

10 Mentoring Poems  
by Catherine Lee

Mentor Wonders

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## If Walls Could Talk

The walls of Beacon Hill Academy,  
where this old lady, English speaker,  
is a mentor  
speak in Spanish too,  
in a bilingual public school.

To teach geography, hallway displays  
have Spanish-speaking country flags  
with facts in both the languages. For example,  
Argentina's lesson shows our  
local favorite b-ball superstar  
who comes from there,  
*Los Spurs' Manu Ginobili.*

My new mentee, a fourth grade little girl  
at home speaks Spanish.  
She can converse in English  
reads schoolbooks well, but rarely speaks,  
not even answers to sincerest questions.  
She won't express a choice for both of us  
of what she thinks she'd want to do together.  
Somehow she's learned "be seen, not heard,"  
such a familiar lesson drilled into little girls.  
My parents stunted me this very way  
six decades back. So I've resolved  
to keep on asking her to choose  
and say what she decides  
painful though it seems to be.

I found a Spanish kid book *Los oficios de Elmo*  
*Cuando Crezca Será Maestro* and  
asked her help to understand it.  
I told her I feel dumb not knowing  
how to read *en Español*.  
To tell the truth, I wouldn't know if  
kids her age would recognize  
the characters of *Plaza Sésamo*;  
they have so many other  
superhyped heroic options.  
When I asked her,  
she would barely say  
she knew who Elmo was  
but I was thrilled to see

that Bert was Beto  
(a name I've heard in another  
adult context).  
I demonstrated everybody stumbles  
over words by guessing  
what I thought some Spanish meant  
on giant flap book pages.  
She knew and read quite fluently  
but was reluctant  
to the point of agony  
to be requested to explain.

We stopped that on the second page  
to switch to jigsaw puzzle solving.  
This we can enjoy together,  
mostly silently except for briefest  
commentary about the act  
of matching colors to the pieces.

If walls could talk, they would not be  
monolingual. They would say  
they want to be connected  
to sheltering homes, *casas dulces*  
not to fear filled  
*campos de prisión*.

Building trust is such a slow  
and painful, complicated process  
compared to hiding behind walls.  
Let us start by decorating walls  
with stories, then eventually  
*¿quién sabe?* Who knows?

## Messy Business

She is beautiful, let's face it.  
Her ready smile contagious.  
In a different home  
she'd be a youthful fashion model  
leveraged by parental privilege  
into opportunity and wealth  
headed carefree toward a star's career.

In her home, she and all her  
siblings help crack *huevos*  
so carefully, to save the eggshells  
daily prayerful practice.  
They color them,  
and fill them with confetti  
making *cascarones*  
mom will market at Fiesta  
maybe make an extra buck:  
a dozen for a dollar.

I'm her mentor at the school. Or is she mine?  
I say I never knew confetti eggs existed  
'til I moved to Texas from the frigid North.  
I have a dozen, never played with  
'cause my friends don't care for  
little papers in their hair, cleaning up the mess.

This makes her laugh, and flash  
that drop-dead gorgeous smile.  
She makes me want to buy  
a dozen dozen dozen from her mother,  
so all of us can play something like  
South Texas snowball fight,  
learn how to love a mess.

It's a child, not a budget choice.  
It's a mind, not a dollar sign.  
Why can't we make great public schools our bottom line?

## **When This Mentor Gets Puzzled**

For ages 10 and up, its four straight  
solid yellow borders,  
should be simple to assemble,  
I supposed.

But piecing outer sides together  
with my third grade buddy,  
I'm frustrated while he fits  
colored middle chunks of some  
Transformer figure smartly, quickly  
with triumphant taps and shouts.  
If this needs to be a race to finish  
I suppose my young friend won.

## **Missing Piece (for Jason)**

I mentor a schoolboy who loves puzzles  
but shies away from 4th grade reads.  
Our jigsaw games, it's true, they're fun  
but I'm more fond of reading one-on-one.  
I noticed he's a kid who imitates  
so I'm attempting to inspire him.

One day his teacher sent an article along  
for us to read outside of class.  
I listened to him struggle, read aloud  
while I read upside down  
and silently until he stumbled over words  
like "conflict" "diamonds" "brutal" work  
in tale of children mining gemstones deep in Congo.

At age of 12, boys graduate to working physically  
instead of paying teachers cash to finish school.  
They have a choice, if you can call it that,  
to mine blood gems and skip the reading class.  
I reminded him he's also 12, but he objected  
stated he's 11 yet 'til next week's celebration.

