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REVISION

with her as a child. Then write a poem using both narrative lines and make them converge by the end of the poem.

3. Take a poem you've already written and analyze its movement. Does it have a high level and a low level—what Billy Collins terms the Alpha and Omega? Does it surprise us and turn somewhere unexpectedly? Does it drive on like a team of dogs? Does it pull back?

up fishing with my grandfather. When I was very young and we fished together I couldn't catch a fish. He a leader, or put on a lure without checking my work. And it's only now that I realize how much he did check my work. He was the teacher; I learned from it. He was a tackle box, and I considered him a teacher. He would rig lines, tie knots, bait hooks, and release fish, and clean fish with his grates and patience and elegance. He was better than anyone I knew. So when he and my work, I watched and either got his lesson or got a lesson in doing it better and did it again. This was revision at its finest. That was my earliest lesson at how to go about

revision. Then I've learned a thing or two about revision in my life. Specifically, I learned how to revise my writing. Moreover, I realize that there's a reason we engage in that we don't revise. We constantly revising. When we cook, we revise a taste to see what it's missing. When we leave our guests. When we mow the lawn go back and get the long spot in the yard that we missed on the first pass. When we write, we go back and assess how effective we are in praising or scolding. When we go

*Those of us who find
life bewildering and
who don't know what
things mean, but love
the sound of words
enough to fight
through draft after
draft of a poem, can
go on writing—try to
stop us.*

Richard Hugo

out on a date, the next day we always say, "My God, did I sound like a total idiot when I asked her why she . . . ?" So there's no reason to avoid revision when we write.

The reasons we invent for avoiding revision when we write, however, are many. As writers we ought to love revision—it's our chance to make things better, to tighten our hold on something, to take out bad lines, or to add something delicate or something powerful. And yet for many, revision is the scourge of the writing process. It's the moment in creating a poem that we like least, that we sometimes don't engage in. And then when we do, it's minimal. I see people regularly in our workshops who hand in "revised" poems with only one or two words changed. At the most, maybe a line is broken slightly differently than in the first draft. That line change is a step in the right direction, but one- or two-word changes don't really constitute revision. Why do we avoid it with such vigor? Maybe because we have spent so much time creating the poem that we think we are finished with it. Or maybe we feel we would impose too much on what was "creative." Maybe we're simply overwhelmed by or uncomfortable with revision—we don't know exactly what to revise or how to go about it.

Before we talk about how to go about revision, it's important to briefly address the previous reason for avoiding revision. If you feel that you will take out the creative purity of a poem by revising it, just remember that you become creative when you revise. And that makes revision part of the creative process. Consider the fishing metaphor. When my grandfather was fishing and he wasn't catching fish, he'd change things. Maybe he'd change the bait or the lure. But maybe he'd just reel the lure a little faster or slower, maybe give it a little jig up and down occasionally. Sometimes he'd change the depth where he was fishing. But many of these little revisions to his presentation produced fish, and, of course, that was the exciting and fun result we were looking for. If, for instance, you're someone who is overwhelmed by the thought of revision, don't worry—taking it slowly will produce results. I often hear from beginning writers, "I can't even think of where to begin. It took so much to write the poem, I can't imagine how to find what to fix. I just wrote it—you're the poet; now help me." These are exceptionally valid and powerful feelings that can certainly inhibit the revision process. But, even the least experienced writer of poetry can go back and measure her work, check the reactions of her classmates, and see if she's hooking fish. If not, let's jig that lure a little. And so we learn to revise.

HOW SHOULD I BEGIN REVISING?

"What should I revise?" can be a daunting question sometimes. In fact, many beginning writers feel that they put so much into the initial draft that there's nothing left to put into subsequent drafts—that they've used all their

knowledge and creative talent the first time around. But, going about revision by asking more manageable questions will push us into the process of revision. Approaching revision by asking questions is a helpful way to proceed because it gives us concrete points to focus on while we revise. What's more, we can take revision in a somewhat systematic way without getting overwhelmed by everything at once.

