

# *Poetry of Place:* *Helping Students Write Their Worlds*

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# LEARNING FROM OUR STUDENTS – Five student poems

## Two Riddle-Like Poems

First I felt cold,  
and I was all white.

Airplanes fly over me a lot,  
but they don't touch me.

The rain falls heavy at night,  
And I stand there and shiver.

I have some company, now and then  
but lots of times I'm lonely.

I get poked by being climbed,  
but my cover always grows back.

Now and then I shiver  
from cold, but I always stand.

The wind blows fearful  
and the snow never melts.

I look down on the city below,  
and I do not tremble.

-John (4<sup>th</sup> grade  
Butler, Ohio)

I am a string being  
pulled from  
both sides

I don't want  
to be pulled,  
yet by being  
pulled, I tie  
your life together

I am a string  
I was made  
from the wool  
of something greater  
and more powerful  
than I

I am a string  
being tied  
in knots by  
those that  
rule me  
My knots, though,  
sometimes are  
intertwined  
with my thoughts

-Caitlin (9<sup>th</sup> grade / Lodi, Ohio)

## A Poem Working With Opposites

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

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

-Nicole (4<sup>th</sup> grade / Columbus, Ohio)

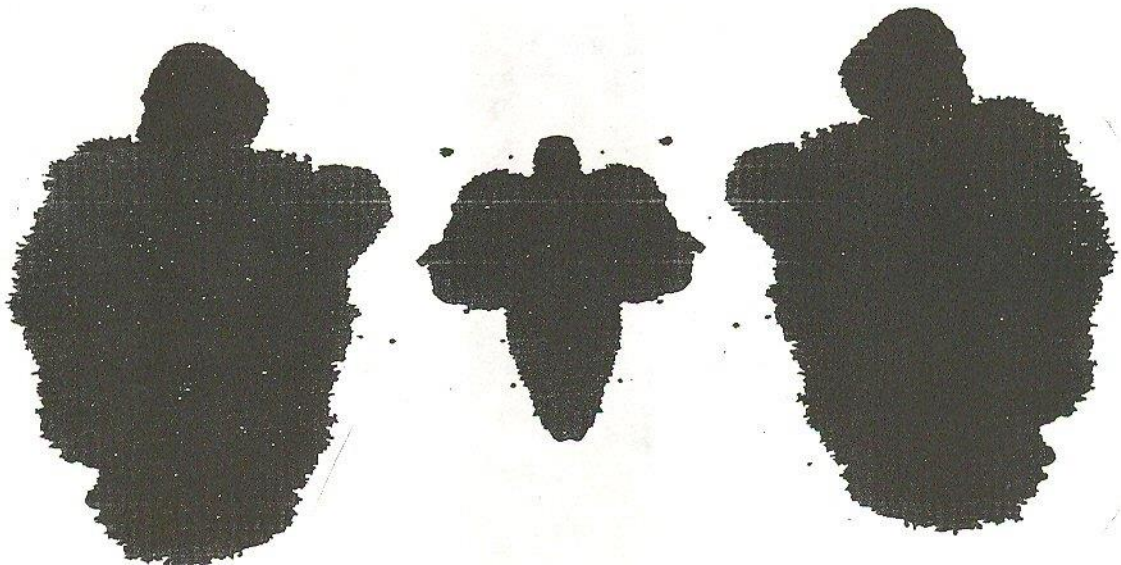
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*(window to the future)*

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

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

*-Chad (6<sup>th</sup> grade/ Savannah, Ohio))*



**Inkblot #23**

Two fat dudes running after the  
bartender for a refund

Two fat dudes going to heaven and  
the guardian angel is guarding the  
gate to life

*-Lewis (5<sup>th</sup> grade/Columbus)*

# A Generative Cycle: Four Tasks of Poetry

## Metaphor

“Unless you are at home in the metaphor, unless you’ve had your proper poetical education in the metaphor, you are not safe anywhere. Because you are not at ease with figurative values: you don’t know the metaphor in its strengths and its weaknesses. You don’t know how far you may expect to ride it and when it may break down with you. You are not safe in science; you are not safe in history.”  
-Robert Frost, “Education by Poetry”

from John Ciardi (How Does a Poem Mean?): all words as metaphor...

examples: “Clue” = originally “clew,” a ball of string or yarn. Theseus unwound a clew as he made his way through the labyrinth.

