

Chautauqua 2010

Welcome to Utopia. I think there are a good many of you who have been here before; Chautauqua is like that, wooing people, drawing them to its flower-edged brick walks and its Bestor Plaza with children playing ball and all ages licking ice cream cones, its bells ringing out over Lake Chautauqua, wooing people back again and again. And, as you know, our wonderful conference has staked out that special corner of the Chautauqua campus for its own, at least for a week: its picnic tables, its creaky stairways to the Literary Society's famous classrooms. Its Hall of Philosophy. Welcome to the territory. It is yours to savour and have for a week.

(I am going to be giving you some post-it notes this morning, put this first one on your mirror where-ever you are staying this week : this territory is mine to savour and have for this week.)

This morning, I am excited to be with you in this enchanted territory, and I want to talk to you, writers experienced and new, young and not only young, about "transcending" as a verb in writing a book - no not just a book, a good book: picture book, nonfiction, novel - a book for children of all sizes and shapes. I know, I know that word is a little stuffy. Okay I have other names for it: breaking out, isn't bad. Hitting a story or a scene "out of the ball park" may work for the baseball set. "Going far enough" always works for me because I can turn that phrase into a question for writers: Have you - in that scene or story - gone far enough?

But "transcending" - stuffy or not - is really the word I want. There is some kind of magic in transcending. And this morning, I want you as writers to understand that magic.

How on earth did I stumble upon this word? I read an absolutely *transcendent* book, Grace Lin's *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*, which won a runner up Newbery this year. I loved the book, was enchanted by it, but "transcendent" how? It was transcendent as a story, for starters. Having finished the book, I felt as if I had climbed some very special mountain and walked into some kind of light - isn't that what transcendence means? Climbing into light? But, no, it was more than that, Lin's book transcended accumulatively: in the idea for the book, the language and Voice she used, the characters she chose, in objects she selected to tell her story, in the "place" itself, but for me, perhaps most of all she transcended in moments. Ecstatic moments - call them scenes - one after another, like beads on a string, rising until the whole book amounted to something enchanted and enchanting.

Let me share one of those moments with you so you will begin to understand.

Just for background: Minli lived with her mother and her storytelling father, working hard in the fields by day and listening to her father, Ba she called him, tell stories about Jade Dragon and the Old Man of the Moon by night. Nonsense, her discontented mother says, we are poor and have only bad fortune, and you bother the child with stories. But, believing in her father's magical storytelling, Minli starts out on a Journey determined to find the Old Man of the Moon to see if the wise man can tell her how to change the family fortune. Along the way she meets Buffalo Boy, who introduces her to his friend.

(Listen)

. Minli was startled when she saw her. Even with the buffalo boy blocking most of her view, Minli could see his friend was beautiful, even more beautiful than he had described her. She seemed to glow like a pearl in the moonlight and her deep blue silk dress seemed to be the same color as the sky. The bag she held in her graceful hand seemed to be made out of the same silk, but the silver thread embroidered on it made it look as if it were made from a piece of the star-scattered sky. Everything about her seemed finer and more delicate than the average person. There was definitely something unusual about the buffalo boy's friend.

"Glow like a pearl in the moonlight" "deep blue silk the same color as the sky" "silver thread embroidered as if it were made from a piece of star." Ah, so whole passages transcend, break out, break through. The very words she uses, the rhythm of them transcend: simple, concrete - hardly an adjective, did you notice? The writer moved that moment so artfully with words so beautiful that the moment moves like life itself to an exquisite point.

But let me give you another such moment from *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*:

On her way to the inner city where she is certain she will find The Old Man in the Moon, Minli meets a beggar in the marketplace, shaking with hunger. She uses a copper coin Buffalo Boy has given to her and buys "the largest peach on the stand" and hands it to the old beggar. (Listen)

"In fact, as if under a spell, the whole crowd stood and watched him swallow the fruit until he held a peach pit in his hand.

"Thank you," the beggar said in a much stronger voice. "The peach was so delicious, I wish for all of you to be able to taste it. If you would humor an old man and stay a little while, I'll share my good fortune."

The old man took a small stick out of his pocket and bent down. In the dirt next to the black bricks, he dug a small hole and planted his peach pit. He stuck his stick upright in the little mound and then asked for water. Minli, now completely fascinated, took out her water jug and handed it to him. As he poured water onto his stick, it trembled, and - was she imagining it?- it seemed to grow.

And it was growing. The stick grew higher and higher and thicker and thicker, until it was the width of Minli's arm. when she could no longer see the top of it, pink flowers and branches began to blossom out of it. As the sweet scent of the flowers filled the air, Minli realized the stick had become a peach tree. The crowd of people seemed to realize this too as they all gaped at it openmouthed. Even the stingy vendor left his fruit stand to stare at it in awe.

Like pink snow, the petals fell from the tree and made a soft carpet on the dirt. Green leaves sprouted and, as they cascaded over the branches, pale moon-colored balls like pearls developed. Almost as if they were small balloons being blown with air, they grew into round fruit, blushing pink and red as they developed. Soon, the tree was heavy with them and the air was full of the enchanting smell of ripe peaches. Children gathered around and stared longingly at the luscious fruit while the adults gulped with their mouths watering.

Finally the old man reached up, plucked a peach from the tree, and handed it to one of the people in the crowd, "Please," he said, waving his hand, "Help yourself."

The crowd needed no other urging. Young children climbed the tree and passed down the fruit, while the taller adults simply stretched and grabbed. A boy with a tired horse climbed on its back to reach an especially red peach that called to him. Before long, everyone's mouths were full of soft, sweet peach flesh and groans of delight. Even the peach vendor, his stand forgotten, stood under the tree with his eyes closed contentedly and peach juice dribbling out of his mouth.

"... (The beggar) was watching with an amused look, and suddenly Minli saw that the beggar wasn't really that old at all. "He must be a magician. Maybe he can help me get into the Inner city."