Ah, but where to begin? Consider the core of the poem. Ask yourself what the seed was. What was at the heart of the poem? What was I really trying to say? Then maybe look at the poem and make a list of what you see in it. Are the feelings or thoughts from the seed of the poem there? If so, note how they appear in the poem and when you think they are the strongest. These are creative points and places we will need to focus on and come back to. Some we will want to come back to as anchor points, as moorings if you will, to keep us from floating too far from the heart of the poem. Others we will want to work on so they become stronger and more centrally connected or rooted in the heart of the poem. Once we've done some of this conceptually creative revision we can begin asking some technical questions about our creative elements and tools.

We can proceed much the same way as we did with the creative concepts—by asking questions. Is there alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, or slant rhyme? Are there strong images? Are there metaphors and similes? After creating this list you can figure out a bit about what you have, and you can ask yourself what's missing. Once you know what you have, go through those things and check them for their quality, their relationship to the seed of what you wanted to say in the first place. Then you can begin to work with what is not there. I remember that when I first began to write poems, the one thing that was regularly missing from my poems was similes. Once I noticed this missing link, I made a conscious effort to include them. But often this didn't happen until I revised. And maybe I had a great image of, say, a lemon tree, but when I added the metaphorical side of it, "the lemon tree stood like . . ." that's when the image took on some power.

After having done this type of revision and thinking both on and off the page, I've always found the beginning a logical place to go to revise. For many reasons that happen during the initial writing and first few drafts, there's a momentum, an opening into the poem, that gets building near the start. So, I find myself asking whether I'm making things move in the early part of a poem. Are the lines sparking energy? Do I have some image that the reader can hold onto? How central will it be to the poem? Ultimately, a few questions like these get me tapped back into the root energy of the poem, the creative movement that was happening early on, so that I feel reconnected in a vital way but I'm also looking at the poem in a very fresh way. And then as I near the middle of the poem I can begin to see if it's turning the way it ought to, if the lines are carrying a rhythm and trajectory that is necessary, and if the words I've chosen will allow me to create some emotional resonance at the end. Of course, toward

the end of a poem, I'm looking for how I've gone about closing things off, so that while I've concluded the poem I have not concluded the experience.

Let's look at an example of some revision. In the following poem, our author sets up a number of images in the first stanza. We can see by the second stanza that the poem might focus on the sister, the husband/accountant, or maybe the uncle. Then the persona comes in and is taking photos and there is a very self-conscious sense of the persona's relationship to her sister. And, by the end of the poem all of these things converge in some rather moving lines with a focus on the father being central. But there's just something missing. Here's a draft of stanzas one, two, and three.

Walking the Aisle

Walking beside Uncle, my sister's white satin gown
Lit up the dim church

She was marrying the accountant
A wedding, long months in the making

Behind the camera I clicked the shutter away
And from where I stood, they were two figurines.
I focused the lens and caught sight of her accountant

Something was familiar in the way his shoulders slanted
Our father's sternness,
All with the resolve of a lumberjack.

AMY WONG

The following is the revision of the poem. Amy has gone through a few drafts by the time we get this following draft, but it came by tinkering here and then tinkering there. One of the important things to notice in her revision is how much more amplitude she gets out of crafting new, fresh images. There are a number of places in the initial draft where the language is simply flat and does not move anywhere very significant. And, of course, what also happened in changing images was that the dominoes began dropping in relation to how the focus of the poem changed. The evocative elements of the poem came naturally when Amy found the power behind the images. The uncle becomes central instead of the accountant. The sister is very prominent, but in a very subtle denounced way. And the use of "I" for the point of view drops from three times to one. That may seem like a small change but essentially it shifts the psychic focus of the poem from the persona to the connection between all the family members

Walking the Aisle

My sister was a lantern in her white satin gown.
Radiating the way I always knew she would
For the clicking camera shutters.

Beside her was our uncle, scuffling without his cane.
An arthritic leg he fittingly called his lame oar.
To be certain,

Our uncle would one day soon
Find himself at the mercy of a wheelchair.
And though we did look, there was no one left to give my sister away.

