

# Puny Poetry Meets Its Match

BY GERRI RUCKEL AND JIM HORRELL

## *Puny Boy*

*Puny boy is puny,  
He looks just like George Clooney,  
He's yellor and green  
if you know what I mean  
Puny boy is looney and oh so puny  
He gets bugged by the goonies  
And they are all so puny  
and they'll beat him up soonie*

– Zeke Wozak

It seems that when it comes to poetry, writing students decide to take the plunge when they don't know what else to write or there's some sort of deadline approaching. Then it's time to produce, as quickly as possible, a short, silly rhyming poem devoid of meaning.

Zeke, a new student to our school, came from Israel by way of a public school in nearby Philadelphia. He had plenty of things to write about. He had fond memories of a favorite teacher from that school, while, at the same time, he harbored feelings of academic inadequacy. He had many additional real topics to explore in his writing, including: new school, new home, new friends, fears of not fitting in, and the experience of having lived in another country. Why, then, did he refuse the opportunity to write about any of those things? Instead, he chose to write "Puny Boy." Why?

Consider Bill. Bill is a very intelligent young man who seemed bent on proving to his classmates that he was clever. He has many interests, including baseball, HTML programing, and world affairs, since his father works for the military. Bill unveiled his poetry prowess with this little ditty

about our class mascot, Bubba the giant plush green frog:

## *Bubba In Da Tubba*

*Bubba's in da tubba.  
He needs a good rubba.*

*He's really awfully sad.  
He broke his lily pad.*

*He needs a bite to eat.  
He needs something sweet.*

*Morris Moose came over to say hi.  
He brought a cherry pie.*

*He also sang a song.  
It took him rather long.*

*It's not very dark.  
So they went to the park.*

*Morris Moose fell in the lake.  
He was eaten by a snake.*

– Bill Heinz

When conferencing with students about poems like this, it can be hard to know where to start. Equally difficult is the challenge of trying to figure out what you'd like the outcome of the conference to be. Bill's conference went something like this:

"Bill, I see you've written a poem here," the teacher says. "Tell me about it."

Bill smiles. "It's about Bubba. He smells bad."

"So you're telling me that Bubba, the plush frog, smells bad. I see."

"Yeah. So I figured he could use a bath."

"Hence, 'Bubba in Da Tubba?'"

"Yeah."

"He looks hungry to you?"

"Well, I needed it to rhyme."

"So, where did Morris, the equally plush moose, come in?"

"Well, he brought the cherry pie."

"Uh huh. What is it that you really want to say about all of this? Bubba is important to you as our class mascot? You enjoy seeing him every morning? You remember winning him in the magazine drive contest? How you were the number one seller of magazines in the whole school?"

"No. I just thought it was funny."

"So, you're happy with 'Bubba In Da Tubba' as is?"

"Yeah."

Root canal is a simple, painless process compared to cajoling these students to rewrite or revise these pieces. To them, the poem is done and no amount of educated teacher prodding is going to make a difference. We began wondering why we were pushing students to revise. Whatever it was they were trying to say, they said. There is no meaning, no message, nothing expressed here beyond simple word play.

But what about those times students had real feelings to express and no other poetry voice to use?

When Jeff, a classmate, died suddenly in a freak accident at home, Ken worked secretly on this poem for a month. Ken was a new

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student and Jeff had taken him under his wing. They shared many interests such as skateboarding, music and clothes. Ken intended to write a tribute to his friend.

