in some of those row houses for achievement—knew from the inside the African-American legacy of self-help and self-improvement. She knew in her bones the brilliance of her people and believed, in the deepest way, in the promise of their children.

Stephanie assumed, therefore, that her students could "do better than many people expect them to," that "if you put good stuff in front of them, wonderful things will happen." She was always on the lookout for materials and techniques to interest and challenge them. Sometimes she drew on their immediate experience, sometimes on the legacies of their culture. But sometimes she called on more distant resources. Take, for instance, those Venn diagrams. About four years ago, Stephanie visited a "very exclusive private school" and watched a first-grade teacher skillfully use the diagram to enhance the way her students thought about the books they were reading. "I'd like to try some of that," she thought. "My kids might not be able to read as well, but they're just as verbal." Stephanie's science curriculum provided

another illustration. Two years ago she joined a National Science Foundation project aimed at integrating science into the elementary school curriculum. Most of the participants came from schools different from Duke Ellington; several even expressed skepticism as to whether students from such schools could benefit from the project. Stephanie had no doubt, and by the following year her science curriculum was captivating Romarise, Miko, and the others. It was not uncommon, then, for Stephanie to move across educational boundaries, seeing what was done in more privileged settings, and asking herself how she could bring it to the children who came, full of energy, into her room each day.



Stephanie Terry grew up in a family that celebrated children. "Our house was always full of neighborhood kids. Every night, it seemed, there was an extra face at the dinner table, and my parents just made it known how lovely it was to have us . . . to have all of us around them." She and I were sitting in small chairs in the corner by the piano, right alongside the Author's Chair and a big box of books. "Kids came first, and as I grew older, I guess I never forgot that. It just felt very natural to be around a lot of young people . . . to enjoy them and support them." Stephanie was wearing a full purple dress, a swatch of kente cloth around her long, braided hair, and earrings from which crescent moons dangled. It was late afternoon, but there was still a soft light on things. A few pencils and some crumpled papers were scattered around us. The debris of thought. "Maybe," she said, "maybe that's why I always wanted to be a teacher. I've wanted to be a teacher for as long as I can remember."

She attended public schools in the city of her birth, York, Pennsylvania, then went to nearby Lock Haven State College (now a university) to major in teacher education. Since graduating, twenty-one years ago, she has taught in York, then in Trenton, New Jersey, then in Baltimore, where she has lived since 1977. About six years into her career, while still in Trenton, she was selected to participate in the planning of an experimental school, one that involved teachers in the development of curriculum and the structuring of the school day. The project gave her, at a young age, a sense of intellectual daring—she came to see teaching as an ongoing experiment, as inquiry. Once in Baltimore, she had the opportunity to participate in further educational experiments, one of which combined "regular" students with the "gifted and talented"—with the result that half of the regular students tested as gifted and talented, and reshaped their academic careers. This convinced her that "if your expectations were high and you put the right things in place in the classroom, a lot was possible." For some time, then, Stephanie Terry has pushed on limits, has taken risks—"stepping outside the district curriculum," she called it—has been instrumental in challenging assumptions about what poor, usually poor and Black, children can do. She shrugged her shoulders and brought her hands together as a cup. "I guess some see me as a bit of a renegade. But what else can I do?"

If Stephanie ventured beyond protocol, though, she did so with a quiet step. She spoke softly, deliberately, and as she talked about her students, she

looked at you often, holding connection. She was intent on making herself understood: pulling out a piece of student writing to illustrate a point, telling a story, stopping momentarily to reflect on what she had just said, a slight lilt to her voice as she questioned herself, then starting off on a different tack. She was both focused and even-tempered, seeming to speak from some deep self-knowledge and a bedrock sense of peace. As Mrs. Ortiz put it, "Stephanie just seems to have a special quality."