Minli edged toward him. As she weaved her way to him, the last peach was picked from the tree and the leaves and branches began to disappear. The tree trunk seemed to shrivel into itself and it grew thinner and shorter. ... When Minli finally reached the beggar, the thin twig of the tree vanished underneath the pile of peach pits and the beggar was turning to leave.

"Wait, " Minli said, and grabbed his arm. However, as Minli took hold of his sleeve, it pulled back and a glint of gold shone. Hastily the beggar pushed back his sleeve, but the quick glance was enough for Minli to see that he wore a gold bracelet in the shape of a dragon. They stared at each other as Minli's quick thinking mind somersaulted. ... Only the imperial family is allowed to use the image of a dragon, (Jade) Dragon had said. ...

"You're wearing dragon," Minli gasped. "Only the ...is allowed to wear a golden dragon...you must be...you must be..."

"... Quickly the beggar shook off Minli from his arm and began to run. She stared in shock as she finished her sentence."You must be," Minli whispered to the ragged, disappearing figure, "the king!"

This is a thoroughly ecstatic moment , the writer using all her senses to bring this moment to life - touch (soft, sweet peach flesh) and hearing (groans of delight) , sight (pale, moon-colored balls), active verbs(peach juice dribbling out of his mouth) and concrete images (round fruit blushing pink and red). She gives a simple object - the peach - center stage, then with her storytelling wand draws her sense-drenched words together into a glowing moment.

For heavens sake, where does a story like this even come from! In Grace Lin's case, having been brought up in America, she had disregarded her Asian heritage. Her wise mother left Chinese folktale and fairy-tale books on the bookshelf, and she, quietly I am sure, picked up these books and read them. indeed, Grace Lin found them flawed, though there was an undeniable charm. Into her own internal bag of stories went the Chinese stories for another time

When she was ready as an adult to tell her own stories, out came pieces of those old stories, including the charm of them. The psychologist Carl Jung talks about what is in our unconscious: that there are whole stories that

reside in all of us, perhaps have resided over time. When rising to the surface - - our surface - they often have an almost dreamlike or nightmarish quality to them, characters, oversized- in Grace Lin's case: the gold fish guide, Magistrate Tiger, Jade Dragon, Buffalo Boy - the journey to The Man in The Moon itself, oversized; the place, Dragon Gate, City of Bright Moonlight, Never-ending Mountain, oversized, at times nightmarish other times dreamlike, with wide and emotional power fueled by a range of very human - not magical - emotions: fear, anticipation, caution, affection.

Her story, like a gathering summer storm, simply *transcends*.

What does it take to get to that place? Every particle of all that an author is, knows, senses, intellects, but there is no question in my mind there is also a permission that is inherent in an author who can write a transcendent book like Lin's, the permission to "let go to story": To let the unconscious be a part of the writing game.

(Put that on a post-it behind your computer: I have permission to *let go to story*, to let go to what is in me.)

And what about that unlikely object, the peach. How exactly does that peach function in the story? Once a year I teach at Manhattanville College during which the assignment is frequently a short story of about ten to 15 pages. One weekend, some time was left over and I assigned an additional three-page story using three objects: an orange, a blue vase and a newspaper. That was it: write a story using an orange, a blue vase and a newspaper. That year and in years since, in similar classes, the most powerful stories have come not from the labored-over 15-page stories but from the quick, three page object-centered stories. Why, I asked myself? How does this happen when they spent so much time writing and rewriting the longer stories. I believe the answer is there was no time to ruminate or squeeze a story into existence; no time to over-think: the writers, having only a little time and focused by these simple but concrete objects -the orange, blue vase and newspaper - simply "let go to story"

It has always intrigued me that simple objects should have so much narrative power. Almost a transcendent power in themselves. Anyone who has taken any class of mine knows that I feel the essay "Tree and Leaf "by Nigel, an essay by Tolkien, is an extraordinarily powerful essay, because it confides in the writer where real power lies. Tolkien implies you are not writing with your whole box of pencils if you don't understand the power of basic earth objects or elements. Tolkien is interested in fantasy in particular, but I have come to believe this is so for any kind of writing including picture books and nonfiction.

What elements or objects are we talking about: a fire, a piece of wood, a stream, a stone, a wave, a tree, a leaf: the elemental stuff of our world. An orange. A peach.

Could Tolkien be right? Poets know this to be true, but I say the prose writer, knowing these elements, and using them, brings a resonant power and authenticity to narrative as well: to stories of secondary worlds, worlds you as a writer create, *and* stories of primary worlds, the world you inhabit. When I read Kate Di Camillo's *The Tale of Despereaux*, a tale set in a fantasy world, and saw how she danced around Soup - soup, for goodness sake - , I was amazed! The Queen died for loving it. The kingdom was ruled by the rules for it! The tiny mouse Despereaux, whose story this is, was brought to his knightship by events caused by it! (Listen.)

"The Queen loved soup. She loved soup more than anything in the world except for the Princess Pea and the king. And because the queen loved it, soup was served in the castle for every banquet, every lunch, and every dinner.

And what soup it was! Cook's love and admiration for the queen and her palate moved the broth that she concocted from the level of mere food to a high art.

On this particular day, for this particular banquet, Cook had outdone herself. The soup was a masterwork, a delicate mingling of chicken, watercress, and garlic. Roscuro (the cellar rat), as he surfaced from the bottom of the queen's capacious bowl, could not help taking a few appreciative sips.

"Lovely," he said, distracted for a moment from the misery of his existence. "Delightful."

"See?" shouted the (princess). "See!" she stood. She pointed her finger right at Roscuro. "It is a rat. I told you that it was a rat. He was hanging from the chandelier and now he is in Mama's soup."

The musicians stopped playing their guitars. The juggler stopped juggling. The noble people stopped eating.

The queen look at at Roscuro.

Roscuro look at the queen.

