

Connecting

Section Editor's Message

Dear Readers,

I especially love the pieces for this issue of “Connecting.” They speak of the fragile, complex, impossible teaching task with the eloquence of the survivor, of the barefoot traveler who has seen too much to turn back despite the thorny path. Hope and inspiration peek through these narratives of “doing what is necessary to do” and point to the paradox of making possible the impossible.

I have heard Jim Super’s high school teaching stories in person for years, so I was pleased when he sent me one to include for you. It is entitled “Fearless.” Pamela Hartman’s story is the flip side to Jim’s. She presents her own student narrative of encountering school literature, allowing us to realize how forcefully our choices affect our students. Thank God for the Jim Supers of the world and the Pamela Hartmans too because, instead of dropping out of school English, she is currently teaching English methods classes.

Nancy Myers complicates this learning-game portrait even further. Her nightmare memories of a graduate class end up showing us the power of literature, the same power that Jim Super gave as “the reason why I had become an English teacher in the first place.”

Andrea Siegel’s “Walking the Talk, Breathing the Breath” suggests that the demands on teachers are even greater than pursuing our academic passions against great odds. We should practice integrity and “walk our talk” outside the classroom.

“The Day Jenny Died” by Traci L. Merritt reminds us that teaching means sharing our human-ness and that, when we have the courage to do so, the reward is healing and lasting.

Susan Schiller’s narrative about her composition pedagogy class speaks strongly in support of the work we are about as practitioners beyond the cognitive domain. She recounts what we all surely dream of: “a perfect collaboration of people touched by grace.”

Our final “story,” this time in the form of a poem, presents the impossible magic we ask of ourselves. Our students lead us, need us, and we with feet of clay can choose to walk the hero journey—and reap the reward. Please read this poem and be inspired as I was.

Fearless

Jim Super

Helen,

You ask for chatty detail about teaching moments. For thirty years I have been building a stock-pile of chatty details. Unfortunately, few of my memories are preserved in writing. Perhaps the sheer volume of paperwork that crosses my desk determines that sad fact. And, with the current “no child left behind” legislation, I’m afraid that the skill building demand may negate any significant education. We’ll be back to “back to the basics,” and then my teaching stories won’t be worth preserving.

As for my current circumstance, I am in the beginning stages of a poetry investigation with my juniors and an impassioned leap into the waters of British Romantic poetry with my seniors. With the budding of spring, I once again feel the necessity of pouring sand into the proverbial rat hole. Yes, I know that a continued assault on subject-verb agreement and thesis statement building might be more skill oriented, but, for my own peace of mind, the quest for opening access into poetry sings like the sirens. My ears are wax-free, and I refuse to be lashed tightly to a mast.

With my juniors, the question arose today, “Will this be fun?” Perched on my tongue, ready to leap with reckless abandon, was the reply: “Compared to watching reality television, *Married by America*, *American Idol*, Springer, or the war, this could be the defining moment in your life.” But I resisted, choosing instead to offer that this project would allow them to explore a single poet with depth, passion, and earnestness. They stared back mouths agape. Undaunted, I continued that they would be experimenting with five distinct kinds of writing, with deductive and inductive reasoning, with research, with critical analysis, with persuasion, with cultural archetype, with criticism, and with the very heart and soul of the poet. Two asked to go to the bathroom, one for a pass to the nurse; the rest just sat there while visions of prom danced in their heads. Tomorrow we begin in earnest, and, when we finish, most every student will have completed this task with considerable success. I am left exhausted, a wasted man.

Yet, the greatest task remains: to engage my seniors with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and Shelley. Springtime with seniors is a memory that I had chosen to put aside seven years ago. I had had my fill: from the whining parents to the beer-crazed, preoccupied, spiked, pierced, tattooed, tanned students who wandered into my class without regard for bells, decorum, or good sense. But here I am once again trying to fit 1,000 angels on the head of a pin. Me, the man who had sworn off, who had given in, who had succumbed to the casual life with juniors—who have yet to discover the facts that they know everything and

Jim Super, a 30-year veteran of the “English Wars,” teaches English at Olathe East HS in Olathe, KS. His realm of influence includes two college prep English IV classes (British lit) and three English III classes (American Lit).

high school is a mere exercise to keep me busy in their spare time. What the hell was I thinking? How had this happened to me again?

Today I drifted back into “A Preface [Pre-face, as Mike read] To Lyrical Ballads,” and I rediscovered why I had become an English instructor in the first place. I’m far too old to remember for certain when it happened, but it must have been somewhere between 17 and 23.