I see. He always balks when task is hard.  
He finds it wrong to lose. He must be Number One.  
So we turn to different kinds of puzzlement  
finding United State shapes on a jigsaw map.

Texas is the shape he knows extremely well  
with border limits he can easily identify.  
I best him 'cuz I hail from north New Jersey,  
old enough to drive through lots of other states.

May he grow wise enough to follow roadmaps  
puzzling past the borders set before him,  
smart enough to understand the shifting shape  
of knowledge: reading  
is the missing piece he needs  
to always win.

## Laces Rule

Though I have never actually observed  
a youngster trip on untied laces,  
I issue just this warning  
to my mentored  
hallway-racing 3rd grade boys.  
Does their unkempt footwear showcase carelessness?  
as in, they could not care less  
about their shoes' appearance?  
It's obvious they do competitively care  
who wins the sprint.  
I observe so many knots in one kid's laces  
he could never hope to tie them  
neatly into bows.  
I need another strategy if I want to stimulate  
their interest in tidy shoes.  
I found online about 4 dozen choices  
how to lace a sneaker.  
These lacing methods, some with doubled colors,  
do require math skills we can learn,  
like counting keyholes, brads,  
and calculating lace length to fit shoe size.  
Young athletes seeking footwear  
to enhance their race performance  
could learn to modify the speed  
and comfort of their stride  
with shoelace engineering.  
Next visit, I propose we try to make enticing  
loops of shoelace art.  
Would anybody toss the guys' artistic sneakers  
up and over wires near their school?  
Maybe they could have the latest thing  
in schoolyard admiration:  
untied laces get transformed  
to sneakers looking fly  
when flashy laces rule.

## 'Rithmetic: Fractions, Mysteries, Curiosities

Her teacher wants me to work on fractions with my little girl.

“Uh oh,” says that part of me convinced

I’m bad at math since flunking Calc in college.

“OK,” slowly says the grown-up’s mouth, “I’ll try.”

How does a woman living well past

one-half her life’s potential hundred years;

a few more than three-quarters of 80,

but still a ways away, four-fifths of 90

come to track her aging on a fraction strip?

Visualize, so long is mine, compared to this child’s

diminutive one-tenth portion, so differently wise.

Numerator over denominator, what’s that mean? I know

but it’s a mystery HOW I know to answer

4th grade book’s command: “Explain your answer.”

“Let’s leave that one for your teacher and move on,”

I say. Or should we both explore?

Like me, she figures work-arounds to keep

from handling rulers, measure-tools;

but she excels at spatial thinking;

calculating well enough to use one piece to model more.

To make these fractions fun instead of hard,

we cut up colored paper into thirds

to craft handmade votive candle covers

called *luminarias*.

We measure with a ruler where to make our cuts.

This act reveals arrays of tick marks,

different lengths, between the inches numbered.

Which line is the right one? We can count.

I hadn’t taken notice until this moment

that child-eyes see as total blurs

these calculating mysteries.

A new ’rithmetic task for me:

to cultivate her curiosities.

## **Age Difference**

She says I'm older than her grandpa (causing aging fears).  
I guess she's younger than my dog (in human years).  
She hears "Who made this playroom mess" complaints  
Admits her sloppy playtime mixing brightly colored paints.  
My mentee loves such art activity, I must admit,  
But I can't have librarian or janitor throwing a hissy fit.

## Like Dominos

I usually intimidate my fourth grade friend  
when I ask her to decide about activities  
in the mentor room at school.

We have too many choices  
what to do. I offer grown up things  
I'm fond of: reading, making a craft  
or book, or drawing, things I've done  
with other kids before, like jigsaw  
puzzles sometimes missing pieces,  
board games, building blocks,  
or checkers sometimes played  
with chessmen if they think  
the royal characters are cool  
but cannot grasp chess movement rules  
for all those medieval personalities.

I wonder, being flexible with rules  
to make up other ways to play these  
tainted games, am I modeling  
an undesirable role?

This day it's dominos she wants to try  
when we discover box of tiles.

At my advancing age with CRS  
(I "can't remember stuff")

I vaguely recollected rules I played  
with sisters at our grandma's every week.

We did not score from counting pips.  
Tiles were laid out upside down;  
one upside up began the board;  
took turns, each picking one. You match to  
numbers facing up; if you didn't  
have a match in hand, you picked again  
from "boneyard" — what we called it —  
'til you matched; first player  
done with all their tiles would win.

