

# **CATEGORICAL ALTERNATIVES: AN EDUCATIONAL CRITICISM STUDY**

By: Elizabeth J. EVANS

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## **Abstract**

In the writing of this paper, the design of which is based on Elliot Eisner's Educational Criticism model, both linguistic and non-linguistic description were used to encourage the interpretation and evaluation of a specific and unique alternative educational setting. Five years ago, Ellen's Learning Annex, a multi-age, one-room school house, was just next door to the researcher, while her son was struggling at the public school a mile away. A day spent observing Ellen and her students yielded data from which three general themes emerged: Heterogeneous age-grouping, place-based education, and sensory integration in a teaching and learning environment.

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**Keywords:** Alternative learning environment, elementary education, heterogeneous age-grouping, place-based education, sensory integration

*L'arbre cache  
souvent la forêt.  
[Don't make  
hasty judgments.]*  
-FRENCH PROVERB

**Re: Me:** I was not really who I said I was when I got into my car in front of Ellen's house. Ellen's house was next to mine, a fact that made it significantly easier for me to run back in to get my winter coat when I realized spring was not holding court that morning. I learned days

after my time at Ellen's school that the students thought I was there to document, polish and admire the curricular jewels that were bound to fall out of the walls of a multi-age schooling environment. Perhaps they imagined me taking my tape recorder and notebook back to my pre-service teachers with bated breath, sharing with them my findings in the hopes of blowing their minds, or at least reminding them that alternatives to public education do actually exist. The funny thing is, I didn't even mention my experience with Ellen and her students to my teachers-to-be the next day in class. It was not at all because I didn't think my time with them or what I witnessed was important; it was one of the most significant days I'd had in a long time. It was because that was not my purpose. At the time, I was a Ph.D. student in Foreign Language Education with 13 years of secondary school teaching experience and a great love of Curriculum Studies. But far more importantly, I was the mother of a very unusual boy.

As a teaching assistant at the local university, I taught foreign language pedagogy classes and supervised our student teachers. I spent countless hours sitting in public school secondary classrooms watching mostly young Spanish, French, German, Chinese, and Latin scholars try desperately to apply what they had learned throughout the licensure process. I suppose that I could have documented the fact that there were Spanish words taped around the three-room guest house outside of town that was *Ellen's Learning Annex*. I could have debriefed her students and adults alike on their feelings about the short French lesson I had given days before. I could have

tested their memories of the basic vocabulary I had fed to them in a somewhat contextually-appropriate moment, because it's *not* that those things were unimportant. It's just that it wasn't my purpose that day. I was to become a curriculum critic for parental homework, describing, interpreting, and evaluating this educational setting, going far beyond focusing on whatever foreign language teaching and learning happened to be taking place there. I was planning on giving Ellen herself my version of her reality, perhaps for entertainment value, or maybe just so she could peek at what she does, every day, through a new pair of glasses. However, I must admit up front that this was not the only lens through which I was peering. I looked official, taking photos, taping conversations, furiously jotting down students' verbalized thoughts and my inner judgments. And I *was* official, depending on your definition. My head was indeed processing all the details that made up this school: the teachers, the students, the assistants, the weather, the behavior, the furniture, the walls, the flowers, the house, the classrooms, the ceiling, the windows, the socks, the microwave, the rice and the beans. The emotions of the day though, the decision-making, heart-melting, tear-jerking milliseconds were all about Luke. *What is best for Luke?* Luke Patrick was my six year-old, now ten, who by all accounts did not belong in public school, but perhaps not for the reasons that might spring to mind. I was determined that morning to leave Ellen's Learning Annex with a truckload of notes and a verdict: Luke would attend this school the next year, or he would not. He would fit in (or he wouldn't), would work at his own pace (or not), would enjoy learning (or would not). It was simply a matter of the message my gut would leave me as I walked out the door; left or right, up or down, good or bad, high or low, black or white.