Yet the unmistakable “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” flashed into me like a thunderbolt. Here I sit, planning for tomorrow, immersed in the Romantics, fearless as I prepare for my seniors. Will I be able to engage them for a lifetime? I don’t know. Yet the effort is worthy if one student discovers the magic of poetry. I gotta go. I look forward to hearing from you. I doubt that I will make it to Ithaca this summer. The money for high school teachers has dried up like a well during a drought. — Jim

English? I’d Rather Read A Book

Pamela Hartman

When I was young, I called two activities in my life “reading,” one having very little to do with the other. One activity included snuggling with my mom and little brother, traveling to strange and colorful places with other children, and drinking red Kool-Aid. The other involved sitting in hard-backed chairs, wading through uninteresting stories with underlined words that must be used in complete sentences, and agonizing that the teacher would correct my pronunciation again. Which memory was first? I’m not sure. They happened simultaneously in my mind. I loved the time I spent in my mother’s room, Dad away on his weekly business trips, listening to my mother read books that my brother and I picked ourselves off the library shelf. I dreaded the time I spent at school in my “reading group,” mainly because I always knew there was the threat of being moved down to a lower group (or “nest,” since the reading levels were always disguised with bird names). Being a “Robin” wasn’t much, but it was still better than being a “Buzzard” or a “Dodo.”

I resisted reading alone for a while but soon found a friend I wanted all to myself. Her name was Laura Ingalls Wilder, and I couldn’t wait until the next birthday or Christmas to receive another book. I thought her family was wonderful and her life full of adventure. I remember wanting to be her, to receive tin cups and peppermint at Christmas, and to see Indians on the hill outside my front door.

In the eighth grade, when I started taking English instead of Reading, we read novels, poetry, short fiction, and drama instead of stories in Readers. I was put into “Advanced English,” a fluke I still credit to my ranking high on a national

math test, which instantly placed me in all advanced courses. Although we read better literature in junior high and high school, I never lost my aversion to being told what to read and considered English my worst class only after phys ed. I found little interest in sitting through lectures about the lives of men long dead, memorizing lists of disconnected literary and vocabulary terms, or matching Greek gods and goddesses to their domains and heroic deeds.

Still, I enjoyed hiding away in my room to read the latest book that my mother had forbidden. I poured through *Flowers in the Attic*, *A Tunnel in the Sky*, *Go Ask Alice*, and *Sybil* only to search for more books hidden in the hall closet. My reading materials were also supplemented by my monthly selections from the grocery store, the one “extra” my mother never said no to. My friends and I shared these books and debated the motivation of the characters and the styles of the authors. We looked for the “truth” between these covers, and we applied this knowledge to our lives. We owned these books and the knowledge that we made from them.

It was not until college that I began to find meaning in school literacy. In college, I was required to take Literature Interpretation. This sounded suspiciously like English to me, but there was no getting around it. To my surprise, this class was actually interesting as well as challenging. There were no vocabulary lists, matching or multiple choice tests, reading groups, or book reports. The teacher actually seemed to want to hear what I had to say, and, if he didn’t understand what I was saying, he didn’t shake his head and move on to the next student. Instead, he asked questions as if I had some insight into the piece that he had never encountered before. This man built up my confidence and made me understand the connection between the reading that I loved and the reading I was required to do. I could read for different purposes yet enjoy the experience. I would again find pleasure out West, driving cattle with Gus in *Lonesome Dove*. I would also find pleasure and satisfaction in finding meaning in the works of Shakespeare, Margaret Atwood, and Zora Neale Hurston.

Through my experiences, both inside and outside of English class, I learned that powerful reading happens when we are allowed a space to talk about and negotiate the meaning of the texts. I think this is particularly important today in the light of high-stakes testing and “accountability,” when teachers too often feel pressured to provide knowledge and to teach skills. In both my literature and English methods classes, I want my students to go beyond lists of standards and skills. Instead, we work towards thoughtful reflection and understanding of ourselves and the world we live in as well as the literature that we read. In this case, what is important is not what we are told is knowledge, but instead the knowledge we are able to make for ourselves and carry with us beyond the classroom walls. I want my students to make connections between home and school literacy and to value challenging the texts they read and choosing the focus of discussion, if not the actual texts that we read. I want them to recognize the power of human interaction and connection in our learning. These are the challenges that I contemplate as I sit down at night to finish planning my classes, a glass of red Kool-Aid sitting nearby.

