

Literate Stirrings

The sign announced that we could get our passport photos *and* our children's first communion pictures here—quickly. Next to it, above another storefront, hand-lettering invited us to visit—*visítenos*—for this was a wholesaler open to the public: *precios de mayoreo al público*. A little shop selling *artículos religiosos*—pictures, medals, and statues of Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary—was next to a dark, dark bar with a blond speaking Spanish on a Budweiser poster, and that bar was cheek-by-jowl to a *zapatería* with unclaimed, dusty shoes in the window below a promotional sign that read, in English, “invisible half-soling.” It was all part of a walking tour of Brooklyn Avenue with Lillian, a compatriot in the Teacher Corps, who translated the Spanish along this busy East Los Angeles street with its mix of merchants and shoppers. The buildings were off-white and decorated in once-bright yellows, reds, oranges, and blues. Print was everywhere, neon, ornate lettering, and crude, hand-painted signs: *carnicería, farmacia, frutas tropicales, panadería, chorizos, camisas, tortillería*. There were many smells in the air, and they were strong and varied—mesquite, grilled pork, baking bread, leather, honeydew, wet wood, mothballs—and Norteña, the music of the north of Mexico—played loud from a record shop, its upbeat, choppy accordion counterposing lyrics of great sadness:

O tierra del sol
suspiro por verte
ahora que lejos
yo vivo sin luz; sin amor

"He's terribly homesick," explained Lillian. "He's saying he's living without light and without love. Pretty serious, huh?" *Quisiera llorar*, wailed the singers, *quisiera morir de sentimiento*.

The Teacher Corps separated its volunteers into teams, and each team was attached to school districts in depressed areas of the county. Lillian and I were part of a team of five: Joe Palacios and Monica de la Torre were the other two interns, and Benigno Campos, a seasoned teacher, was our supervisor. Lillian's father was Edward Roybal, a member of Congress and a longtime advocate of progressive social policy, so her involvement in Mexican American affairs started in her childhood. Lillian and I and the others had been together for two months now, and we would soon be going into the elementary schools of Ben's district in El Monte, a community eight or so miles to the southeast of Brooklyn Avenue. Concurrent with our internship, we would be taking courses at USC, the home base for the Los Angeles Urban Teacher Corps. We were in two of them then, Social Stratification and Sociology of Education, and we would continue taking courses for the next two years that, in various ways, were oriented to the work we would be doing in the schools.

Half a block down from the record store was a market that opened out onto the street. Crates of lemons and oranges and banana squash were shoved together along the sidewalk; the squashes were cut open, and webbed clusters of their yellow seeds spilled out onto the wood and concrete. Lillian stopped by a crate of *nopales*, the cactus that women strip and put up in bottles to marinate. "It was a special treat," she said, "to go to our grandmother's house for breakfast. She'd scramble little bits of nopales in with our eggs." Above the market was a row of small apartments. Some of the windows were cracked and held in place with masking tape that crisscrossed the glass. Others were smooth. And still others were decorated with lace curtains, tied carefully back. The window above the place where Lillian had parked her car had orchids on the sill and a cactus with bright red flowers.

Lillian walked over to the driver's side of her car while I waited at the curb, absentmindedly finishing off a bag of potato chips. A little boy and, I guess, his younger sister were trying to get a kitten out of an empty shopping cart. The kitten stayed fixed in a far corner out of their reach. The boy heard me saying some-

thing to Lillian as she was reaching across the driver's seat to unlock my door. He left his sister and ran up to me with his hand out: "Papitas, papitas." He grabbed the leg of my jeans and gave it a tug: "Papitas!" I gave him some chips just as his mother was walking out of a store. She stopped cold and stared at me. Lillian was watching this, opened her door, and rose half out of the car, smiling. She spoke to the boy's mother in Spanish, and the woman smiled back and called her son. I got in the car and asked Lillian what she said. "I told her that you were okay—for a gringo," and gave me a poke in the shoulder. "Let's go. There's one more place I want to show you."

We drove further down Brooklyn, passing more shops and cafés, and soon business started mixing with housing: faded bungalows and two-story Los Angeles houses, white and tan and gray. I was reminded of the quiet, old houses along the side streets of South Vermont. One place had a nice porch, and two old women were sitting on wood chairs cutting some sort of vegetable into pans set between their feet. Another house was built back from the street, thirty feet or so. Cars were parked at angles in the yard, and two men, bare-chested, were upholstering the front seat of one of them. Less than a mile from the heart of Brooklyn, we crossed Mednik. To the left of the intersection was a broad stretch of housing projects: rows and rows of run-down cottages that looked like old military barracks.

Lillian explained that these houses had been built in the early 1940s and had since become the bloodiest place in East L.A. It was generally believed that the police wouldn't go in there unless they had heavy support. If they went in at all. Kids were playing baseball and tag and war on the dirt and brown grass. Women were talking to each other from the front steps of their homes. Shirts and sheets were fluttering from makeshift clotheslines. Two cars were up on blocks. An old Ford pulled around our car and into the projects, and a man in grease-covered overalls got out and limped around back of the hut closest to us. "This project is called Maravilla," said Lillian. "And do you know what that means? It means 'the marvelous place.' Can you beat that?"

Many of the people in Maravilla hold onto the hope of moving into communities to the east: Monterey Park, San Gabriel, Montebello, Rosemead, El Monte. El Monte, my assignment, was

named in the 1860s and means "wooded land." From its christening down through the 1940s, El Monte had generated its income primarily through farming—walnuts and, later, cauliflower and onions. Ben, my team leader, was born in one of the city's agricultural settlements, a shantytown for migrant workers named for the owner of the land on which it sat: Hicks Camp. A few people still lived in Hicks, a blighted cluster of one-room shacks, but El Monte had grown beyond its camps. It was a city trying to do its best. The brochure from the historical society announced that El Monte's airport was among the seventy busiest airports in the country and that Crawford's Country Store was the biggest country store in the world.

Northern El Monte ranged from middle to upper middle class, but the rest of the city had a high percentage of working-class whites and poor Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals who were laboring in warehouses and foundries and orange groves to support families here and across the border. The Teacher Corps required its interns to familiarize themselves with the neighborhoods in which they would work, to get to know the people out of whose homes their students would come. This, I would discover, was a very special kind of teacher training. We visited social agencies and community groups. We talked with school board members and principals, teachers and parents, conservative priests and militant Brown Berets. And we drove by and drove by again the small white house with the chain-link fence that was the headquarters for the American Nazi Party, a reminder of what poor whites were willing to do to explain away their misery. Ben had made it out of Hicks, so he knew all the local historians and all the nooks of their history. And he still walked with a trace of the *cholo*: a hint of a slouch to the stride, the right arm swaying slightly behind the butt. Ben and Joe, Monica and Lillian were all Mexican American, so I had the benefit of linguistic and cultural guides.

In some ways, though, I wasn't a greenhorn. There were South L.A. experiences that transferred to the East Side and to the streets and back alleys of El Monte. But one poor slice of a county is not another. All have different political histories, different cultural clashes, dreams shaped in different ways, different languages. When I was growing up, my mother worked on Broadway in downtown Los Angeles, about three miles from Brooklyn

Avenue. Six days a week, she took buses from South Vermont into the heart of the city and then, enervated and mechanical, she took buses back out of it. Her life did not radiate outward, and, for a long time, neither did mine. We were webbed in close, a four- or five-block stretch: the pet store at Ninety-second street, Palazzola's Market at Ninetieth, a long and venturesome walk four blocks north to the Bank of America. There would be new landscapes for me to get to know. But as I walked along, watching the children or reading the signs with Lillian or, later on, as I drove with Ben down Santa Anita or through Medina Court, it seemed as if moments of personal history were being projected out onto the streets, reshaped and out of phase but familiar: the faces and buildings of an unsettling childhood dream.

One of the households I visited was that of Rosa Ramirez. Mrs. Ramirez had four children. The youngest was Lucy—Luz de Maria: Light of Mary. She was five years old, and Carlos, the oldest, was sixteen. Mrs. Ramirez's husband worked in a dairy, and on the weekends he laid tile, installed lawn sprinklers, cleared weeds, and did whatever else contractors would pay him under-scale to do. Mrs. Ramirez's kitchen table was adjacent to a small pantry, and as we sat at the table drinking a soda and talking about her children, I watched the wind move strings of garlic and oregano and dried red peppers hanging by the back door. Small vegetables were lined up on shelves around the stove. Above a large metal sink was a picture-calendar of Saint Martin de Porres, the mulatto Dominican who cared for the poor in the small towns of Peru. I hadn't seen my grandmother's house since I was a child, but this was it, one little view of it—garlic and peppers swaying in the breeze.

Mrs. Ramirez and I walked outside. The yard was fairly long, forty feet maybe. There was a garden: peppers, lettuce, chayotes, tomatoes, jalapeños, mint, a few cornstalks. To the side of the garden was a toolshed and a small garage. Behind the cornstalks was Carlos and his Saab. I had met Carlos during my first visit the week before; he looked up and said "hi" and turned back to the engine. He had a smudged and dog-eared repair manual propped open against the dirty windshield. The grass around the Saab was cut low, but right at the tires it was hubcap-high.

"How long has he been working on this thing?," I asked Mrs. Ramirez.

"Months," she said, smiling and shaking her head.

Along the left side of the car was a rectangular piece of gray tarp. On it were a distributor cap and its leads, a package of new sparkplugs, four or five screwdrivers, a set of wrenches, and a notebook opened to some sketches and scribbled writing. I asked Carlos about the notebook.

"It's really hard to get parts, so I make drawings and copy down stuff from the manual and go around to junkyards. Sometimes I find what I'm looking for. . . ." His voice rose quickly, "Oh, hey, listen," he said, straightening up and reaching for the manual on the windshield, "I can't figure this part out. What are these words?" He handed me the manual and pointed to "canister" and "detrimental" and "sector," the stilted English of translated technical writing. I explained them. He nodded, satisfied, and scribbled some notes in the margins of the manual. "Thanks a lot," he said and returned to the alternator.

Mrs. Ramirez and I walked back to the house. "Wouldn't it be a lot easier," I asked her, "for him to get an American car? Something that he could get parts for, quick—and cheap?" "Yes, I guess so," she said. "But don't you see? The Saab is very special to him. There are no Saabs in El Monte."