Jeff

Jeff loved to skate  
And even stay up late  
Jeff loved to surf  
And even mark his turf  
Jeff loved to play soccer  
And was a very good blocker  
Jeff loved to roller blade  
And even make a card trade  
Jeff made me a friend  
And even let me lend  
Jeff made me a part of the school  
And was very cool  
Jeff always made me laugh  
And lead me through the path  
Jeff was very strong  
And even read along  
Jeff liked to do stunts  
And liked those candy runts  
Jeff liked biking  
And even did some hiking  
Jeff loved to do things with his dad  
And this was very sad

– Ken Wood

There was a poetry itch that Ken really needed to scratch, and he was frustrated at not being able to say what he needed to say. During his writing process, Ken had been advised that he might be better able to express his thoughts about Jeff and his death if he didn't worry about rhyming. In the end, after several revisions, Ken felt like he had worked long enough on this piece and was satisfied with this poem. He said, "It's good. I like it. It rhymes." He was unable to get away from the idea that poetry had to rhyme.

Ken and everyone else had read Seuss, Moss, Prelutsky and Silverstein and each had formed a file in his mind called, "This is Poetry," where rhyming and language play rule. Any linguistic ambiguity could be cleared up with an accompanying illustration. Unfortunately for Ken, there was no illustration to make his message clear. As Donald Graves, in *A Fresh Look at Writing*, put it:

*At first, children are often caught up in the 'form' of poetry. This is especially true of children who insist on rhyming. Unfortunately, the form of the poem, the straining for rhyme, can push meaning to the sidelines.* (p. 335)

Ken was not alone in this poetry wasteland, not by a long shot. What was going wrong? As writing fellows of the Pennsylvania Writing and Literature Project (PAWLP), we decided it was our duty to move our student writers beyond puny poetry. In writers' workshop, we shifted all focus onto poetry. Our new poetry unit was supposed to go very smoothly, a slick combination of strategies gleaned from two different PAWLP summer writing institutes. It was time to get out the shovels and dig through the writing gurus.

We wanted to inspire our students. Georgia Heard said, "Every writer of poetry is first a reader of poetry" (p.1). Following Heard's suggestion, we placed all kinds of poetry books in the classroom. We cleaned the library out of all the old forlorn books of poetry that hadn't been checked out in years. We raided our closets and bookshelves and we encouraged our students to do the same. The children were given several class periods to pour over the

poetry anthologies, selecting and sharing their favorites. Ultimately they copied their favorite selections into their writers' notebooks.

We decided to follow Heard's suggestion to hang poetry all around the school. Suddenly our students were eager to locate and recopy the perfect microscope poem to decorate the science teacher's door. The enthusiasm began to spread, and students began searching for poems at home as well as at school. Poetry about windows appeared on the glass in the hallways. Even the cafeteria and bathrooms weren't safe. The principal's well-known distaste for cats prompted the students to blanket his office with cat poetry.

There were only so many poems about cats in all of our collected anthologies, so the students pitched in, adding some original cat poetry. Polly, eager to please, created "Three Fat Cats" to add to the collection. It illustrated how far we still had to go.

*Three Fat Cats*

*three fat cats wobbling & balancing on  
a high sky wire  
juggling & jumping higher & higher  
the first fat cat with a bat  
went & crashed into  
another fat cat  
when wham bam  
down went those fat cats.  
fat cat three said, "Hey what about me?"  
Three fat cats moaning & groaning  
but when they were done they were  
very mad at fat cat one*

–Polly Lockwood

The students were enjoying poetry. They were developing a sense of which poetry

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they liked and which they didn't. Bill loved Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven" so much that he committed it to memory. It was fun to get him started by saying aloud in the hallway, "As I wandered, weak and weary..." He said, "I never knew poetry could be so neat and spooky."

Some students collected their favorite poems in special notebooks which they carried everywhere. Knowing only the first line of a poem, one student persisted in trying to locate the rest of the poem. Eventually, the eighth grade English teacher came through with the rest of "Sea Fever." Another student, Maria, noted, "I thought poems were just about flowers. It's cool that they can be about everyday things."

The expression, "Maybe dat's youwr pwoblem" became heavily used throughout the sixth grade after introducing the poem, "Maybe Dats Youwr Pwoblem Too" by Jim Hall.