B

Nancy Myers

I hit the top of the third flight of stairs, veered right down the hall, trying not to slip on the freshly waxed tiled floor in my 2-inch heels. The door was open, so I knew I wasn't late—yet. Bad form to be late on the first day of a graduate seminar. I had stopped to chat with a friend I had not seen in two months, so here I was racing to make that open door. I almost collided with the professor outside the classroom. Secure in my arrival, I smiled.

“Why are you taking this course?” he queried me in the hall.

“Because I want to read Melville and Hawthorne,” I replied a bit confused.

“Well, you'll not get better than a 'B' for your time.” As he strode in preparing to set his materials on the lectern, he commanded, “Close the door behind you.”

I had not looked up or into the room in my haste to get to class. But, when I did, I recognized that all of the other graduate students were quiet and looking down at their desktops. They had heard everything. Like Hester Prynne, I walked into the classroom a marked woman, only my scarlet letter was a “B.”

Like many other students in that course, I had had this professor in the previous semester's seminar on Faulkner and Hemingway. I had loved the reading. We had read all of Faulkner and all of Hemingway in one semester. I was reading three novels a week. The man's pedagogy consisted of lecturing and weekly essay exams with regurgitated answers that we had to guess at since he did not tell us in advance. We learned his agenda only after the exams, as he read from the essays he liked and read from the ones he did not. My writings and Socratic responses were either ignored or ridiculed. But I loved the reading. Class time was hard because he was brutal and mean, particularly to women. Each semester he gave a speech about how women had no place in higher education. That statement, of course, came the first day in Melville and Hawthorne, and, of course, it was aimed directly at Hester with a “B.”

I had been anxious about each class session on Faulkner and Hemingway, but being labeled before we started this course changed my educational life radically. While the professor was trying to run me off, I chose to stay. While he worked to show me my place, I wallowed in the ecstasy of the readings. The he-man-teacher who so tried to discourage me taught me-woman-student in one short semester the difference between working for a grade and learning. Yes, I got the “B.” And I am very proud of it.

Nancy Myers is an associate professor of English at the U of NC at Greensboro, where she teaches composition, linguistics, and the history of rhetoric. Along with Gary Tate and Edward P.J. Corbett, she is an editor of the 3rd and 4th editions of The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook. Most recently she published "The Slave of Pedagogy: Composition Studies and the Art of Teaching" in Teaching Writing: Landmarks and Horizons (SIU P 2002).

Walking the Talk, Breathing the Breath

Andrea Siegel

I find it pretty easy to tell students what to do. In the classes I offer through the continuing education departments of Barnard, Hunter, and Borough of Manhattan Community Colleges, I teach techniques from behavioral psychology which cut right through the terror that can accompany public speaking. The students are happy because the techniques help them overcome what had been a humiliating problem. I'm happy because I see dramatic, sustainable improvement in their performance. I certainly think it is important that I take the advice I give my students; of course, I must "walk the talk." No matter how challenging, if I have any integrity at all, I must use my methods when I am afraid. However, this is not so easy. First of all, I'm the teacher, so I think it's ridiculous that I'm having a problem. (I'm pretty hard on myself.) Second, when I feel my life is in danger, the last thing I want to try is some weird exercise from my pedagogy . . .

Last June, my boyfriend Al decided to give me a treat for my birthday—he would take us on a sunset sailboat cruise. Al did not know that twenty years ago my friend Vicky had taken me out on Long Island Sound in her sailboat. When the sail knocked me into the water, she sailed circles around me teasing me about sharks in the water. After that afternoon, I decided I never needed to get on a sailboat again. And I hadn't.

Now I had to be gracious. "Besides," I thought, "I'll be fine sailing with Al. It's been twenty years. I was a kid."

When we got to the dock, the couple ahead of us was telling the captain that they'd decided not to go. "I can't give you your money back," the captain said, "Please come." The captain looked about seventeen. She was cute.

The woman in the couple said she was so scared that she knew she'd throw up and she didn't want to do that. I didn't want either. They left. I told Al I was nervous. "Relax," he said. "It'll be fine." This didn't make me feel better.

When we got on the boat, the captain told us (we were sitting in a cushioned seating area) that we could sit there for the whole cruise, that she'd never turned the boat over, and that it was a beautiful night. She also mentioned that the boat would tilt a little once we got our sails up.