We four interns would be splitting our time between two elementary schools in the center of El Monte. Shops and small industries had built up around the schools, causing poor neighborhoods to slide even further. Right along the west side of one of the schools was a large appliance store, its parking lot extending to the fence of the schoolyard. Across the street was a run-down trailer court: One house-trailer was boarded up and weeds were growing high around cracked concrete slabs, foundations for trailers that had long since rolled away. Facing the entire north side of the school was a factory that manufactured metal fittings. Both the south and east boundaries were residential: Small one- and two-bedroom houses with cracked fences, weeds, wild roses, and nasturtiums. Several windows displayed handwritten signs advertising a room for rent. The school itself was a connection of one-story rectangles and prefab huts, a cross between light brown and dirty gold, built in the fifties and kept up, with a wide stretch of grass

for baseball and football. In the mornings or at noon, you could always find children in the center of the yard playing tetherball and dodgeball and twisting themselves through various jungle gyms. Kindergarteners had their own little spread of grass where they rejoiced in a circular sandpit and coaxed teacher's aides to push their swings toward the sky.

Lillian, Joe, Monica, and I worked three days a week in El Monte; the other two were spent in the education classes at USC. Joe lived very close to the schools, so we would go to his apartment in the late afternoon to help his wife make extra dinner and to talk about teaching. Joe had a storeroom with a cot in it, so I sometimes slept there and drove into SC with him in the morning. We couldn't have full responsibility for instruction as we weren't yet credentialed, but we observed classes, aided teachers, and assisted with special projects. Patti Masters, an old friend from Westwood, made me three long ties, so I fit in visually with the professional staff. And, before very long at all, the teachers and the aides, the secretaries and the cooks and the custodians were treating us like part of their community. We ended up spending a lot of time around children, and that was particularly good for me. I grew up in a neighborhood of storefronts and retirees and wasn't all that familiar with the way kids learn and do. I joined the Teacher Corps for a variety of reasons: frustrations with graduate study, a desire to work with people, my draft board, which, once I left UCLA, was after me. But essentially I was moving away from dead ends more than being drawn toward children. I had a lot to learn.

There were many pleasant moments, and some disturbing ones. Glimpses into the realities of schooling. I was shooting baskets with a fourth-grade boy. He had a nice touch, a good sense of how to execute his shots. I was asking him questions about his schoolwork while we played, and he told me, matter-of-factly and without guile: "I used to be in the dumb math group, but then, um, my teacher found out it was too easy for me. So now I'm in with the smart kids." The groups, of course, had various nondescript names to hide from the children the truth that they divined immediately. I was beginning to understand scholastic folkways.

I got to watch a lot of teachers. The worst was Mr. Wilson. He was a young, frumpy-looking guy who was full of himself, and

he treated his fifth-grade students like a cohort of mechanical clerks. He would have one of his best students read aloud a passage from a science or language arts textbook, then have all the students fill in the blanks on various mimeographed sheets supplied by the textbook publishers. Mr. Wilson explained to me that this method was supported by psychological theory: By having children fill in the blanks, he was "reinforcing" the material they heard read aloud. Poor Skinner, I thought, even his pigeons would shudder at this. While the good reader was reading, most of the other children were looking off into space—and many spaces on the sheets were left blank while children doodled in the margins. Fortunately, Mr. Wilson's methods were an exception. Most of the teachers I saw thought more carefully about learning and seemed to care about their children. And they certainly worked hard. It was not unusual to have a classroom of thirty children, many of whom needed a lot of attention. From what I could tell, the teachers spent a good deal of time considering their students' needs and abilities. I would later come to question the way they were trained to determine these needs, but even when that time came, I could not deny their commitment.

Several of the teachers were extraordinary. I first met Rosalie Naumann one afternoon in the teachers' lounge. Monica and I were sitting around with four or five teachers, and one began talking about a child in her class: "When we're doing social studies, she wants to draw, and when we're in the middle of an art lesson, she'll go over to the bookshelf. . . ." The teacher continued for a bit longer, expressing her frustration, when a somber-looking woman—short, tennis shoes, a close crop of gray hair—looked up and asked her why that bothered her so much. She didn't ask the question in a nasty way; in fact, it seemed an invitation to think the problem through. And the way the others responded made it clear that she held status in this lounge. I later found out that this was the school's reading specialist. I was also told that her kids loved her. I actually saw one of her students, a fifth-grade boy, slug a sixth grader who was not one of her students, for mocking the way she walked. I asked Ben to make sure that she was my master teacher. And Ben arranged it so that she was.

Two trailers had been rolled in onto the grass by the prefabs huts, and Mrs. Naumann worked out of one of them. They were

creaky and thin and close, and hers was filled to the point of clutter with maps and posters and children's drawings, art paper and crayons, hand puppets and vases and bowls. There were long shelves of books and a rangy philodendron had grown over the top row. The serious demeanor I saw in the lounge was also present in the trailer, and the kids took it just right: They would talk to her, for I suppose they sensed she cared. She looked at them when they spoke and always had her hand on their shoulders. They drew and wrote and read around the table. And I moved quickly from observing to helping her work with small groups. Soon after my arrival she was saying, "Mike, would you please get me that book?" or "Mike, listen to this story of Loretta's" or "Mike, would you mind working on Manuel's story with him?"

Somewhere toward the end of October of that first year, Rosalie suggested that I alter my routine of observing and assisting and start working directly with some kids who could use the extra help. I suppose she thought I'd be excited by the idea, but I automatically said no: "Isn't it too soon?" I asked, a little surprised at my reluctance. What if the kids didn't listen to me? I thought. What if, after all, I couldn't help them? I'd been protected up till now by Ben, by the safety of the team, by my observer status. I sounded like an echo in the teachers' lounge. Rosalie pooched my apprehension and said she'd take responsibility for me and work something out with the principal. She did. When she saw me the following week, she explained that she had selected fifteen of the school's poorest readers—fourth and fifth graders—and had arranged for me to meet with them in the cafeteria every Thursday after lunch.

I asked Rosalie for some guidance. She simply said, "Do something nice with them. Their lives are pretty dreary." And when I pressed her further, she said that the schools try things that don't seem to work, and she might speak too much with the voice of the schools. "You're closer to them than I am. Use music; use your poems. Do what you think is best." I went home, wanting to do something very special, but came up short. I sat at the desk I shared with my roommate, Matias, and sketched out, then crumpled up, ideas for lessons. I watched a cat pawing at butterflies in the courtyard. I looked absently around the room:

macramé, grape ivy, Huelga stickers, John and Yoko naked, Jimi Hendrix. All sorts of fantasies about my first solo teaching came and went, my anticipations ranging from Hellenic pastorals to feral colloquia danced around my severed head. "Do what you think is best," Rosalie had said, and after all that fretting, I quit trying to create the golden lesson and went with something simple I had seen her do: I'd have them write about pictures. I took a poster of John Kennedy from Matt's bulletin board. I clipped an advertisement from *Life* showing a little girl looking out of a single apartment window set in red brick. And, for spice, I peeled off my wall a particularly grungy photograph of Ron McKernan, aka Pig Pen, the hirsute keyboardist for the Grateful Dead.

The next day, as the lunch crowd was clearing out, I went to the far west corner of the cafeteria and pulled two tables together. Pots and tin trays were clanging over the whirr of dishwashers; the tables smelled sweet and oily. I leaned against the wall and thought back to a graduation party at my old grammar school. Crepe paper was twisted overhead, and there were dull metal bowls of Kool-Aid on folding tables. The smell was just the same.

The one o'clock bell rang. My students started walking in: scuffed pumps and knee socks, print dresses, sneakers and pants stained with grass, the odors of milk and exercise. They were quiet. Some looked apprehensive. I asked them to sit around the table, then I sat down on a stool that brought my knees up to belly level. I was a little nervous. I introduced myself, and they looked on. Some sat up straight, others slumped down in their chairs. No one was smiling. I explained that we would meet once a week, that we would tell stories and write stories, and that there would be no grades.

I then asked them to tell me a little bit about themselves: their hobbies, their friends, their pets. Things started to loosen up. A few smiles. Some relaxed postures. And that helped me relax. I got up slowly and took my three pictures out of their folder. "Do you ever watch people?" I asked them. "You know, really look at them and wonder about them? Well, here's three I want you to look at." I taped each picture to the wall. Kennedy first—and some of the children said his name to themselves. Then Pig Pen: oohs and ahs and giggles here. Then the little girl at her window. "She looks lonely," someone said. I asked them to take turns

talking about the pictures. What did they see? What did they think each person was thinking? What would these people have to say to each other? To them? Some kids stayed silent. Others talked. A few got animated. I then asked them to pick a picture and write. Rosalie had warned me that some of the children were such poor writers that they'd get stuck right away on spelling, so I had better cool them out. I did. I repeated that their papers wouldn't be graded, that I wanted them to just write what came to mind and not worry if they couldn't spell a word. We'd fix that up later. Two kids still refused to write unless I helped them right then and there. So I spelled troublesome words for them. By the time we did all we had to do, they had about twenty-five minutes to compose.

Here's a sampling of what they wrote. First, on Pig Pen, who proved to be a big hit:

I think the hippy on the chair looks weird.

—JOEY

He needs a shower. The way he is sitting, he needs a haircut. He's too much.

—CASEY

He makes me lonely and he is creepy and ugly. And he has long hair and funny eye-glasses. He makes me feel lonely because he is in a big room.

—DORA

Anthony wrote about the little girl in the window and formatted his writing so that it looked like a poem:

Very lonely in the world.
No one will talk to you.
Think about it.

And Juan chose to write on the picture of JFK:

John Kennedy is more important than any other person I know because he was going to make a good world. By stopping the war, that's why.

When the bell rang, the children scrambled out, and I walked around the table collecting their papers. Everything had gone well. They wrote for me. No disasters. I typed up the essays, correcting aberrant spelling and punctuation when necessary, and glued them onto individual pieces of art paper. Then I borrowed some masking tape from the office and hung them on the cafeteria wall.