*MAYBE DATS YOUWR PWOBLEM TOO  
All my pwoblems  
who knows, maybe evwybody's pwoblems  
is due to da fact, due to da awful twuth  
dat I am SPIDERMAN*

*I know, I know. All da dumb jokes:  
No flies on you, ha ha,  
and da ones about what do I do wit all  
doze extwa legs in bed. Well, dat's funny yeah.  
But you twy being  
SPIDERMAN for a month or two. Go ahead.*

*You get doze cwazy calls fwom da  
Gubbener askin you to twap some booglar who's  
only twying to wip off color TV sets.  
Now, what do I cawre about TV sets?  
But I pull on da suit, da stinkin suit,  
wit da sucker cups on da fingers,*

*and get my wopes and wittle bundle of  
equipment and den I go flying like cwazy  
acwoss da town fwom woof top to woof top.  
Till der he is, some poor dumb color TV slob  
and I fall on him and we westle a widdle  
until I get him all woped. So big deal.*

*You tink when you SPIDERMAN  
der's sometin big going to happen to you.  
Well, I tell you what. It don't happen dat way.*

*Nuttin happens. Gubbener calls, I go.  
Bwing him to pwice. Gubbener calls again,  
like dat over and over.*

*I tink I twy sometin diffunt. I tink I twy  
sometin excitin like wacing cawrs. Sometin to make  
my heart beat at a difwent wate.*

*But den you just can't quit being sometin like  
SPIDERMAN.*

*You SPIDERMAN for life. Fowever. I can't even  
buin my suit. It won't buin. It's fwame wesistent.  
So maybe dat's youwr pwoblem too, who knows.  
So maybe dat's da whole pwoblem wif evwytin.  
Nobody can buin der suits, day all fwame wesistent.  
Who knows?*

Each student's "This is Poetry" file was expanding, filling up with many different styles and types of poetry. Randy Bomer in *Time for Meaning* calls this "creating a sense of genre." We couldn't wait to see how their original poetry would show this growth. We realized, however, that this wouldn't be enough, by itself, to strengthen puny poetry. They were developing an appreciation for poetry, but there was no transfer into their writing. Maybe dat was the pwoblem. It was unrealistic to expect the kids to grow in poetic voice by merely reading, selecting, and sharing poems. We were only building to that moment. As Graves said, "Children need to hear the voices of many poets when

they are writing poetry, to discover how they shape words and sounds to meaning." (p. 337)

We asked the students to examine some of their newfound favorite poetry and ask themselves, "What did the writer do to help me understand and enjoy this poem?" Now that there was a heightened awareness of writer's craft, we began, as Nancie Atwell would say, "to tease out" the elements of poetry. These included: line breaks, organization, use of white space, sensory images, figurative language, rhyming, alliteration, repetition, word choice, rhythm, and descriptive detail.

Then, the words of Ralph Fletcher from *What A Writer Needs* (1993) surfaced:

*It turns out that many writers actually discover what they have to say in the process of writing it. The writer's challenge is to keep this sense of discovery intact; this keeps writing fresh and vibrant." (p.21)*

Fletcher also recounts a tale that illustrates this concept beautifully:

*A little girl watches a sculptor at work. He begins carving into a large wooden cube and works hard all day. By late afternoon, the shape of a lion has begun to emerge. Absolutely dumb-founded, the little girl looks at the sculptor and sputters, 'But how did you know there was a lion inside that wood?' (p. 23)*

So, our next step was clear. It was time to write.

Maybe all of the yucky — for lack of a better word — poetry the writers had been

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churning out had a purpose after all. Perhaps it was just their way of trying to find that lion.

In this fairly typical piece of puny poetry, Katie tries to recount her memory of a recent day at the beach. Through the sometimes forced rhyme, some sensory images and personification stand out. Perhaps this piece is not an emerging lion, but certainly something worthwhile is emerging.