After we left the harbor, the boat tilted a lot. I'm not a mathematician, but I'd say the sail was roughly just above horizontal with the water. I clutched Al and thought, "I can just white-knuckle it for the whole hour, and then I'll never have to get on a boat again."

There are times when reminding myself that I am a feminist has no effect. This was one of those times. I closed my eyes. I tried telling myself that if I fell out of the boat, I knew how to swim. I was a trained lifeguard. I had just finished

Andrea Siegel is the author of Snapshots from the Heart (Agapanthus Books, 2003), Open and Clothed (Agapanthus Books, 1999) and Women Aikido (North Atlantic Book, 1992). Her work has also appeared in the New York Times and Salon Magazine, among other places. She is currently earning a master's degree in the Liberal Studies program at CUNY Graduate Center.

drafting a book about swimming. Sometimes the truth doesn't help.

I clutched Al some more. Then I thought, "I won't be able to face my students next week if I don't at least try some of the relaxation techniques that I teach them in class." I reminded myself that the fear was being produced by my brain: it was coming as a result of adrenalin, and I knew how to stop it. I tried to do the breathing technique. I could not get myself to breathe. "OK," I thought. "What can I do? Maybe if I start pumping my stomach in and out, start the motion, then the breath will follow."

I gently pulled my stomach in and then released my stomach muscles four or five times, and my breath started working again. I started relaxing. By the end of the trip, I was completely relaxed, and I had something even better; I understood why people love the sea. I could see that it was hypnotic and beautiful sailing through blue grey waves.

When my students start to use this "belly breathing" technique to turn off anxiety, I see an immediate change in their demeanor. Their brows un wrinkle. Their shoulders relax. They move with more awareness and grace. They tell me the technique makes a huge difference. I wonder if their world changes as abruptly as mine did . . . to a place far more peaceful and centered.

The Day Jenny Died

Traci L. Merritt

As teachers in the United States, we are trained to do many tasks. I have been through countless fire drills, tornado drills, and nuclear disaster drills, preparing for the worst scenarios. I did not realize that none of my training would assist me in dealing with the situation I would soon face. Last March 19, 2002, I became a paralyzed victim unable to remedy a situation, unable to fall back on my experience, unable to remember any portion of the emergency plan that would give relief—the day that Jenny died.

Jenny Melton, our beautiful, vibrant Homecoming Queen, was applying for colleges and looking forward to wearing a bikini at the state National Honor Society Convention at the beach in April. Her intelligent mind, beautiful smile, zest for life, and love of Spanish made her a wonderful friend to everyone in our school. On the morning of March 19th, Jenny ran her car off the shoulder of the road. Through overcorrecting then slamming on her brakes, Jenny spiraled headlong into a telephone pole on the opposite side of the road. She was killed instantly.

The morning of her death is nothing but surreal to me as the horrific news came via an assistant principal who called me outside my classroom to explain what had happened. None of the students was to find out until an announcement was made. When I walked back into my room, my eighteen honors English Seniors

Traci Lawson Merritt is currently the Language Arts Department Chairperson at West Hall HS in Oakwood, GA. A 19-year teaching veteran, she serves as National Honor Society advisor and senior class sponsor.

read my face and began asking questions: “Have there been more terrorists? Did someone call in a bomb threat?” As much as I wanted to respond, I was desperately waiting for the announcement. It never came. After many minutes that seemed an eternity, we all heard a scream, the most mournful sound I shall ever hear. At that second, my class with pleading looks demanded that I tell them. I said as matter-of-factly as I could, “This morning, on her way to school, Jenny Melton was killed in a single-car accident.” At that moment my life changed.

All of my students began to cry—the boys and the girls. Jenny’s best friend screamed then began flailing and shaking violently, rocking back and forth. I simply did not know how to deal with such a traumatic event. I instinctively held onto Lara, hoping to comfort her struggling body. I held on and could not say a word, hearing the cries and sobs of my students. A knock at the door came, and the students were told to go to the cafeteria where grief counselors were waiting. I walked with them into a room filled with grieving and crying students, teachers, and other adults. I sat in disbelief with my students—none of us knowing what we were supposed to do next. No one had an answer. We stayed there, trying to comfort each other, trying to bear each other’s agony. Finally, many of the students located their parents who had rushed to the school to pick up their grieving sons and daughters. I don’t recall how that day ended. I just know how empty and inadequate I believed my words and actions had been.