Or: “Curfew” = from the French words: “couvrir” (cover) + “feu” (fire) The Medieval rule being that “domestic fires must be extinguished at bedtime” (to prevent the house—and the town—burning down).

## Physicality

“Through metaphor, we make use of patterns that obtain in our *physical experience* to organize our more abstract understanding.”

-Mark Johnson, The Body in the Mind (emphasis mine)

Just as we use phrases like “We’re not there yet...” or “Literacy metaphor occupies just a small corner in the house of analogical thought.”

“A concept is a package of analogies.”

-D.R. Hofstadter, in “Analogy as the Core of Cognition”  
in which he speaks of the word “shadow” as a physical concept we apply in various analogical ways:

- A mountain chain’s “rain shadow”
- “a young woman who aspires to join her high-school swimming team but whose mother was an Olympic swimmer... ‘swimming in the shadow of her mother’”
- As well as a “population shadow” used by geographers to refer to situations such as that after WWII where certain decimated groups had a drop in births for several generations.”

## Visuality

-W.J.T. Mitchell, from Iconology & Picture Theory:

“Postmodernism is an explosive breaking down of that barrier between vision and language that had been rigorously maintained by modernism.”

“Word and image are like two hunters pursuing their quarry by two paths.”

“Everything—nature, politics, sex, other people—comes to us now as an image.”

“[For Foucault,] knowledge itself is ‘a system of archeological strata made from things and words ... from bands of visibility and bands of readability’.”

## Play

from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria:

“The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception ... The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will ... and differing only in degree ... It [the secondary imagination] dissolves, dissipates, in order to recreate ...”

from Susan Stewart, Nonsense

“Each world presents a system of differences in relation to any other world. To step into the artistic text is to transform the external into the internal ... And each transformation opens up the possibilities of transformation itself.”

“Like [money], [language] is a confidence game society plays with and against itself.”

from Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: “Civilization arises and unfolds in and as play.”

from Gregory Bateson, Steps Toward an Ecology of Mind:

“This is what we’re doing much of the time ... plugging in ‘ready-made sentences’ to substitute for thought. ... In order to think new thoughts, or to say new things, we have to break up all our ready-made ideas and shuffle the pieces.”

## Interlude: Playing With Inkblots

<p><b>Inkblot #2: Mr. Double-Eyes</b></p> <p>All skulls, all shovels, all shields double. All swimmers. All minds.</p> <p>Even this shabby cap of Mr. Double-Eyes' that drapes his head like muskrat hides</p> <p>and allows him to pretend to think – or see – his upper set of pupil-less flickers,</p> <p>his cortex slumped to a flimsy tongue</p> <p>dividing his pointy lobes. It's like he perches – as we all –</p> <p>upon his nobler self – or selves – the push-me pull-yous</p> <p>that rock within our sea of worry and wonder at our troubled nights,</p> <p>and do their twinned and starry best to shine.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-Terry Hermsen, from THE RIVER'S DAUGHTER</p>	<p><b>Inkblot #8. Dance of the Single-Winged</b></p> <p>The theory of inkblot predicates the uncreasing</p> <p>of the wings, their caped dalliance, their tendrils strung with flesh.</p> <p>From ancient days the drapery sprung: but how to fly</p> <p>when there is only one? . The years have burdened even</p> <p>our walking. Our merest touch threatens, our wines are</p> <p>ragged in the throat. Yet look, love, when we meet we form a mirror</p> <p>anyway, configuring how, with these weaponed appendages, we will learn</p> <p>to feed each other – and risen on no other point of balance</p> <p>here in the air, swing ourselves to flight.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-Terry Hermsen</p>
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# FOUR SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS

## *Exercise #1: Mockingbird Moments: Riddles for Novels*

*Riddle for one moment in To Kill a Mockingbird*

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

*-Josh (10<sup>th</sup> grade/Mt. Gilead, Ohio)*

**MR EWELL**

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

*-Brian D. (10<sup>th</sup> grade/ Mt.  
Gilead, Ohio)*

Elizabeth Proctor (based on The Crucible)