All of these students had been judged poor readers and writers; at the least, they were reading one year below grade level. But within the group, there was quite a range. For two of the students, writing seemed a torture. They bent over their papers, holding their pencils tightly, chipping out one word, then another. Most of the other children weren't so bad off: there were misspellings and problems with commas (too many or too few) and some difficulty determining where one sentence should start and another should end, though this seemed to me to result from confusion about the rules of capitalization. Only in one case was a student's writing composed of one streaming, boundless sentence and words spelled in unusual ways—for example, a vaguely phonetic *worn* for *when*. I'm not sure exactly what I expected, but most of what I read was better than I thought it would be.

The days after this first lesson had a nice feel to them. I was still a little unsure, but could tell that our one brief hour made me a part of things in a way I hadn't been before. The kids would come up to me in the playground and ask what we were going to do next week—as though I knew!—or toss me a basketball and invite a free shot at a netless hoop. The real kick came when I walked through the cafeteria a few days after our lesson and saw two of my students showing their posted essays to a third child who was not in our group.

The posters and pictures worked well, so I asked Rosalie if she thought that it would be a good idea to supply magazines and let the children find pictures of their own. She said that sounded fine. On the next Thursday I met the class with a box of scissors and a pile of old magazines: *Sports Illustrated*, *Life*, and a *National Geographic*. I told them what I wanted them to do and turned them loose: "Do what you did last week, but this time you find a picture that you like."

Hilda cut out a photo of a longhaired flutist sitting under a tree, but could write no more than a single associative sentence: I saw a hippy in the park.

Joey found a picture of *Apollo 9*:

The *Apollo 8* went around the world, and *Apollo 9* went around the moon. If you were in there, it would make you feel dizzy.

Lupe was taken with a wispy advertisement of two women in wedding gowns walking through a forest:

The picture is of a summer when the colors were beautiful and clothes were hot for girls because they were long. But no more! Now dresses are short and summers are cool.

Eduvina wrote about a photograph of a doctor talking with a patient:

Doctors help you when you are sick. You help your friends and your friends help you. Your friends help you get out of jail.

And Jesus, a migrant worker's son who was struggling with English, found a photograph in *National Geographic* of a forest in winter:

The snow is very pretty and I wish I could live there.

The most interesting piece of writing was Mark's, a response to a color photograph of a doctor delivering a baby:

The doctor is helping a baby to get out from the mother because it is in danger from the blood. If the baby came out, he will look red. It will be so funny that the mother will sell her baby to the Indians. The baby will grow up and hunt animals like deer, bear, and birds.

Mark's black hair was thick and rich, and he had a small, precise crescent scar on his right cheek. He spoke up readily, and the other children seemed to like him. This was his second year at our school. After the session, Rosalie told me his story. At his previous school, his entrance IQ tests had yielded a score of 62. Retarded. He had a slight lisp that used to be more pronounced. The kids in the other school used to tease him about it, so he

stopped talking. Rosalie speculated that his silence probably confirmed the low assessment of his intelligence.

That evening I had dinner at Joe's house. Joe and Lillian were sitting in the front room working on a social studies lesson, and Monica was arranging folding chairs around the card tables that she would soon be covering with white cloth. Sheilah, Joe's wife, was stirring the sauce for our pasta, and I was peeling carrots and cucumbers for a salad. Monica was telling a story about one of the girls in her school, a precocious fifth grader who showed up that morning in nylons and high heels.

"She could barely walk in those things. She just wobbled along with a big smile on her face. And the—*the nylons*. The nylons were *way* too big. They were probably her sister's, and they sagged all over."

"Did anybody say anything to her?" Lillian asked from the other room.

"Well, yeah, sure. The vice-principal came over and took her aside. But, God, what a sad sight. There must have been ten runs in those stockings. She's trying to grow up, and she doesn't have a clue."

"The pasta's done," announced Sheilah, pouring it into a colander. I opened a can of sliced olives and spread them over the salad, and we sat down to eat.

During the week, the children had been taking one of the many standardized tests that are a part of life in elementary school, and Joe, whose keen eye didn't miss much, had been helping the teachers administer it.

"What got me was that a lot of the kids were just kind of fidgeting around. I mean here is this test, and it's gonna go into your file, and it's gonna follow you around, and—it just didn't mean anything to them."

"Well, why should it?" asked Lillian. "I mean, what's it got to do with anything in their lives?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But I just kept thinking about how I used to get all cranked up about these things, and, well, I mean the point is that these tests will be cited when people talk about the low IQ of minority kids and all that bullshit. From what I saw, it only measures how well they want to play the game."

I had been thinking about Mark all day, so I started retelling Rosalie's story. For whatever reason—bad day, bad English, bad

test—Mark had scored in the range of the mildly retarded. "And what gets me," I said, "was that the kid had clammed up to protect himself from the other kids, and all the while his silence was confirming what the *test* said!" It was lucky for him, Lillian pointed out, that his parents moved. Files precede kids, but at least he got a second chance with new classmates. Lillian knew who Mark was, and she thought he looked happy and alert. "If Mark's IQ is 62," she said into the steam rising off her pasta, "then I'm Baboo the Chimp."

Because of the Thanksgiving holidays, I wouldn't be meeting with my students for several weeks. I was surprised by the response I had gotten to some pretty simple assignments, and it seemed time to try something a little more ambitious. I began to wonder what would happen if I asked the children to write about pictures of themselves. There was an audiovisual specialist at USC who kept urging the Teacher Corps interns to use his equipment, so I checked out a camera and picked up some Ektachrome. For two days I roamed around the school looking for interesting shots: I caught Joey on the monkey bars and Casey spiking the tetherball; Esther posed for me, hand on hip, by the cafeteria door; Anthony and Jesus never even looked up from their game of marbles; Rosalie Naumann contributed her wistful smile. By the time we met again, I had put together a low-budget slide show. I used one of the school's old record players and, while playground images flicked across the cafeteria wall, I played "Everyday People," Sly Stone's funkish plea for tolerance and racial harmony:

There is a blue one
who can't accept the green one
for living with the fat one
trying to be the skinny one.

There were lots of squeals, and pointing and poking; however, when it came time to write, some children simply described what they saw:

I liked the music and the pictures. I liked when Keith and I were in the picture, when Joe was playing baseball, and when Esther did that pose that was boss.

But a few of the writers picked up on the lyrics and wrote about brotherhood:

Everyday people are black, red, yellow, and white—and we have to live together. No matter where you go, you will find people, for God put all kinds of people around. So you can hate them, or like them, or love them. But you have to live with them, no matter what kind of people they are.

—LUPE

And two of the boys let loose with the joy of seeing themselves on a screen. In one slide, Danny is making a muscle and Mark is looking on. Danny adapted a Three Stooges tableau and wrote a comic dialogue to go with it:

DANNY: "Do you think I am great? I think so."

MARK: "Why?"

DANNY: "Because I have muscles, and I am a hero."

MARK: "No! Because each time you put your muscles up, they go down."

DANNY: "Mark, don't say that!"

MARK: "It's true, Danny!"

Most of the children seemed to enjoy being one of the "everyday people," but I was caught off guard by the reaction of one girl. While I was walking around the schoolyard with my camera, I came upon Hilda bouncing a ball. Hilda was a bubbly kid with a quick, high laugh, so when she let go of the ball and put her thin hands over her face, I missed the signals completely. I joked with her, saying something I no longer remember, and she raised her head and looked at me, teary-eyed: "Go away. Would you just go *away!*"

A week before, I had brushed against another child's tender side. Dora was the girl who, during our first meeting, had written that Pig Pen was "creepy and ugly." At thirteen, Dora was only in the fifth grade. She missed one year when her parents emigrated from Mexico, and she was later held back another grade so that her low test scores would match her grade level. Dora and the embarking on adolescence with children at her side. Dora and the

others had finished writing, so I did something I had seen Rosalie do:

"Dora, why don't you read your story to us?"

"No, I don't want to read."

"Oh, Dora," I pushed, "that's a good story. Let's hear it."

"I don't like it. I don't want to read it."

At that point, Casey looked over her shoulder and started reading her paper. She slapped it down on the table and grabbed his essay and read it quickly. "See," she said with anger, "I can read if I want to!"

I felt terrible. I had been paying a lot of attention to the children's writing and had been avoiding the full meaning of the rest. Suddenly I felt like some weary psychoanalyst, seeing sorrow and damage wherever I looked. There was Mark, of course, with the cruel and secret quotient of his intelligence. And Lupe, the girl who wrote that "God put all kinds of people around," had also been labeled retarded, but by a person rather than an instrument. She was an obese girl who had been plagued by a series of thyroid and tonsil problems, and a second-grade teacher mistook her lethargy and reserve as a sign of intellectual defect. Eduvina's brother had been shot to death in a street fight, and Joey had a long jagged scar along his forearm whose cause I had been reluctant to pursue. And there was David, the little boy who wrote that Esther's pose was boss. He was an absolute nonreader until Rosalie got her hands on him the year before. He was so withdrawn that his fourth-grade teacher had feared him and had speculated that his silence might indicate childhood schizophrenia.

The churches these children attended told them they were made in the image of God. But I began to wonder what images they were creating for themselves as they came to know that their physical being was so vulnerable, that whatever beauty they bore could be dismissed by the culture or destroyed on the street. The schools could have intervened but instead seemed to misperceive them and place them on the margin. Here's the essay Dora wouldn't read, a response to a picture of a tenement she had torn out of *Life*:

Crazy people are going around with guns killing others without asking their names or who or what they are and without looking to see if it is a woman or a man or a child

What were my students coming to believe about their faces and their bodies and their spoken and written gestures?

The hopeful thing was that not one child gave in. Most of the children were adding a little more detail, trying to elaborate their writing as best they could. Even the poorest writers were spending more time on their work and were moving beyond tentative, one-line productions. I kept encouraging them to let their imaginations go, and some did, catching themselves in linguistic mousetraps, but pushing ahead, involved in what they were doing—if only because they knew it mattered to me. Jesus, the migrant worker's son, started drawing a line about a quarter of the way down his writing pad. He would then bend over the paper, his face close to his pencil, and work until he had written beyond his mark. As soon as he passed it, but not before, he would look up smiling and call me over.

Teaching, I was coming to understand, was a kind of romance. You didn't just work with words or a chronicle of dates or facts about the suspension of protein in milk. You worried kids with these things, invited a relationship of sorts, the terms of connection being the narrative, the historical event, the balance of casein and water. Maybe nothing was intrinsically interesting. Knowledge gained its meaning, at least initially, through a touch on the shoulder, through a conversation of the kind Jack MacFarland and Frank Carothers and the others used to have with their students. My first enthusiasm about writing came because I wanted a teacher to like me.