I anticipated an empty classroom for first period the next morning. I was wrong. All of my students came to school except Lara. Naturally, we were all extremely worried about her. After about twenty minutes of blank stares with no one talking, Lara walked into the room with an envelope full of pictures of Jenny: Jenny with her friends at the beach, Jenny and her family, Jenny at birthday parties, a close-up of Jenny’s ugly teeth! The pictures broke the ice, and talking with a few laughs through the tears began; each of us, in little baby steps, began the grieving process, climbing out of a black hole back into the land of the living. The days that followed were long and difficult, but by the end of the school year, those eighteen students and I had developed a special bond. We were there together when Jenny died, and that experience gave us a unique strength, the power to live each day to its fullest, day after day.

As I reflect upon that day, I realize it had important implications for teachers. When tragedy strikes, I learned that being brave and strong may be the wrong reaction. While I truly wanted to maintain a guarded front and not break down in front of my students, I learned that breaking down with them and for them was key. I realized that as a teacher, I am first and foremost an individual with feelings too. I believe my response to join them in their tears kept us close and created a sense of trust. The tears that my students and I shared, the moments of pain and hurt we carried to the Junior/Senior Prom, and the bittersweet knowledge of an empty chair at graduation allowed a healing to transpire. For those eighteen students that were with me the day that Jenny died, I have more than love and admiration. When I see them now or hear from them as they have moved on to college, I am constantly reminded of the vulnerability of human life and how precious each life is.

Touched by the Spirit in AEPL Topics

Susan A. Schiller

During fall 2002, I taught English 519: The Teaching of Composition, which generally features an overview of theory and practice in composition studies. Most of us who teach it focus on college composition, but we sometimes require readings relevant for the elementary and secondary level depending on the student enrollment. The course is open to undergraduate seniors and graduate students. In past years, it filled mostly with graduate assistants who were required to take it, but since that requirement has been dropped, the course has had trouble filling. This particular semester four graduate students, Monica, Crystal, Angie and Jane, and one undergraduate student, John, enrolled. John was the only student who lived close to campus. Everyone else commuted from a ten to thirty-mile distance.

My plan was to begin with a motivational view of writing and progress through controversial topics JAEPL readers investigate in their research. We read, in this order, Maisel's *Deep Writing*, Dick Grave's *Writing, Teaching, Learning*, Anson and Beach's *Journals in the Classroom*, Starkey's *Teaching Writing Creatively*, Foehr and Schiller's *The Spiritual Side of Writing*, and Anderson and MacCurdy's *Writing and Healing*.

Most JAEPL readers have probably witnessed student resistance, mistrust, and even fear when students are asked to move beyond the cognitive domain in the classroom.

Tension usually arises when we ask them to consider seriously the theories and practices JAEPL readers and contributors study. My students in the fall felt the usual responses but used their responses as signals to pursue in-depth intellectual inquiry about these topics.

From the start the students in 519 were eager participants. Monica and Angie had taken undergraduate courses with me, and, as graduate students, they entered the course with a certain comfort that led to stimulating and fearless discussions. They set a tone that the others quickly embraced, not just with me but with each other. By the third week, it was common to engage in intellectual argumentation without fear. Collaborative support of one another and for a wide range of ideas and questions replaced competition. It became our standard practice to explore topics as they arose and to follow any inclination for discussion that our reading material might invite or that our thoughtful meanderings might lead to. Most of our questions invited contemplation and reflection rather than right or wrong answers. Classes were intense, exciting, and energizing. The three hours whizzed by, and we usually left before completing our topic explorations.

By the time we began to discuss *Writing as Healing*, everyone had selected a

Susan Schiller is a professor of English at Central Michigan U. Her research interests include spirituality in education, holistic education, affect and image. She and Regina Paxton Foehr co-edited The Spiritual Side of Writing (Heinemann 1997), a collection of essays motivated by AEPL topics.

research area and was engaged in writing an annotated bibliography about it. Jane had chosen spirituality in the classroom. Monica was curious about integrating literature into a standard composition course. Crystal needed to satisfy her interest in creative nonfiction, and John investigated meditation practices for classroom application. (Angie had reached a point in her pregnancy that required her to withdraw from the class, taking an incomplete.)

To begin our exploration of writing as healing, a guest, Ed Comber, spoke to us. He essentially repeated his session from AEPL's summer 2002 conference. Ed's work features a practical taxonomy that is used to recognize what he calls Emotive Response Discourse (ERD) in student composition. The students saw this as provocative work. His expansion and practical application of ideas found in Anderson and MacCurdy's book, *Writing as Healing*, helped the students to move beyond theory. It also helped them see how theory can lead to research and professional growth.

