Strange Students in a Strange Land:
An Excerpt from A Poem for Every Student

by

SHERYL LAIN

In winter of 1996, Sheryl Lain, director of the Wyoming Writing Project, submitted to The Quarterly her article, "A Poem for Every Student." Reading her piece, we knew we were in the presence of a rare talent, both as a writer and as a teacher. We asked Sheryl to expand her article into a book, one which illustrates the special way she connects with her students by writing each of them a poem. A Poem for Every Student: Creating Community in a Public School Classroom, is being published by the National Writing Project this November. Sheryl's book is much more than a book of poems; it is a clear-eyed, articulate portrait of the complexity of school life and a moral and practical guide for teachers building more humane classrooms.

—The Editors

Junior highs house lunatics, and I don't mean just the students.

I'd taught four years in high school before we moved from central Wyoming to Cheyenne. In our new home town, I landed a junior high teaching job, and thus began a stint of some fifteen years with the crowd who taught me about rocking along, afloat on a sea of hormones.

The first faculty meeting should have warned me. The teachers at the table across from mine giggled manically while the principal talked. Their junior high behavior hinted at things to come, a craziness that was confirmed at the first faculty party.

When I came home from the October ice breaker, my husband Gayle asked, "How'd it go?"

"You gotta get me out of this place."

"Why? What happened?"

"Those people threw food at each other. A slice of bologna landed on my head. We were kicked out of the Coors Hospitality Room after the fist fight."

"A fist fight? You gotta be kidding."

"Nope. Ever heard of the horn trick?"

"Oh, yeah. The one where some fool blows flour all over himself?"

"Yeah. The PE guy did it to the music guy. The music guy has good lungs, being a singer and all, and he blew hard on some crazy-looking horn. Didn't realize that the end of the horn was loaded with flour aimed right at his face. He didn't think the prank was funny. He hit the PE guy before those nuts could quit laughing long enough to grab his arms."

Gayle grinned in spite of himself.

"So much stuff was going on I got a headache."

In spite of my culture shock, I didn't resign from that junior high, and by the Christmas faculty party, bologna throwing didn't seem out of the ordinary any more.

Something happens to all the inmates in junior high. The students lead the way, and the teachers follow.
The teachers who cut up, resembling their own students, are in some way validating the kids’ stages. I’ve known teachers who perform pratfalls, just to show students they can live through embarrassment. “See, kids,” the teacher behavior seems to say, “you fall down, you laugh, you live to tell about it.”

During my long stay in junior high, I knew some loonie birds, and some kids filled to the brim with rage, pain, fear. Students this age are like fresh garden tomatoes: they have very thin skins. From them, I learned to dislodge some of my own stuffy perceptions about propriety so I could be a better teacher. I’m convinced that once I learned to deal with weird people, I really learned to teach.

Robbie the Red Baron
Take seventh-grade Robbie. He was a very strange boy. During finals, he entertained himself, at the same time he was doing a first-rate job of revising a piece for his writing folder, by flying his desk. First, he’d tip the wings to the left. Then he’d tip the wings to the right. He accompanied the maneuvers with sound effects, not too loud, but loud enough for me to hear. When I gave him the teacher-laser look, he winked at me.

Another time, all of us, teacher and students, were right there with Pony Boy in The Outsider. Back in our world, a police siren sounded out on Pershing Street. Some of us were so engrossed in escaping the burning building we didn’t even register the noise, but Robbie hit the floor shouting, “Take shelter! Take shelter!” He never really quit acting.

Robbie fit into the loonie category. I gave him this poem.

Robbie
So much depends upon
the bright green gum bubble
Robbie blows.
It pops on his nose
a light bright note in this gray day.

My poem to Rob tried to tell him that, for all his kooky behaviors, I liked him. In my words, he could sense that it was OK to be zany. Even grownups need to keep alive some adolescent whackiness—belly laughing, racing their own kids, and retaining a mischievous twinkle in their eyes. Adulthood without a little adolescent goofiness is like 7-Up without carbonation. I wanted Rob to know that I knew he’d grow up. When he did, I had complete confidence he’d remember to zip up his mouth in business meetings.

