

## First Day

### **First Day**

*We size each other up, and I would like  
to birth each one, shiny, red, and freshly fourteen,  
from a rib, from a ventricle, from an armpit—nothing  
too sexy, this is school, but intimate,  
an indelible connection that we'll remember  
when rain turns this gray room grayer and I call it  
silver, autumnal, they will think Nah,  
it's fucking up football but—fondly?—Yeah,  
autumnal's not bad, that's just the way the old  
woman is, and they'll think back to how warm it was  
in the good old right ventricle, and I'll have  
some built-in credibility without being  
the Home Mom they have to break on a wheel  
every couple of days.*

*And I won't teach them  
hygiene and sex and vegetables  
and I won't just be the Great Dispenser of  
Grades, but this mythic guardian whose genes  
are theirs so we recognize the same thresholds,*

*shapeshifters, dragons in black holes,  
and know why we have to start journeys  
to save something that's dying in a distant wood—  
it's in the blood, we gotta go there—  
and when it's time to start singing on the rocks,  
or let ourselves be wrecked for a while,  
well, our eyes and skins turned out to be different  
but we all came from one place, and when it rains  
so everything's real autumnal, we don't  
forget, we kinda want to get back there.<sup>1</sup>*

**E**ach of us has his or her own language. But in any classroom, a common language starts to grow right from the first day. I know my own vocabulary to be thoroughly Romantic—*silver, autumnal*—rooted in my favorite English poets and New England Transcendentalists. But it's been beefed up by thirty years of exposure to students and a growing fascination with contemporary theater and poetry, the multicultural and feminist movements, jazz, the visual arts, newspapers, dance and film and music criticism, gay rights activism, Zen Buddhism, dictionaries of slang, children's literature, and Dave Barry columns.

To excite students about language and help them discover and develop their own, a teacher needs to be ready to say, even in midsentence, "I wonder what this word means. Does anybody here know? Okay, let's look it up." And, maybe more important, we need to be on the alert for interesting—or even just characteristic—words and phrases used by our students: "Cut the fluff?" Kelly, I love it!" And up it goes on the board—*Cut the fluff*—with her initials under it, as a valuable reminder of how to edit. By the end of the year, most of us will have gotten better at fluff cutting, but we'll also have one more example of what writers mean by "voice." And we'll have strengthened our sense of ourselves as a community—by adding one more phrase to our common language.

Handing out the assignment sheets on this opening day, I stumble over Tom's long, outstretched legs—these desks are really too small for growing teens—and I realize I'll probably go on stumbling over them all year. "Oh,

sorry," I tell him. A few weeks later, he's written a poem about his feet, which he describes as "Clydesdales." With his permission, I read the poem aloud, asking everyone to listen for words that we should put in our notebooks. The horsewoman in the class picks this one and explains that Clydesdales are strong, high-stepping horses with long hair along the backs of their legs. She giggles. And then I suddenly remember noticing the word in my little paperback slang dictionary (*21st Century Dictionary of Slang*), which I keep a copy of in the classroom.<sup>2</sup> I look it up: "(Teen & College): attractive guy, derived from handsome horse breed." We all giggle, and both definitions go into our notebooks.

I'm having students keep their own word lists all year long. In the past, we did this for a month in the spring during our poetry-writing unit, which I always kicked off by showing my own writing notebook full of words, clippings, and rough drafts. Then I began to experiment with taking time after the daily five-minute period for free reading to share interesting words and phrases we were encountering in our various books. The results were so good—a couple of students even chose to browse in a dictionary during some of their reading time—that I resolved to build this activity in every day.

Starting the class with free reading had already helped focus the students on language. In a five-minute spurt, they're more likely to notice individual words than in a forty-five-minute homework assignment. It also made them more aware of the different reading tastes of their peers. On the second day of the school year, when each person had brought in a book from home or chosen one from the classroom library (which I stock with a range of genres, collections of photographs, and various schools' literary magazines), we take time to hear volunteers read aloud a paragraph from their choices. "How many of you think you might want to look into this book, based on what Kate read to us?" I count the hands—"Hmm . . . a lot of girls. Is there such a thing as a girls' book? A guys' book? Who in here likes sci fi? War novels? Who thinks, "I probably wouldn't like . . .?" Gradually, as the year goes on, we find ourselves breaking down certain stereotypes and expanding our own repertoires. (I read *Childhood's End* and like it.) Every month or so I ask my classes to put together a list of recommendations, each of us annotating a few new finds and suggesting which classmates might want to try our titles. Students keep reading cards on file with me—title, author, rating, and brief annotations—and we discuss books in conferences and freewrites.