AMY WONG

The revision we've just looked at is something that has caused us to change our entire reaction to the poem. By the time it's over we've changed our connections within the poem from first to second version pretty significantly. Amy has achieved the goal by focusing on the core of the poem without superfluous interruption. She's also created language that works on us at a very figurative level. This should be a goal of most revision we make: to change the poem in a way that shifts our understanding of those lines and situations we revise. Consider those times when we say to ourselves "if only I had . . ." or "if I could do it over again . . ." Well, consider revision our chance to do it over again and we can do it the way we feel it might have been best done the first or second time. Unlike a real-life situation, with a poem we can go back and do it over as many times as we please—that dirty word: *drafting*.

Let me suggest a process that can be helpful in revising by drafting. Rather than spending a long time going through a poem and stopping in each line or every couple of lines and asking what can be done here, set up a revision situation that will be successful. Set down for yourself what you will look for and revise for as you go through the poem. Say to yourself, "I will go through this draft and look now only at images. Then I'll come back and comb through the poem for sound quality, specifically, internal rhyme in my lines." If you proceed this way, it's likely you'll avoid that overwhelming feeling that can cause us all to abandon revision for the thirty other things we'd rather do.

Let's look at a poem that was revised significantly—in fact, so significantly that it looked like a different poem. But on close inspection we can see that, in fact, Jenelle has kept the core of the poem alive in both drafts. The situation here is that Jenelle has revised the poem so significantly that now she has to work through the revision process on the new draft. But she's hung tightly to the core. The poet Richard Hugo states that a poem has two sub-

between all the family members

place, and the real or **generated subject**, which is what the poem comes to say. He also states that, in fact, we may not even consciously know what the real subject is but just have some instinctive feeling about it. This idea of two subjects becomes clear in Jenelle's poem and her revision.

a long time ago

the hand shakes as it reaches out
to touch his pale lips
the mouth reaches down
to plant a goodbye kiss
gone is the lover
with golden hair
and bright blue eyes
why are angels always
blue eyes and fair hair?
I was an angel once
far away
but that was a long time ago
now I have black hair
and I suppose
I'm not an angel anymore.

JENELLE EAGER

This is definitely a first draft. She has started to do some things here that have merit and potential. There's some play with language, we have some ambiguity happening, and there are certainly contrasting images creating some tension. Note that there are two subjects here. As the readers we can see what's going on. Jenelle may not have seen the "real" subject rising but she maintains it in the second draft.

Search for Pride

I was not made -
in the image of God.
My ancestors did not live
in the Garden of Eden.
They tell me it's
Adam and Eve
not Adam and Steve,
not "Brother Adam" and

"Sister Eve" from the hood,
or Eve, the slant-eyed
yellow-bellied gook.
Golden hair and
bright blue eyes
the epitome of "good"
the poster-child for "princess."
No, I was made in the image
of my mother
my father and
my ancestors,
who were made in
the image of beauty.

JENELLE EAGER

Such revision is dramatic. But note what she's done. The sense of the poem is actually made stronger by her having collected ideas and placed them in stanzas—this allows for her tone to be a bit more provocative. And stanza two—entirely new to the poem—allows Jenelle to connect the speaker of the poem to a broader set of lives and members of society who she also feels are outcast and who are being moved against. Jenelle was also tapping into her roots of growing up Asian American; tapping ethnicity, history, and the tensions of finding all that in America. While there is much good here, now Jenelle is ready to go back and revise this draft again, this virtually new and different poem. But, in calling it "different" let's also note that she has remained attached to the triggering subject and actually heightened the real subject by using it in the title, by creating stanzas and circling back to the first stanza at the end of the poem. Our writer here has hung tightly to another Richard Hugo maxim of the poem: "When rewriting, write the entire poem again. If something has gone wrong deep in the poem, you may have taken a wrong turn earlier." We can see, based on Hugo's advice and our writer's example, that this type of revision can pay off with a little sweat and hard work.