*The dirt is rusting,  
the walls bare.  
But light  
shoots like an  
arrow through it.  
The wall breaks  
down.  
There he stands,  
his head like  
a torch,  
his body,  
the sun.  
He reaches  
for me,  
I for him.  
We touch  
and I feel  
silk and water,  
yet feel nothing.  
He raises his glamorous wings  
and sails on the  
moonlight,  
the wall fixes  
itself, but I am  
not afraid,  
for I have  
the light in  
me.*

*-Brian D.*

## *Exercise #2: Earth Water Fire and Air*

Model Poem for using “the elements” for writing about memory:

### *Childhood*

*Newspapers scarred the stream;  
Words swirled in the eddies;  
Grey figures - a dead thief,  
The President and his wife,  
Two race horses - floated past  
And sank...*

*Or snagged the rocks  
Rippling the slow water  
Until the sun, like a man  
With a knife, cut them apart  
So they could sail away.*

*...  
On the last night, outside my tent, someone  
Startled the woods: a flashlight fluttered; twigs,  
Like small animals, crackled underfoot;  
Mosquitoes buzzed the netting. I held my breath  
To hear the hushed voices, a muffled cough,  
A siren down the road...*

*A match was struck,  
I crawled outside: my mother and my father,  
Dressed in white, stood near the sumac, waving  
Their hands of fire. They touched the trees, they licked  
Their palms, and rose above the burning woods.*

-Christopher Merrill, from Watch Fire

<i><b>The Lure</b></i>	<i><b>Building Our House</b></i>
<i>Planted like a tree on the edge of the bank My box of traps is my accomplice Ripples, clouds that come and linger Shifty and uncertain, it moves along... and comes back, it is also my secret friend.</i>	<i>From the ground up we built it The rocky earth was shifted, heaped, and moved Until we found its position satisfactory At first it was just a hole in the ground But later it would become much more</i>
<i>The light plays with my senses My mind drifts and is consumed The immaculate display of whim... I am a willing captive.</i>	<i>The summer rains turned it into the mud puddle of a giant Winter would bring icy winds And freeze the earth solid</i>
<i>Bethany (10<sup>th</sup> gr., Mt. Gilead HS)</i>	<i>I can still hear the low hum then roar Of the space heater I can still smell the burning leaves</i>

	-Heather (10 <sup>th</sup> gr., Mt. Gilead HS)
<p><b><i>Climbing a tree or a rope</i></b></p> <p><i>I hold fast to the earth as I move up through the air. Knowing if I were to let go, the air would pass right through me, &amp; I'd be back to where the air began.</i></p> <p>Sarah M (10<sup>th</sup> gr., Mt. Gilead HS)</p>	<p><b><i>The Fire</i></b></p> <p><i>Sitting there glowing in the night, How I got here I don't know People standing all around me rubbing their hands They're relying on me to keep them warm I start to flicker and shrink A man grabs a stick and starts to poke at me Trying to stay strong for their sake, I just don't have the power to So slowly I start to die As I feel I've disappointed them</i></p> <p>Brittany (10<sup>th</sup> gr., Mt. Gilead HS)</p>

### ***Exercise #3: Supposing***

1. Pass out 35 blank cards to each "player."
2. Have each person put "concrete nouns" on the first ten, each word with a strong B, D, G, K, P, or T sound (called the mutes, and said by many people, including Mary Oliver, to be the strongest sounds in the language, especially for poetry).
3. Shuffle these cards and deal out four to yourself, leaving the blank cards aside.
4. For each of these four words, come up with three words that "alliterate" with it, either for the first letter or for other strong letters (for "strum," for instance, one might add three cards with "middle," "song" and "strike"). The only hint here would be to keep the words as physically or concrete based as possible. At this point, you will have 22 cards.
5. Now, add five active, interesting verbs from your blank cards. You will then have 27 word cards.
6. Shuffle all the cards-with-words on them again, and draw out four more, adding two "half-rhymes" for each (half-rhymes being words that almost rhyme, but not quite--such as "leaf" having **some** of the sound of "life," but not all; they can add a subtle new texture to poems, without the reader being so blatantly made aware of it, as with full rhyme).