*What is the meaning of diversity when the basic grammar of schooling segregates children by age and regulates them by the hour and minute for 12 to 16 years or more?*

***Re: Heterogeneous age-grouping:*** I'm sure

many would say that the biggest difference between Ellen's school and the public school that Luke was attending was the multi-age factor. There were 18 students at Ellen's school on some days, fewer on others, who ranged in age from 5 to 14. There was Ellen (the founder and director), three assistants who were there quite a bit of the time, and a few teachers who came in on specific days to work on math with

the older students and science with the whole group. Some things, like geography and writing, were done with all ages sitting together in the main room of the house. The day I was there, students broke into four groups for math according to both age and ability. From the moment I sat down on one of the steps going down from the kitchen into the main classroom, there were tears. Michael, age seven, had hurt his tooth before coming in. He and some of the others were running down the hill and collided. "What's the lesson here?" Ellen asked. It wasn't for my benefit, I don't think. Everything can be turned into a lesson. The focus turned to one of the older students, Jackson, who was missing. There were a few others absent as well, but it was Jackson who was MISSING. I would later come to find out that Jackson had a behavioral disorder that can have a profound effect on the learning that goes on during the school day, and often required Ellen's undivided attention. She began the morning with a recap of the themes they had considered the Friday before, non-violence and truthfulness. "So, when we talked about non-violence, sounds to me like at the end of the week, Jackson didn't, like, have a real good time of it with non-violence, right?" She asked the students, all seated here and there, some

at desks, some on steps, all paying rapt attention, what they could do to help someone with violence issues. “You could give him a squeezey ball!” Michael exclaimed gleefully. “Yes, you could use that, but what if they threw it in your face?” Ellen asked him. Everyone laughed uneasily. A psychological discussion worthy of a 12-step program workshop developed over the course of the next ten minutes. Ellen was using Jackson’s absence to her advantage by allowing the other children to vent about him, consider his feelings, or defend him. The older the child, the more detail would emerge: “I thought he was really nice to me, because he was. He didn’t bother me as much, and I thought that, he needs another chance. And I think it’s great that he’s doing better at this chance than the last chance”, Tyler (age 12) said, referring to previous instances in which Jackson had been kicked out, and then accepted back, to Ellen’s school. Other students chimed in, and time was taken to fully discuss these relationships, and how to control anger in oneself and in others. Because the heterogeneous grouping provided the opportunity for younger students to sit with the older ones, a lovely *big family* feeling was palpable. Nel Noddings (2005) writes about the benefits of a multi-age environment that includes a mix of teenagers and younger children:

There are many reasons for involving teenagers in the lives of children...involvement with children can be effective as an integral part of the academic education of teenagers...a deeper understanding of self is another benefit to be gained from involvement with children. As older children have opportunities to interact with younger children, they should be encouraged to reflect on their own childhood and the special relations that guided their lives (pp. 104-105).

It was as if I were a fly on the wall of a huge pioneer family dealing with an on-going crisis. There was acceptance, no competition to get the right answer out first, it just seemed

normal to start the day like this. I looked at the clock to see what time it was and what Luke might be doing across town. Almost 10:00. At 8:25, I had said good-bye to him and waved to the line of kindergarteners standing against the brick wall of their school. “Eyes forward!” his kindergarten teacher had called down the line, gesturing to her face, and they followed her in like little ducklings in their yellow rain boots. I walked home feeling as though I had just dropped my robot off at the factory. Words from previous readings rang in my ears, reminding me that “no group of students has been found to benefit consistently from being in a homogeneous group” (Oakes, 2005). I opened our screen door and looked to my left at Ellen’s house, her real house, the one in which she lived with her husband and her dangerously obese black cat. They were there, Ellen and her students; they met at her house every morning and then took the van over to the donated building that had become part of the *Annex*. When I taught the mini-lessons on French and global languages to them the week before, I was much less official. There was no tape recorder, no note pad, and no camera; just them, and me, and Ellen, and an assistant, and that cat begging for food, sprawled out on the floor like a bearskin rug. It was really during that time that my impressions of how a multi-age environment began to develop. Somehow as a teacher, I was able to feel the dynamic in a way that was lost to me when I spent the day observing. It was hard. It was hard to cajole the younger children to participate (scared), to get the older kids to allow the middle kids to have their say (Tyler and Jackson, who happened to be there that day, attempted to dominate the conversation...to impress me? To impress Ellen? To talk just to hear themselves talk?). The middle kids, however, seemed to thrive. They were helping and encouraging the younger ones, and learning and listening to the older ones. This was the group that never seemed to get left behind, always appeared focused.