Reader, in the spirit of honesty I must utter a difficult and unsavory truth: Rats are not beautiful creatures. They aren't even cute. They are, really, rather nasty beasts, particularly if one happens to appear in your bowl of soup with pieces of watercress clinging to his whiskers."

And Di Camillo knows this source of power: Did you notice how, in loving this element - soup, she uses it sufficiently, repeating it, playing with it, elevating it to the status of character in its own right! She has two other primary objects: "the needle" and "red thread", objects that in her knowing and using them as elements of her story, bring her story to an authentically new place. In this scene that introduces the Red Thread, Despereaux is condemned to the dungeon for consorting with a human – the Princess Pea- and refusing to deny it is so. (Listen)

Despereaux came to, he heard the drum. His father was beating a rhythm that had much more boom and much less tat. Together, Lester and the drum produced an ominous sound that went something like this :Boom-boom-boom-tat. Boom-boom-boom-tat.

"Make way for the thread!" cried a mouse who was pushing a wooden spool of red thread through the crowd. "Make way for the thread!"

Boom-boom-boom-tat, went the drum.

"To the dungeon!" shouted the mice.

Despereaux lay on his back, blinking his eyes. How, he wondered had things gone so terribly wrong? Wasn't it a good thing to love? In the story in the book, love was a very good thing. Because the knight loved the fair maiden, he was able to rescue her. They lived happily ever after. It said so. In the book. They were the last words on the page: Happily ever after. Despereaux was certain that he had read exactly those words time and time again.

Lying on the floor with the drum beating and the mice shouting and threadmaster calling out, "Make way make way," Despereaux had a sudden, chilling thought: Had some other mouse eaten the words that spoke the truth? Did the knight and the fair maiden really *not* live happily ever after?

Reader, do you believe that there is such a thing as happily ever after? Or like Despereaux, have you too begun to question the possibility of happy endings?"

"Happily ever after," whispered Despereaux. "Happily ever after," he said again as the spool of thread came to a stop beside him.

"The thread, the thread, the thread," murmured the mice.

"I'm sorry," said the mouse behind the spool, "but I have to ask you to stand up, I have to do my job."

Despereaux got slowly to his feet.

"On your hind legs, please," said the threadmaster. "It's the rules."

Despereaux stood on his hind legs.

"Thank you," said the mouse. "I appreciate it."

While Despereaux watched, the threadmaster unwound a length of red thread from the spool and tied a loop.

"Just enough for the neck," muttered the mouse. "No more, no less. That's what the last threadmaster taught me: enough thread for the neck." He looked up at Despereaux and then back down at the loop of thread. "And you, my friend, have a small neck."

The threadmaster raised his arms and put them around Despereaux's neck. He leaned in close and Despereaux smelled celery. He could feel the threadmaster's breath in his ear as he worked at tightening the thread.

"Is she beautiful?" the threadmaster whispered.

"What?" said Despereaux.

"Shhhhh. Is the princess beautiful?"

"The princess Pea?"

"She is lovely beyond all imagining," said Despereaux.

"Just right," the threadmaster said. He drew back. He nodded his head. "A lovely princess, just so, like a fairy tale. And you love her, as a knight loves a maiden. You love her with a courtly love, a love that is based on bravery and courtesy and honor and devotion. Just so."

"How do you know that?" Despereaux said. "How do you know about fairy tales?"

"Shhhhh." The mouse leaned in close, and Despereaux smelled celery again, green and alive. "Be brave, friend," whispered the threadmaster. "Be brave for the princess." And then he stepped back and turned and shouted, "Fellow mice, the thread has been tied. The thread has been knotted."

A roar of approval went up from the crowd.

Despereaux squared his shoulders. He had made a decision. He would do as the threadmaster had suggested. He would be brave for the princess.

Even if (reader, could it be true?) there was no such thing as happily ever after.

Do you doubt, the story transcends. I am not even sure if these short remarkable passages with their rhythmic beats and imaginative images as well as the courtly story itself came from the author's head or her unconscious, but they came: oversized - or in this case minisized - and outrageous giving focus and authenticity to her story. Surely, to make so much of something so simple - soup, a sewing needle and a thread, she had to let go to it. And where did the smell of celery come from! That lovely lovely touch of celery. Hardly from the brain.

(Put this on a post-it above your computer: Is there a concrete object - orange, spool of red thread, peach --that should or could be part of my story? What powerful part can it play?)

And do notice that transcending happens in early moments of a book as well as climactic moments; it has to do with what is needed at the various points in a story. At an early point and a minor complication, a delicate transcendence will do; at a climax, an ecstatic transcendence. An over the top transcendence. It is a question of degree.

And of course you begin to see, particularly through Di Camillo's *Despereaux*, how *Voice* is part of a story that transcends. That mysterious vehicle of the writer: *Voice*. By now don't we all agree that *Voice* is important, essential, maybe even crucial? Isn't it what you hear at every conference, every workshop? Always followed by these questions: "My story is just a little school story...is *Voice* necessary?" Yes. "My story is just a nonfiction biography, is *Voice* necessary?" Yes. "My story is just a little picture book, is *Voice* necessary? Yes. Is *Voice* necessary for a book of any stripe that hopes to transcend? Yes. Yes. Yes. *For goodness sakes, then tell me: what is Voice?*

Many years ago I gave a speech on *Voice*, that mysterious element of writing that everyone tells you is essential. I said then, and I will say again, that it is probably the first thing an editor looks at when beginning to read a manuscript: does the story have *Voice*? A resonant and very individual *Voice* enchants us but, more important, it convinces us the story is authentic, that a real someone, with a real personality, is talking intimately to us; that the story is worth listening to, that it is an essential element of writing, essential for hitting a story out of the ball park. For going far enough. It's the vehicle for transcending.