Given this structure, it's easy to heighten student awareness of language. From the very first week, the notebook—wordbank, wordpool, wordhoard—becomes a collaborative effort. We each collect our own words—from class reading and discussions, eavesdropping, graffiti, song lyrics, recipes, newspaper and magazine articles, ads, readings in other courses, and our own areas of expertise. But we also copy in the words we share after the five-minute reading periods.

It's important that I read and fill my notebook right along with the students. If a few days go by in which I've broken this rule in order to organize my lesson plan better, I notice them starting to lose interest. Sometimes I'll begin the sharing process myself: "Today I'm reading a poetry collection by a friend, Renée Ashley—*The Various Reasons of Light*.<sup>3</sup> I love this phrase right here, 'the urgent furnace of her life,' partly because of the way the sounds in *urgent* and *furnace* go together—the push of the repetition makes it *sound* urgent—but also because it gets me thinking about my own life. How is life a furnace?" I write the phrase on the board, and we copy it into our notebooks, underlining the repeated sounds.

And then, after a long pause, someone says *furnace* makes him think of the Bible and the three men cast into the fiery furnace who don't burn up—and maybe life is a sort of miracle like that, because it's so dangerous and we're living so hard. Somebody else says life is a flame, but sooner or later your flame gets put out.

"But not if you believe in an afterlife," a third kid objects.

"Yeah, but you can't prove it," says my resident skeptic. "Religion is just a crutch."

And I see we could be in for a full-period discussion, so I say, "We could argue this one all year, but we need to move on. But for now, notice how far the image of the furnace took us? How much can be evoked by that single image—how many associations it brings up? And we haven't even asked yet about what the *fuel* is—and how it's acquired. As part of your homework tonight, let's come up with two more images for life—that is, a concrete noun, something you could draw, with an adjective attached if you want. Let's write for five minutes on each image in order to explore how it works. We'll put these new possibilities up on the wall tomorrow. Over the centuries, people have found this is a very powerful and creative way to think—through images and associations."

And then Julie reads a passage from her book, Barbara Kingsolver's *Pigs in Heaven*, about how the Cherokee Nation is trying to reclaim the American

Indian child, Turtle, from her adoptive mother, and how, during an interview with a native lawyer, the mother is trying to keep birds from eating the apricots off the tree in her front yard because Turtle “likes apricots more than anything living or dead, and she’s the kind of kid that just doesn’t ask for much.” As long as the boom box the mother has strung up in the tree continues to play her lover’s demo rock band tape, the birds stay out of the tree, but at the end of the interview with the lawyer, the tape also ends, and the birds fly back and “reclaim” the tree. “One by one the birds emerge from the desert and come back to claim their tree,” Julie reads. “That’s a neat symbol.” So we put into our notebook, “birds reclaim apricot tree—will Cherokees reclaim Turtle?”

Next day Jon asks to read aloud from *All Quiet on the Western Front*. His passage is about how the character’s “inner camera focused,” so we jot down the phrase and discuss what one’s inner camera might be. Parker says it’s “his photographic memory.” Someone else says that it just means “seeing everything really clearly and sharply.” And then a third student suggests it’s “seeing with the mind’s eye—like with his imagination.”

I’m still engaged with Renée’s poems, so I bring up another of her phrases—“a half-assed arabesque.” Ilona, who we discover has been studying ballet for many years, says she can demonstrate an arabesque better than describe one, so she does, extending her body slowly and beautifully, flowerlike. Then Jon offers to do it “half-assed.” “Be sure you’re using only one half!” his friend Patrick warns him. And I think *yes*, these two guys are going to be very useful when it comes to staging scenes from Salinger and Shakespeare and Fugard. And thank God for Ilona, since this winter we’ll be prepping to see a performance of the ballet *Billy the Kid*.

The third day someone reads a sentence that contains the word *woozy*.

“Tired?” Dmitri suggests.

“No, dizzy,” Jen corrects him.

“It’s a funny-sounding word. Where do you suppose it came from?” I ask, and call for a volunteer to look it up in the classroom dictionary.

At Parents Night, I’ll encourage everyone to make sure their kids have a good hardcover dictionary at home—the school makes some secondhand ones available—and in class I’ll photocopy an individual page from my own or put it on the overhead projector to see whether each student knows how to read and interpret an entry. But during these brief language sessions, we rely on my *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*.<sup>4</sup>

“Woozy,” reads Jennifer—“1. stupidly confused; muddled. 2. physically unsettled, as with dizziness, faintness, or slight nausea. 3. drunken. [1895–1900, *Amer.*; perh. short for boozy-woozy.]”