### *The Beach*

*The wind brushes my hair  
A kite flies in the air  
The water is cold  
Hot sand I hold  
The sun goes down  
Without a sound  
The sun is down, so  
We have to go*

Like May Belle in the Katherine Paterson novel, the students needed a *Bridge to Terabithia*. In order to be able to apply what they were being taught, students needed to be ready to learn it. According to Lev Vygotsky, some tasks are too difficult for students, even when clearly explained. He goes on to say in his theory of the “zone of proximal development” that while learning there are times when “the child cannot solve a problem alone but can be successful under adult guidance or in collaboration with a more advanced peer.” Jerome Bruner called it scaffolding. Scaffolding is where a teacher provides the needed support by supplying “clues, reminders, encouragement, breaking the problem down into steps, providing an example, or anything else that allows the student to grow in

independence as a learner.” Our student writers needed help taking the first steps into writing meaningful poetry.

Poet Julia Blumenreich, a presenter at the 1998 PAWLP summer institute in Buck’s County, offered us our first step, an approach she called “parallel poetry.” Students write parallel poetry by imitating the form of a published poem. She also emphasized the importance of working on whole-class or large-group poems of this type before turning kids loose to try it on their own.

After consulting Kenneth Koch’s *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* (1973), it seemed that William Carlos Williams’ poetry would provide the perfect stepping stone. His poems are simple; they are about ordinary things, and they’re short. It’s entry-level meaningful poetry.

Williams’ “This Is Just to Say” was the first poem in Koch’s collection, and it became our first model:

### *This Is Just to Say*

*I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in  
the icebox*

*and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast*

*Forgive me  
they were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold*

– William Carlos Williams

We read aloud to the students, then each was given a copy for examination. Next, each accepted the challenge of writing “parallel poems.” Parallel poems borrow the pattern and spirit of the original poem, but the students supply their own words and ideas. We wrote several group poems of this type, then each student set off on her own.

This poem was a great jumping off point because it gives an insincere apology for doing something deliciously wrong. The students delighted in writing this kind of poem.

### *This Is Just To Say*

*This is just to say  
I have flooded the school  
And gone scuba diving through the  
halls.  
If I say I’m sorry you won’t believe me;  
Besides, I have always dreamed of  
doing it.*

– Craig Lewin

### *This Is Just To Say*

*This is just to say  
I have eaten your dog’s food,  
I am sorry  
It tasted different,  
So crunchy and hard.*

– Ryan Young

Many students enjoyed “confessing” to not doing homework, wearing older siblings’ clothes, taking things without asking, and eating food that wasn’t theirs. This was a totally new experience in writing poetry for the students. Many enjoyed expressing themselves in this manner.

Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow” provided a similar opportunity for some more poetry baby steps.

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### *The Red Wheelbarrow*

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.

– William Carlos Williams

Natasha used her parallel poem here to poke fun at Williams' original. While she closely follows the form, she clearly makes her feelings known when it comes to "The Red Wheelbarrow". For our students, this represents another new use of poetry, and, a baby step toward parody.

### *Mental Hospital*

So much depends  
Upon

Being able to  
write

And not selling  
stuff

You wrote during  
your

Stay in a mental  
hospital

– Natasha Simonova

In this parallel poem, Elizabeth shuns the form of the Williams poem, but keeps the red wheelbarrow.

### *Silence Broken*

In  
the

silence  
of  
the  
night  
I  
slept  
A  
red  
wheelbarrow  
fell  
through  
the  
ceiling  
I  
slept  
no  
more.

– Elizabeth Robinson

It should be noted here, Elizabeth was delighted with her ending, "I slept no more." She also felt that she perfectly mimicked what she felt was a surprise appearance of chickens in the original by having the red wheelbarrow crash through her bedroom ceiling.

We then arrived at Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken." We read the poem, noted poetic devices, discussed interpretations, placed a copy in our notebooks and bathed in the beauty of the words.

### *The Road Not Taken*

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveller, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

– Robert Frost

At first, Frost's masterpiece suffered the same treatment as Williams' works as the students wrestled with another new piece to parallel.