But once we engage in this type of rewriting it's necessary to be able to gain momentum, to shift things, to change things as we see fit. While we need to write from our own experiences, we need to be able to think about them in a frame of reality/fiction that allows us the elbow room to create. Memory is an important element here and we all remember things slightly differently. A student wrote the following lines about his grandmother's death despite his not having been there when it happened.

She lay on the ground
the beating stopped
her face gray as the cement
on Christmas day.

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and later my brother

threw her fruit basket out the window
screaming down the 405

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He came to class and said "I want to change them." "Why?" I asked. I was thinking, *why in the hell would he want to change these lines?* And he said "because my mother flipped when she read this. I wasn't there and she said this isn't the way it happened." And I was thinking, *to hell with his mother*, but I told him, "Look, you may not have been there, but it's part of your experience and how you remember and want to express how your grandmother died. Tell it the way you want." My point was not to create an irreconcilable rift in his family, but rather to get him to keep his sense of how something had happened. This was his poem. I later found that in fact his brother didn't throw the basket out of the car window—he tossed it in the garbage at home. But the student thought that was a more poignant and compelling detail. He was right. What I found compelling too, as a teacher and a writer, was that he had the nerve and sense enough to change a detail from how it did happen to how he thought we'd want it to happen so we'd feel more in the experience. Now, that's getting to the core of revision. Because he saw that in the end, the reader wasn't going to say "Nice writing," no, the reader was going to say "Wow, I feel that deeply."

When revising poems, remember that no matter how you go about it, whether you've adapted rules or mantras from this chapter or made your own, the importance of allowing yourself to create and recreate is paramount to success. And remember in revision, too, that nothing is permanent—if you don't like it, go back and change it. Try new things, reshape the experience, change the memory, and take us deeply into the heart of the matter.

MOONSHEEN AND PORCHLIGHT: REVISION AS ILLUMINATION

Gary Thompson

A very good poem might matter to the poet who wrote it for much of a lifetime. The poem brings pleasure and insight each time the poet reads it, especially when reading it aloud. Not surprisingly, that same good poem will very often provide pleasure and insight to others. Galway Kinnell has probably read or recited "The Bear" a thousand times in the thirty-some years since he wrote it, yet each time I hear him read the poem, I notice the great joy he takes in saying it aloud, and how that pleasure has shifted from one section to another over the years. Needless to say, "The Bear" is a very good poem and it has provided both pleasure and insight through these decades. But in the midst of writing a new poem—in struggle or frenzy, pain or joy—how do we poets make the decisions that might turn this emerging poem into a good poem, and hence a poem that matters to us, and perhaps to others, for a lifetime?

For most poets I know well enough to be privy to their working methods, initial revising is a basic part of writing that first draft. My first drafts, for example, always have words erased, or lines scratched out, stanzas eliminated or moved, titles changed, linebreaks shifted. These decisions or hunches are an integral part of the discovery, and they come within the rush and flow and excitement of a first-glimpsed poem. Most poets have experienced some version of this simultaneous writing/revising, although it is true that some prefer to jot down a very rough, yet whole, draft before making even small changes. It is also true that it becomes more difficult, and probably less thrilling, to make productive revisions after a few hours, or days, or weeks, or months have passed since the initial excitement of creation. However, these later revisions, made under the full light of conscious scrutiny, are often the most important ones we can make because they help us illuminate the deepest and often the most difficult parts of our poems. Simply, we can come to see our poems, and perhaps ourselves, better. Revision, then, is a way for the poet to learn what is important. Like all worthwhile knowledge, revision is an art we must teach ourselves, but we can learn this art more quickly if we are honestly open to the comments and observations of other poets, readers, and editors. We must make ourselves vulnerable.

There are many ways to think about poetry, many models and metaphors that attempt to explain how poems actually affect the reader or how poems are written. There are so many models, of course, because poems are, at best, mysteries. It's unlikely that any one explanation will satisfy a poet or reader for any length of time, let alone a lifetime. Our understandings change, broaden with each poem we read or write; therefore, our personal model (and we all have one, consciously or not) of poetry subtly shifts and evolves over time, and obviously then, our sense of what makes a good poem will change too. So it is remarkable when a poem of ours continues to provide pleasure and insight after any length of time at all. Most fail this test, but when one succeeds, it succeeds mysteriously. In a talk about revision given at the Foothill Writers Conference, George Keithley suggests why the very good poem continues to resonate: "Remember that the mystery which moves us in a poem is not the meaning of the poem, but how the poem achieves that meaning. Its existence is the essential meaning of the poem."