*One transcendent  
experience in  
nature is worth a  
thousand nature  
facts.*

-SOBEL (2008, p. 13)

**Re: Place Based Education:** I had never been to the

building that was Ellen's Learning Annex before the morning that I observed her and the kids. They all piled into the van, and I followed them over in my car. We drove through a part of town that was lovely, just turning green, very woodsy.

Ellen used the grounds of this house extensively, believing strongly that the children could not understand nature and

their relationship with it without working, playing, just being outside. Before the heavy JACKSON discussion, Ellen began the day by laying out the plans for that morning, the rest of the week, Earth Day; her idea was to have everyone bike around on a "tag along". She asked Cole, the youngest at 6 years-old, if he felt he could participate in such an event. "I don't know what you mean, Ellen", he sighed, and his adorable voice just ripped me to shreds. I wanted to go over and hug him. Some of the children shifted in their seats while Ellen began to talk about writing *haikus*. "We're going to be doing some poetry this morning, uh, based on Earth Day, and I'm going to want to go for a little hike and put our poems in trees so that we can share our views of the Earth," she explained. She interrupted herself to tell the students that she had gone hiking the day before and saw her first red-headed woodpecker. One of the girls excitedly proclaimed that she had heard one that morning; all eyes automatically went to the huge window looking out into the forest behind the house. "What is Earth Day?" Ellen asked. Many hands went up, all the kids seem engaged and excited about the coming week. "It's a day we celebrate the Earth," one girl explained. "We pick up garbage," her neighbor chimed in. Sam, age eight, launched into a lengthy description of the invention he dreamed of to catch rain water. Ellen let him talk, he stuttered a bit, tried to get the words out, did finally, was proud. "So you make sure

to reuse and treasure the resources of the Earth?” Ellen rephrased. He nodded emphatically, they all did, more ideas. Not using a lot of plastic or paper, not creating garbage, this is generally where this dialog would stall. I know this because when I asked Luke what he did at his school on Earth Day, only the ideas of reusing and recycling came up. There was no mention of going outside, except for the two normal recesses that were in no way tied to the celebration of our one and only planet. Sam came up with another idea involving wet paper towels and bean sprouts. Ellen reminded them how fun it was to grow pumpkins in the fall, to watch them grow. The school would be moving buildings next year, the new location had a garden, they were all looking forward to the change. “You guys won’t believe it! We have a HUGE space for a garden, and the backyard is gigantic, so gigantic, and it’s completely surrounded by trees.” Mara, the assistant, spoke for the first time that morning. All the kids, every one, reacted as though she had just told them that there was a pound of candy hiding in their desks. “O.k., we are going to celebrate the Earth this week by writing about the Earth,” Ellen went on. “We are going to write some poems, and these poems are called haiku poems...a haiku poem is sort of like taking or drawing a picture, o.k.? Only instead of using paint or a camera, you are using words. Words are your palette, o.k.? So you’re using words. So the words you use, because this is such a short, simple, form, you must be careful about the words you use. Now, why would I choose haiku poetry for Earth day?” A *middle* (a member of the unofficial group of students who were neither the youngest, nor the oldest) held up her hand. “Because they’re usually about nature.” Ellen elaborated on the middle’s response up at the board: “They’re usually about nature, and they’re often about changing seasons.” “It’s trying to catch a, like a short little period of time, like a sudden little time,” one of the older girls said. “Perfect!” Ellen exploded. “This picture that we’re taking, it captures a moment. Excellent, Melanie.” Dewey writes:

We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything. All this means that attentive care must be devoted to the conditions which give each present experience a worthwhile meaning (1938, p. 49).