There are so many ways I would describe *Voice*: first and foremost it's almost always conversational, there is an informality about it - and an intimacy: Shhhh I am sharing a story with you. And it is like a thumbprint of the narrator or writer - of everything the writer or narrator is from the way the writer or narrator breathes to the way she or he expresses or exclaims. (Di Camillo exclaims: "Reader, in the spirit of honesty, I must utter a difficult and unsavory truth,: Rats are not beautiful creatures.") I'm convinced *Voice* is driven by the writer's passion for the story he or she is telling. ("Writer, as storyteller Di Camillo might say it, "in the spirit of honesty, I must utter a difficult and perhaps surprising truth: your own passion for your story in large part creates your *Voice*.)

(Dear writer, put this on a post-it behind your computer: choose a story that I can feel passionate about because my very passion will help me discover my Voice.)

But let a new book show you what Voice is. It is another runner-up Newbery, from a year ago, a surprise hit called *Savvy* by Ingrid Law. . The woman who wrote it had not really written before, but clearly she was a natural storyteller. Her characters move around *Savvy* like the stripe around a barber pole as they commandeer a bus to take them to their ailing father, but it is, first of all, the Voice that charms the reader with its authenticity and passionate demand to be heard. (Listen)

"When my Brother Fish turned thirteen, we moved to the deepest part of inland because of the hurricane and, of course, the fact that he'd caused it. I had liked living down south on the edge of land, next to the pushing-pulling waves. I had liked it with a mighty kind of liking, so moving had been hard - hard like the pavement the first time I fell off my pink two-wheeler and my palms burned like fire from all of the hurt just under the skin. But it was plain that Fish could live nowhere near or nearby or next to or close to or on or around any largish bodies of water. Water had a way of triggering my brother and making ordinary, everyday weather take a frightening turn for the worse.

"Unlike any normal hurricane, Fish's birthday storm had started without warning. One minute, my brother was tearing paper from presents in our backyard near the beach; the next minute, both Fish and the afternoon sky went a funny and fearsome shade of gray. My brother gripped the edge of the picnic table as the wind kicked up around him, gaining momentum and ripping the wrapping paper out of his hands, sailing it high up into the sky with all of the balloons and streamers roiling together and disintegrating like a birthday party in a blender. Groaning and cracking, trees shuddered and bent over double, uprooting and falling as easily as sticks in wet sand. Rain pelted us like gravel thrown by a playground bully as windows shattered and shingles stripped off the roof. As the storm surged and the ocean waves tossed and churned, spilling raging water and debris farther and farther up the beach, Momma and Poppa grabbed hold of Fish and held tight, while the rest of us ran for cover. Momma had to keep my brother calm and help him ride out his storm."

Oh, it is tempting to read on and on. This book is stock full of voice. (Listen.)

"My savvy hadn't come along yet, but I was only two days away from my very own thirteen dripping candles - though my momma's cakes never lopped to the side or to the middle. Momma's cakes were perfect, just like Momma, because that was her savvy; Momma was perfect. Anything she made was perfect. Everything she did was perfect. Even when she messed up, Momma messed up perfectly.

I often reckoned what it would be like for me. I pictured myself blowing out the candles on my cake and fires dying in chimneys across four counties. Or I imagined making my secret birthday wish -getting my cheeks full and round with air - then floating up toward the ceiling like my very own happy birthday balloon.

"My savvy is going to be a good one," I told my brother Rocket. "I just know it."

Would you call that Voice original? Would you call the words she uses original? Can you feel them driven by the author's passion for her story, hear its rhythms - rhythms that clearly have come from the author herself, maybe her own savvy? "Momma was perfect. Anything she made was perfect. Everything she did was perfect. Even when she messed up, Momma messed up perfectly."

And how about the images that she chooses? Did you cotton to them,? To the idea of Savvy itself? To the narrator's analogies that seemed to have just popped up out of nowhere.. "Disintegrating like a birthday party in a blender." To her tremendous energy: "My brother gripped the edge of the picnic table as the wind kicked up around him, gaining momentum and ripping the wrapping paper out of his hands, sailing it high up into the sky with all of the balloons ..." or the narrator "getting my cheeks full and round with air - then floating up toward the ceiling like my very own happy birthday balloon.'

What do you call that kind of writing? Is it over the top, out of the ball park, does she go far enough? It is certainly sassy and spirited; it is certainly original. Is it transcendent? I think it is. And I think she has let go to it. That it came directly out of her subconscious - her words, her energy - with her intellect along for the ride.

(Put on a post-it behind your computer: Am I writing or is my narrator speaking with Voice? Am I using words and rhythms that come from me?) (Maybe you should add: am I sassy enough?)

Maybe you picture book writers are thinking: this is just about novels. "For goodness sake, all I am doing is writing a little picture book. I can keep my mostly-thinking- hat on for that, surely. I can add a few rhythms. There are hardly enough words in a picture book to worry about Voice. Or letting go. "

About five times a year I receive a package from a good friend - not necessarily a writer - with one of his or her friends' just completed story in it.

"Would you read this manuscript," the friend invariably writes."So and So is so talented, and has written *this little story* – it might be a picture book." Excuse me. Once again someone who storytells "little stories" to their children, has decided from the response they receive reading to their own little ones, that they can write, and so, without allowing there might be something to craft, they do, and somehow the miraculous story finds its way to me. Almost always the story rhymes, and almost never do the lines scan, at a least a word or syllable left over. Voice is an unknown characteristic to this unknown writer. Originality eludes him or her. The truth is he or she *thought* they were writing "just a little story" - nothing very big nor very important - because it was short and for children. "It might be good for a picture book," a cover letter says.

Picture books are not JUST little stories. They are part of the lifeblood of children's literature, historically and contemporarily, thank you very much.

Picture book writer Barbara Joose is a master at letting go - and transcending picture books. She first wrote *Mama Do You Love Me* over ten years ago. All it is is a list of all the ways that a mother can love a child. It isn't really even a story, but she let go to it, imagining one reason after another - always specific - the way a mother and child can love one another, and the book grew melodious with delicious specifics right into readers' hearts.