After the "Everyday People" exercise, I spent some time looking back over the work the students had produced since their first day with me. One thing that was evident was that many of the children used pictures as stimuli to create stories, so, for our fourth lesson, I decided to go with some old-fashioned storytelling. As soon as they were settled around our cafeteria work station, I placed the needle on "Rocky Raccoon," Paul McCartney's comic rendering of a frontier romance and shootout. The story goes like this: Rocky's girlfriend, Nancy, had run away with someone named Danny, and Rocky, having tracked them down, burst into their room, announcing a showdown. Just as Rocky was kicking down the door, I lifted the needle from the wobbly turntable. "Okay class," I shrugged, "looks like you have to

write the ending." Snickers, swaggers, *ka-pows*, and they settled in. A few children wrote brief conclusions:

He shot Danny.
Then he danced
with his girlfriend Nancy!

—EDUVINA

But most, the boys particularly, played out the story more fully:

Rocky broke in, got his gun, sat down and watched. Dan went for his gun. Rocky fell down laughing. Rocky got up and shot him. Then Rocky went home and Nancy walked in. Rocky shot her too. The fuzz came for him. He died for killing Nancy.

—DAVID

And several children asked to come back after school to finish their long, detailed endings, fuller and richer than anything I or their teachers had yet seen them write. I had to help Hank with spelling and with the complexities of punctuating dialogue, but, otherwise, this was his:

Dan said, "Step outside, I'll be ready."

Then he went out. Rocky Raccoon kissed the girl and went out. The girl went out too. All the people went into the saloon and watched through the windows and doors. The sheriff went out.

Rocky said, "Get away, Sheriff."

"No," said the sheriff.

So Rocky Raccoon shot the Sheriff and Dan shot Rocky.

The girl ran outside and laid on Rocky. The people went out too. The Deputy came and got Dan.

The people said, "The Sheriff, the Sheriff is dead."

The girl was sad and went away. The people were sad and went in their houses. The Deputy was sad. Everyone was sad! The girl got on a stagecoach and was sad all the way.

Rocky's tale mirrored a thousand awful Westerns, and Hank and some of the others knew exactly what to do once the macho raccoon kicked in that door. I didn't tap the most noble of humanity's pursuits, but I had to admit there was something just in Hank, a Navajo, taking the plot line that had served to degrade

his people and appropriating it to produce a testament to his literacy. He had been tagged a "slow learner" in the second grade and had been doing poorly in school for a long time.

The next day Ben and I had lunch away from the school-grounds. I wanted to tell him about Hank and the others and get some advice on what to do when I met with the children next week. Ben took a route through Medina Court, a poor section of El Monte, and as we drove along he told me that I should collect the writing my students had done so far and make little books for them: "Kids like them. It gives them something of their own. Ask Rosalie about it." Ben was starting to say something else when he slowed down by an empty lot. He gave a little wave to a man sitting on the bumper of an old Ford truck. The man appeared to be in his forties. By him was a younger man squatting in the dirt in *cholo* fashion: feet splayed outward, hand dangling—cupping a cigarette—shirt buttoned at the collar but open from there down. He was smiling and looking at the ground in front of him. Back in South L.A. we used to talk about a guy "standing behind a fix." It seemed that these two had just positioned themselves. The man on the bumper looked lazily up at Ben and raised his hand off his leg in a slow wave.

"Who are those guys?" I asked Ben.

"The one on the truck is Ernie. He's my second cousin."

"Ben, umm, is he high?"

"Yeah, looks like it, huh? He used to just sell it. He was a—
businessman, you see. But now, well, now he's a heavy user."

Ben and I found our restaurant and continued to talk about my work, but I couldn't shake the image of his cousin waving listlessly from the truck. Months before, while Lillian and I were walking down Brooklyn Avenue, I had a powerful realization that South L.A. hadn't trapped me, that I could come back to neighborhoods like mine and do things. The streets seemed full of life and promise. What I felt as I sat with Ben, and realized I'd been feeling on and off since arriving in El Monte, was something quite different: It was the powerlessness of South Vermont, an impotence as warm and safe as a narcotic. It wasn't clear despair—it wasn't that articulate—it was more a soft regress to childhood, to hot and quiet afternoons in an empty lot. Little things could trigger it—a smell in the cafeteria, a ramshackle house—and whatever

I was doing—creating a lesson, working with the children, shaping an observation for Joe or Lillian—would begin to feel unworthy, lifeless from the inside. I did my work in spite of all this, but with an inner labor the I was just now appreciating, holding a lazy and familiar ineptitude at bay with one hand while framing a lesson with the other. This, I thought, was how South Vermont kept hold of its errant children. You can leave those streets, but the flat time and the diminished sense of what you can be continues to shape your identity. You live with decayed images of the possible.

When I met with the children again, I had them, as Ben suggested, make books out of the four assignments they had written. I came rattling into the cafeteria with a dining cart piled high with red and yellow construction paper and pieces of poster board, trays of pens and colored pencils, boxes of scissors and staplers and glue. I told the children a little about books and bookmaking—simple things I had learned in Dr. Gullans's bibliography course at UCLA—and showed them a sample I had mocked up of the kind of book they could make from their own pieces of writing. I then outlined a procedure for them to follow and turned them loose: they had their stories (typewritten because they had been on display) and piles of magazine photographs and the mimeographed lyrics to "Everyday People" and "Rocky Raccoon." Some of the children drew pictures to accompany the stories while others pasted pictures alongside them. Dora and Eduvina combined their stories into one big book. Lupe took the ribbon out of her hair and made a bow and glued it onto her cover. Danny added a sentence to one of his stories, carefully printing it below the typescript.

I had asked Monica to come by near the end of the hour. She could letter with precision and flair, and I wanted her to print the children's names on their books. When she showed up, she sat at the end of the table, and as the children finished, they came forward and Monica, with her careful script, wrote: "Lupe's Book," "Danny's Book," "Casey's Book," "Anthony's Book" on their poster board covers.

My students knew they were considered poor readers. We were approaching the last session I would have with them, and I

wanted to leave them with something snappy that would allow them, if just for an hour, to gain entry to the sophisticated vocabulary that would probably serve to intimidate them for some time to come. Here's the lesson I came up with, pretty contrived, I admit, but it was fun to play out. I printed on strips of art paper words that had unusual spellings or that would sound funny if exaggerated slightly:

Macabre

Eulogy

Misanthrope

Lampoon

Paranoid

And so on. I also clipped out pictures that could accompany each word: For example, for *eulogy* I used a picture of a priest reading from a Bible at a funeral. I spread out the words on the table—saving the pictures for later—and told the children these were big, important, snazzy words, and they were to pick one that looked weird or was spelled funny or that hit them in any way. They then had to explain why they chose their words. Finally, I gave the meanings of the words and spread out the pictures before them, asking them to find a picture they thought went with their words. After all this rigmorale, they were to write a story to fit the words and pictures they had chosen.

Rodrigo picked out a picture of a man, eyes wide, with his hand over his mouth. Rodrigo's word was *macabre*:

This man used to like girls very much. One night he was driving a truck when he saw a girl and stopped. He went over to see the girl. When he saw her face, it looked like a horse! He ran as fast as he could! He jumped into the truck really scared, and he never liked girls again.

We labeled this "Rodrigo's Macabre Story," and it, like all the essays before, went up on the cafeteria wall. Danny wrote the word *misanthrope* over the two pictures he chose: one of a boxer posed for a punch and another of a TV private eye elbowing a man across the face.

These dudes think that they are smart, but they aren't. These dudes hate everybody! They look mean. They kill. And most of all, they are dumb.

And Delores chose *lampoon*. Delores was tall and overweight and wore glasses that were a little too large for her face. In a moment of sweet revenge, she turned her own catalog of insult toward the boy who sat next to her in her regular class, displaying one of the motives that has perennially impelled writers to write:

Hi everybody. Guess what I am writing about? I am writing a lampoon of Tommy! He looks so funny. Let me tell you how he looks, O.K.? He has four eyes, and long hair, and is so fat that he has to wear a size 60! In town he can't even fit through the door. They have to push him out! And you should see his hands. They are so big that they could cover your face. And he is only nine years old! And boy, I tell you, he is so big that we hate him. You know what we call him? Fat-head Fatty!

That afternoon Casey came running up to me in the schoolyard: "Hey, I wrote something for you all on my own!" and held out a piece of paper, folded in four. Casey was one of my favorites. He was an affable boy with sandy hair, a perennially scraped elbow, and an awful home. His father was long gone, and his mother cocktailtailed and sometimes didn't come home for two- and three-day stretches. Casey was rambunctious and was always getting in trouble—not serious, nasty trouble, but fooling around, talking-in-class trouble, little bruises on the shins of Conduct. I would look at him during our class and think of Dave Snyder, the guy I tip-tapped through biology at Mercy High. I listened to the defensive wit he had developed about his mother and simultaneously wanted to laugh with him and hold him close to me: "Last year, my mother gave us turkey dinners," he told Ben and me just before Thanksgiving holiday. "TV turkey dinners! But she gave us two apiece." Here he paused for a beat, "After all, it *was* Thanksgiving."

So here was Casey with a story for his teacher. "I'll be damned," I thought, "I've flicked the switch." I unfolded the note as Casey looked on:

Mike

How are you. Do you want to tripout today. I have a lid of weed. I will meet you in the park. You are a kool guy. I am going to take a crap.

so long

your buddy

Casey

Jesus! What in the hell—what am I gonna say? Was he really carrying marijuana? Worry flipped quickly to anger. Casey was pushing—pushing. . . . And as I stood there, I saw . . . as though rising out of confusion, I saw that Casey was doing what so many of my high school friends loved to do: freak the teacher. And he'd succeeded. I pretended to read the note a moment longer, giving myself a chance to come up with something. I pointed to the end of the last sentence and looked solemnly down at him: "You know, Casey, you spelled 'crap' perfectly. Congratulations." "Awwww," he said, "you're no fun," and started laughing. I tapped my fingers on his head and grunted, and then he and I walked out onto the wide, grassy field to talk, man to man, about the risky methods people devise to show their need and their affection.

