

from *A Surge of Language: Teaching Poetry Day by Day*, Heinemann, 2004

When I ask questions, I ask questions about the poem's art. Since any given poem has so many facets, I find that I never really repeat a question. I also find that I don't have to ask questions that put the student on the spot by making presuppositions and creating anxiety. This means I never ask what a line or a poem means nor do I ask what the students think the poet had in mind. If you talk about art, meaning will take care of itself because art creates meaning. To talk about what the poet had in mind is to practice mind reading. I am interested in the text not in hypotheses about the poet's mind. When I hear (and I have heard) a teacher say "Now, what did Shakespeare mean to say here?" I cringe. It's what a friend of mine calls "the intentional fallacy." Poems are not hierarchical-every word matters. That means the doors into a poem are as numerous as the words in the poem. Accordingly my first question to the class usually will be a question about word choice. As my students say, "When we talk about poems, we talk about language." In the case of Gentry's poem this means I might ask what word is most surprising to my students or what word doesn't seem to belong or what word doesn't make sense to them or what word moves them the most. What I want is for my students to respond to the words in the poem as words. Poetry affords me the opportunity to focus on the lives of the words.