"Writing is seen as a splurge of emotion rather than a combination of inspiration and craft."

MATT BARNARD

This observation, cited from *The London Times*, suggests two ways (from a myriad of ways) of looking at the process of writing poems, and each contains its truth. Also, and perhaps more significantly, each implies

a completely different approach to revising poems, and again, each has its validity. If we look on writing as a “splurge of emotion,” then how do we revise the words, phrases, lines that were created by this emotional outpouring? Certainly it would be helpful to listen to what others have to say about our draft, but do we really want to change anything, since to change the poem in a different, perhaps cooler and less expressive, mood would diminish the splurge effect that we so value? The poem is what it is: words caught in the moment of emotional excess. The way to revise, it appears, is simply to write the next poem, hoping that each poem teaches us something that will be useful in the next. Eventually, the poet hopes to find a burst of words that produces the very good poem. In this, it resembles learning to surf where the novice, after perhaps a few words of wisdom from a teacher and a couple of lessons on the beach, paddles out and tries to catch waves. Each teetering ride teaches something, but the wave can’t be caught again. It’s the next wave, the next poem, which is important. Eventually, given luck, that great wave and the skills required to ride it will come together at the same time, and that ride will be remembered and celebrated for years.

However, if we look on writing as a combination of inspiration and craft, then we have ways to set about revising the first draft of a poem. Certainly, this model brings the craft of poetry, the various skills a poet learns and uses, to the forefront and more likely into our consciousness. The poet might find it useful to analyze the sounds and rhythms of the poem, for example, and ask questions about the findings. Linebreaks, images, and all issues of craft could be isolated, scrutinized, and nudged toward perfection. After all this precise work, however, will we have written our very good poem? Not necessarily. We’ve all read poems that are soundly crafted; yet they have no life, no magic, no surprise, no mystery. This is where inspiration plays its important role in our model. *Inspire*: the word has many meanings and contexts, and several apply to the writing and revising of poems—to fill, to arouse, to impel, to animate, to give rise to, to infuse by breathing, to inhale. In other words, the poem begins to breathe, to be filled with life. At some point, the very good poem mysteriously takes on a life of its own, and this is both because of, and in spite of, the poet’s craft. It’s important to remember that this inspired moment can occur at almost any stage of the creative process. It might happen just as the poet is penning the first word, or at any stage of that initial draft, or later when the poet is concentrating on issues of craft, or during the later stages of revising. Eventually, something *must* inspire the poem or it will remain simply a construction of words. So the first stage in later revision for me, whether looking at a poem of mine or a student’s, is to ask: What is inspired in these lines? Where does the poem come to life?

Let’s turn to a specific example of the revision process. This poem is by Karen Seipert, a bright, talented, and serious student in my recent

summer workshop. I think this poem may be especially instructive because it was discussed in an earlier workshop taught by another instructor, and Karen kept the various drafts, worksheets, and notes about her observations. So the poet had been thinking about this poem for some time before she brought it to my class, and we can follow her thinking pretty clearly as she revises over a number of months and with various sources of feedback. The first draft was written on a computer, so she doesn’t have a record of the earliest revisions made during the initial writing. She does remember that the changes were minimal. Draft one:

Jealousy

The sill creaks
while the window
groans upwards.
Faded paint,
the peeling culprit,
telltale pained ascent.
My cousin Jeffrey,
halfway in
mostway out
escapes
onto the roof.
Moonsheen
on his Chevy
illuminates the plan.
I tiptoe
across cold wood
a willing conspirator—
but the Chevy’s rolling
lights extinguished
down the gravel
drive towards emancipation.