I used versions of this curriculum again with other groups of students, tinkering with it, being more cautious with the "Everyday People" slide show, streamlining the exercise with the big words. Still, whatever adjustments I made, there were lots of ways, I can see now, that the curriculum fell short, even considering the general limitations of time. While there was some continuity between the exercises, each didn't build carefully on the ones preceding it, didn't take full advantage of what was developing in prior lessons. The "Rocky Raccoon" exercise, for example, tapped knowledge of plot line and story structure, and there were some students who should have had a further chance to use what they knew.

Another problem was that the curriculum was somewhat self-enclosed. While it did not prohibit children from drawing on their interests and the events in their own lives, it failed to elicit creatively the tales and folklore and genres that were part of their

various families and cultures. Finally, I could have done much more than I did to get the children to reflect on this mutual venture into literacy. How would they explain the work they were now doing? What did it mean to create stories? Were they noticing any changes in the way they wrote? Could I get them to reconsider the attitudes they must have developed about themselves as readers and writers?

But for all the limitations of my fledgling curriculum—its shortsightedness, its fragmentation—something unusual was going on. The essays many of the children were producing, flawed as they were, were not jibing with the various assessments of their ability that I had heard and read. A series of achievement tests and the grades and comments of assorted teachers had designated these students as having significant problems with written language. By the fourth or fifth grade, they had been pretty thoroughly defined as limited. The question, then, was what was the nature of the curriculum and the assessments that provided the base for this definition?

The English curricula that I saw, and the English textbooks particularly, were almost entirely oriented toward grammatical analysis. Subskills. Every year the children faced about two hundred pages that required them to circle or underline subjects or verbs or pronouns; that directed them to fill in the correct noun or pronoun or verb form; that asked them to read lists of sentences and indicate if they were simple or compound or if their purpose was to tell, raise a question, or exclaim; that told them to indicate whether a noun was singular or plural, simple or compound, common or proper; that told them to indicate the tense of verbs, to label action verbs and linking verbs, and to decline irregular verbs. And the tests they took measured how well they had learned to do these tasks.

There ended up being little room in such a curriculum—unless the inventive teacher created it—to explore the real stuff of literacy: conveying something meaningful, communicating information, creating narratives, shaping what we see and feel and believe into written language, listening to and reading stories, playing with the sounds of words. Writing and reading are such private acts that we forget how fundamentally social they are: We hear stories read by others and we like to tell others about the stories we read; we learn to write from others and we write for

others to read us. The curriculum I saw drained the life out of all this, reduced literacy to the dry dismembering of language—not alive, not communicative at all. The children's textbooks were colorful, and little boys and girls and dogs and cats cavorted around the exercises, but the exercises themselves were not all that distant from the ancient descriptive grammar books I had learned about in graduate school—grammars that analyzed language down to its smallest parts and invented a meticulous, even finicky, classification system to contain them. This was a science of language that was "not . . . intended to help with teaching," as the historian H. I. Marrou once observed. It was an exercise that was "all analysis and no synthesis," pursued for its own pedantic ends.

It seemed to me that such a curriculum was especially troublesome for children like the ones in my class: children who had not been prepped in their homes to look at language in this dissected, unnatural way; children for whom English was a foreign language; children of particularly mobile families who fell out of the curricular lockstep demanded by this approach to language; children who might have some problems with their vision or with the way they process written language; children who, like me long ago, just didn't see the sense in such analysis, and, before long, were missing it, not getting it and falling behind. And so these children would fail at the kind of literacy activities the school system had woven throughout its curriculum and turn off to writing and reading in general. But that did not mean that they were illiterate.

Given that cognitive growth does not proceed in miraculous leaps, my curriculum was clearly not kicking these children's development into fast-forward. It had to be eliciting and shaping something that was already there. Hank could write his sequel to "Rocky Raccoon" because he knew something about Westerns. Mark deployed his vivid imagination in a wild-child narrative to create a boy who hunts deer, bears, and birds. Danny relied on a dopey and familiar joke to produce a comic dialogue about deflating muscles. And Delores—Delores rambled, but she wrote the most elaborate essay her teacher had yet seen her produce. She appropriated slapstick and hyperbole to the delicious purpose of lampooning the fathead who made her life miserable. There were times, then, when emotions and desires and all sorts of child

knowledge about movies and sitcoms and slapstick and family stories blended in complex ways to yield a piece of writing that belied the schools' assessments of these students' literacy.

I was in Mexico for the weekend. I went there to visit my mother. When I came back home, the whole town was burned! I went through all the houses and hotels, but no one was there.

I walked to Los Angeles because the cars were all burned, and even L.A. was burned. I saw something. It was in the street. It looked like a girl. It was. She was still alive! I took her to a hotel. She was lucky, there was some medicine, I was the medicine! With me everybody lives. She lived too. She was pretty and we went upstairs. There was only one bed, so we both slept on it, and that is it!

—WILLIAM

He is going to the world of rotted people. He is rotting already. He is getting scared. He is seeing rotted people. He don't know he is rotting. Already they are getting uglier.

—KENNY

Once while I was walking,
I saw a man swaying in the shadows.
I saw his face under the light,
And there stood a picture of sadness.

—ANGIE

The children in El Monte certainly produced for us their fair share of dog and pony stories, and good guy-bad guy cop and Western tales, and gooeey romantic fables, but it was striking how often the testaments to their literacy were formed from the dark side of their dreams and from the harsh events and troubling protective fantasies of their day-to-day lives. The impressive nature of the children's achievement would mask the full import of the visions of violence and dilapidation, the sexualized apocalyptic landscapes, the textures of peeling walls and pitted floors. If I looked at the world through these stories, held them to the light like a prismatic lens, the courage and hope of working-class El Monte grew dim, and anger and quiet despair came into focus.

Violence and abandonment, the guns and pregnancies, the paralyzing fatigue. Men waiting in their trucks in the heat, smoking, gone to fat, looking through the windshield at nothing, so deeply tired that only a gunshot could jolt them. A father screaming at an older boy, pushing him out the door, slapping him hard on the back of the head. The boy turning to face the father, silent, big as the father now. At Bob's Big Boy, a pouty blond sits in the corner booth. Bleached, teased, wearing an anklet, she's gazing off, a cigarette in her right hand, inattentively smoking while her husband looks into his plate. She was the queen of the local prom perhaps—she's pretty enough—or, more likely, the bad girl, the defiant rock 'n' roller, married now, long red nails, kids, holding down a counter job that betrayed the promises of her adolescence.

It was across these emotional landscapes that some of our children were condemned to wander, and, at times, they recoiled, flailing out by the classroom door. Ray had vandalized the school—broken windows, splattered eggs and mud over the walls—and then claimed to not know why. Rosemary was frequently absent or tardy and alternated between verbally abusing her teachers and flat-out ignoring them. When she did come to school, she simply went through the motions, mechanical, detached—all the earmarks of a dropout while still a sixth grader. Terry had broken another boy's jaw, and was generally viewed by his peers as wild and explosive: they still talked about the time he chased off a gang of boys with a tire chain. When I was growing up, I saw this kind of rebellion and assault as potency. Terry was the kind of kid I sidestepped on South Vermont. Now I came to understand something about the misery that sparks such combative defiance, the desperation it reveals: The children's rebellion was all the more troubling because of its ultimate loneliness. The vandal, Ray, lived with battling alcoholic parents, and it was not uncommon to find him sitting on the curb outside the school an hour or so before the gates were opened. Rosemary was one of ten children. When she skipped school, she would sit alone in her barren and usually crowded house and watch other worlds evolve on the daytime soaps.

Terry's home was worse. Garbage and auto parts were strewn across the front yard, and the house was as dilapidated as any city house I'd seen. He lived alone with his mother, who be-

longed to a white supremacist motorcycle gang and who, from what Terry told me, was most likely a prostitute. This was where Terry had to establish who he was, find guidelines where few existed, explain to himself the things he had seen done to his mother. By his tenth or eleventh year, he had developed a tough, detached public self—isolated, distant, *minimacho*—a future angel from hell in frayed sneakers. He would let nothing, *nothing* affect him. His guard was up, constantly—his seething motto: "I don't like to be pushed around"—on the defensive, constantly, for the affront that taps the confusion and anger that churns beneath the surface, that began with the first vision from some violated crib. He kept to himself, and there didn't seem to be any way to reach him. It was revealing, I thought, that the path to Terry's heart was found by someone more vulnerable than he was. This is what I saw one late afternoon from the office window: Terry was shooting baskets alone when a young girl, noticeably hydrocephalic and retarded, wandered onto the playground. She saw Terry and walked over. Terry said something to her I couldn't hear, and she responded, and he handed her the basketball. She tried to bounce it, and it hit the tip of her shoe and shot off. Terry ran after it, and for about ten minutes he tried to show her how to shoot a basket. Then he took her by the hand and led her back out of the schoolyard.

A week or so later I was driving back to El Monte from an errand in East L.A. It was getting dark and I was late for a dinner meeting with my teammates at Joe's and I had to bring the wine. I spotted a seedy little store, pulled over when I could, and quickly hopped out. When I was walking back to my car, which was a good twenty yards away, I saw three boys—fifteen or sixteen maybe—coming toward me. They were tough-looking kids, and their gaze was fixed. Suddenly two of them split off to the left and one to the right and I felt before I knew—something fast and helpless and strangely clear—that I was about to get jumped. By reflex, I grabbed the wine bottle by the neck and brought it across my waist. Just then, a car pulled by, and an old woman began struggling to get out of the passenger side. The boys looked at each other and kept on walking, one saying as he passed me, "Hey, man, you're a lucky motherfucker." I got in my car, my heart pounding, and relived the moment again—and again. Later at Joe's I found myself, in the middle of yet another replay, telling

my teammates about Terry. How long before he'd end up on those streets? Was he there already? I kept shuttling back and forth in my mind between the scene with the retarded girl and the feeling I had when I saw those boys split up to flank me.