But let me read you a picture book that is coming out this month, another passion-driven story by Barbara Joose. It is called *Sleepover at Grandma's House* and illustrated by the Dutch artist Jan Jutte.

Goodie, Goodie, Goodie.

I'm packing up my little trunk

my little overnightty trunk

my nighty in my nighty trunk

.

Goodbye little fish and little fish flakes

and everything in the regular place.

Goodbye my mom

goodbye my dad

goodbye you

baby in the bed.

Well I'm going there this minute

to the Gramma who is in it

and the Doozie who is barking

and I'm bouncing bouncing bouncing

and I'm flipping off my shoesies

and I'm rolling down my socksies

and I'm sighing

and I'm singing

and I'm

THERE!

Oh, we love each other so.

Gramma silly

silly millie silly millie

"Let's put paper over the doorway

so we can run through!"

TA_DAH!

We put on pinky party hats

one for Gramma

one for doozie one for me

then we set the table fancy

with a razzle and a dazzle

and a horn to hootie tootie

to make the party start.

TOOT!

Oh, we love each other so."

Not just a "little book" - a book that transcends. It is about a grandma and visiting Gramma's house,

having a good time, ordinary ordinary ordinary, but nothing is ordinary about it. It has a wonderful, bouncy, original Voice, a wonderful, bouncy elephant-kid, and a memorable grandma who is

more kid than grandma. Original. Transcendent. Right out of the ball park.

(Listen to the last pages.)

"Tick tock tick tock tick

RRRRRRUUUUUUM<BLE

At the tippy end of our sleepover day

we like to finsh up this way...

snuggled and together

on the pitter patter porch

on the ricky rocky swing.

OOOOOH!" watch the lightning

sky writing

AHHHHHHH!Hear the thunder rain rumbling.

This we know -

the very best way to fall asleep

is inside a hug.

Oh, we love each other so.

Sleepover at Gramma's House absolutely transcends.

(Put this on a post-it behind your computer: I need Voice in a picture book, too. Originality of story

comes in part from the individuality of Voice.)

(Do you need to add to your post-it: think Rosemary Welles and her Max stories; even now, think Arnold Lobel and His Frog and Toad stories; think Kevin Henkes and his Lily and Chrysanthemum stories.)...

In addition to choosing the right words and Voice, there is a shape to a story that transcends. I need to make certain to tell you that. The shape is something like a deep- breath long. Something like walking out on your porch in the early morning as day is breaking, emptying out your nighttime breath, then taking a new deep breath and breathing and breathing until at some exquisite moment - there is a catch in your breath - , you exhale, feeling the absolute satisfaction of it. In your story your sunrise needs to be there - or the promise of it, the air needs to be crisp, the confidence to take the breath needs to there in scene or story, and then the breathing in of scene or story, the rising , breathing in, breathing in until you are just ready to exhale. Then, right there, there's that catch in the breath, then the exhale.(Everyone take that morning breath now! Did you feel what it feels like at the top of your breath, before you exhale? The catch. Then the satisfaction as you exhale?) That's transcending.

Chapters are shaped like that. Many - not all - but many scenes are shaped like that. Whole books are shaped like that if they transcend.

One of my favorite transcending scenes - call it a narrative breath - is in a book called *Highway Cats* by Janet Lisle. This author is incredible. She could direct a play, she shapes her chapters and her books so magnificently.

This is no fantasy; this is definitely a story of this world, though the center stage is taken by a group of scruffy highway cats, a bunch of yowling misfits, who have had more of life than they even want to talk about. There is Shredder whose ears are torn and whose eye suspicious, there is Khalia Koo, a female cat of shady background who runs a rat farm, there are those reprobates Murray the Claw and Jolly Roger. Out of the day to day of ordinary life, they are safe on their patch of cemetery land between the mall and highway, spending their days betting on "road kill" - whether various adventuring animals will make it across the highway alive when - miraculously? - a box with three kittens is thrown on the highway between the speeding cars.

Not only do the kittens miraculously make their way across the highway, the highway cats take them into their world. No ordinary kittens to the Highway Cats, they are charmed by the mysterious kittens, the scruffy things suddenly able for the first time in a long time, to love creatures outside of themselves! Shredder grows protective, Khalia Kooo gives up the rat farm, all of the cats become obsessed about making the place safe for the little kittens who are oblivious to all the fuss they are creating.

Then the mayor of the town decides it's time to get out his bulldozers and take back the derelict patch of land for more mall. The story is set. The breath taken:

"The sun had barely risen the next day when the startup roar of an engine ripped like an explosion into the peaceful hush of the little forest. It was joined by a second roar and a third until the air itself seemed to scream in pain.

The noise came from the shopping center parking lot. A small army of men had gathered there during the predawn hours and was now ready, with a battery of earth-moving machines to advance on the woods. The men's boots were laced, their hard hats were strapped down and their faces were grim, as if they really were soldiers about to enter a combat zone.

Khalia Koo, watching from the top of one of the tall pine trees that grew near the cemetery, smiled her knowing Siamese smile. The hard-hats were scared of the forest. This boded well for her plan. she signaled with her tail to Shredder below: *They're coming!*

"As if that weren't obvious!" growled Murray the Claw to Jolly Roger. The two cats were huddled together behind the cemetery's stone wall, keeping a cynical eye on the proceedings.

"It's sad, sad how Khalia and Shredder have got everyone believing they can beat the odds," Murray went on. "Rejects conquer the world! Highway trash fights back! Who would you put your bet on?"

Jolly Rogers grinned his gruesome grin.

Around them, an extraordinary scene was taking place. Several dozen highway cats were attempting to rig themselves out in what appeared to be, in fact, rubbish. Tissue boxes and cracker boxes, chip bags and burger wrappers, fried chicken tubs and paper cups, takeout food containers and instant cocoa packets were just a few of the items that were being snatched up by the cats and tried on for size. they came from the pile of trash that Murray and Roger had brought up from the highway the night before..