School Subtracts Steve
While the junior high milieu may be the source of oddball humor, it is also an environment that generates a lot of pain. Steve’s ninth grade year was terrible. Small for his age, Steve prayed to the puberty god for growth. “Please,” he’d beg, “let me grow out of size ten T-shirts.” His prayers weren’t immediately answered. PE was agony, showering with the other boys, fearing the ridicule he came to expect.

Steve’s clenched jaw revealed his barely controlled rage. At school, he held himself rigidly in check. At home, his mom eventually told me, he let it all out, venting. He screamed himself hoarse, even shoved her once, hard. She’d had it, put him in the psych ward of the local hospital for three weeks. After all, she was tired, raising Steve alone with no father to offer support and occasional relief.

At first I didn’t know why he disappeared from school. I asked around the lounge. Fran, a science teacher, was there; she didn’t know him. Neither did some guy at the coffee machine, whose name I didn’t know. No one did. Our school housed about 1,200 students, not large by some standards, but I caught myself feeling that old frustration: this school does more to keep people separated than it does to help us connect. What Native American tribe was it, I mused, that maintained itself at about fifty people? If they exceeded fifty, they couldn’t keep track of everyone so the tribe would split.

After the third day, a homebound teacher came to my door, asking for Steve’s homework; that’s when I learned where he was.

Steve came back to class subdued. He never wrote or talked about the time-out. We both knew where he’d been, but he shut his mouth about the whole experience. I felt sorry for him. He reminded me of my own son, now away in college. Jade used to be a little like Steve. But my boy’s rage turned inward, forming a murky pool of depression. At home I talked about Steve, expressing my concern for him. The talk, the fact that a teacher cared, comforted my grown boy, who still remembered the nightmare of adolescence.
I wrote about Steve in my teacher journal.

Steve
does not know
he sits at my dinner table.
I think of him daily and my other blood son
away at college
I knew their inner staggerings against walls
and the bruises.
My own son in his long purgatory
cried,
"Is it worth it?
Where's the pattern that makes sense?"
Somehow,
knowing I carry this student around in my heart
comforts my own son.

I hoped that Steve could sense my compassion. I think he did. Three years later I worked with him and 150 other student writers in a writing clinic out at the college. He came up to me and, reserved as he was, touched my arm, a Steve embrace, distant but warm.

Steve wrote about his feelings toward school in a poignant poem about learning the hard way how school subtracts a person.

Arithmetic of School
Take the total of a person
Subtract 20% for a parent's degrading remarks.
You are 80%
Subtract another 20% for kids who hinder and pester.
You are 60%
Subtract another 20% for teachers
who do not see, do not help.
You are now 40%.
Lose another 20% a day for relatives
who do not openly love and cherish.
You are 20%.
Drop another 20% due to shyness and low self-esteem.
You are 0.

Though Steve never openly talked about his "mental" problems, Arithmetic communicated his suffering and loneliness. Eventually, he felt strong enough to publish his poem in the school literary magazine.

About School
Who ever thought it would be a good idea to pack goofballs like Robbie and sufferers like Steve together?

The whole time I worked with this age group, I found myself wishing for something better. A better way to get the job done. Students like Robbie need stages and spotlights and a real audience to play to. For every play in the curriculum, they need to perform in one, complete with spotlights, make-up. They need to connect with someone else in biographies and history books, someone whom they admired, someone who made them cry. For every novel they read raising issues of social class or prejudice, they need to build a bus shelter or deliver a meal on wheels. For every poem to read, they need to write ten and produce literary magazines. They needed newspapers to publish, debates to hold on earth-shaking issues, lots of writing about their lives, their loved ones, their beloved places. And in the process of learning and doing, the sad ones like Steve might feel more at home.

These pseudo-adults needed to stretch their wings, however silly and awkward they look — to take risks and laugh at their own mistakes. Junior highs should be safe places to practice flying and flopping. Hard to do in the current setting.