I suggest looking up *booze*—“which sounds sort of slangy, doesn’t it?” But it turns out to have come into the language in the 1600s, deriving from the Middle English *bous* (strong drink) and the Middle Dutch *busen* (to drink to excess). Our acquaintance with derivations is expanding.

As the year goes on, I ask students to carry tiny pocket notebooks or else a few file cards with them whenever possible to record windfalls that come at odd moments; they can later transfer these into their main word collection. I tell them that I do this myself, and that I often write down whole phrases or sentences—quotations from movies, songs, dreams, conversations, even ideas for poems and articles. I read to them from Anne Lamott’s lively book on writing, *Bird by Bird*, about the virtues of these little file cards:

I have index cards and pens all over the house. . . . I carry one with me in my back pocket when I take my dog for a walk. In fact, I carry it folded lengthwise, if you need to know, so that, God forbid, I won’t look bulky. You may want to consider doing the same. I don’t even know you, but I bet you have enough on your mind without having to worry about whether or not you look bulky. . . . I . . . head out, knowing that if I have an idea, or see something lovely or strange or for any reason worth remembering, I will be able to jot down a couple of words to remind me of it. . . . I might be walking along the salt marsh, or out at Phoenix Lake, or in the express line at Safeway, and suddenly I hear something wonderful that makes me want to smile or snap my fingers—as if it has just come back to me—and I take out my index card and scribble it down. . . . I have an index card here on which is written, “Six years later, the memory of the raw fish cubes continued to haunt her,” which I thought might make a great transitional line. But I have so far not found a place for it. You are welcome to use it if you can.<sup>5</sup>

What will we do with the words we collect? I remember a student conference with a girl who’d written a prosy, predictable poem about losing her boyfriend—“suddenly the sun started to dim. . . / You leave me there, standing in your shadow, / alone, as I hear your footsteps moving / further

and further away.” Neither of us had liked it much. Now Jen showed me a new version that she said she was very proud of. It ended:

 *My eyes began to swell as salty drops of water  
fell upon my white tank top  
creating a sheer appearance in which  
everyone could clearly see right through my body  
and into my broken heart.  
The shattered pieces left marks upon everyone whom  
I've touched.*

“So how did you find your way into this new language?” I asked, admiring some of the images.

“I looked back in my word lists, and that got me going,” Jen said. “It was the lists you had us make of nouns and verbs from different categories—you know, weather, buildings, food, but especially the one on clothing. That led me into the tank top image, and I was able to picture myself the day he and I split up. I remembered exactly what I was wearing and thought about what I must have looked like, and it all got much more personal and detailed. I didn’t have to explain how I was feeling.”

In fact, she was so pleased with the revision that when visiting poet Naomi Shihab Nye came to class and asked to hear our poems, she was the first to volunteer. Naomi liked the detail about the tank top made transparent by tears.

Of course, one could argue that becoming a collector is a good thing in itself. Parents generally encourage their children to build collections, whether of butterflies or baseball cards, on the theory that the child gains some confidence and sense of individuality along with the new expertise in entomology or the history of the Yankees. I collected praying mantis cocoons for a brief period in fifth grade—not for class but just because I was fascinated by the way the brown-gray foamy little bundles were camouflaged in the weeds. I loved the triumph of spotting one woven to a twig in the underbrush of our back lot. I did read articles about these insects, but not imaginatively enough to realize what would happen when the twenty cocoons hatched in my mother’s china bowl on the dining room buffet. Nor was I inspired to become an entomologist or even a writer on insect life. But I learned some new language—that one of the plural forms of mantis was *mantid*, for example, and that mantid were *predacious*, the female mantis

actually devouring the male. Which led me to connect *pray* with *prey*. Later, when I read about Clytemnestra, I pictured her with long green feelers.

I also enjoyed telling my parents and my girlfriends about mantid. And I now realize that doing this reinforced what I had learned from observation and reading. So it seems important to make opportunities for students to share their word collections. There are many ways to do this. Let them pair up and read one another's notebooks, and ask them to steal the words they like best from their partners' lists. Or put them in small groups and, after they read the notebooks, ask each student to act out a word that appeals to him or her for the others to guess. Or let them collaborate on creating a story or dialogue using words from the group's lists.