More than a few cats had already chosen their getups. they were hard at work gnawing eyeholes, a tricky task requiring concentration (and a lot of spitting so as not to swallow) to get the spacing right. ...

Our plan of attack is as follows," she began. "We'll lie low until the road crew is just outside the graveyard. When I give the first signal, it would be best if everyone could howl. Can you do that?" A few of the younger cats, delighted by this invitation, began to yawp and meowl in excruciating tones at the top of their lungs. The effect was ghastly. the older cats flattened their ears.

"Excellent! That's just what we want," Khalia told them.

She went on: "At my second signal, there must be another round of howls with the addition of some wailing screams. Imagine that you are sinking slowly into quicksand or, better yet, being ambushed by coyotes."

The cats shivered and glanced over their shoulders at the mention of coyotes...

We must stand up and move together in our disguises, no one rushing ahead. this is very important. Together, we'll terrify the road workers. Single, we'll have no effect whatever. Is this

understood? It was. By now, most cats had put on their containers and were hardly recognizable as cats at all except for those telltale lengths of fur protruding from beneath.

"All tails out of sight," Khalia warned, gazing with satisfaction at the stinking heap of four legged trash standing in front of her. "We are no longer what we were. We are now what we have never been: an apparition of horror!"

"What 's an apparition?" Jolly Roger whispered to Murray the Claw. "I think I'd like to be one!" ...

"Don't be stupid, Stupid! It's just a fancy name for a ghost. This is all a buildup to catastrophe," Murray hissed. ..."

On the other side of the graveyard, Shredder was saying the same thing to the kits. The little scamps were in one of their playful moods. They had found an old egg carton and were parading around underneath it caterpillar style. Only their twelve tiny feet showed out the bottom, a sight hardly calculated to terrify anyone.

"Stop that right now," Shredder warned them. "we must go before it's too late. This is no place for kittens. You'll only get trampled."

It was no use. They wouldn't follow directions Soon it really was too late. Heavy footsteps and a thundering tread of machinery could be heard coming uphill. Shredder collared the egg carton and yanked it behind a gravestone. The other cats lowered themselves, and their disguises, into the high grass.

Closer the noise came, closer and closer. All eyes trained on Khalia's Siamese tail, an elegant, dark ribbon rising up through the long grass. A gritty smell of hot machinery swirled like a dust storm into the graveyard. The kits sneezed. The cats coughed. Would the signal never come?

It came.

Above the weeds, Khalia Koo's tail waved like a gallant flag.

A bloodcurdling howl poured from the throat of every cat in the graveyard, a sound so heartfelt and penetrating that it cut through the roar of a bulldozer just then cresting the hill.

A line of approaching hard hats glanced uneasily around. One worker held up his hand to stop the bulldozer. IT halted, growling and panting like a unleashed dog.

Once again, Khalia 's tail flashed in the weeds. The cats let loose with a second howl, a wild crescendo of ghoulish wails and cataclysmic shrieks as if all life on earth were about to come to an end. The work crew froze at the entrance to the cemetery. When nothing could be seen there, they looked at each other and then, fearfully, up into the sky. Here was the perfect moment for the third signal.

Khalia waved her tail: Rise!

Between the long grasses, the disguised cats came to their feet and began, with slow and steady steps, to move forward across the cemetery. The effect was horrifying, as if a monstrous field of trash had come to life between the graves, a living, breathing tide of furious-eyed garbage that slobbered and hissed and slithered toward the road crew.

"HELP!"

"RUN!"

The workers didn't wait to ask what kind of apparition this could possibly be. They fled,, pushing and yelling and tripping over each other. Caught in the retreat, two bulldozers, a dump truck and a front loader reversed gear and accelerated at top speed down the hill. the machine roared backward through the little woods and, following close behind the running workers, heaved back onto the parking lot, where they flattened several parked cars in their haste to get across. The mangling sounds of these collisions rebounded back to the cemetery with a satisfying echo. Several cats peered out from under their disguises.

"Are they gone?"

"They are!"

"Did we do it?"

"We did!"

"We did!"

"Hooray! Hooray!" The monster wave of trash wobbled and toppled and began to break apart. For a moment, rubbish flew in all directions. then the transformation was complete: tubs and cups, bags and wrappers became again the heads and tails of ecstatic cats. They surrounded Khalia Koo and Shredder in a wild surge and, before they could protest, pulled the kits from their egg carton and lifted them high off the ground.

"Put them down! You'll crush them!~" Shredder cried in alarm.

"If you want to thank someone, thank me!"

Khalia sniffed.

The cats did thank her. They loved and extolled her. They loved

Shredder, too.

And they loved each other. Hadn't they all worked together to pull the thing off? Together! Think of it. Without a scratch or a hiss. This in itself was a kind of miracle. Something wonderful was in motion, some fantastic cosmic change, and everyone, even Khalia, agreed on who was responsible.

"It's those kiddens again," Murray the Claw growled to Jolly Roger.

Where was the catch in the breath? Somewhere between the monstrous field of trashing coming alive and the bulldozer workers yelling and tripping each other as they roared backwards, then through the little woods. Transcendent.

But let's not forget the "fantastic cosmic change."

Look, it isn't enough in a book that transcends for the dog to get the award for best pet, for the girl to get the boy, or the boy to get the dog. A transcendent story has to do with the interior life or lives of the character or characters. And what they do, or become, or rise to. If we have our druthers, we want a character who may be on the other side of OK but who is a mostly good character, to rise to a human standard that we ourselves - every child, every adult, every male and every female - aspire to. Someone loyal or courageous or persevering, someone outcast who against type overcomes, someone who stands up to adversity, or the clan, or the tyrant, to social narrowness, or profoundly to him or herself. Someone spirited who breathtakingly survives, whether it is in a school hall or on top of a mountain. A wandering child using her father's stories as a map to discover her fortune, a two ounce mouse who has fallen in love with a full-sized princess, a group of ragtag cats who have fallen in love with three naive, oblivious kittens. We want characters to overcome because there is promise in their overcoming that we and our children - the smallest, the most unimportant, the ordinary - can overcome, too.