I taught fifteen years in a traditional junior high, straight out of the '50s. Fonzie would have felt at home there. Seventh, eighth, and ninth graders careened through the doors at 7:30 a.m., three hours before they were fully awake. They were released at 2:30, three hours before parents came home from work to keep them out of trouble. Lunch lasted twenty minutes — long enough for all of us to wolf down our food, but not long enough for anyone to start a full-fledged food or fist fight.

The bells rang every 44 minutes all day and the lockers were off limits, period, the better to prevent locker horseplay, such as locking small Steve inside. Kids took English, social studies, science, math, P.E., shop, home ec, foreign language, art, music — all segregated from one another, all content-driven.

If you were smart or had aggressive parents, you might land in honors something or other. If you were "dumb" or parentless or misunderstood, you might find yourself in remedial something. And that's the pack you ran with all day.

Parents of junior highers didn't come to school much, maybe because they couldn't negotiate a relationship
with anyone on campus, full to overflowing with half-crazed inmates. In many junior highs, PTOs and PTAs cease to exist, and fewer parents come to open house. Maybe, discomfited, they remember their own pains and idiocies those umpteen years ago when they were in the same junior high boat.

Traditional junior highs do not work anymore, if they ever did, and moving ninth graders to high schools in order to make room for sixth graders to join the rat race isn’t the answer. Instead, I pined for some elementary school practices: self-contained classrooms, longer blocks of uninterrupted time, more hands-on learning, more integrated subjects, fewer students for a few teachers to teach all day long, everyone getting to know and feel responsible for one another.

Those big schools were built under the faulty assumption that bigger is cheaper. One principal, one utility bill, one cafeteria crew. But the debits outweigh the credits. The more kids in one place, the more disciplinarians. More principals, cops, counselors, special services personnel are hired to manage the crowds. Volunteers, like foster grandparents, found in every elementary school, are scarce as hounds’ teeth in junior high. They’re probably intimidated by the numbers packed in school like tuna in Star-Kist cans.

Once, a group of teachers from Japan came to Cheyenne and wanted to tour a typical American junior high. My principal, bless him, came to my room — it was my prep period — and asked me to show them around. I dreaded the job. It was Friday afternoon, last period. It was spring, so juices were flowing inside and out. To top it all off, it was Crazy Day, meaning students could dress up in some wild costume depicting ’50s attire. In short, the kids were wound up.

I met my guests at the front door, all of us smiling and bowing at one another. Off we went down the long math hall. I figured that’d be a safe place to find some real work going on. Wrong! In the first room, two boys were standing in the front of the room, squared off, wearing boxing gloves. The teacher looked up at us with glazed eyes.

Oops! Bad day here. I led my gaggle off to the next room. Kids were sitting atop desks, on the radiator, talking away the last ten minutes of the week. In another room kids were watching a movie, in another they were arguing about the best make of cars.

The bell was about to ring letting school out. I needed to find a safe place for my entourage out of harm’s way when the floodgates of hell were raised, so I herded them into a little alcove out of the hallway. Some kids dashed out of rooms a few minutes early, clanging the doors against the walls. When the bell rang, the kids hit the halls in earnest, running off their adrenaline-powered joy. Seeing our school from the visitors’ eyes, I began to wonder in earnest about how, and why, we do things the way we do.

**Doug Caught in Time Warp**

Doug, like Steve, was another small boy, but he copped by ignoring all of us completely. When he came to, which he rarely did, he acted surprised to find himself in junior high school. He wasn’t done playing and imagining fantastic journeys far away from the realities of school. I watched Doug work his way down the hallway to the lunchroom. There he was, a boy who hadn’t yet shaved, applied deodorant, or tamed down his cowlick. He shuffled along behind a gaggle of ninth grade girls — Laura and her crew — probably giggling about sexual adventures last Friday night. I saw an arm snake out of the mash of bodies and hit him in the back of the head, lurching him forward into the girls.

From my vantage point against the hall, I saw all their vulnerabilities — the girls worrying about red stains on the backs of their white pants, the boys feeling too puny to peel off their shirts in PE, the seventh graders worrying about their locker combinations, everyone sniffing the air, using that special adolescent radar to detect the rise and fall of their social standing.