KAREN SEIPERT

What’s inspired here? For me, it’s the first view of cousin Jeffrey being “halfway in / mostway out” of the window. That “mostway” certainly catches a visual image of the teenager sneaking out the second-story window. It also mimics the slangy quality of teenage talk, as well as implying the fact of his age, since he is mostly grown and mostly gone. The second inspired moment in the poem is the description of light on the Chevy. “Moonsheen” is a fascinating coinage here. It suggests the

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romance of sneaking off into the night world, as well as the illicit quality of the action (perhaps by its proximity in sound to moonshine). Finally, the third inspired moment in the poem is the image of the Chevy's "rolling / lights extinguished / down the gravel / drive . . ." This clear image of the car also suggests the way some teenagers speed off, blindly and dangerously, into the world. So there's much to admire here, even in this very early draft.

What might the poet consider in her next version of the poem? Certainly, there are some craft issues, such as linebreaks (why does the next-to-last line break differently from all the rest?) and why does the strategy change from detailed punctuation to almost no punctuation? Also, most of the poem is so concrete and visual that three phrases stand out as being quite different, quite abstract: "telltale's pained ascent," "a willing conspirator," and "towards emancipation." The question might be put this way: Can the simple, playful, almost-childlike language of this poem carry the extra weight of these abstractions? All of them? And finally, why is the poem titled "Jealousy"? Jealousy connotes a certain bitterness and anguish, but who is jealous of whom or what? These are some of the questions Karen might mull over before revising her poem, and it appears that most of these questions were brought up during that first workshop, because her next draft responds in part to these issues.

Draft two, revised a month or so later, is called "Envy," a title that better prepares the reader for the wistful and yearning tone of the speaker, without forcing us to ask questions that lead outside the emotional territory of the poem. Other notable changes: the window is now an *aged* window; the paint now *telltale's painful rising*; and the Chevy's *already* rolling—a small but brilliant change that reinforces the unfolding action in the present tense and adds to the drama. She also changes the inconsistent linebreak, and attacks the punctuation issue by placing periods after each short phrase, a strategy that seems at odds with the relatively smooth flow of the speaker's thoughts and words. Karen's notes about the class discussion of this draft indicate that she is still uncomfortable with the "telltale's" line and the overall punctuation scheme; she also recognizes that "Faded paint. / the peeling culprit" simply explains that the window is old, which has already been stated by adding "aged." A student in the workshop has evidently questioned whether "moonsheen" might be too romantic, and Karen notes this observation with two poignant question marks.

Draft three is the end-of-the-semester version to be turned in to her instructor for comments. Three significant changes occur in this draft. First, Karen begins to solve the problem of inconsistent and ineffective punctuation by eliminating all punctuation (except parentheses that enclose lines 3–6) and allowing the natural linebreaks to control pacing and meaning. In conjunction with this strategy, she also eliminates all capitalization (except for proper nouns and the first person pronoun),

and this emphasizes the lines as lines, rather than as parts of a sentence. In her notes, she surmises that writing in lower case is more "dreamlike," and I suppose it is. The third significant change is not so productive, at least in my opinion. Apparently swayed by her fellow student's argument, she replaces the splendid "moonsheen" with the ordinary "porchlight," perhaps feeling that the first draws too much attention to itself for this little poem. Adroitly, her instructor responds: "I somewhat prefer 'moonsheen' because it adds to the furtiveness and romantic excitement / longing that the young girl must feel." This advice is sensitive and clear, and it helps steer the poet back towards the strengths of her poem.

Draft four, the draft submitted to our summer workshop, reflects the many small decisions the poet has made over the months since that first draft called "jealousy."