(Here are a few post-its: Do my scenes or chapters or book itself rise enough? Do I take a deep enough narrative breath, and importantly do I win a catch in the breath at the moment of climax?)

(Here's another post-it: Does my character overcome, standup, make a difference? Is he or she a part of a "cosmic change?")

You can see why the idea for story itself matters so much. Does a writer get a great idea sitting over a cup of coffee at the breakfast table? Does he or she get it from something they read in the paper like: Mayor promises to clean up the deserted cemetery land between the mall and route 84 and the wild animals that have invaded it? And say "what if?" Or from some accumulating sense of injustice in their bones? Something that drives a writer to share her incredible sense of that injustice? Where did the idea for Soup as a kingdom's rule-maker come from, or the idea of a young girl going after the Man in the Moon; where did the idea for a story about derelict cats, knightlike in courage, with helmet like cracker boxes and chicken buckets on their heads, attacking bulldozers like so much garbage, come from?

For that matter where did the incredibly imaginative idea for *Holes* by Louis Sachar come from, that crazy hole-digging story about Stanley Yelnatz; Or *Where The Wild Things Come From*, that out and out celebration of a child's monsters? How about *The Mixed Up Files of Basil E Frankweiler*: where two children sneak into a bathroom stall at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in order to spend the night. How about idea for *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman, last year's Newbery winning book, where a little boy whose parents are murdered crawls away before the murderers can get him, into a Graveyard where the ghosts adopt him. Or *Owl Moon*. *Junie B. Jones*. *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. *Sleepover at Grandma's House*. *So You Want to Be President*. Not only a story transcendent in shape or voice or scene or tone, but transcendent in the very idea that inspired the story. In its originality and potential. Its opportunity for cosmic change!

As they begin their stories, exactly what are Lisle and DiCamillo and Grace Lin and the others following? An outline cut in stone? Analyses of plot and theme in a three-hole binder? Or with basic goals in mind are they taking a deep breath, following the sense of story that sits in their bones, and that has sat in their bones since, like Grace Lin, they began to read stories, to be swept into the ways and worlds of tales and books by ancient or contemporary storytellers? Or are they following stories, emotionally and with a sense of freedom, driven by their own private passions for what's right, or fair, or beautiful. Do you know what is in your bones? Have you taken a deep breath? Do you know what the ecstatic or transcendent moment or moments are in your story?.....can you get there with words? Have you listened to yourself well enough to know?

(Here's a post-it: Is there opportunity for an ecstatic or transcending moment in my story?)

Every once in a while an editor picks up a manuscript and is thrilled with it. I like to use the word "satisfied." You read a manuscript, you take its journey, you hear its words, you enter its forest, and climb its mountains with a hero or heroine that takes you to a new place in thinking about what humans even are, and when you are done, you sit back, as if after a full meal or a full breath, and feel satisfied.

I picked up *Mockingbird* as the second submission by Kathryn Erksine, a former Chautauquan. She had written a first book for me called *Quaking* featuring a wonderfully quirky character, a foster kid, who was sassy and all personality, and who was an obsessively driven believer in peace. The book got one starred review and other good reviews, nice first book.

But Kathy struggled with *Quaking*, she told me afterward. She squeezed it into existence. Not so with *Mockingbird*. Kathy lived near the school shootings at Virginia Tech some years ago and was powerfully affected by them. In addition, she has an Asperger's syndrome child, and suddenly one day she sat down, and wrote a book. As she tells it, the book almost wrote itself. The hero is Caitlin, an Asperger's syndrome child, whose brother is shot in a Virginia Tech-like school shooting,. but that's not the story. Caitlin's brother Devon was Caitlin's best friend, her only friend, and his loss to her traumatic. Listen to this scene, written in Caitlin's voice. See if you can see through it to the Caitlin who hurts and the Caitlin who is trying to climb the mountain of her own emotions. (The chest she refers to is an oak chest Devon was making before he died.)

(Listen.)

This is from a chapter called: *The Day Our Life Fell Apart*.

Mrs. Johnson gives me back my group project. It says *well Researched* and *very Interesting* and *Excellent* but at the bottom she also writes, *Why are capital letters in the middle of your sentences? Common nouns are not capitalized. Only the special words are capitalized.* I look at my paragraph;. I did not put capital letters in the middle of the sentences. They are only at the beginning of some words. She has put an X over the H in Heart and written a lower case h. It doesn't look right that way. I'm sure she's wrong about the special words and capital letters even though she's a teacher. How can any word be more special than Heart?

At home I think about Devon's Heart. I sit on the sofa and look at his chest. It's still under the gray sheet. There are rays of light coming in through the blinds and the dust swirls around in the beams and hits the chest and I wonder if any of the dust particles are Devon and if I can feel him.

I close my eyes and remember some of the things that happened on The Day Our Life Fell Apart. That's what Dad calls it. After we came home from the hospital that night - with no Devon - Dad was yelling and kicking the furniture and the walls and he started pounding the chest with his fists and shouting, *Why? Why? Why?* and he threw the woodworking books and Scout manual into Devon's room and slammed the door and said, *No no no no*, until I screamed at him to *Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!*

Then he put the sheet over the chest and now he never even looks in that corner.