Doug’s defense against the hullabaloo was to check out, mentally. He just wasn’t there. He spent so much time fantasizing I was surprised he could find his way home to supper. His writing was never first-person narrative, never about his own real-life experiences. Instead, he wrote wild tales about superheroes, crosses between flora and fauna, with some human traits thrown in. He never paid attention and he never combed his hair. That’s how disconnected he was from the classroom and his social condition. Doug created a hiatus, a place in his head to be for a while until something shook him awake — puberty or future responsibilities.
I gave Doug his poem gift.

Doug’s off on vacation at his desk sometimes.
He wants to write his own way
no limits
and his story of the gruesome, man-eating tree
proves he should.
He learned to be in la-la land at school.
Elementary school
forced him to color in the lines of very narrow hall-
ways.
Junior high
combed his hair flat, taming boyhood cowlicks.
Somehow, in this Halloween House of Horrors,
he manages to have fun.
That alone makes you a Huck Finn grinning hero.

Donie Fears School
At the beginning of seventh grade, Donie was absent almost every day. The change from her neighborhood elementary to the big junior high did her in. She was scared of forgetting her locker combination. She was scared of the giant ninth graders lorded over the hallways. She was scared of forgetting what homework was assigned in what class. Fear made her sick.

One day, with Donie present, I told the class about an experiment I remembered from some psychology text, about how these experimenters wanted to test the stress levels of parents who came to junior high open house. They hooked their parent-subjects up to skin-sensitive equipment and had them do some visual imagery about their own junior high days. The needles on those instruments just had a jumping fit. Fears, real or imagined, loom around the corners in secondary schools, and grownups still remember.

Eventually Donie started coming to school and staying. She wrote friendships in her journal, all about growing up out in the country. Her insight was remarkably perceptive for a thirteen-year-old. She told about how her mother fashioned a switch and faked like she would use it just to get Donie on the school bus in first grade. Donie was afraid of the bus driver who had a funny nose. She told about how she got sick every single time they went on a trip to see her grandma—even her stomach was sensitive to change.

I, too, grew up in the country and, like Donie, was the designated garbage burner. One time after school, we talked about our common experiences. We’d been working on the school newspaper, and Donie was waiting for a ride. “Were you ever afraid to take out the garbage at night?” She nodded her head. “Night sure comes early in the winter.” I showed her a little poem I’d written about my terrors.

Going out toward the deep darkness
with the trash
I’m confidence, the light house at my back, whistling
to still the small fear.
I dump and turn
my back vulnerable against the listening night.
I pick up speed racing no breath for whistling,
to the pool of back porch light and screened safety
in the nick of time
slam the door on the fingers of fear.
Taking a deep breath,
I whistle into the house
hiding my wheezing weakness.

Thus began our poem conversations. Back and forth.
I wrote one; Donie wrote one.

Did you ever wonder that stars
maybe feel our eyes pull up?
Did you ever wonder that moons
know they pull our blood like tides?
Did you ever wonder that green grass knows
it pulls us flat to the earth?
Sometimes I think
stars, moons, grass
know more than me.

I wrote to her during our poem exchange before Christmas break. The unsaid message in this poem is how much I admire Donie’s ability to bounce back and right herself.

Donie
a gentle girl, rare in junior high schools
so busy manufacturing cookie-cutter kids.
It made you sick at first.
Your mom wrote excuses for you.
Days at a time you stayed home in bed
during your seventh grade year of adjustment.
The miracle?
You came back and landed a spot on the honor roll.
You survived school
without hardening your heart.
Today, Donie is a wonderful and wise kindergarten teacher, gently ushering the little ones into the world of school.

Shane, the Grade Grunger
“What was the poem you read, about the wheelbarrow?” Shane was busy at the computer, word processing.

“What poem? Are you sure I read it?”

“Yeah, it had to be you. You’re the only one who reads poems to me.”

Shane killed himself for a 4.0 grade average. His mother called me a few weeks after school started to be sure I knew the kind of stress Shane put on himself. I told her I knew he coveted A’s, but, according to the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test, Shane’s reading ability was average; according to the district writing test, his writing was average. No matter, this kid would not settle for average grades.