I think these methods are all more productive than handing out standardized word lists and tests. Students' lives are sufficiently haunted by tests already; mine assure me that the typical vocabulary quiz is "the kiss of death" and stops them from wanting to collect more words. While testing is one way to convey that "this material matters," reliance on it leads kids to believe that there are no *other* reasons why language is important—and that "vocabulary" is a kind of artificial activity relevant only to test days. Richard Lewis, a poet-in-the-schools of New York and Japan, is eloquent on the need for incorporating "the triad of learning, so that mind, body, and feeling are one entity," and "not separating learning from the taproots of curiosity and imagination." He emphasizes the role of imagination, how without it, "we don't know ourselves or each other," and how school, despite its "concern for the mechanics of literacy . . . too frequently makes the recipients of its teachings incapable of relating to what is alive and meaningful in themselves." Lewis goes on to quote Alfred North Whitehead on how students learn: "You must not divide the seamless coat of learning. What education has to impart is an *intimate* sense for the power of ideas, for the beauty of ideas, and for the structure of ideas, together with a particular body of knowledge which has *peculiar reference to the life of the being possessing it*" [italics mine].<sup>6</sup>

One of my favorite language activities, because it involves "the triad of mind, body, and feeling," is what I call "performing the mural." In this activity, the whole class gets to read and speak as individuals, yet in the process it is creating a communal piece. Everyone chooses a different color crayon or marker and, on a huge piece of colored paper I put up on the wall, they enter words from their collections that they particularly like for sound or image or associations. I encourage them to include foreign words,

slang, and words from their reading in other courses. Last spring's first mural included: *tsunami*, *bitchin*, *Rasputin*, *resplendent*, *careworn*, *guts*, *meander*, *i'iwi*, *papier-mâché* flowers, *leer*, *dreadlocks*, *solipsistic*, *brillo*, *sultry*, *watermelon girl*, *nor'easter*, *bouffant*, *hive*, *waddle*, *malamute*, *diablo*, *pimp strut*, *fish tank*, *painstakingly*, *wigwam*, *coif*, *cirrus*, *opaque*, *monsoon*, *yacht*, *saunter*, *apocalypse*, *insinuate*, *melba*, *haughty*, *psychological smile*, *spinach*, *effectual*, *medulla oblongata*, *iglesia*, *philanthropist*, *névé*.

When everyone's put up a few words, we all gather around the mural. "We're going to give a reading," I tell them. "The rules are: Take initiative to read anyone's word you want, in a voice and pace that suits it, but try not to overlap with someone else's voice. Be sensitive with your eyes and ears and 'feelers' to who's about to read—but if you do overlap, keep going, don't worry. It's fine if a word gets read more than once—we'll get to know them better if we keep hearing them in different juxtapositions. Listen to the overall effect, and if you think we've heard too many in the same rhythms or textures or pace—too much legato (sustained smoothness) or too much staccato (short, abrupt sounds), try to vary the pattern. Or if you notice an interesting combination of two words, be ready to say one right after somebody else says the other one. Listen to the overall production, but enjoy each solo."

After the initial self-consciousness, students begin to listen. Gradually we hear ourselves extending the sounds of *insinuate*, *sultry*, *leer*, *melba*, *careworn*, and *watermelon* and punctuating them with almost jazzy, percussive repetitions of *guts*, *coif*, *pimp strut*, *yacht*. We begin to notice and enjoy the way different voices color the performance—soprano, alto, tenor, bass. We even get brave enough to experiment with exaggerating certain sounds, with whispering, with varying the pitch for different syllables of a word. *Fish* (high) *tank* (low). I try a downward glissando on *careworn*.

There turns out to be something almost mystical about this experience—something I can't account for. Even the skeptics are drawn in. Each of us becomes attuned to the others. Our focus is a wonderful combination of relaxed and intense—like the "flow" experienced during the height of the creative process. Voices arise suddenly, mysteriously, from behind us, from right next to us, from the other side of the room. The richness of the language—not just English but the human language of soft and hard, sweet and harsh, abrupt and flowing—emerges from the page, from our throats, into our bodies and imaginations.

As I listen to the sounds of these words connecting, not in conventional syntax but more like individual notes of music falling unpredictably on the ear and inviting it to create some new kind of sense, I remember the distinction that poet Kenneth Koch makes between ordinary language—“a vast, reasonable, practical enterprise, with vocabulary and syntax and grammar”—and poetic language, “in which the sound of the words is raised to an importance equal to that of their meaning. . . . Poets think of how they want something to sound as much as they think of what they want to say, and in fact it’s often impossible to distinguish one from the other.”<sup>7</sup>

As we listen to the words on the mural come alive, we aren’t just hearing denotations. The effect is more like a description I read recently in David Abram’s book about language and nature, *The Spell of the Sensuous*:<sup>8</sup>

Active, living speech is . . . a gesture, a vocal gesticulation wherein the meaning is inseparable from the sound, the shape, and the rhythm of the words. Communicative meaning is always, in its depths, affective; it remains rooted in the sensual dimension of experience, born of the body’s native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole. . . . [M]eaning sprouts in the very depths of the sensory world, in the heat of meeting, encounter, participation.