When the principal first told me about Terry, he showed me a drawing. A boy is sitting at a desk, his hands cover part of his face, and he is terrified. He screams, "I will kill you!" Terry's fear had been expressing itself in violence. But it was not inconceivable that such fear could evolve into the protective sympathy I saw revealed with the girl on the playground. The fear was too raw, however, and, in a strange way, played too readily into a dark American mythology. The other children shrank from Terry, but they told stories about him with relish, the breathless rendering of the wildly swung tire chain. The fledgling outlaw, the man outside society. Terry's public identity was shaping already, and it most likely would prove to be too powerful an identity to avoid, a way to live with and through his volatile pain. On the deserted playground, though, the place where threat was momentarily suspended, he could be the helping child, could guide the powerless. But I know that what I saw was probably fading already, receding with each passing assault to his spirit and with each of his public acts of defiance.

Looking back on my notes and reports from this time, I see a continuing and uncomfortable waver between a celebration of individual potential and a despair over the crushing power of the environment: the children's literate affirmations versus the economic assault and psychological injury of Hicks Camp and Medina Court and "the marvelous place," Maravilla; the narrative testaments I weekly taped to the cafeteria wall versus the squalor of Terry's home. My notebooks reflect a kind of conceptual manic depression: quotations from progressive educators extolling the creative spirit alternate side by side with passages from Martin Deutseh's *The Disadvantaged Child*, with grim discussions of "the culture of poverty" and "deprivation" and "environmental deficiencies and handicaps." And, more than I was then able to admit, this was not simply an intellectual tension.

I was living through the very conflict I was cutting and pasting into my notebooks—the conflict between two visions: one of individual possibility and one of environmental limits and determin-

ers; the vibrant power of meaningful work versus the absorbing threat of South Vermont. One day I saw the emerging human spirit, the next day the naturalist's dreary landscape. Both were true. And, I guess, this was a tension the children felt, in their way—something they couldn't articulate, perhaps, as I couldn't when I was a child, but they were living it, absorbing it into marrow. The school itself became the stage for playing out this drama, creating—at the hands of teachers like Rosalie Naumann—a place that fostered growth and celebrated possibility, but creating, as well, the social conditions for intensifying the child's marginality. It was around this time, well into my second year in the Teacher Corps, when I began working with Harold Morton, and he came to represent for me both the basic human conflict—that we are simultaneously heroes and prisoners—and the fact that our schools can respond to a child's misery as well as institutionally define him by it.

Harold Morton was in the fifth grade, and he was small for his age. His straight brown hair fell half-combed across his forehead, and his clothes were clean but rumpled. He stood by Mrs. Naumann looking straight ahead—not at me particularly—his eyes twitching, his mouth open a little. Occasionally he would grimace and swallow hard, his lips going tight. Rosalie introduced us, and Harold looked up and said hello. She explained to him that he and some other children would be meeting with me to tell stories and write. Would that be okay? He said that it would—a soft yes—and Mrs. Naumann put her hand on his shoulder and said that she thought he would enjoy spending time with me. She moved her hand down across his back, smiled at me, and led him out to the playground. What a strange kid, I thought. I wonder what's wrong with his eyes.

Harold's group, like the first one I worked with, met once a week in the cafeteria. I used some of the same assignments; for the first week, the children wrote about pictures of John Kennedy, Pig Pen, and the little girl at her window. Harold didn't put pencil to paper for quite a while, then, slowly and with deliberation, wrote about Pig Pen:

The middle one makes me feel funny.

While he was writing this disturbing, solitary sentence, his eyes were twitching and he moved about and grimaced, not talking to other children, sometimes just looking at the paper for long

stretches, his gaze blank except for the flicking of his eyelids. I watched him and felt uneasy, worried that I was about to open up more than I could handle.

When the bell rang, I collected the children's essays and, on a whim, asked Harold to help me gather the pencils. I didn't know what to say to him, but I knew I didn't want to let go of him just yet. He went to each messy station at the table and put the pencils neatly in their box, all points together. We took everything back to the teachers' lounge—Harold walking a step or two behind me—and I asked him for one more favor. Would he mind helping me carry some art paper out to my car? I handed him a packet, and we walked to the parking lot. When I opened my trunk he saw a football and said, "I like to play football." I reached in and handed him the ball. He held it and turned the threads upward and said: "What I like to do best is kick." "I'm not very good at that," I said. "Someday you'll have to show me how you do it." He looked up and gave me a half smile. And that was how we started.

During the next two weeks, I looked for Harold on the playground, dreaming up any lame excuse to have him give me a hand. I'd ask him to set up chairs with me around the cafeteria table or carry in scissors and pencils and glue for the rest of the class. We talked about football, and about things he saw on the way to school: squirrels fighting in a tree, trucks unloading materials at the factory across the street. I found out that he had a job retrieving shopping carts for a local market, so we talked about that as well. He was soon talking more readily and his facial tics began subsiding. And his writing took a dramatic upswing. He found a picture of children carrying presents through the snow and wrote a night-before-Christmas story:

It is Christmas Eve. We have to go to bed early tonight. It is 12 o'clock. I heard something on the roof. It was coming down the chimney. It woke me up. I opened the door. I saw Saint Nick.

His teacher, Mrs. Berry, had been giving a nice series of lessons on the haiku, and though the poem Harold wrote for her didn't match the form, he had clearly appropriated the *idea* of haiku, the compressed language, the imagistic focus:

The eagle dives after the fish
The fish swims away from the eagle.

I wasn't too concerned about spelling, but I couldn't help but notice that Harold's spelling was relatively error-free. I took a quick look through his file—a thick and depressing catalog of failure—and saw that you could never have predicted the work he was doing now.

Harold began talking a bit more regularly with the other children—he still grimaced and twitched occasionally, but seemed more open, less sealed up, less distressed by whatever it was that tugged at his face from the inside. I sat in on Mrs. Berry's class and saw that although he fidgeted and looked off into space and spent an undue amount of time straightening his desk, he was also volunteering answers. Mrs. Berry noticed the difference. She had found in the past that when she could sit alone with Harold and go over lessons he would respond, but she had five other children who required a lot of private help as well, and she couldn't give them all they needed. What was going on now, however, was unusual: Harold was coming alive in the midst of others.

Over the next month, I gave my extra time to Harold—working on his reading and arithmetic in pretty traditional fashion, but occasionally trying something out of the ordinary. Once I taped an interview with him. We pretended that I was a reporter who was writing his story; when we were done with the interview, I typed it up and used it as a reader. I discovered that he had three older sisters and a younger brother, and that his father hadn't been around for quite a while. When he was much younger, Harold used to go camping and fishing with him, and those memories remained important—witness the haiku. His favorite pastime was fishing, and for several years, since third grade, he had been walking alone two miles to a lake on the south side of El Monte. We talked a little about fishing, and then I asked him what he did while his line was in the water:

"Think."

"Do you think a lot, Harold?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

A long pause. Then: "Mountains. About going to the mountains and camping and fishing."

Harold's other favorite pastime, of course, was kicking the football. One of the attractions was that he could do it alone: "I practiced kicking at home until I could do it like the real ones."

"You mean until you could kick a spiral?"

"Yes. I kept doing it. Then one day, I did it right. So I do it like that all the time now."

We talked about school and, no big surprise, he didn't like it: He had failed so often and could sense the way the school perceived him. When I asked Harold what he'd prefer to do if he had his way—spend tomorrow at school or at home—he opted for home, dreary as he made it sound:

"What would you do at home?" I asked.

"Nothing. If I'd be at home, I'd probably have to stay in."

The small patch of lawn at Harold's house was overgrown with foxtails, and scraps of old newspaper were fused like mâché grafts onto the dead bushes by the door. A broken hinge had set the screendoor ajar. After our mock interview, I realized that I had to find out more about Harold's life at home. I knocked on the door's flapping edge, and Harold walked out of the darkness of the parlor and let me in. He was quiet, and his eyes were twitching. He left me with his mother, who was sitting on a couch alongside the door. The television to my left was on; newspapers and tabloids were stacked beside it. A bookcase filled with knickknacks was on my right. There were some photographs on the walls—school pictures of children, mostly—and a tinted drawing of Christ with a trimmed beard and a luminescent heart. Mrs. Morton asked me to sit down; I took a chair by the bookcase. The couch on which Mrs. Morton sat had an old bedspread thrown across it: the spread was tangled, and part of it was jammed into the crevices between the cushions. She was sitting in the middle of the couch, sunk in partially, for the springs were gone. She told me that this was the first time anyone from the school had visited the home. "They're always calling me to go there, but I can't always. I have to work. And I've been sick for a while."

One of the temples of Mrs. Morton's glasses was taped to its rim. She was wearing a loose print dress and stockings that were

rolled down below the knee. Her hair was brown and gray and wispy. Harold's father walked out when the boy was five; he had been in jail for the last two years. "They used to go fishing at the lake. Harold really liked that, and I know he misses it. He looks through these books a lot." She pointed to a pile of books on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. I didn't see them at first, so I got up and paged through them. There were magazines like *Field and Stream*, some children's books on whales and dolphins, and two simple books on freshwater fishing.

"Does he have anybody to take him fishing now?" I asked.

"No, not really. My son-in-law works all the time. There's nobody that can do that."

I remembered, then, that Harold had said that he walks to the lake alone.

Mrs. Morton and I talked for about an hour. "Harold is doing better in school this year," she said, "because people are finally leaving him alone." The people, in this case, were the specialists, and Mrs. Morton was angry about the way they had bothered her son. Harold, of course, was doing as poorly as ever, except for the last month, but I was interested in her perception of things, though even here her emotion was flat. She spoke slowly with little rise and fall to her voice. She sat with her arms out to her sides, palms up, fingers curled in. "Junior is just like me. He'll sit in the background, like I do, until someone gets him out."

Mrs. Morton worked in the laundry room of a local hospital and had to alternate shifts. She received no money from her husband and sometimes had to miss work because of an arthritic knee. "We have a hard time of it." Then a long pause. "It got so bad last summer that Junior had to go and stay with his sister and her husband." That didn't work out very well—Harold had to sleep on the couch and got in the way—and almost led to a rift between Mrs. Morton and her daughter. I asked again about the books that Mrs. Morton had shown me. Some remained from the days when her husband was with her; others came from the Sav On down the way. When Harold was younger, he would ask her the names of the fish he was looking at. He could remember the names she told him, and she took this as a sign that he was, in her words, "normal." Harold's little brother came running in asking about supper, so I started making moves to go. I thanked

Mrs. Morton for having me to her house and stood up, extending my hand. We shook hands, and as she looked up from the couch, her eyes were small and cloudy behind the thick lenses of her glasses. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you for coming by."