### *The Idea Not Taken*

Two ideas converged inside my head  
I'm sorry I don't know which one to  
take

As a writer there I thought  
And thought for as long as I could  
To see so many ideas light up in my  
head

So I thought and thought

And perhaps choosing the better idea  
Since it sounded easier to write

I am telling this with disappointment  
Tons and tons of thought wasted  
I chose the easy way out  
And that has made all the difference!

– Caitlin Cahill

A pair of students saw a different kind of parallel between Frost's poem and a book they had recently read.



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Harry Potter

Two worlds converged at one train station  
And sorry I could not live in them both  
And being one person, long I stood  
As I looked between platform 9 and 10  
I could not see platform 9 and 3/4

Then the other I could see so clear  
Which in I was hated by the Dursleys  
Because Dudley was a spoiled brat  
I shall start a new life in the wizard world

And that very first day I belonged to Gryffindor

In happiness I was with my pal Ron  
Oh, I am scared of Snape  
Yet knowing he dislikes me  
I doubted if I shall stay

I shall be telling this with a potion  
Sometime when I'm a ghost  
Two worlds converged in my mind  
In the wizard world I am a hero  
And that has made all the difference.  
— Jason Borowsky and Sarah Binder

While not perfect in convention, this piece demonstrated that not only were the students able to mimic the pattern of a poem, but they could build in some sort of personal meaning. We knew we were on the right track. It was clear that lurking beneath the surface were some real topics and issues to explore.

### *The Friend Not Taken*

Two friends diverged in my mind,  
And sorry I could not be friends with  
them both  
And being one person, not two  
And I looked at them both finding  
their special qualities.

So I thought just as fair  
And having perhaps choosing the  
wrong one  
Because of my choice, they would  
never forgive me.

I shall choose with a sigh  
Friendship and memories with this  
person  
Two friends diverged in my mind  
I took neither one, I'll be on my own  
And that has made all the difference.  
— Sarah Binder

Taking the next step, students wrote parallel poetry based on "Five Versions of the Icicle," by Nancy Willard.

### *The Five Versions of the Icicle*

They are sun's wet nurse, said the  
mother,  
and it milks them to nothing.

They are stockings, said the laundress,  
and grievously shrunken.

They are noodles in a broth of  
diamonds, said the cook,  
and they are sausages oiled with light.

They are the parsnips of heaven, said  
the gardener,  
that cannot be grown out of season.

They are the urns of grief, said the  
widow.  
They live on their own tears.

This poem forces students to experiment with perspective. While the pattern of the poem is simple, expressing a number of perspectives concerning a single object requires the students to do some linguistic

and mental gymnastics. We dared the students to rise to the challenge.

*Water: From Five Different Perspectives*

It is what nurtures my crops,  
said the farmer,  
to help them grow so I can sell.

It is what quenches my thirst,  
said the aerobics teacher,  
to cool me down after a hard workout.

It is my home,  
said the fish,  
to live and swim in.

It is my hobby,  
said the swimmer,  
to have fun splashing in it.

It is the dangerous tide,  
said the beach's lifeguard,  
to become stronger than and over-  
come everything else.  
— Maria Tagle

Maria's piece illustrates a clear understanding of perspective and the form of the original "Five Versions" poem. Adam, in his piece, used the form to express his adolescent angst.

### *Five Versions of Nothing*

It is what I see, said the blind man,  
black, just black

It is what I hear, signaled the deaf man,  
blank and cold

It is what comes out of my mouth,  
signaled the dumb man,  
just breathing my mouth is for

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*It is what I remember, said the lady  
with Alzheimers disease,  
holes in my memory*

*It is what I am, said the man with no  
hopes, no future, no goals, and no  
motivation,*

*No one Nobody Nothing*  
– Adam Gitzes

Writing parallel poetry is, we found, a valuable exercise. However, it was time for our student writers to begin to strike out on their own. We knew, however, they still were in need of some guidance. In an effort to provide needed structure in a more open-ended format, we worked with some poetry we called “template poetry.” In template poetry, students are given a series of line starters and are asked to fill in the rest of the lines. The result is close to an original poem, with the obvious exception of the line starters.