"How does such a strong advocate," I asked her, "stay so calm?" She laughed, disavowing any hedge on serenity. But as we talked further through the afternoon, those translucent windows turning dark blue, the conversation taking casual and unexpected turns, Stephanie revealed three sources of her strength. There was, of course, her family. "My parents gave us a powerful sense that we were valuable, that we could accomplish whatever we set our mind to." Then, during the 1960s, she, like so many Black Americans of her generation, began to read the history of Africa and African Americans, and that reading sparked a life-long cultural and spiritual quest. That night, in fact, she was going to a rehearsal of an *a cappella* group she and three other women had formed called Rafiki Na Dada, Swahili for Friends and Sisters. The members included, beside Stephanie, a physician, an epidemiologist, and a lawyer, and they sang what Stephanie called songs of the African Diaspora: from South African freedom songs, to gospel, to rhythm and blues à la Marvin Gaye and the Pointer Sisters. "I think that when some folks hear about such an African-centered focus," Stephanie mused, "they think of White-hating, because that's what makes it into the papers. But I don't see it that way [she paused on each word] not at all. I see it as positive. I'm interested in positive things . . . you know, like contributions to culture, family and spiritual values, respect for each other and for the earth."

And there was a third source of strength for Stephanie Terry. Meditation. For six or seven years, she had been a member of a study group organized to "read and talk about the intellectual dimension of Christianity and other religions." Though Stephanie's own religious affiliation was with the Heritage, United Church of Christ, she found something compelling in the meditation techniques of Eastern religions. And, in line with her experimental bent, she had wondered whether a kind of secularized meditation could assist her teaching. "A way, maybe, to begin the day with some sense of unifying, some focus . . . a sense that we've all come together for the same purpose." Thus was born the Morning Unity Circle.

Stephanie Terry lived and taught, then, out of the flux of the stable and the exploratory. "It's important for me to have my base as an African-American woman—and it's solid and steady—but I also have to be able to move out to find things for me and my classroom. I can't separate things into all sorts of compartments." To place her culture and personal history at the center was not to wall off movement. "With a solid base, you can travel far and wide. That's what I want to impart to my kids." In Stephanie's eyes, the center made movement possible. In life and work. Center. Movement. One enabling the other. . . .

III

...The Author's Chair might have come from an inexpensive set of kitchen furniture, if it weren't so small—housekeeping drilled and pressed in miniature. Steel tubing, blue-green speckled plastic seat and back rest. A sign, curled at the edges, was taped across the top: *AUTHOR'S CHAIR*. At least once a week, each student in Stephanie's class had the opportunity to sit in it and read something he or she had written, the rest of the class listening and responding. The students looked forward to the readings, letting out a moan when, for some reason, a scheduled session had to be canceled, or an athletic "yesssss"—hitting that *s* with brio—when Mrs. Terry announced that it was time for the authors to come forward.

Jamika's trip to the Author's Chair was typical. Jamika's parents were devout Jehovah's Witnesses, so it was not uncommon for Jamika to write on religious themes. She was small and serious and had the full cheeks that relatives yearn to pinch. Just before Jamika started to read, she inched forward on the chair so that her feet were steady on the ground:

Saturday and Sunday I went to a Assembly. I ate breakfast in the Assembly's cafeteria. They gave me a chicken sandwich. I took my food home. When I was in the Assembly in the Auditorium I took off my shoes because my mother said I could. Lots of Brothers gave lots of talks. People got on the stage.

When she finished, she looked over the top of her paper, anticipating questions. "That was a good story," said Shaquente. "Thank you," replied Jamika, glancing at Mrs. Terry and smiling. "You gave a lot of details," said Leon from the back, standing up to be heard. "Thank you," Jamika said again. "Why did you take your sandwich home?" asked Frank, alert to the advent of lunch. "Because I wasn't hungry," explained Jamika. "Well, uh, maybe you could say that, too," he offered. "If you decide to say something more about your sandwich"—Mrs. Terry tapped her lip with her index finger, as if in thought—"where would you put it?" "I could put it where I say 'I took my food home,'" answered Jamika. "I could say, 'I took my food home because I wasn't hungry.'" "OK," replied her teacher. "Think about it."

Kenneth was next, shooting his hand up in the air, waving it, pressing his cheek against his arm. "Wa . . . what did the people do on the stage?" Stephanie waited a moment, then added that she was curious about that, too. Jamika set the paper on her lap. "They talked about the ministry, and they told stories from the scripture and . . ."—a pause here, looking at Mrs. Terry again—"and that's what I remember." "Well, Jamika," said Mrs. Terry, "I think your readers would like to know that," and leaned over to provide a quick assist to Jamika, who was fishing a pencil out of the pocket of her dress.