Ellen's focus was on the nature of that particular place, on the present, on experiential learning. It occurred to me, although it may not be fair to say, that teachers in many schools would not move forward to put their money where their mouths are. Although they would hopefully have positive feelings about the outdoors, it would rarely if ever be an option to actually *go outside* to write haikus. Sobel (2008) posits that "real adventure provokes real writing" (p. 23). I was sure that Ellen had never read Sobel, but she instinctively knew this to be true. There are critics of this ideology, though, those who "say that these activities are a waste of valuable class time, [those who are] more likely to view the teaching role as mainly conveying content..." (Knapp, 2008, p. 15). I'm fairly confident that I would never want to be a student in one of those critics' classrooms.

They went over a sample haiku poem, and they discussed how they were going to come up with their own creative ideas. "I could give you a topic: '*I want everyone to write a haiku poem about the trees outside*'. Good idea or bad idea?" she asked. "Bad idea!" everyone called out. "So we're going to let you pick your own topic. So our first thing would be observation, right? Sitting somewhere, looking at something, and writing down what you see. Trying to create a lot of little pictures." They took their *fluency write* journals, the black and white ones, and a pencil, and headed out to commune, sit, observe.

*...concept formation is itself biologically rooted in the sensory systems that humans possess...concepts are formed not only in visual, but in gustatory, olfactory, tactile, and auditory form.*

—EISNER (1994, p. 35)

**Re: Senses:** Dewey writes that “we have to understand the significance of what we see, hear and touch” (1938, p. 68). Ellen encouraged them to use all their senses, to be conscious of them, while outside on their *fluency write*. “You want to really stop. Take a couple of deep breaths. Settle yourself down. You want to really *look*. Because you know, if you’re not really looking carefully, do you think you’re going to see the ant carrying something across the ground? No, but that may be one of the coolest things you see today.

Do you think you’re going to hear the red-headed woodpecker banging on the tree? No, but it might be one of the better things you hear today. How does the wind feel? It’s a little windy today...does it feel warm, like a mother blowing on her child’s cheek? Use all of your senses when you’re sitting out there. How can you write about nature if you’re not there smelling it, breathing it?” Outside, there was a helicopter flying overhead, birds singing, and the chair that Thomas was standing on was creaking. The sun peeked out every few minutes, and the temperature seemed to rebound when it did. Behind the clouds, still winter. All the kids were working either independently or in groups, except the youngest, Cole. He was sitting by some newly-bloomed daffodils with Ellen, who was helping him put his observations into words on his paper. “Everything gets compared to some kind of monster with you”, she told him. He gazed down as she attempted to expand his observational skills. Twenty minutes later, I went inside to look around the school when there was no one in it. The light was extraordinary, coming in through the cracks and the windows and bouncing off the

desks and the tables, the white board. In the upstairs room, there were two couches and a bed. This is where two groups would later have their math lesson, cozy and comfortable. Even the way in which the students were being asked to do things was *soft*. Eisner (2002) expresses his dismay at the way in which traditional schools are furnished: “Consider for a moment school architecture and the design of school furniture...they speak of efficiency more than they do of comfort. Where, for example...can one find a soft surface in a secondary or junior high school?” (p. 96). The children and adults began to filter in, no lines or a certain time at which they were supposed to be in their seats. Everyone came back in except Clara, who was still sitting under her tree, writing, miles away in her thoughts. “She’s entrenched in it,” said Ellen. She came in when she was ready, a few minutes later. Ellen encouraged them to describe what they experienced outside, what they wrote, and they were eager to share. Emma, age nine: “I feel the cold sun shining in the dark sky. Silence for a while, and then the bark of the dogs. The strong wind talks to me.” Melanie, age 11: “I smell the soft pine, I hear the wind rustling the trees. The leaves dance about. I feel the language of the birds in the trees in my ears. The wind tugs me into the forest, the sturdy tree holding me here.” I was astounded by the maturity and depth of their writing. The younger students tried different ideas out, perhaps to see the reaction of the older ones; the older students were visibly proud to share what they had written. Their homework was to pick two images that fit together, that created a striking impression. They were to “capture the essence of a moment.”