I wrote this poem for Shane. Then I decided not to give it to him. No sense in giving him more of my opinion than he could tolerate.

Shane, your mom
called alerting
me to your quest for straight A’s.
I said I know
but hinted, so as not to make her mad, that
self respect and deep learning
shouldn’t be sacrificed to the GPA god.
Said: What a tricky balance helping a boy know
quantity isn’t quality.
We all use fake mile markers
on the muddy road of life,
like:
What car do you drive? Are those Guess jeans?
It’s almost un-American of me to think
that coveting after A’s is
a dead end in this school puzzle.
You know those Pizza Hut mazes kids draw on with
a pencil line?
Sometimes you bump smack into a dead end.
Grades alone won’t take you everywhere you want to be.

Because he loved right answers so much, Shane was poetry-phobic, worrying that I might give him a B for a reason he couldn’t even fathom. He was much more comfortable with true/false tests, one clear right answer to memorize. But he relaxed once he realized he wouldn’t be tested nor asked to analyze. “Just listen.” That’s all I asked of him. Poetry offered Shane the idea that he could play with language. He quit tying himself into knots, trying to be perfect the first time around. I got a kick out of watching him squint his eyes and move his words around here and there, like furniture, just to see the effect.

Something about reading poetry enriches the air in the classroom. The words in the poems, the shape of them, crop up in student writing.

One day at the computer he was composing an imitation of William Carlos Williams’ “Red Wheelbarrow.”

Wheelbarrow:
So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

Shane’s version was fresh as peppermint:

So much depends
upon the white lifesaver
glazed with sugar coating.
I taste winter.

Shane fell in love that ninth-grade year, with Melissa, a pretty, peppy cheerleader, and he was just as intense about her as he was about grades. He wrote this poem, published it in the classroom anthology:

Long long ago
three months
my life shot up like a rocket
for
when I asked
you said yes.

Melissa loved Shane — for a month or so. Then, in typical ninth-grade style, she broke up with him two days after he wrote his poem.
Shane was devastated, for a few hours. But he was spunky and he’d learned, partly through poetry writing, to go a little easier on himself. The writing helped him figure out what he was thinking — and how he thought. Maybe more than any other kind of writing, the poetry allowed him to be free enough to feel the power of words, a liberation that perked up his other writing. He was learning to balance straight-line thinking with playfulness and imagination.

Writing was such an important learning tool for my junior high students. It helped them keep their footing. They needed to write every day just to keep up with themselves, to move all their learning into consciousness. Junior high minds, like Shane’s, are in a waking-up stage. They still remember the times tables and the names of states and capitals memorized in elementary school, but their minds are at a different place. The “Ah-ha!” learning happens more and more often. When those book and school concepts connect with the students’ inarticulated knowing, their faces look like they just awoke from hibernation.

Shane kept getting A’s in my class, but his jaw relaxed and he quit hanging out at my desk arguing over every lost half point.

**Mighty Morphin Travelers**

Teaching in junior high taught me about emotional roller coaster rides. Even though kids looked like they were morphing at the speed of light, catapulting around blind corners, their core selves were somewhere inside, intact. Once I talked with Brian, my student teacher, about how sometimes I had this feeling. Maybe if I looked closely at Shane, or Donie or Doug, squinting my eyes in concentration, I could project them safely into some future place with all their unique inner flavors intact.

After we talked, I wrote a poem and shared it with Brian.

*Beam Me Up, Teach,*
*I love them,*
*these blatant busybodies,*
*awkward child-men of our species.*
*Their split hooves tap a constant rhythm*
*down the corridors of youth.*
*Riding the rapids, they abandon safety for experience.*
*What scars? They shrug.*
*They charge every red sea,*
*expecting water walls to part.*

I’m an inanimate object to them,
a life preserver,
ready to buoy their heads above the water
before they submerge on the third count.

Originally, Brian had wanted to teach high school, but he’s teaching junior high instead, out in California. I picture him on his roller coaster ride, holding on for dear life. Maybe even throwing food at a faculty party.

Sheryl Lain is director of the Wyoming Writing Project.

A Poem for Every Student can be ordered from the National Writing Project by calling (510) 642-0963.