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

*Model poem for working with “supposing” and playful language:*

### **SUPPOSE YOUR FATHER WAS A REDBIRD**

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

*Suppose, before you could speak, you watched  
The slow spread of his wing over and over,  
The appearance of that invisible appendage,  
The unfolding transformation of his body to the airborne.  
And you followed his departure again and again,  
Learning to distinguish the red microbe of his being  
Far into the line of the horizon.  
Then today you might be the only one able to see  
The breast of a single red bloom  
Five miles away across an open field.  
The modification of your eye might have enabled you  
To spot a red moth hanging on an oak branch  
In the exact center of the Aurorean Forest.  
And you could define for us, "hearing red in the air,"  
As you predict the day pollen from the poppy  
Will blow in from the valley.*

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

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

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

*Pulling itself and the sky in dark red*

*Over the edge of the earth.*

*-Pattiann Rogers, from FIRE KEEPER*

*STUDENT EXAMPLES—from Jill Grubb's 10<sup>th</sup> grade English/Mt. Gilead, Ohio:*

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

*Suppose Christmas presents hung from pillows  
Suppose the pinnacle of the beaming lamp ran away  
Suppose the laugh of water could be heard all over (Bethany)*

*Suppose stampedes were clumsy  
Suppose laughter had a temper (Nate)*

*Suppose a distant daylight dawned inside your brain (Brian)*

*Suppose you were a catdog and romped in the grass  
You looking dark and flubbery (Heather)*

*Suppose all the stones were trees and all the trees  
were stone as the water is cement and the bus is a camel  
Turn fur into dogs or a dock into a giant bomb exploding  
with a boom and a laugh, and every lock in the world was free (Corky)*

*Suppose everything you say rhymes with shoelace and whim  
Suppose kings opened doors for others (Brenna)*

*Suppose you could look through the dark  
and see the dog making its dreadful journey  
Suppose you couldn't laugh or see beauty (Rachel)*

*Suppose your goal was to become a board (Shelby)*

*Suppose making was in the midst (Ben V)*

*Suppose the ground sizzled the damp of the room (Jenny)*

*Suppose a sweater poked like a nail  
Suppose flubber (Lauren)*



## ***Exercise Four: Writing About Local History Through Photographs***

*Model poem from writing about old photographs:*

### ***An Old Photograph from Vermont***

*We are too far away to see the pattern  
of the embroidery she holds against  
the back of the chair in front of the house  
with its open window and two screened doors.*

*Nor is her face clear, though she seems  
to smile. Curves of a mountain blur off  
to each side, and a pair of apple trees  
press thin shade upon the walls.*

*It is late summer, blackberry season.*

*Beyond fields which we cannot see, a stream  
burrows into the cool side of a hill. Further,  
in wild country where she has never gone,  
one dark pond reflects a circle of spruce,*

*and the birds are silent, for this is the time  
just before a storm, when leaves grow heavy,  
and your heat thickens for no reason.*

*Why, then, is she smiling,*

*as the first gust falls into the yard, as husband  
or father calls from the house, telling her  
to come in, far off telling her that, as*

*she strays into the crush of weeds, at the edge  
of the field, beyond garden, barn, and all  
of us. You would think she believes*

*the wind will carry her away.*

*-Lawrence Raab – from Mysteries of the Horizon*



Figure 7.16 Unknown photographer, “Sister Vanatta, Butcher”

***Sister Vanatta***

*He keeps his shop so clean,  
 even though the freshly  
 cut meat hangs on the wall.  
 Only two lights to the room,  
 but the sun shines in so bright.  
 You can hear the Dayton National Ohio  
 cash register click on the \$1 sign.  
 You can almost feel the  
 chariot engraved in the  
 southwestern wall.  
 But what you don't notice  
 nor does he  
 is that above the door  
 is a reflection of  
 a face, my face,  
 with my staff and halo.  
 For I am his guardian angel  
 that watches a man  
 with winter hair & floor  
 patterns of leaves.  
 I am his watcher.*

-Sarah M (10<sup>th</sup> grade/Mt. Gilead H.S.)