During math time, the younger group went upstairs, along with two of the older, advanced learners, and they broke up into two groups. Since being outside, all of the children seemed more focused, more calm. I remember Luke’s kindergarten teacher complaining to me about how hard it was to get the kids to settle down after recess. That didn’t seem to be a

problem here, as *time spent outdoors* and *recess* were not synonymous. Although three teachers were talking at once to fewer than 10 children, everyone participated, was on-task, and actively involved in learning. They looked relaxed. It was acceptable there to find your comfort zone, literally and figuratively. Lucy and Emma, sisters, sank into a chair just slightly too small to hold them both. They laughed and played three games of subtraction bingo with their friends and two of the assistants.

Lunch after math, the smell of rice and beans being heated up filled both floors of the house. As Ellen and Mara worked to prepare the meal in the kitchen, I thought about what was on Luke's menu for lunch that day: *Beef Patty Sandwich*. *Alternate: Chicken Patty Sandwich*. None of the kids here complained about not liking what they were being served, and they certainly had no reason to; it was delicious. They invited me to eat with them, and I stood by a group of the younger students eating at their desks. During the two minutes of silence Ellen called for as we enjoyed our lunch, one of my black beans rolled off my plate, sailed through the air, and landed, as if carefully choreographed, in the still untouched pile of black beans on Cole's plate. He didn't notice that this had happened, but I thought it was one of the most perfect things I'd ever seen.

*What qualities of mind differentiate this student from the rest?*

*What is it that uniquely characterizes the student's mode of thinking? Surely attention to the qualities that uniquely distinguish a student from his or her peers is an appropriate consideration for educators to attend to.*

-EISNER (2002, p. 247)

**Re: Categorical Alternatives:** I'll bet you're

wondering what I decided then, in the end, about Luke.

About the educational environment being critiqued,

Eisner (2002) asks "Are the children being helped or

hindered by the form of teaching they are experiencing?

Are they acquiring habits of mind conducive to further

development or are these habits likely to hamper further

development?" (pp. 222-223). Did I think that Luke

would flourish at Ellen's Learning Annex? Without

question. At his elementary school down the road? On

most days, probably.

Ellen had left her previous "alternative" school

in town years before. She had been the director, but no

longer agreed with the board's ideologies, whatever

they may have been. She wanted to go out on her own,

to create a place in which every child, particularly those marginalized in a traditional school

setting, would thrive. She's been called a miracle worker. At the very least, she is one of the

most dedicated educators I have ever known. Would Luke do well with her there? She would

temper his obsession with schedules, allow him to work to his potential, encourage him to focus

his racing thoughts and know when he needed time outside, or alone. The other students would

embrace him, perhaps seeing a kindred spirit. It's no small fact that for the first year we lived

next door to Ellen, Luke called her *grandma*. Luke loved Ellen, her husband, their stomach-

touches-the-ground cat, their granddaughter, her garden, really everything about her. Ellen cared

for Luke in a way that made me feel like everything was right with the world. Noddings (2005) argues that “the school cannot achieve its academic goals without providing caring and continuity for students” (p. 14). Ah, but there’s the word that kept tripping me up: *Continuity*. Would it be damaging to yank him away from these precious and oh-so-new relationships that had been intricately and carefully built over the previous nine months? Would a unique and tailored educational experience with Ellen offset the hurt he’s coming home with every day? Would it minimize the stress of such a transition? The confusion? It was impossible to know for sure, which of course was the crux of the problem. For it was not the minutes spent in a plastic seat as opposed to rolling around outside, or the rigidly scheduled day compared with one that flows freely, although these school features (or lack thereof) were crucial to consider. As Dewey (1938) so aptly points out, “young people in traditional schools do have experiences...it is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, nor even of activity in experience. Everything depends upon the *quality* of the experience which is had” (p. 27). As if to prove Dewey’s point, Luke excitedly told me on the way home from *his* school that day that “I Care Cat” (the puppet the guidance counselor would bring out on Wednesdays to help the children express their feelings) was “fan-TAS-tic”. We got back to the house just as Ellen was dropping off a copy of all the haikus that her students had written, wrapped in a green ribbon. It felt like silk, taking it all in without judgment, without haste.