The week before my visit, my students had turned the topic of discussion to loneliness. We talked a little about the times we'd felt lonely, and then I captured the opportunity and had them write a story about loneliness. Here's what Harold wrote:

I am lost in the woods. I cannot find my way out. I yell and yell. No one answered me. I climbed a tree then I fell out of the tree and broke my arm.

As I was walking out of Mrs. Morton's yard toward my car, I saw Harold halfway down the street setting a football on a kicker's tee. I waved to him and he waved back and then executed his kick. The ball flew off the tee into a pretty good arc, and when it hit the street, it took a weird bounce and rolled under an old panel truck. I pulled up alongside him and told him I thought he was a good kicker. He gave me a confused smile: a tentative grin with eyes averted. I smiled back, said good-bye, and, once past the corner, leaned over to roll down the passenger window to let the wind blow across me. I felt as if I had descended into something dark and warm and couldn't keep my breath.

I drove back to the school to find Ben, but by the time I got there his car was gone. The principal's car was still in the lot, though, so I went in. I had decided to have another look at Harold's file. The principal handed me the thick folder, and I took it to the teachers' lounge and closed the door. As I went through the pile of smudged and dog-eared pages, slowly this time and with my weeks with Harold and a visit to his house behind me, I saw how his teachers had increasingly misread his tics and twitches and detachment as signs of organic damage, how they had gradually despaired of helping him, how he was progressively defined by the school as the outsider his mother felt him— and herself—to be. The folder displayed the sad and elaborate chronicle of what happens to a child who is too distressed to fit neatly into our classrooms.

The first document in the file was a copy of a reading readiness test given to all entering first graders. His score placed him in the "high average" category; that predicted a good chance of success in learning to read. Surprising, given the trouble with reading he would experience.

After the readiness test came a whole set of forms on which teachers had written comments about student progress. The first of many entries was recorded several months after the start of first grade:

Harold has trouble keeping his eyes on the page or "tracking": the eyes seem to jump away from their visual patterns. He has trouble orienting himself to any written work. He also has to work very hard on his written work.

The second entry comes four months later:

Harold is unpredictable, is easily distracted, lacks continuity of effort, has a short attention span. . . .

Three weeks later, the teacher added these observations:

Harold needs *medical* help as well as much careful teaching. He appears neither to have ability nor to care—is immature, but this child has real ability.

With the second entry, the teacher's frustration sneaks into her commentary: Words like *unpredictable* suggest a growing mismatch between her expectations and Harold's behavior. But it was the third entry that caught my eye, for it contained both a final outcry of hope ("this child has real ability") and a final abdication of potency: The teacher looks for help to the medical expert outside her domain.

When Harold was in the second grade, he was tested again. The first series was given right after Christmas. His reading score was below grade level: It placed him at 1.3, first grade, three months. (A further test taken four months later registered 1.7; he was still behind but was growing apace.) His math was close to grade level: 2.3. His IQ was 96, a little below average. One month after the tests, his teacher wrote the following entry:

Harold has become quite verbal but otherwise progressed little. He enjoys sharing and telling about things he sees. He attempts to do arithmetic but rarely gets any written work correct. He is able to give some answers verbally.

She requested that Harold have a diagnostic workup. The form teachers had to fill out to initiate this further testing listed a number of items and provided room for the teacher to write in brief comments. Among other things, Harold's teacher noted the following:

Reason for Filing Report: Progress very slow. Very short attention span. Dreamy.

Social Maturity and Adjustment: Seems immature. Has few friends.

Emotional Stability: Placid most of the time.

Special Interests and Abilities: None that are noticeable.

Reading Level: Preprimer.

Language Ability: Poor. Speech problem.

Arithmetic Ability: Poor

Home-School Relationship: No one came to the conference. I don't know the parents.

Place, with me, the teacher's written comment about Harold's classwork alongside the formal request for further testing. Her prose may damn with faint praise, but it gives some hint of life ("has become quite verbal," "enjoys sharing and telling"); the standard form, however, offers a gloomier picture of detachment and ineptitude. Perhaps the language and format of assessment combined with the sluggishness of school bureaucracy led her to emphasize the negative. This sort of report might have been necessary to get action, but it also pretty convincingly defined Harold as a marginal child.

Harold's third-grade teacher entered this comment:

Harold brings many books and encyclopedias to school with pictures that relate to our area of study. However, he has difficulty in reading and written expression. Needs individual attention and supervision.

The books, I suppose, were those I saw at his house, and there was promise in his attempt to connect the literacy of home and school. By now, though, Harold had been placed in a special class; he spent one period a day with a remedial reading teacher. Here is her observation:

Harold's problem is neurological. Perhaps aphasia. I think that the problem is even too great for remediation. He needs a clinician to work with him.

Harold had been defined as slow, as being in need of remedy, but the person designated by the school to provide remedy saw the problem as beyond her, as "too great for remediation." She appealed to the clinical setting and applied the neurological designation, aphasia, the impairment of the power to use words. Harold's first-grade teacher had invoked general medicine. Now the appeal was to neurology: a designation seemingly more precise—and more weighted with status. With this assessment, Harold was, in a sense, excluded from the school, pushed further away from the healing possibilities of the teacher-student relationship and further toward the cold instrumentation of the clinic.

Harold's fourth-grade teacher filed an Observation Report, a form with a series of characteristics for the teacher to check off. She put marks by the following:

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS	PERSONALITY TRAITS
Poor coordination	Unpredictable
Pale	Inactive
Facial grimaces	Restless
Speech difficulties	Demands much attention
Frequent bathroom requests	Inability to follow direction

By an entry labeled "Language Ability," she wrote "oral only." On a reading scale that ran "Good, Average, Poor" she wrote in "None." After "Progress in School" she wrote "None. Is being considered for other placement."

"Other placement" meant that Harold was being considered for a slot in an EMR class, a setting for mentally retarded children who were "educable" and who had the potential to profit from certain kinds of highly structured schooling. What interested me was the way the teacher's assessment reduced Harold to a child without any ability to read or write. Although he was behind grade level almost from the beginning, Harold's earlier teachers gave testimony to some degree of literacy, and my work with him certainly revealed a literate capacity. Had he completely closed him-

self off in the fourth grade? Or did this particular teacher so despair of helping Harold that she wrote him off? I wondered if a highly structured curriculum would best serve a child who was already failing in the considerably structured curriculum of the regular classroom? Harold's minor successes with me were not the result of any structure I provided, for I provided relatively little. It seemed that Harold was responding to human connection and to an encouragement to express himself in a setting where some of the strictures of the standard curriculum had been momentarily suspended.

Harold had been increasingly defined as a child who was limited organically, who had some sort of medical or neurological impairment, who had problems that were "too great for remediation." I turned, then, to his medical records, also a thick bundle, for many of the assessments he had accumulated brought with them visits to physicians, neurologists, speech therapists, and ophthalmologists. I went through these records carefully, but could find no indication that Harold's problems were primarily physiological.

All eye examinations registered Harold's vision at 20/20 and made no mention of the kind of muscular or neural problems that would result in irregular eye movements. Medical examinations listed purely physical problems—enlarged tonsils, caries—with one exception: "missed many on finger to nose." That warranted a neurological workup at the local hospital. The results were negative. Harold's developmental history was normal; except for "a severe attack of bronchial pneumonia" at age three, there was no record of serious illness, head injury, or convulsions. During his stay in the first and second grade, he saw the district's speech therapist. After a good deal of work, the therapist finally registered the problem as being primarily orthodontal:

Harold is still having difficulty making an "s". His bite is poor and he is unable to close his teeth in order to make a good "s". Has made as much progress as possible. Dismiss from speech class.

By the vagaries of shuffling, one of the last sheets in the medical file was a report from an ophthalmologist. He had scribbled a note on the bottom of his diagnostic report that brought Harold's journey full circle:

The problem is psychological.

I read that sentence and thought of Harold pushing shopping carts along Peck Road, alone, absorbed, perhaps, with thoughts of fishing, hunting, and his father.

When I finally closed the file, it was dark outside. I was to have supper at Joe's, and I was over an hour late. I went to the secretary's desk and called, apologizing and explaining that I'd be along shortly. Then I went back to the teachers' lounge and sat down. The thing that was most affecting me was the sheer weight of the file: the endless assessments, the multiple referrals, the accumulation of voices saying, "No, no, not us." There was no denying that Harold *was* a strange kid: He was very far behind, he drifted off, his face registered the irregular beat of some inner pulse. But his response to personal attention was too dramatic to be ignored. The way the schools are set up, however—the loads teachers carry, the ways they're trained to deal with difference, the vast patchwork of diagnostics and specialists—make it very hard for someone like Harold to get what he needs: a guide sitting down on the steps by him and building a relationship through the words on a printed page.

One day, several weeks before, Harold came running up to me as I was getting out of my car. He was carrying an album by the Angels, one of the "girl groups" of the early sixties, that had belonged to his oldest sister. The Angels' big hit was "My Boyfriend's Back," and it was one of Harold's favorite songs. He wanted me to play it for him and help him write out the words:

My boyfriend's back
And you're gonna be in trouble
Hey la de la, my boyfriend's back. . . .

What fluff, I had thought at the time. But I saw now what I had entirely missed then. At the heart of the *la de la* was the promise of return and protection. A boyfriend—or a father. How sweet that must have sounded.

I thought a lot about Harold over the next few weeks. There were things in the books I had been reading before entering the Teacher Corps that made a lot of sense here: Maslow's cautions about psychological labeling: "What is stressed . . . is the category in which the person belongs . . . *not* the person as such";

R. D. Laing's objection to the diagnostic language used to describe malady: "The words one has to use are specifically designed to isolate and circumscribe the meaning of the patient's life." Harold's file gave testament to an extensive network of assessment, to a sophisticated diagnostic technology, but there was little in it that illuminated the core of his loneliness or that could be used to guide him toward competence.

Still, one of the assessments continued to nag at me. Was Harold, as the reading specialist suggested, aphasic? The neurologist's report was negative, but the word carried such ominous and final implications that I felt I had to find out more for myself. I went to the psychology library at USC and checked out a stack of books; one thing I could certainly do after graduate work in English was conduct research. I went through the *Aphasia Handbook for Adults and Children*; *Aphasia, A Clinical and Psychological Study*; *Differential Diagnosis of Aphasia with the Minnesota Test*; and three or four more. What I found was increasing diagnostic and clinical disagreement.