We tried that game but soon observed  
this tile collection never has been used  
for matching numbers. Random tiles  
had duplicates and other pieces lost,  
I guessed most children only must have played  
that other game, the one of setting vertically

a string of tiles that knock each other down.

While she made topple lines like that,  
I sought another set of dominos.  
I found a sack with several different colored sets.  
“Let’s see if we can make a proper set  
of black ones we can play.”

She agreed; with doubled numbers on both tile halves

we arranged them

“0” with 1,2,3,4,5,6

“1” with 2,3,4,5,6

“2” with 3,4,5,6

“3” with 4,5,6

“4” with 5,6

“5” with 6

in a pleasing pattern visually  
that revealed immediately  
which tiles were gone irrevocably.

With full black set assembled,  
we felt satisfied, investigated other tiles:

red set: missing some;

yellow: full but hard to read white spots;

blue set: missing quite a few.

We grouped into a plastic bag  
a multicolored set for toppling fun,  
and wrote a warning note for future players.

One official game of dominos  
we played with our black set, then  
boxed it up responsibly.  
We both enjoyed this graphic puzzle,  
improvising how to check the tiles,  
identify, correct irregularities.  
We figured how to fix annoying glitches  
facing other kids and mentors,  
together making problems fall away  
like dominos.

## Keeping Score

Scoring 10th grade student essays  
assignment was: Explore  
when Rolling Stones sang their timeless phrase  
“You can’t always get what you want . . .”  
tell the reader what you wanted, did not get;  
how you relate to this, explain.

Most of these young writers, what they wanted,  
out of reach was stuff, consumer products —  
Xbox 360: parents thought too pricy  
New car to celebrate a 16th year and licensed:  
depreciation killed that pretty ride  
puppy, pony, dirt bike, ATV:  
longing trumped by safety fear.

Another hefty group of teens was looking for  
athletic triumph for their team  
or precious spot on drumline, cheering squad:  
learn patience now, perhaps next year.  
As these responses reappeared  
it seemed test monitors permitted hints,  
suggestions on the wall.  
These are high-stakes assessments, after all.

We scorers are ourselves compared  
for client quality to be assured.  
Should same response’s double score be deviant  
by more than 1, alarm is raised,  
retraining time endured before another  
piecework item hits your queue.  
Compensation by the piece means  
scorer’s paycheck suffers. Can’t always get  
what computer-tethered effort’s worth.

A boy I thought deserved the highest score,  
a 4 for innovative thought, related how  
he intervened between a bully and his mark.  
A fight ensued and he — the dark-skinned one  
latecomer viewers thought was the aggressor —  
made that perpetrator trip to principal,  
who sent him home, while bully got away  
to hunt another day for hapless schoolmate prey.  
Justice is what this young, black  
and (in my opinion) gifted writer didn’t get.

Vindication. At that time

And then another scorer thought  
his essay only worth an average 2.  
I made a spirited defense of  
both his ethics and my rubric reading.  
Dismayed to say, Stones lyrics told it true:  
when what you want, for no good reason  
does not always come to you:  
my scoring supervisor  
amplified this unjust crime.

## **Crescendo**

She knew instinctively, it is music is a godsend.  
But this little girl was trained to be unseen, not heard.  
She did it well, performed superbly most of her adult life –  
well, some.

Her mother would not finish playing piano, any tune she started.  
Why do you suppose?  
Though beg to listen daughter did,  
beg for lessons they could not afford.

She knew instinctively, playing keyboard is physical –  
finger, ankle, wrist and spine activity,  
also exercising brainpan, spirit.  
Exertion toward creation.

Though musicians, also poets (some her lovers)  
got climaxing all confused inside her mind,  
between their skins crescendo registers  
her loving, stirring heartstrings.

At such vast distance from smooth moves, she struggles now.  
What gives with these conflicted instincts?

When sounding keys, some welling up of god connection vibrates.  
She recalls all loved ones planted seeds  
her swelled anatomy still carries  
need, ongoing, reach someone  
who'll help her come to understand  
how basic music theory deeply circles, in lucent propagation.

Tones resound – unfailingly – profound godsent intelligence  
that learns and teaches resonance with infallibility.

Tentative, her human hands traverse free will's contrasted  
black and white geography  
to essay into harmony that which  
might not always perfect be.