## *Epilogue*

**Re: Ellen:** Ellen's Learning Annex no longer exists. Ellen gave plenty of notice to the students and their parents, helped them to find alternate educational settings, and happily retired. I did send Luke to Ellen's school the fall after this piece was written, where he spent two-and-a-half very happy, challenging, upsetting, uplifting, frustrating, intense, surprising and educational years.

As a final note, all of the names of people and places described above were changed to preserve their anonymity.

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Appendix

Ellen's students' haikus and photographs I took at the Annex.

*Swooping birds to thorns  
Red roses blazing like fire  
Taken to birds homes*

-Michael, age seven

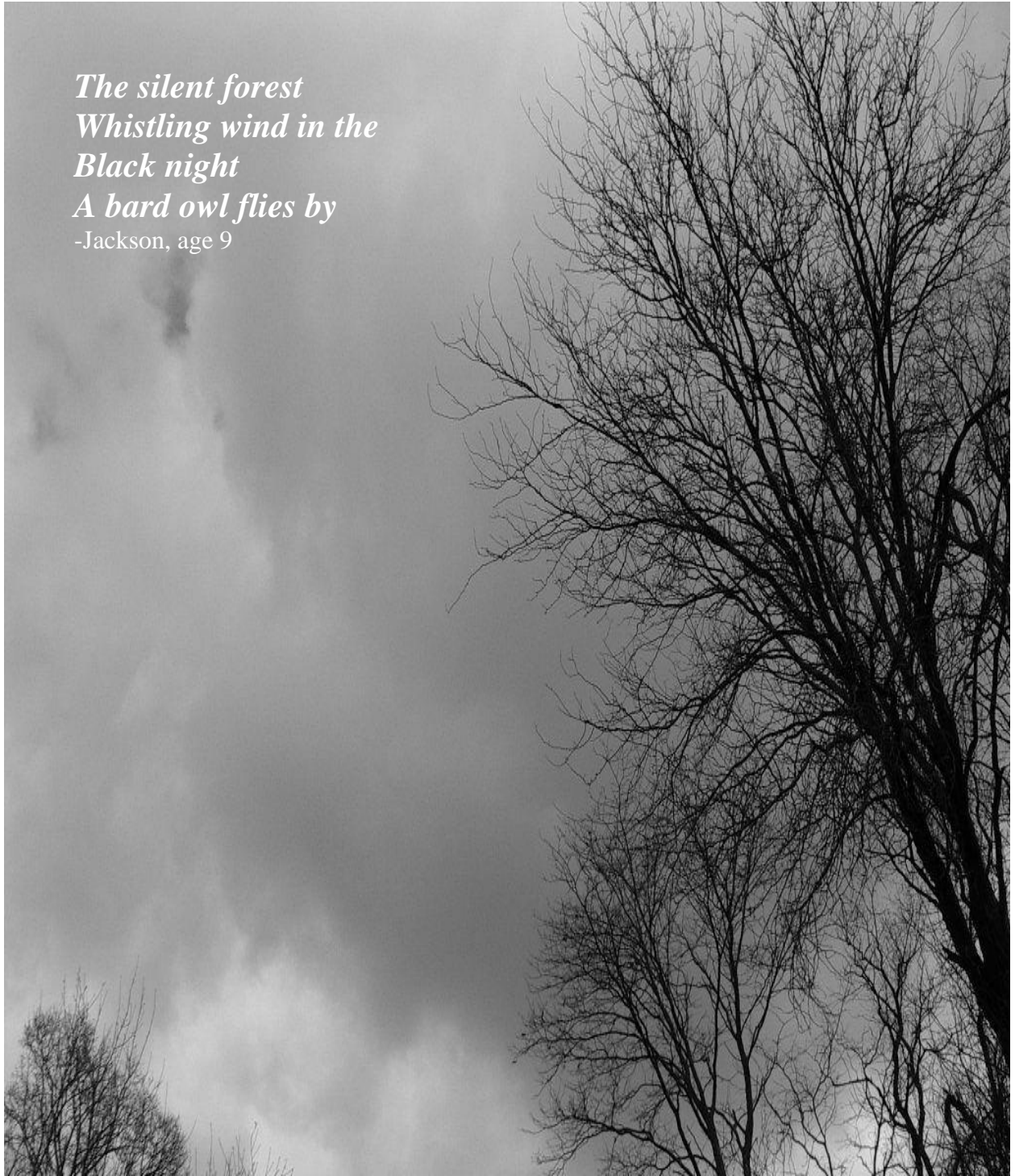
*Winged droppings leap  
Paint teacher's shoulder  
Children laugh, birds chirp.*

