I'm Listening to You:
A Poetry Writing Lesson

by Patrice Vecchione

Choosing lessons is an intuitive process. Lessons should be developmentally appropriate, engage the students' imagination, and preferably relate to other areas of the curriculum. I take clues from the students' responses and the poems they write. This, however, is a good beginning lesson:

Poetry is something to listen for, words which, at times, seem to come from a long way off. What are those words calling to us? Since we rely heavily on sight, even when we devote a poem to what we are hearing, we're likely to make a poem we can see as well as hear. To make our imagery fuller, it's good to wake those sleepier senses. I use this poem by Robert Bly:

Listening to a Cricket in the Wainscoting
That sound of his is like a boat with black sails.
Or a widow under a redwood tree, warning passersby that the tree is about to fall.
Or a bell made of black tin in a Mexican village.
Or the hair in the ear of a hundred-year-old man!

This poem works with children as young as kindergartners, and it's evocative for older children as well. You may need to define wainscoting, a good word to illustrate how the sounds of words can surprise and delight us. The short poem begins, "That sound of his is like a boat with black sails," and ends, "Or the hair in the ear of a hundred-year-old man!"

To begin, we talk a little about the day's writing idea, then I read a poem or two, rarely more than three. I like to read poems at the beginning, to invite the imagination in, then discuss what we could write. I may ask, "What do you listen for? What wakes up your ears? What sounds scare you? Think of those that let you know something good is going to happen, like the sound of a friend calling you, inviting you to play." I may read a poem again before we write to stimulate the imagination, to move away from sequential, predictable talk into the realm of anything-can-happen-now.

Following is a poem written by one class of seven- to ten-year-olds. After deciding what we should imagine listening to, they each wrote "What I'm Listening To" poems, then I served as scribe as they offered lines out loud for the following group poem:

Listening to a Waterfall from the Side of a Road
Near a Chinese Garden
That sound is like a faint, out of tune hurdy-gurdy.
The water falling into my washtub.
Ten cats hissing at me.
The beat of an African drum.
A 90 year old woman opening a door.
The water falling from my faucet.
The steady beat of a tabla.
The silvery star and the golden moon.
The high pitched crashing of a bagpipe from Spain.

by Matthew Bush, Erin-Kate Escober, Justin Fisher,
Bennet Jackson, Sally Nordgren,
Bethany Thippen, and Daniel Vahradian

* "Listening to a Cricket in the Wainscotting" by Robert Bly is from This Tree Will Be Here for a Thousand Years and is also in The Invisible Ladder: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poems for Young Readers edited by Liz Rosenberg.