One example of this, picked up in a sharing session in the 1998 PAWLP Fall follow-up class, was an “I Am” Poem. We provided the first few words of each line.

### *I Am Poem (Template)*

*I am (describe yourself as you dream  
or as you wish you could be)*

*I wonder...*

*I hear...*

*I see...*

*I want...*

*I am (repeat – same as above...I am)*

*I pretend...*

*I feel...*

*I touch...*

*I fear...*

*I cry when...  
I am... (repeat)  
I understand...  
I say...  
I dream...  
I try to...  
I hope...  
I am (repeat)*

After guiding the students through this once as a group, the students were asked to fill out this template on their own. We all were surprised by some of the results.

### *I Am*

*I am who you want me to be  
I wonder what kind of person you'll  
make me be  
I fear you'll make me a nobody  
I cry when I don't know what I'll be  
tomorrow  
I am who you want me to be  
I understand I might be crazy  
I say I don't know who I am  
I dream I am a famous person  
I try to think I'm not strange  
I hope I'm not insane  
I am who you want me to be  
I hear what you say about who I am  
I see you talking about who I am  
I want not to be dull  
I am who you want me to be  
I pretend I am energetic  
I feel nothing  
I touch nothing  
I am who you want me to be*  
– Edward Appelbaum

### *I Am All That I Can Be*

*I am all that I can be  
I wonder why I always try to be like others  
I hear voices saying that I can be better*

*I see others that I feel are much more sophisticated  
and more mature than me  
I want more to say to me “I like your shirt,” instead  
of saying, “I did better than you!”  
I am all that I can be  
I pretend that I am someone or something other  
than myself  
I feel depression and that I could've done better  
I touch pictures of things that I'm not and wish to  
myself that I am what's on the picture  
I fear that if I do change I'll want to change back  
I cry when I stare in the mirror and picture  
something other than my face  
I am all that I can be  
I understand that I can't get everyone that I want  
and that life is dependent on choices  
I say to myself that I can make my own choices  
I dream that I am famous and everyone had a  
great time with me by their sides  
I try to tell myself that I can get better, but I always  
end up saying, “Stop trying, it's too late!”  
I hope that everyone can understand and say that  
“I am all that I can be”*  
– Courtney Goldstein

Both Edward and Courtney were surprised by the power and revealing nature of their template poems. Both were struggling with a sense of insecurity, yet both volunteered to share these with their classmates. This served to raise the bar for the others. One student after a pregnant pause, simply sighed, “Wow!”

Another type of template focused on nostalgic memories. We called it a “That Was...” poem. This template encouraged students to draw on meaningful memories to convey the circumstances as well as the essence of that time. Memories of several teachers and the deeds that touched her heart joined to form Kathleen's poem “That

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Was My Teacher.” See if you can find the template.

### *That Was My Teacher*

*Have you ever met my teacher?  
Sure you have.  
Remember that time  
When you got a hundred on your test  
Or when you got a fifty  
And you cried on your desk?  
Remember how she handed you a  
tissue  
And the retest  
That was my teacher.*

### *Remember that time*

*When you got in a fight with your  
friends  
And you sat alone at lunch  
And you didn't talk to anyone  
And when she found out  
You sat in the corner of the room  
talking to her,  
The quietness of her voice?  
Remember how she helped you and  
your friend get back together  
All joyful and relieved  
That was my teacher.*

### *Remember that time*

*When you were trying to correct  
Mistakes on your worksheet  
And you didn't know what you did  
wrong  
And your head was starting to hurt  
But when your teacher said,  
“Don't worry, I'll help you.”  
Remember how her words made you  
understand  
All firmly held, but nice?  
That was my teacher.*

*If you try very hard,  
Can you remember that time  
When you forgot to wear a cartoon  
shirt for spirit day  
And you were the only one  
And you found me an extra one right  
away?  
It took you a long time to find one  
Do you remember it was her shirt you  
were wearing?  
That was my teacher.*

– Kathleen Vassallo

Now the meaning had become the focus of student poetry. Rhyming, for almost all the students took a back seat. “It’s okay to rhyme,” they seemed to understand, “if I say everything I want or need to say.” Most students abandoned the idea of rhyming all together at this time.