Aphasia was broadly defined as an impairment in the ability to use symbols, the ability to speak, read, and write. As the authors got more specific, they generated lists of characteristics, but some of the lists were so long and sweeping that they seemed to lose their diagnostic value. One book, for example, detailed twenty-nine characteristics of aphasia, ranging from short attention span to epilepsy to withdrawal to hypoactivity to hyperactivity to poor hand-eye coordination to poor judgment. What value was a list like that? Furthermore, some authors even questioned the usefulness of the diagnosis, particularly with children who did not have clear supporting evidence of neurological damage. Several books included samples of aphasic handwriting, and I compared those with Harold's script. I double-checked the spelling in the writing he had done for me. I thought back to the "high-average" score on his reading readiness test. I thought about our conversations. I thought about his home. The diagnosis revealed more about a teacher's need to reduce the complexity of troubling behavior than it did about the nature of Harold's difficulty with written language.

There were times with Harold when it was no more than a flicker, indistinguishable, almost, amid the tics and grimaces. But

there was no doubt that it was light, like the headlamp of a miner trapped deep in the wood and vapor of a collapsed tunnel. And, sometimes, the light did shine: "The eagle dives after the fish/the fish swims away from the eagle." Harold had been on a shuttlecock odyssey: his intelligence was calibrated, his eyes checked, the rhythms of his brain monitored. The journey yielded snapshots, but they were cropped of his history: camping with his father, his solitary walks to the lake. His past was being replaced by a sterile chronicle of assessments that couldn't get to the living center of the problem: the lost father, the mother receding slowly into a dim parlor, the growing weight of the assumption of his feeble-mindedness. Harold was made stupid by his longing, and his folder full of tests could never reveal that.

"Most of them have been terribly hurt about their intelligence," Lillian said, and paused, seeming to reach inside, trying to catch the right word. "We think that if . . . if we can only give these kids more study skills, that'll solve their problems." Again a pause, then focus—and eloquence. "But poor reading is not at the core of the paralysis they feel. They continually relive all the old hurt." The American educational system is an extraordinary achievement. Secondary and higher education is not systematically regulated—as in many other countries—by examination or quota, and even if you're poor, there are schools you can afford. We have provided elementary education for virtually all American children for some time now, and we fret more than many societies do about meeting the diverse needs of these young people. We test them and assess them—even kindergartners are given an array of readiness measures—in order to determine what they know and don't know, can and can't do. The supreme irony, though, is that the very means we use to determine those needs—and the various remedial procedures that derive from them—can wreak profound harm on our children, usually, but by no means only, those who are already behind the economic and political eight ball.

Kids *do* come to school with all sorts of linguistic differences, and some kids, like Harold, arrive on our doorstep with big problems. But what happens at school can then further define the

child as unusual, as marginal. Our approaches to language and literacy as often as not keep us from deep understanding of differences and problems—and possibilities. As Mark, Danny, Hank, Delores, and many of the others I worked with demonstrated, kids labeled as marginal have a literate capacity far richer than the numbers in their folders reveal. We set out to determine what a child knows in order to tailor instruction, but we frequently slot rather than shape, categorize rather than foster. And the poorer the kids are—the less power their parents have—the more likely are their chances of being, as Lillian put it, hurt about their intelligence.

American meritocracy is validated and sustained by the deep-rooted belief in equal opportunity. But can we really say that kids like those I taught have equal access to America's educational resources? Consider not only the economic and political barriers they face, but the fact, too, that judgments about their ability are made at a very young age, and those judgments, accurate or not, affect the curriculum they receive, their place in the school, the way they're defined institutionally. The insidious part of this drama is that, in the observance or the breach, students unwittingly play right into the assessments. Even as they rebel, they confirm the school's decision. They turn off or distance themselves or clam up or daydream, they deny or lash out, acquiesce or subvert, for, finally, they are powerless to stand outside the definition and challenge it head-on. Teachers like Rosalie see through this behavioral smokescreen to the pain and fear underneath, but class load, bureaucratic protocol, the sheer weight of the child's record, the difficulty of reversing established institutional perceptions, and a dozen other factors make it very hard to act fully on their teacherly instincts. Meanwhile the children gradually internalize the definition the school delivers to them, incorporate a stratifying regulator as powerful as the overt institutional gatekeepers that, in other societies, determine who goes where in the educational system. There is no need for the elitist protection of quotas and exclusionary exams when a kid announces that he just wants to be average. If you want to insist that the children Joe and Monica and the rest of us taught had an equal opportunity in American schools, then you'll have to say that they had their equal chance and forfeited it before leaving the fourth grade.

The dance floor is dim, and colored lights give the bland cafeteria walls and the sagging crepe the snap of fiesta. On a makeshift stage, an older man is playing the *bajo sexto*—a bass guitar with six double strings—and the accordionist pushes and pulls on a button squeeze box: a jumpy vibrato, tremulous, happy. Your feet and shoulders move, even if you stand along the back wall, as I am, for the dances, the Norteña polka and the *corrido*, are so expressive and merry. The *corrido*, a quick dance with rapid turns, the woman pressed in close, the man's right hand firm in the small of her back, their feet moving in swift shuffle steps, their shoulders bouncing—a dance simultaneously abrupt and delicate. We celebrate the end of English classes, a night school for adults. We are having a graduation of sorts, one of those moments when time is stopped with colored lights to honor achievement, the achievement here of people working to make English a full second language.

Our stay in the Teacher Corps would soon be over. Almost from the beginning of our work in El Monte, Ben Campos got us involved in things you'd never find in the traditional ed school bill of fare. Ben possessed the kind of binocular vision I needed so badly. He was able to see head-on the community's poverty and despair, yet saw as well the many points of desire and possibility. He knew where to tap. He'd identify a need and figure out a way for us to help. Of all our special projects, one of the most tentative but most enjoyable was an English program we set up for Spanish-speaking adults. It was probably Ben's most instructive move.

We met two evenings a week in the empty cafeteria, arranging those long Formica tables into stations at each corner of the room. The participants came from the houses and crammed apartments that surrounded the school; many of their children were in the classes we taught and observed. Some of these people were in the United States on temporary visas and others were here illegally: migrant workers and ditchdiggers and other day laborers trying to keep a Mexican family in shoes and clothes with American wages. Every so often, the INS, *la migra*, would raid the apartment buildings in which they lived, and we'd lose a tableful of students, to be replaced, eventually, by new workers who started coming to our program with relatives and neighbors. Ben

counted it all up one day and announced to us that we must have seen a hundred people. We got to know some of them quite well, and, I think, had decent success with them. Others, though, would show up for two or three or four weeks, and then voluntarily or otherwise go back to their families in Baja or Jalisco or Michoacan.

Our lessons were practical. Mostly, we focused on spoken English, though we did work on reading with those who were already gaining fluency in their new language. What curriculum we had, we tried to build from the situations most immediate to them: role-playing and modeling how you'd hire a lawyer, determine price, and express your satisfaction or displeasure; how to converse with your child's teacher, a physician, an Immigration official. We'd ask them what current problems they were having in their communities or on their jobs and try to structure the conversation accordingly. This work was exciting for us; we had never taught adults. Ben, who knew about second-language instruction and who took the least skilled students himself, laid out some general guidelines about relevance, and role-playing and language acquisition and then eavesdropped on our lessons. After the first few sessions, the people we worked with began shaping the encounters themselves. They'd start showing up at six-thirty and stay until nine—sometimes later—to talk over concerns about jobs or kids. Occasionally, Ben and I would then go with a few of the men to the local bar, where Spanish and English fused on the jukebox and on the shifting channels of a dusty TV.

Most of the participants had grown up poor, so their Mexican education was limited—that, combined with uncertain English, made it unlikely that they would have many official contacts with American schools. A number of them told us that they were concerned about how their children were doing, but felt funny about seeing the teacher, for their English was so bad and . . . well . . . who were they to presume to talk to the teacher about what she does? Our night school was different for them, though, and they showed us that in a variety of ways. After working all day, they'd arrive with a bowl of *pollo con mole* or a tray of *chiles rellenos* or a bag of pastries: *pan de huevo*, *elotes*, and *empanadas*, little turnovers stuffed with pumpkin or pineapple. Occasionally Lillian and I and the other interns would grieve to Ben that we didn't know enough to really help, that we weren't advancing our students' English quickly enough. Ben would pause—the thoughtful pause

was characteristic of him—and then point out that the sessions, by all signs, were valued by these folks, that just using English in the company of native speakers was a good thing. Most important, he'd say, tapping his spoon on the rim of his coffee cup, the classes were bringing them comfortably into the schools, breaking them far away, distant from the places where their kids were learning how to read and write. We were too focused on specific outcomes, said Ben, slipping into educationese for our benefit; there's more to look for here than just an increase in vocabulary. I believe him now more than I believed him then, though interesting illustrations of his point surrounded us. Take, for example, my student Tranquilino.

When we completed our classes at the end of the school term, we got various cards and notes of thanks from the participants. Tranquilino sent me a card with a long note written inside it. He thanked me for the lessons and worried that I might not understand his letter, which was in Spanish. He wished me well and hoped that I found myself "enchanted with life"—a beautiful way to say that he wanted things to go well for me. He wrote further about several classmates we both liked and then closed with *disculpame por los borrones y lo mal espresado*—"pardon my erasures and the poor way in which I express myself," a respectful gesture to the language teacher and a reminder of how intimidating the use of written language can be. But the part of this that was most linguistically revealing—and certainly touching in a complicated way—was the fact that the card Tranquilino had sent was a sympathy card: It had a tableau of praying hands on the front; "praying God will comfort you," it said on the inside. A gaffe of a different order from those for which he apologized. I knew that Tranquilino was capable of deciphering most of the individual words, yet the message of the Hallmark text went by him, a sign that he was still a beginning reader of a new language. He heard the individual sounds but missed the song. He probably thought the card was appropriate for his teacher because it looked and sounded elevated, respectful. I thought a lot about the card, was alternately flattered and moved—for the error in choice was so engaging—yet I fretted too, for I felt I should have done a better job with Tranquilino's reading.

I had finished with Tranquilino in April, and as June ap-