After this kind of sensuous participation in one another’s words, students start asking questions: “What’s a *coif*?” “Yeah, and who put up *pimp strut*? Where’d you find that?”

Happily, no one volunteers to demonstrate it.

## Notes

1. Judy Michaels, “First Day,” *English Journal* 88 (July 1999): 110.
2. Princeton Language Institute, ed., *21st Century Dictionary of Slang* (New York: Dell, 1994). This handy paperback organizes its lists by subjects such as advertising, crime and law, ecology, fashion, technology, etc. Its “Note on Usage” warns that the meanings of slang terms can be “subtle and implications depend on circumstances. . . . Know your audience.” It excludes terms “that describe the sex act, parts of the human anatomy, or any that refer to sexual preference, ethnic background, or size.”

3. Renée Ashley, #5, "The Various Reasons of Light," in *The Various Reasons of Light: Poems* (New York: Avocet Press, 1998), 16.

4. *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1997). This is the dictionary I turn to most often for recent words, meanings, and usages. I also like the clarity of the definitions and the typeface, and I enjoy browsing with students in the prefatory essay "Defining Our Language for the 21st Century," which includes lists of words according to the decade in which they entered the language.

5. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor, 1994), 133–42. The novelist and memoirist offers a witty, anecdotal discussion of the writing life and craft. Her delight in words is apparent throughout, and her advice is often relevant to high school writers and their teachers. She quotes an old Mel Brooks routine in which the therapist tells the patient, "Listen to your broccoli, and your broccoli will tell you how to eat it." Or, as Lamott explains, "You get your intuition back when you make space for it. . . . Rationality squeezes out much that is rich and juicy and fascinating." Excerpts from this book have helped my student writers relax sufficiently to discover fresh juxtapositions of words through freewriting and free association.

6. Richard Lewis, *Living by Wonder: Writings on the Imaginative Life of Childhood* (New York: Parabola Books, 1998), 44–45, 84. Lewis has founded the Touchstone Center, a New York–based source for workshops and books that offer children (and adults) various entries into their creative imaginations through speculating about the mysteries of nature, time, the body, and the mind by means of the visual arts, dance and theater, poetry, myth, and music. His work grows directly from his own practice as an artist in the schools and as a parent.

7. Kenneth Koch, *Making Your Own Days* (New York: Scribner, 1998), 21. This book by the well-known New York City poet who popularized the poet-in-the-schools programs through his books on teaching poetry—*Wishes, Lies and Dreams* and *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*, among others—is subtitled *The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry*. It explores the idea that poetry is a separate language, one in which music and sound are as important as syntax or meaning, and shows how confusion during the reading of a poem can eventually lead to truly experiencing the poem. This is a good corrective for those of us—teachers and students alike—who are prone to reading a poem

in class and then demanding immediate “right answers” to its mysteries. The book includes a rich collection of poems from a variety of languages and cultures, with Koch’s brief commentary on each. It is helpful to hear a poet respond to Marianne Moore’s “To a Steam Roller” in this casual, open-ended way:

The subject matter, the whole idea of talking so seriously to a steamroller, is funny. A reader may suppose, too, on the basis of Moore’s other poems, that the “steamroller” probably represents a person Moore doesn’t like, perhaps a literary critic. In which case, who knows what the “butterfly” may represent—perhaps the steamroller’s mistress or wife. The identity of these two is not a “hidden meaning” but simply something else to think about—the steamroller and the butterfly are enough.

As a struggling poet trying to make myself clear, I find it very discouraging to be accused of deliberately planting a “hidden meaning” in my reader’s path, and as a struggling teacher of poetry, I try hard to ban this popular term from the classroom. “Something else to think about” is a nicely untechnical and unthreatening phrase.

8. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 74–75. This is a book about language, but it’s also about breaking down boundaries—between man and nature, philosophy and psychology, poetry and ecology. Abram, who is a scholar of philosophy as well as a student of the relationships between magicians and the natural elements, explores the nature of perception and, in particular, the power of language to enhance or stifle “the reciprocity between our senses and the sensuous earth.” To quote the book jacket, “Animal tracks, word magic, the speech of stones, the power of letters, and the taste of the wind all figure prominently in this astonishing and intensely ethical work.”