By this point, the writer’s workshop was alive with poetry. It was satisfying to see what Bruner would call “hand over” taking place, as each day the students became more competent and more independent poets.

To describe the process of hand over, Nancie Atwell tells the story of teaching her daughter how to brush her teeth. At first, she did it for her. The next step was for both mother and daughter to have a hand on the toothbrush, brushing away. Next she watched her daughter, offering encouragement. When the little girl thought she was finished, she was advised to run her tongue over her newly-brushed teeth to see which ones still “had mittens on them.” Those still needed to be brushed. In the end, Atwell’s daughter was able to brush her own teeth with no input or intervention. Thus, the hand over was complete.

The students were eager to compose and revise; they were better equipped to create original poetry and take risks. Some students were eager to work from favorite poems hidden in their special poetry notebooks. Others wanted to develop themes that emerged from template exercises, trying out their own voices.

Caitlin was daydreaming one day in class and noticed the poster-sized version of Carl Sandburg’s “Fog” on a bulletin board. There was an illustration of a lighthouse and a catlike cloud of fog. Caitlin loves horses; all her written pieces in some way return to the theme of horses. She had been working on a poem about Assateague Island and its famous ponies. Click. Suddenly the lighthouse and its flashing light made its way into her poem.

### *The Island's Guard Tower*

*It stands tall and proud,  
Guarding the gleaming, moonlit channel,  
Guarding the wild ponies sleeping in a  
warm, comfy crowd  
It keeps watch over the friendly passing boats.  
As the two tiny islands sleep peacefully,  
The beauty of the moon in the sky seems as  
though it floats.  
One, two, three. Flash. Flash.  
The ponies go to sleep.  
The children go to rest.  
The island makes but not a peep.  
One, two, three. Flash. Flash.  
What's this tower that guards boats from  
shores ever so crude?  
What's this tower that watches over the  
sleeping town?  
To which your mind it shall not delude,  
A lighthouse that turns my frowns upside-down.*



## Puny Poetry Meets Its Match

*One, two, three. Flash. Flash.  
Assateague Lighthouse.*

– Caitlin Campbell

Caitlin purposely used repetition and personification in this piece. She even worked in a subtle rhyme scheme. She wanted to use her words to make the reader see the flashing light house. One way or another, she managed to work in some alliteration and vivid sensory imagery.

Natasha, new to the school district from Russia, released a flood of feelings about her old home versus her new one. She first had written about this subject in prose. Poetry gave her a means to explore her feelings.

### *Between Worlds*

*Caught between worlds  
Don't know where I belong  
One side I long since left  
The other side my new home  
If someone's saying something  
About life over there  
They criticize my birthplace  
Oh, this I just can't bear  
If someone dares to mention  
Some fault of this country  
Then suddenly all that I left  
Is a distant memory*

*Who knows where life shall take me  
But this one thing I know  
I will never go back to  
What used to be my home  
Yet I am so uncertain  
If my life I can lead  
Not knowing where my heart is  
Only knowing that it bleeds.*

–Natasha Simonova

Note that this poem about being caught “Between Worlds” is in two stanzas. The desperation she feels trying to fit in is so powerful, as evidenced by her strong word choices. This clearly is far from puny.

Charles is a very mild boy. He has a wealth of knowledge, but has never really seemed interested in sports. However, he found himself getting caught up in all of the hockey discussions brewing around him. Although he has never played himself, he chose to use poetry to put on the mask as if he had.