When Stephanie first introduced me to the children some days earlier, she told them I was a teacher and an author. "We're going to have an author staying with us for a while." "Ooooo, Miss Terry," Dondi offered, waving his hand, "we're authors too!" You couldn't be in Stephanie Terry's classroom for

long before the children walked up to you, their dog-eared journals folded back, asking whether you'd like to hear a story. They saw themselves as writers. And, thanks to Mrs. Terry's feedback and the experience of the Author's Chair, a number of them were becoming reflective about their prose. Ciera came up to me—hair in cornrows, pretty, a little coy—and read me a description of her rings: "I have four rings. One has a whitish stone. One has a red stone. One is gold, one silver." She finished and looked up. I complimented her, and she said "Thank you," but then she paused, pursing her lips, and said, "I think I need more ideas, huh?" "Like what else?" I asked. Again a pause. "Maybe how I got the rings?" "Now that's a good idea," I said. She turned on her heel and ran off, still holding her paper in both hands. Six or seven minutes later and she came back, a big smile on her face. "OK," she said, "this is better." She read her original description and then her new sentences: "My mother got me the rings. She got two at Kmart and two at Sears."

Not too long ago, it was assumed that children couldn't learn to write until they had learned to read. It was—and in many classrooms still is—assumed that a critical awareness of one's writing and the impulse to revise should not be expected or encouraged until the later elementary grades. And in many settings it is assumed that the most effective language arts curriculum for poor kids, inner city or rural or immigrant, is one that starts with the alphabet, phonics, and lists of simple words, presented in sequence, learned through drills and packaged games, and builds slowly toward the reading of primer prose. Stephanie Terry's classroom challenged those assumptions.

Writing and reading were taught as related processes and were developed apace. Children did receive instruction in letter recognition and principles of phonics, both from Stephanie and from the school's reading teacher, Carol Hicks. Carol was, by her own description, "a traditionalist," who worked with Stephanie in her classroom and, together with Stephanie, planned supplemental instruction for those children "who may fall through the cracks." But while the students were learning about letter-sound correspondences, they were also learning to brainstorm, consider an audience, reflect on their writing, add detail, and revise. The development of these complex processes was not put on hold until more discrete language skills were perfected. So Ciera spelled "stone" as *stone* and "Sears" as *Sers*, and Jamika, who was the most proficient speller in the class, wrote *Sauterday* and *cafetereia* and *chiken*. Errors like these would gradually disappear as Ciera and Jamika read more and wrote more, as Stephanie and Carol gave them feedback on their work, as they received more direct instruction—from Stephanie, from Carol, from an aide—in phonics and spelling. Meanwhile, they were using language in full, rich ways to tell the stories they wanted to tell.

~

"It's all part of it," Stephanie had said to me. "Everything contributes to the writing. The animals, the books, the music, the things on the wall, the African themes and images—it all feeds into their journals. And the activities. They need lots of opportunities to talk, to hear good books, to ask questions, to share experiences with classmates, to help each other, to read the things

they've written." So any given reading at the Author's Chair may grow from a number of sources, all part of the classroom environment.

There were, of course, the books. Each day, Stephanie read at least one book to the class: fairy tale or folktale, a story about children, biography, history, an account of other cultures, an explanation of the biology or ecology of the creatures living along the wall of the classroom. In any given month, then, the children might hear a tale set in the African rain forest, a linguistic romp by Dr. Seuss, an explanation of the Navajo cosmology, information on the newt or hermit crab, the life of Harriet Tubman or Rosa Parks, a story about a magic fish or a spirited girl or a trickster spider. A wide range of genres.

The children could check out any of the books overnight. In the front of the room, taped to the blackboard, was a long sign-out sheet, and at the end of each day, those children who wanted a book would line up and write in the title and their initials. This usually went surprisingly fast; the kids were used to the procedure. When they came in the next morning, they would, along with hanging their coats and other routines, put a check by their name and indicate, in one of three columns, whether the book was "easy," "just right," or "a challenge." Stephanie could thereby tell a lot at a glance. And the children had the chance to be with books. Reading them for a first or second or third time, or just looking at the illustrations—words and pictures feeding their imagination.

There was music. Some was instrumental—drums, harps, guitars, and birdsong to accompany that rain forest tale, for example. But most involved language play and storytelling: Taj Mahal's "Shake Sugaree," Sweet Honey in the Rock's "All for Freedom," "Yoruba Children's Tales," and a collection called "Peace Is the World Smiling." Picking up on the lyrics of the peace songs, Kenneth started one of his entries with "My Earth give us Love and Peace. You got to love the Earth just like you love your friends."