***What If***

*...the reflections on the new Chevy are foreshadow  
to modern day Zebra Stripes?*

*...the hydraulic lift uses strength holding life  
up high?*

*What if their days have gone bad, but yet they  
keep going, looking intent?*

*What if they're old friends from high school  
reuniting, bringing back memories?*

*What if they are nothing but kind strangers,  
one helping the other out?*

*What if they're finishing up last minute work  
before their wives call them in for dinner?*

*What if they're friendly Mt. Gileadeans  
just doing what they love to do?*

-Shelby

## EXERCISE #5: THE SIX-BLOCK FIELD TRIP

### Bench

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

*Rachel (10<sup>th</sup> gr., Mt. Gilead HS)*

### Confession

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

*Brian D. (10<sup>th</sup> gr., Mt. Gilead HS)*

### Riddle

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

*Sara L (10<sup>th</sup> gr., Mt. Gilead HS)*

## EXERCISE #6: Writing At the State Park

Model Poem for Writing Outside -- Looking “Out” and Looking “Down”

### Milkweed

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

-James Wright, from *THE BRANCH WILL NOT BREAK*

### STUDENT EXAMPLE OF A “LOOK OUT / LOOK DOWN” ASSIGNMENT:

*I hear the bridge creak unsteadily  
beneath me,  
my imagination looks deeper and  
spots a troll.  
You can dig into our soul,  
but be careful,  
too deep and you may pay a toll.  
Water is shallow.  
It's like a painting,  
the muddy banks drip softly  
into shallow,  
still, yet rippling water.  
Autumn tinted leaves that  
sleep upon the water  
look as though they are  
small, separate fires  
whose flames have silently  
faded.  
Dull, gray rocks play the  
role of headstones.*

*With my feet dangling aside  
the bridge,  
it looks & feels as though  
I can walk atop the shallow  
waves.  
I turn as the breeze blows  
in,  
the other side is completely  
different.  
The rocks are still entombed  
within the dark waters.  
But moist blades of fading grass  
enclose the rushing waters which  
are not so still as the other side  
portrays.  
Emerging from the lining  
are rusted stems,  
brightened with the new  
blooms of almost  
winter berries.*

-Kelley (10<sup>TH</sup> grade/Mt. Gilead HS)

## *Postscript: SHELBY'S DREAM*

### *Shelby's Dream*

*We were going on a field trip to write poems about old buildings and I was trying to direct you (the bus driver) to my church. Well I kind of got us lost and we ended up on this road (near Galion) that my family and I take to get to my Grandparents' house. But at the intersection that we were at, there were two old buildings - one on each side of the road.*

*Well my parents were on the bus and they said that they owned this 'building/house' (which looked like an old school house, so my parents took me in it and showed me around. And the inside was a mixture of my aunt's house and an old Victorian house. So I decided to go around by myself and I managed to get downstairs and it was HUGE! There were like 50 'great rooms' and this bar (which I don't know why it would be there b/c my parents don't really drink) and all this other cool stuff. -Oh, and then when I went out to see the pool, the outside wasn't a school house, it was what a normal huge house would look like. (Yeah, and I don't know what happened to you and Mrs. Grubb and the rest of the class.)*

### *SHELBY'S FINAL POEM THAT SEMESTER:*

#### ***Blumpy Donuts***

*It looks like people are serving each other,  
sharing the 'blumpness' of each doughnut,  
everyone standing back waiting their turn.*

*It seems like someone is holding the pan side  
ways, and will gradually let them slip to the ground.  
The bakery has been attacked! (flipped/turned)*

*It may appear that the boys will soon be dumping  
the doughnuts into a backpack and then making  
a run for it.*

*They are trying to dump the doughnuts, they won't  
fall off  
The doughnuts seems to have a sweet glue that  
keeps them bonded to the tray  
Magnetic poles have strengthenly pulled  
away from the boy and he uses his strength  
to keep ahold*

*The sweet doughnuts glide down the raspberry  
tray and land in the boy's hand  
This, this is the chosen tray, hold thee above  
all other doughnuts  
A tasteful treat heading right to my mouth*