### *Goalie*

*I hear the swish of skates  
As the players come closer  
Sweaty breath above the ice  
Clashing sticks like swords  
Fighting for the prized puck  
The ice ripples like my tense muscles  
Stretching my nerves like strings  
Suddenly, the little puck tries to rush  
past  
Crash! I stop its course  
Swish! I repel it back to the ice fighters  
The game is over  
My post is safe  
Victory is ours!*

– Charles Glass

Anthony, a classmate of Charles, is an ice hockey goalie. When asked if Charles had found the mark with his imagery and quickly-paced lines, he replied, “Yeah, even better than I did!”

Erica shyly slipped this poem on the teacher’s desk with the simple request, “May I hang this on the art teacher’s door?”

*A World of Art  
The sky is the easel  
Hovering over the world*

*The water is the paint  
Giving adventure and life*

*The air is the paintbrush  
Flying lightly  
Swiftly  
Through the trees  
It's a breeze*

*And we the people  
Who have created  
So many features  
Cannot be described  
As any art utensil  
But only as the main illustrator.*

– Erica Rounick

Erica found another use for poetry. True, we had been hanging poetry throughout the school for some time, but, this tribute represents a gift of writing. Other students saw what Erica did and the complete and utter delight of the recipient, and began to follow suit. What a difference from “Bubba In Da Tubba”!

This is not to say that every student’s poetry transformed into soaring triumphs of literary genius, but the vast majority of the poetry produced was of a much higher quality.

Remember Katie’s poem about the beach? She stuck with it and applied what she learned in the many craft lessons. We conferenced about word choice and using specific details. Also, we discussed the use of white space and word placement to

suggest movement, such as the kite flying. Katie wanted the ending to be more powerful, since leaving the beach is often very sad. We spoke about how, when she leaves the beach, she watches out the rear window as the beach gets smaller and smaller the farther away she goes. How could we make what had been her last line suggest that? Did her lion emerge?

*The Beach*

*Wind brushing through your hair,*

*Flying*

*a*

*kite*

*in*

*the*

*air.*

*Swimming in the cold water,*

*While on the sand it gets hotter.*

*As I watch the sun go down,*

*I'm glad to be at the beach.*

*We pick up our stuff,*

*Without a sound*

*and we leave the empty beach,*

*Sighing*

*as*

*we*

*go.*

—Katie Essenthier

Past attempts at improving student writers' poetry by only teaching lessons on writers' craft were doomed to failure. It's possible that the many lessons on the craft of poetry had actually done the opposite of what was intended. We hoped that these lessons would define poetry and help students write it. The standard "poetry unit" fare

turned out to be more of an anchor than a sail. It seems that all of that "learning" forced the student writers to retreat to that safe world of poetry they knew and recognized: Seuss, Moss, Prelutsky and Silverstein.

Obviously those lessons are valuable, but not in isolation. Creating an atmosphere where children gather, select, share and enjoy poetry; are allowed to play with words; experiment with language and take risks is an important first step. Next are providing the scaffolding of parallel poetry and growing through template poetry. And, as the students become more confident and independent, we guided them through the hand-over phase.

There are still signs of struggle, to be sure: Ken is still mulling over where to go with a new piece about Jeff. His struggle is encouraging, however. It's now over how to best say what he needs to say, rather than what might rhyme with "skateboard." That's a big jump.

At the same time, by expanding our own vision of teaching poetry, we have come to accept that Bill has as much right to love "Bubba in the Tubba" as Natasha has to love "Between Worlds." In the final analysis, we had managed to spare ourselves and our students another crash-and-burn attempt at teaching poetry as a writing genre. Lessons gleaned from PAWLP Summer Writing Institutes led us to reexamine and reopen our thinking toward poetry as we'd always done it. We were freed to figure out where the kids were, then lead them — at least most of them — toward greater self-expression through poetry. Now, everyone

from Bill to Natasha seems to see what Coleridge meant when he defined poetry as "the best words in the best order."

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