There were the creatures and all the print surrounding them. Words referring to their anatomies—*claw*, *antenna*, *gill*—to their habitats and birth cycles—which the children had observed—words about how to care for them ("In our room, we feed praying mantis nymphs apple bits"), and words on the ecological functions they served: "aquatic snails keep our aquarium clean." The language, for the most part, came from the children themselves—with a spelling assist from Mrs. Terry. (It was not uncommon to see children leave their desks to copy from the walls the correct spelling of a difficult word.) And there was all that talk, "science talk," the language of close observation that led to the creation of the children's own explanatory texts.

Another kind of generative talk was the daily recounting of the children's experience: fishing expeditions, trips to the zoo, church services, birthday parties, visits to relatives, neighborhood journeys with "best, very best" friends. These accounts were taken seriously as contributions to the linguistic environment. Children's oral stories were celebrated, analyzed, incorporated into discussions of written stories, and considered for further elaboration. And occasionally one student's story would find its way into another student's composing.

If the books and animals and the rest provided a multilayered content for the children's writing, the journals themselves offered the occasion to learn about the process. Each month, Stephanie passed out homemade stapled booklets filled with lined paper. The children wrote every day, sometimes on an assigned topic, more often on a topic of their choosing—but not infrequently with some kind of guiding principle that arose from other classroom work. If, for example, Stephanie had read a book that was especially rich in description, she might ask the children to try to "add lots of detail" to their own writing. And as Stephanie or an aide circulated around the room, they would give on-the-spot instruction in spelling or encourage a student to be a little more descriptive or point out an unhelpful repetition. All of this, of course, set the stage for revision.

Such work was done on the fly, but once or twice a week Stephanie drew from everything she saw to present a more formal demonstration of the composing process. Resting on an easel in the front of the room, right by the blackboard, was a three-foot-high version of a journal. On the front was Stephanie's self-portrait in crayon, braids twisting into the air. *Mrs. Terry's Journal*, it said across the top. With felt pen in hand, she would model how to get started and how to revise, and would provide opportunity for children to apply their editing skills. "Last week I went to the Baltimore Aquarium," she might say in mock consternation, "but, uh, but I don't know what to say about it." And the children would jump in: "Did you go alone?" "What fish did you see first?" "Did you have fun?" "These were the kinds of questions they heard when they were in the Author's Chair. Then Stephanie would start writing, making many simple errors—"on sunday i wnt to the aquarium"—and a chorus of her students would happily edit her writing: "Miss Terry, you need to start with a capital." "Miss Terry, there's a *e* between the *w* and the *n*." "Miss Terry, oooh, you didn't put a period at the end." As she proceeded, she repeated herself or put sentences out of logical sequence, and that would lead to discussion of broader revisions—as would a question like: "What else would you as a reader like to know about my trip?" With time, these questions and operations, and an awareness of the linguistic contexts that give rise to them, would gradually work their way into the children's composing process.

The journals encouraged another kind of work. At the table close to the door, Romarise leaned over and asked Kevin how to spell *night*. Kevin thought for a moment, then wrote *n-i-g-h-t* across the top of his page. A few minutes later, Kevin turned to Shereese. "Hey, Shereese, do you know how to spell *Friday*?" Shereese ticked off the letters, and Kevin wrote it out and thanked her. At another table Rachel had gotten up with her journal in her hand and was guiding Shaquente toward the comfortable section of rug and pillows by the piano. They settled in, and Rachel read to Shaquente her thoughts on the biography of Sojourner Truth that had been capturing her interest for the past week or so. Stephanie encouraged her students to work with one another: to write about each other's experiences, to help with spelling and punctuation, to share stories and elicit peer reactions. Individual writing, in her eyes, was enhanced by a community of writers.

It was all this that made possible Ciera's and Jamika's and Romarise's performances at the Author's Chair.

Another way to consider how Stephanie Terry's students grew as writers would be to look at their work over time, getting a sense of how growth happens in a curriculum of such sweep and embrace. I'll present two students: Kevin, whose writing would place him somewhere in the upper half, maybe third of this classroom's achievements, and Rachel, who, despite some trouble with spelling and mechanics, was one of the most accomplished writers in the class.