# Catherine A. Lee

Project Manager | Media Producer

138 North Drive, San Antonio TX 78201 | 210-663-4145 | leecatheri@gmail.com

vimeo.com/jazzovation | soundcloud.com/jazz-cat-lee | facebook.com/jazzovation

## Professional Experience Highlights

**PRODUCER at MEDIA PRODUCTION JS**, San Antonio TX – 2009, 2012-ongoing

- Manage production of documentary videos, including fundraising in support of new projects
- Log footage, write script treatments, research and secure assets

**PRODUCTION SERVICES MANAGER for CHESHIRE CAT COMPOSITION**, freelance during FT employment breaks – Boston MA, San Antonio TX – September 1975-1977, 2002-2003, 2009-2012 & ongoing

- Write successful proposal copy, customized and boilerplate, for various nonprofits' fundraising needs
- Write/edit web/blog copy from legacy and online-researched sources
- Produced and wrote script treatments for 2 video PSAs for public elementary school's mentoring program
- Wrote print marketing piece whose bullet points repurposed easily into effective web video script

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR for SAN ANTONIO INTERNATIONAL PIANO COMPETITION**, San Antonio TX – 2016-2017

- Wrote funding appeals to present 2 series of solo piano concerts by prominent guest artists and talented local youth
- Wrote/edited web copy, adding multimedia content from legacy and online-researched sources
- Managed production of 4 professional concerts, including one recorded and rebroadcast by Texas Public Radio

**WORKSHOP CO-TRAINER for "stART PLAYING POETRICITY,"** San Antonio TX – October 2014-April 2015, & ongoing

- Raised City of San Antonio funds supporting video recorded classroom sessions, rehearsals, and recital performances. Available online at VIMEO.
- Developed curriculum with composer/musician/educator Cecil R. Carter
- Trained poets were recorded and broadcast over KRTU-FM April 21, 2015
- Currently revising curriculum for online podcast delivery based on feedback, using new and archival assets

**INDEPENDENT PRODUCER for "POETRICITY,"** KRTU-FM, San Antonio TX – November 2013-April 2014

- Produced three 1-hour radio specials (broadcast April 5, 15, 23, 2014). Interviewed prominent poets, and read various poems with music. The April 5 show, featuring an interview with former US Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, was rebroadcast for International Jazz Day on April 30, 2014. Available online at SoundCloud.

**PARTNER at EXTRAORDINARY WORDS**, San Antonio TX – 2012-2015

- Managed production of a custom nonfiction history book, *Eda & Ilse*
- Wrote grant application to inaugurate and run a public school role model visiting lecture series
- Wrote and ran Facebook marketing campaign including interactive posts, custom welcome pages, and PPC ads

**TRAFFIC MANAGER at TEXAS CREATIVE**, San Antonio TX – 2007-2009

- Coordinated workflow among 9 designers and 8 account executives at a top ad agency

**PROJECT MANAGER at PEARSON CUSTOM PUBLISHING** – Boston MA – 2003-2006

- Monitored schedules and quality on 8-38 simultaneous textbook production projects to meet aggressive deadlines of between 3 weeks to 12 weeks following project initiation

**ARTISTIC/EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FOUNDER at STUDIO RED TOP, Inc.**, Boston MA – 1978-1992

- Produced 350+ concerts, workshops, and exhibits presented at large and small venues throughout eastern MA
- Wrote and designed PR for events including concerts, jam sessions, workshops, and exhibits
- Wrote grants to public agencies and private foundations to support 501(c)3 nonprofit programming and overhead
- Scripted and guided audio engineering of 20+ radio hours broadcast over college radio and National Public Radio affiliates, including 12 hours of live concert excerpts; directed 2 live concert videos
- Only jazz presenter named by MA Cultural Council 1 of 29 "Cultural Leaders of the Commonwealth" (1989)
- My production selected as 1 of 5 "Best Concerts of 1981" in year-end review by *Boston Globe* music critic

## Education

- Robert Pinsky's Art of Poetry, BUx, online learning initiative of Boston University through EdX - Certificate
- Gemini Ink, San Antonio TX, participation in monthly Open Writers Workshops,
- Southwest School of Art and Craft, San Antonio TX, classes in Book Arts & others
- Massachusetts Software Council Fellowship Program, Waltham MA & Entrepreneurs Program, Enterprise Center, Wilmington MA - Certificates
- University of Massachusetts, Amherst MA; Linguistics Institute at State University of New York, Buffalo NY; Linguistics Institute at University of California, Santa Cruz CA - Masters level coursework completed
- Montclair State University, Upper Montclair NJ - Bachelor of Arts, English