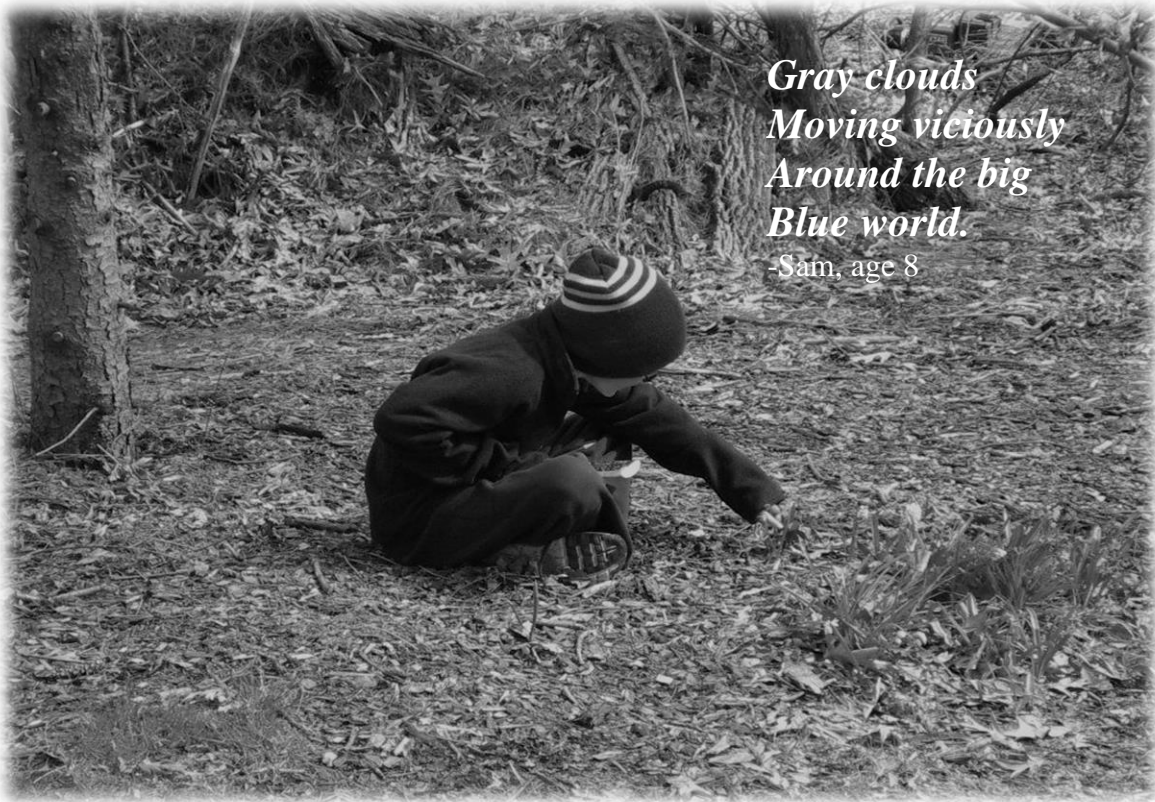
-Cole, age six

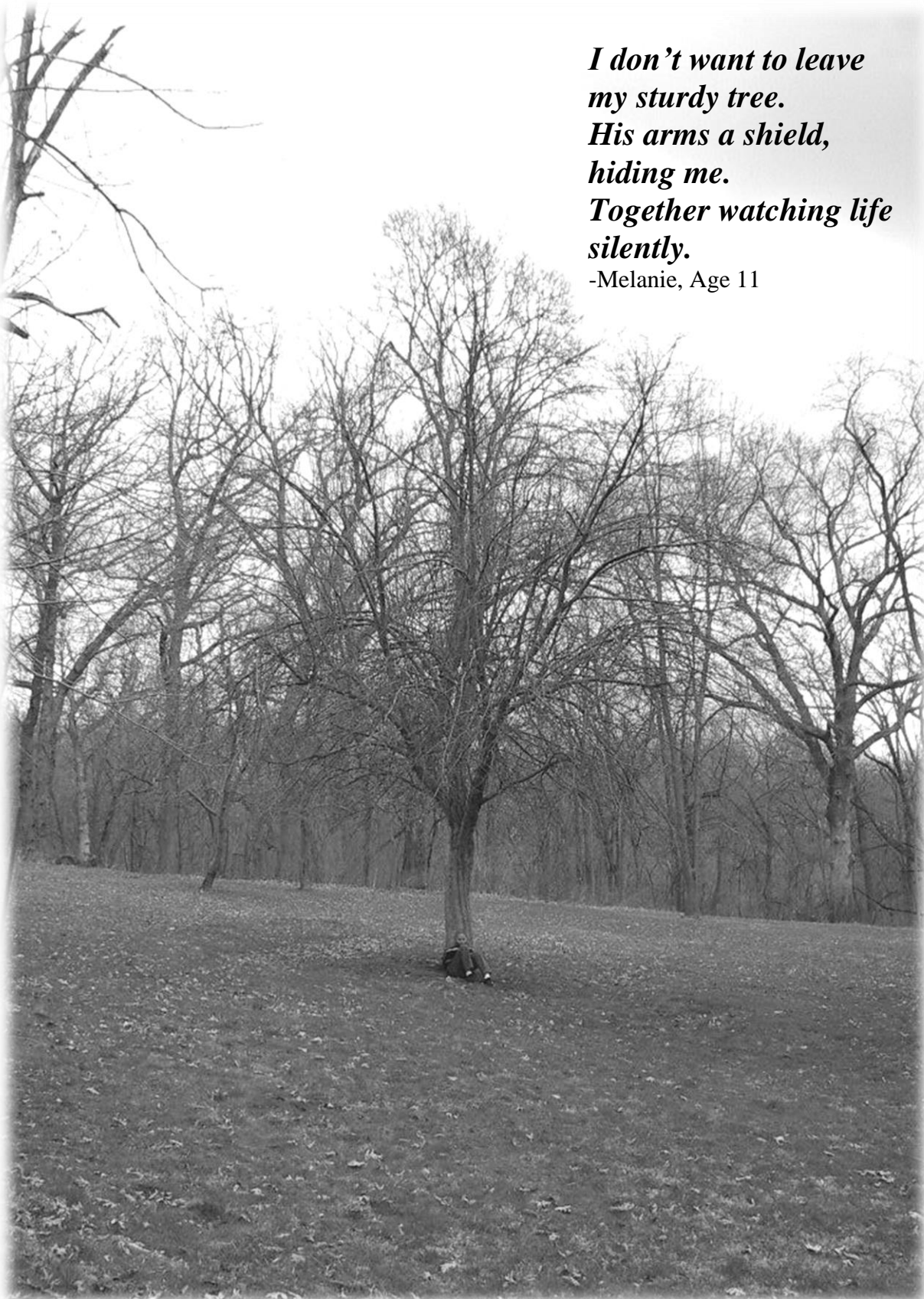
*Sun Shining  
Awakening our spirits  
Spring is here.*

-Sari, age 11

*The silent forest  
Whistling wind in the  
Black night  
A bard owl flies by*  
-Jackson, age 9







***I don't want to leave  
my sturdy tree.  
His arms a shield,  
hiding me.  
Together watching life  
silently.***

**-Melanie, Age 11**