Kevin was one of four or five boys who, in another setting, might have been labeled a "behavior problem." He had large, soulful eyes and was usually pretty low-key, but he could easily slip from a task and turn his pencil into an imaginary airplane zipping noisily over his desk or surreptitiously pester the child sitting next to him. About once a day I would see Stephanie sitting with him, head to head, reminding him of the importance of his work, of the importance of his very presence here among the children. And he would usually calm down and get to it, writing a story, or helping other kids spell—for he was a decent speller—or finding a book to take home with him later that day.

The first few entries in Kevin's journal, those for early September, were simply his attempts to copy words he saw on the science displays:

newtafricanfrog
tadgole bloodwormS *Sept. 9*

He had good control of his letters, though he ran words together and hadn't yet mastered capitalization. He also occasionally miscopied—as you can see with *tadgole* for *tadpole*.

About a month later, in early October, Kevin was still copying words but was getting them from all around the room and rearranging them. He was also making his first attempts to guess at the spelling of words he couldn't find on the walls:

Beautiful simWnPeat
The Right crab mhTsn
Thing hermit crabs Rainbow Oct. 7

Beautiful came from the "We Are Beautiful People" display, *hermit crabs* from the science area across the room, *Rainbow* from above the reading carrels, and *The Right* and *Thing* from the title of Spike Lee's movie, which Stephanie had spelled out in red and blue art paper letters over the sink by the science materials. He may or may not have been trying to tell a story with them. But by late October he was attempting to write stories like all the ones he was hearing and was relying solely on his own attempted spellings. The first line of one read:

thet's Info. psw. wlgto psw Oct. 28

What's interesting about these entries—which look a little like a printout from a haywire computer—is that they could be seen as a step backward,

since there are no recognizable words here at all. Yet Kevin was experimenting with phonetic strings to try to communicate, experimentation that would, within a month, begin to yield simple written stories:

le wint too The zooo.
wif mi fe mly.
wif mi murr.

Nov. 22

"I went to the zoo, with my family, with my mother." Kevin was getting the idea about word boundaries and punctuation, and his phonetic guesses were much improved. Here he used his developing skill to take a shot at creating a story common in the primary grades: the visit to an exciting place.

Over the next few months, Kevin's writing took a big leap forward. Here's another zoo story:

I can go to the zoo with you
but you can,t go to day with
me Can i go now not yet
you can go at the zoo at day
With me you can to the zoo
with me now.

Jan. 16

His printing was quite good by now, word boundaries were under control, and he was developing a repertoire of simple words. What caught my attention, though, was the experimentation with story structure. There were several voices at work here, possibly a result of all the dialogue Kevin was hearing in the books Stephanie read to the class. Kevin seemed to be using the basic frame of his zoo story to try out some new linguistic maneuvers.

By the time of my visit in March, six months after his first entry, Kevin had gained greater control over sentence boundaries and punctuation and was taking more adventurous chances with his vocabulary. And along with these skills, he was developing a sense of narrative:

On friday we went on a trip. And it was
fun at the trip. And we saw a man with
firer. And he got a beloon and he bust
the beloon.

March 9

Stephanie's next move with Kevin would be to encourage more of the nice detail in those last two sentences—fire and bursting balloons—and to help him develop other kinds of experiences, from inside or outside the classroom, into material for his journal.



Rachel looked delicate—thin arms and legs—but, during gym, had a quick, pumping sprint, and, though usually reserved, could match anyone's squeal when the tree frog zapped an unlucky cricket. She was not the most technically proficient writer in the class—Jamika would spell words like *sorrow* and *dwelling* for her—but she was the most inventive. She read all the time and wrote in a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes. She wrote copious

entries in her journal, which she frequently took home with her; she copied out long stretches of books she liked; she took notes on church services in a little pad her mother had given her; and there was that Venn diagram on Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. Rachel used writing to render experience and tell stories, to record and relish other people's prose, to keep track of speech, to conduct logical analyses.

The first entries in Rachel's journal showed some basic proficiency and an occasional touch, but it would have been hard to predict her future work from them. Take, for example, this passage:

The FRogsdo not go
rib rib rib and we jump
Did not see thoe jump

Sept. 20

Rachel had a sense of word boundaries and could spell some simple words. But it was interesting to see the way she used her writing to record an observation with a critical thrust: frogs do not make a *rib-it*, *rib-it* sound as kids are led to believe.