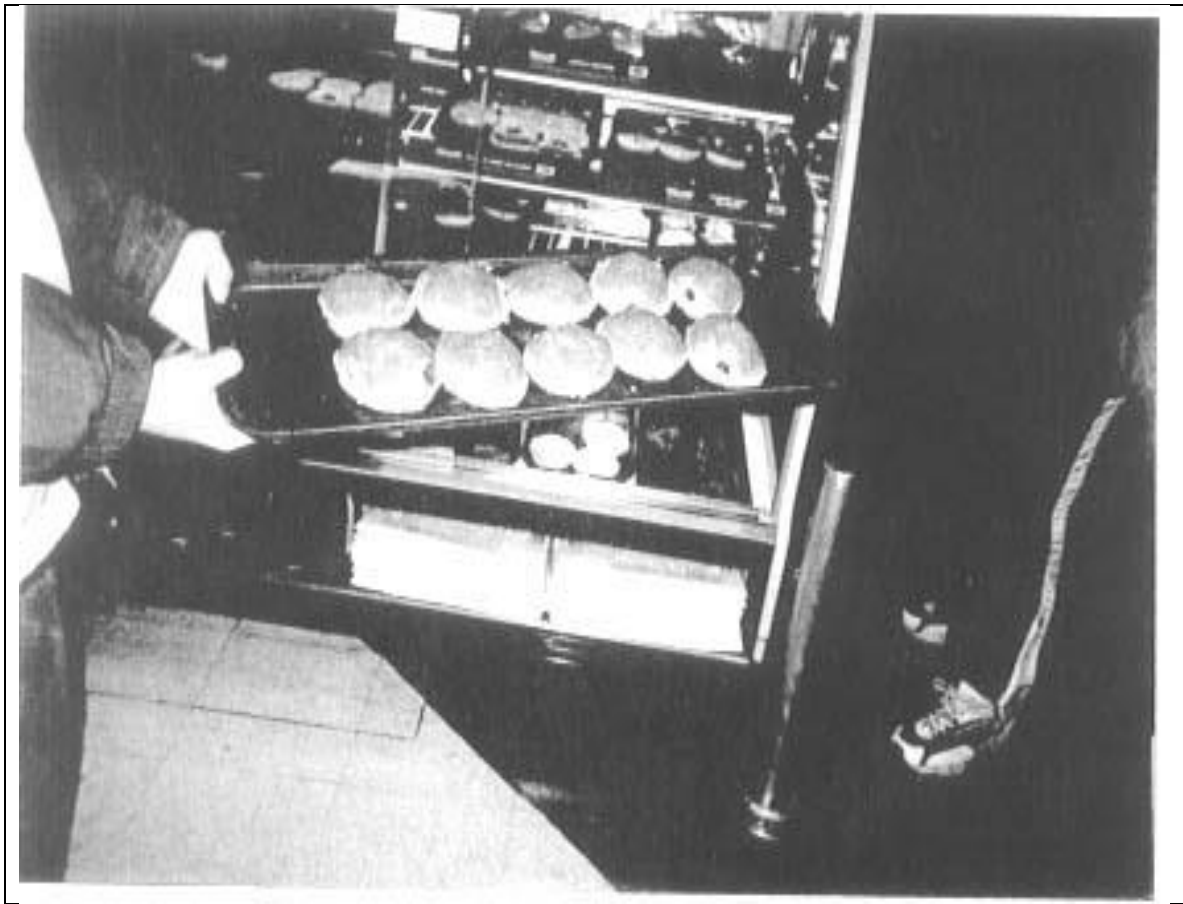
*-Shelby (10<sup>th</sup> grade/ Mt. Gilead, Ohio)*

Shelby was charged up by the end of this writing! She called me over, all excited, saying: "I think I finally got it!" Still, she claimed it wasn't a poem yet—until I showed her all the places she was doing exactly what a poem does... metaphorizing, inventing, describing, noticing small details, imagining alternative possibilities. Frame by frame, as the photograph turns in her hands, she "explains" the new dimensions (and the defiance of gravity) in wildly logical ways. Now she can do what she could not do earlier: create, in a few words, a scene in her mind that responds to/interacts with the image in front of her.

Her language itself follows suit, becoming more risky and heightened when she needs it to. Again, as she did with "Mt Gileadeans," she makes up new words when she has to: "blumpness" and "strengthenly." And most magical of all, she borrows from her church experience to make the moment at the invaded bakery a "holy" moment (excuse the pun) with her line, "This is the chosen tray, hold thee above all other donuts."

This is a writer no longer afraid of failure, one able to see and create and bask in the possibilities of her own creation. One no longer worried about "what a poem is," and much more concerned with conveying her original vision. When she stood before the class that Friday afternoon and read her poem to us, she made quite an elaborate point of showing how each section was written from a different angle of the photograph. Others laughed, perhaps thinking she was going too far. I, on the other hand, was proud. Shelby had shown us all a new twist on how to see, and how to connect our words to enhance our connection to even the most ordinary of aspects of the world around us. In a word, she was "engaged." And more than that, I think she knew it.

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*Figure 8.4 anonymous photographer, "Donuts"*

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