Our animated discussion that evening kept Ed in class for about two hours, twice the time I had allotted him. The hour remaining then became insufficient for us to complete our inquiries, and we all agreed to pick up where we had left off when we next met.

Nearing the end of the semester, we all felt the fatigue common to everyone just before Thanksgiving (classes run from late August straight through to Thanksgiving without a break). With this in mind and since most of these students were commuters, I thought they might need to replace two hours of class time with library time. As expected, they welcomed this opportunity, so we decided to finish our discussion of the week before and then head for the library. It seemed as though it was only a minute or two before the time showed six o'clock. No one wanted to leave. We ditched the library visit and continued through the next two hours deeply involved in discussion.

This was a first time experience for me with students. I have never had students prefer a two-hour discussion in class to free time for homework assignments. I know Dick Graves would say that we had responded to an act of grace as it appeared. Others might mention flow or spirituality. A more traditional view might posit that intellectual stimulation was at its highest. I like to think that it was a spiritual moment of flow created by the perfect collaboration of people touched by grace—and by AEPL topics.

When I knew I would be writing about this class session for *JAEPL*, I emailed the students to share what they remembered about that class. Crystal emailed:

I remember that day's discussion being especially interesting . . . that class period was intense. I remember walking out of class at the end of the night, gratefully! Not because I was sick of being in class, but because we had been so intense and so focused and into what we were discussing that my muscles would go so tight. . . the walk out to my car after class was the aftermath therapy I needed. I haven't had that kind of an effect from any class . . . I have nothing but positive things to say about that class, and would welcome the chance to further that kind of experience for both teacher and student.

John, now assisting in teaching a freshman speech course, answered:

It's kind of ironic I received your e-mail today, because yesterday I was thinking about the experience in my SDA 101 class. . . . One of the students mentioned how she was able to sit down and churn out an entire speech outline in what seemed to her little time at all. I told her I knew the experience, and thought of that day you referred to in 519. If I recall correctly, we were talking about writing and healing, and by some spiritual force everyone began disclosing some real heartfelt information. Well, I told my student what she experienced is a concept I have read about called "flow" in which the mind loses itself in facing a challenge, and our concept of time becomes blurry or nonexistent. In all honesty, after the intrigue I felt that day in 519, I couldn't help but share a small portion of that day's experience with the class.

Crystal and John reaffirmed what I thought about this event in 519. It was special, made special by the way we collaborated, by the people we read, and by the provocative ideas that moved us beyond the cognitive domain of learning.

On The Delicate Art of Teaching

Wilma Romatz

Dangling quietly by a
 Surprising thread,
 Her body is so fragile
 A single twist could crush it;
 Her delicate brown skin
 Offers scant protection
 From the elements.
 Legs poised carefully
 As if on a high-wire,
 She weaves back and forth;
 Silent threads are her voice,
 Her paint, her ink—
 The air her loom,
 Her parchment.
 Passion is her energy,
 Her motive.

I, earthbound, heavy-footed,
 Am astonished by her work,
 [cont., no stanza break]

Wilma Romatz teaches writing and children's literature at C. S. Mott Community College in Flint, MI. Her recent dissertation (Michigan State U) examined the role drawing played in the writing process of 6 non-traditional freshman students. She has just completed teaching a class on Writing/Art/Healing at The Creative Spirit Center in Midland, MI, inspired by the 2002 AEPL conference.

Drawn closer.
 I spin a coarser fabric,
 Limited
 To second-hand filaments
 Spun unnaturally
 With bent back,
 Aching fingers.
 The spindle rises and falls,
 The rhythm and pulse
 Inside my body
 Spiraling, spiraling,
 As I breathe
 In and out,
 And in again,
 Opening
 More fully
 Deeply
 Into myself.

How can I keep on,
 Piled around with
 heaps of straw,
 Playing out words,
 Extracting from
 The meager stuff
 Of my universe
 Garnered bits of wisdom?
 How can I
 Endlessly,
 Willingly,
 Open
 Even wider?

And yet,
 When each breath is spent
 Space opens for another;
 Each strand spun tight,
 Wrapped and
 Cast through the warp,
 Plays from the shuttle,
 Spirals into living cloth
 In its own time, its own pattern.
 And all I need to know
 To perform this alchemy
 Is how to call it
 By its name. ☺