About three weeks later, Rachel began constructing basic narratives on her experiences:

Me an my fin India are walling
at the prak and I get sug
by a bee an we ran hm

Oct. 8

Though Rachel had some trouble with spelling, increasingly she took chances in order to get her experience on paper: *fin* for *friend*, *walling* for *walking*, *prak* for *park*, and *sug* for *stung*. Stephanie would sometimes respond right on the journal page; here she wrote, "Oh no! What did you do then?" The question would urge Rachel to tell more, to extend the narrative she had written.

Rachel's reading and writing were developing together, and about a week after the bee-sting story there was an entry in her journal, pages and pages long, that recorded her favorite Dr. Seuss book:

I am gon to tellw you
The story By Dr. Seuss
it is Green Eggs and
Ham. that-Sam-I am
that-Sam-I am I do not
like that-Sam-I am do you
like Green Eggs
and Ham . . .

Oct. 14

The entry continued, Rachel seeming to enjoy writing the rhythmic words, making them her own. About a month later, there was another long entry. This time, though, Rachel tried to recount rather than copy stories, and, in an intriguing move, blended two in unlikely unison. The first was from Margaret Musgrove's alphabet book *Ashanti to Zulu*, which Stephanie had read to the class.

A. is for the ashot
 people . . . the hoozl
 people was running
 after The ashot
 people when The
 ashot people got
 to a river . . .

The retelling went on for a while; then, on the same line, Rachel picked up *Green Eggs and Ham* once again:

people could not
 get them . . . Green
 Eggs and ham By
 Dr. Seuss . . . that Sam-
 I-am that Sam-
 I am

Nov. 18-19

The shift to Dr. Seuss continued to the end of the entry. I didn't get a chance to talk to Rachel about this, but she seemed to be playing with two stories she liked, connecting them in her own retelling.

Over the next two months, Rachel would gain better control of mechanics, sentence boundaries, punctuation, capitalization—and her spelling would improve.

I love my brother and my sister.
 I love my mother and my father
 they are apart of my family and
 I love them all the same. If they
 make me mad I will stil love them
 beacus I know they did not meen
 it. When somebody dose something
 to you it doesn't mean do it
 back.

Jan. 17

Through January and February, Rachel's entries were fairly straightforward, less experimental as she gained control over conventions. She tended to use her writing now to address a range of topics and to reflect on her own interests and on her developing competence:

I love all kinds of book.
 I love Green eggs and ham.
 I love Cinderella and Rapunzel.
 Piggies. It don't matter what
 book it is. It is so fun to read all
 kinds of books.
 I can read. I am somebody.
 I am me.

Feb. 24

Roughly two weeks later, Rachel began a longer piece in the computer lab about the funeral of a family friend. Stephanie encouraged her to revise it,

and she did so. Her phonetic guesses were improving, and she was beginning to catch and correct her own mistakes. The paper proved to be her most ambitious piece of writing to date:

On saterday I went to the
 froonrol of Manerva Homes. It was
 sad to look at her. She had
 six girls and one boy. My
 family crid. When the froonrol
 was omost over we got to see
 her and I kissed her. She was
 like a grandmother to me and
 my brother and sister. I loved
 her so much. She helped my
 mother knit and everyday we
 went to see her. She was in the
 housbidol taking some pilse and
 deid in her sleep. We had
 he froonarol at the kingdom
 hall. We sanged song 15 and
 that says can you see with
 your minds eye people are
 dwelling togather. Sorrow has
 pass no need to weep or fear.
 sing out with joy of heart
 you too can have a part.
 Man and beast living in peace
 cause no harm to each other.
 Food will be there all will
 share in what our God pervids.

March 11

Rachel was doing some fascinating things here. She told the story of the funeral and of her feelings about the passing of Mrs. Homes, and, relying on the notes she took, she incorporated the psalm into her written text. Her earlier practice of copying favorite passages was being put to a rhetorical purpose, and she was using the notes she had taken in one setting to embellish a piece of writing being done in another.

Kevin and Rachel and the rest of the students kept their current journals at their desks; journals from earlier months were filed in a large box by the piano. So you could sit on the rug before class or after the children had gone home and flip back through the dog-eared pages, thin in places from vigorous erasure, and watch the print becoming more stable, the stories getting longer. Soon you would find places where something wonderful was going on: an experiment in narration, a new understanding of form, an unexpected increase in the kinds of words attempted. And you might, as I did, lay the journals down month by month and stretch out to get a longer view, no longer seeing the particular letters and erasures, but a flow of language, words and effort over time, the development of possible lives.