Envy

the sill creaks
while the window
groans upward
(faded paint
the peeling culprit
telltale's pained ascent)
my cousin Jeffrey
halfway in
mostway out
escapes
onto the roof
moonsheen
on his Chevy
illuminates the plan
I tiptoe
across cold wood
a willing conspirator
but the Chevy's already rolling
lights extinguished
down the gravel drive
towards emancipation

KAREN SEIPERT

The discussion that followed Karen's reading the poem aloud (a practice that helps the class, as well as the poet, hear each poem's distinctive music) was lively and productive, and I think it allowed her to

think about the poem in ways that hadn't come up in her previous workshop. Our discussion, as I recall, began with praise for the clear, fresh, unpretentious imagery that conveys so much about the people and the situation. We also took delight in the music, especially the sounds and rhythms of the second stanza. One student even traced the sound patterns in that stanza, and then explained why he liked them and what they contributed to the poem. It could be implied, I suppose, that the music in the first stanza isn't quite as interesting or as integral, and that may be something the poet wants to attend to, should she decide to write yet another draft. The third major area of our discussion focused on diction, the word choices the poet makes as the poem unfolds, and this conversation opened up our primary suggestions for revision.

- 1) "Emancipation" is an odd word choice in the last line. It is quite abstract, and if it is meant to convey a general sense of freedom, then that is already implied in the previous lines. We know cousin Jeffrey is stealing away from the authority and rules of the house. If emancipation is meant to be a legal term (as in cousin Jeffrey driving off to attain his legal civil rights), then there is much that is unexplained in the poem. Also, the young speaker is envious of the older cousin's freedom, though she isn't particularly angry about his betrayal at not taking her with him. Would she be likely to think about legalities at this point? Most agreed with the suggestion, as I recall, to omit the last line which allows the final powerful image to speak for itself.

- 2) There also was a good deal of discussion about the sixth line: "telltale pained ascent," and rightfully so. Her notes indicate that both poet and reader have been uncomfortable with this line since that first draft. Let's look at it more closely. "Telltale" seems like an interesting coinage, changing the noun/adjective to a verb form. It hints at the fact that the speaker didn't tattle, although the old house tried to, albeit unsuccessfully. "Pained" is playful, a pun on windowpane. This explains why the poet has chosen one form or another of the word in various drafts. However, clever as it is, the resultant personification of the window blurs the image and we tend to lose sight of the main point of this stanza, which is cousin Jeffrey's escape. The class offered a number of suggestions, but the more I consider this line, the more I've come to believe that the solution is not so easily confined to that single phrase. The first six lines describe the window and sill, and there are three qualities that must be made clear for the reader to fully appreciate the rest of the poem. First, the window and sill must be old because the house symbolizes the adult world of authority that the cousins wish to escape.

Second, the window must open or rise so that we are catching the cousins as their scheme unfolds; in effect we share their secret and become conspirators. Third, the window must make some sort of noise, a groan or creak, to indicate that this escape scheme could be discovered and thwarted. My suggestion to Karen, after these days of following her poem from draft to draft, is to rethink the opening and rewrite the lines. In so doing, she will likely rewrite these lines with the same insight, zest, and inspiration that already define the best of "Envy."

This shouldn't have to be said, but experience tells me it does: any suggestion for revision—whether offered by a friend, classmate, teacher, or editor—is just that, a suggestion. The poem is the poet's to tinker with as she sees fit. The poet is not just learning to use the tools of her craft, she is also developing and refining a sensibility, her own way of shaping and understanding the world. When she studies her poem, when she turns the tensor lamp up high, the poet may illuminate a self she has only glimpsed in the past, and this vision could be the essential insight she needs to write new poems. That is why revision is an art.

Exercises

1. Take a poem you wrote a while back. If you're new at poetry, even just a month ago will do. Read through the poem aloud. Then read through the poem for analysis and make some lists. Note what elements it contains. Note what you like about the poem and why. Note what you think the poem is really saying—and along with this note the triggering subject and the real subject.
2. Take a poem you've written and revise the poem one element at a time. Go through it just for imagery, then just for tone, just for rhyme, etc. Make a number of passes at the poem. You will have a number of drafts by the end of this process, but ultimately a draft that ought to look significantly revised.
3. Take a poem you've written, one that you like but that you also know—in your gut or heart—that it needs revision to be the poem you want. Create for yourself the personality of the poem. Now, interview the poem as if it was a celebrity on a poetry talk show. Ask it questions like, "you've created some nice images in stanza two, but why the sudden shift from images in line four—what were you after there?" Then answer the questions as if you are the poem. Use your answers to revise.