I press myself against the sofa and squish my eyes tight and even though I try not to I remember being at the hospital and how there were sharp lights and siren noises and loudspeaker noises and beeping noises and medicine smells and finally people dressed in green pajamas and paper slippers said to Dad, *We tried but we couldn't close your son's chest. His Heart - there was nothing left - there was nothing we could do. Nothing we could do.*

I'm shaking and sucking my sleeve and I try to stop thinking about The Day Our Life Fell Apart but when I open my eyes Devon's chest is staring at me so I slide off of the sofa and crawl over to it and pull the sheet up from the bottom and push underneath it and get inside the empty hollow chest and I imagine myself as the Heart. Devon's Heart. My arms are atria and my legs are ventricles and I pump the blood all around the right way because there *has* to be something that I can do. something I can do. First I pump the blood to the lungs to pick up the oxygen then to the left atrium and ventricle then to the aorta to go all around his body like it should. All my valves are working so the blood flow is right and I can feel the beat and I rock with it because rocking makes me feel alive and I will his chest to be alive. I pump the blood around Devon's body. Dev-on. Dev-on. I say it louder and louder to make it rue and my whole boyd is beating for his louder and louder and wilder and wilder and my head is banging the sides of the chest but I don't care. *DEV-ON! DEV-ON! DEV-ON!* And I hear Dad's voice screaming like at the hospital and I don't want to hear it because I don't want any part of The Day Our Life Fell Apart to happen again so I focus and become the Heart louder and louder and harder and harder but then I fall out of the chest because there's no way to close it and I feel Dad grabbing me but all I can do is scream the words from the green hospital people, *I TRIED BUT THERE WAS NOTHING I COULD DO!*

Caitlin! Caitlin! I hear Dad yelling but I can't stop crying. I feel him wrap me in my blanket and put me back on the sofa and I feel his arm around me as he sits next to me in the dark. The ringing in my ears finally stops but then the phone rings.

I feel Dad get u p and watch him disappear into the kitchen. He comes running b ack into the living room and turns on the TV and stands there looking at it. He breathes heavily.

(The man on Fox Five News has a microphone in his hand and is taking in front of a brick building. *I'm at the courthouse where the remaining killer from the Virginia Dare Middle school shooting has just had his preliminary hearing. Among the crowds of curious people, the accused, a mere boy in an orange suit,*) stares into the camera and grins a half smile. Then he lifts his handcuffed hands and gives a thumbs-up sign. Dad goes to the bathroom and throws up. the camera switches to a lady sitting inside at the ne desk. She says, *"We'll hear more about this story later but isn't it good that we now have closure?"*

I suck my sleeve,. I don't think there is anything good about any of it. And I wonder how CLOsure can help. And what it is. When Dad comes back to the living room and turns off the TV I ask him. What is CLOsure? He says he has to call a neighbor but when Mrs. Robbins comes over he forgets to ask her what closure means. He just says she is going to take care of me because he has a headache and needs to take a shower. I wonder if it is one of the crying showers. I close my eyes.

I can see the light come on through my eyelids and I hear a creaking sound and then Mrs. Robbins's shaky voice. *Can I get you something Caitlin? Hot chocolate? warm milk?*

My Dictionary.

Dictionary?

Yes.

Oh, I was thinking of--

PLEASE.

More creaking. *Okay dear.*

I look up CLOsure and it says: *the state of experiencing an emotional conclusion to a difficult life event such as the death of loved one.* I do not know how to get to the state of experiencing an emotional conclusion so I ask Mrs. Robbins. *How do I get to the state of experiencing an emotional conclusion to a difficult life event.?*

Her mouth opens and closes three times and makes a squeaky noise. *Excuse me,* she says, and runs into the kitchen but I can hear her blowing her nose and now I can hear Dad crying in the shower so I put my purple fleece over my head and close my eyes and plug my ears and with my elbows I squeeze my Dictionary tight against my chest.

Transcending is rising through a mischief of words and hitting your mark. Getting that catch in the breath. Usually emotional. Often, when you are lucky, letting words move rhythmically and insistently and progressively to a point universal in its profundity. Cosmic change. Something every reader can "get." Take away. Feel. Some terribly human we're-in-this-together moment of life giving point.

Where does the ability to transcend as a writer come from. From everywhere. It comes from living in the present, in the textures of life so that you know them. It comes from being a William Faulkner and sitting down on the docks, listening to language. People watching, and understanding or putting a name to contours of their lives. It comes from hearing the rhythms of your own voice and becoming comfortable with them, even if they break the rules of your fourth grade composition teacher. After all the aberrations of your speech come from *your* "place": your emotional place, your environment, your hearing place. Indeed, they come from the heartbeats of your own body! Where does the ability to transcend come from: it comes from being a reader. Reading books. Particularly good books, but not just good books. It comes from reading wildly enough, from *Tom Jones* to comic books to *Sarah Plain and Tall*, to begin to put into your own story bag elements you read and appreciate and begin to see have power in them. Reading Fieldings' *Tom Jones* at a dinner with all the wild and textured authenticity of that. Reading Dickens' *Great Expectations* when Pip walks into Miss Havisham's mansion, feeling the bristle and dust of that. Reading James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and seeing the exquisite, transcendent power of the last pages in chapter two, the Pick, Pack Pock of the bats being hit in the yard, and Stephen understanding.

And, of course, reading children's books of all kinds... Like Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*, feeling the rhythmic power of the scene where the grasshoppers, after having been in a kind of catatonic hibernation begin to march, thousands of grasshoppers marching across the dry prairie field, marching into the house itself, impossibly through cracks, through windows, across the floor, demanding that we not only read about this relentless march, but that we live it. How is it that at this age, I have never forgotten those grasshoppers and their march.

(I did not read the following paragraph in Chautauqua, but I include it here. Do as you will with it.: Reading *Sarah Plain and Tall* when Sarah, so lonesome for her seaside home in Maine, slides down the haystack, glorying in this

new kind of wave, with this new kind of family. Not only read it, not only feel it, but look at it as a writer, and appreciate what on earth is going on in this narrative breath. How did Patty MacLaughlan do that! Notice the modulation. How the slow moments leading up to the climax - the breathing in - are as important as the ride itself! Read Jerry Spinelli's *Wrinkler* or *Star girl* again and listen to your heart as Palmer realizes looking up into the air, that the pigeon right above him, in the flock of pigeons that will be shot, is *his* pigeon. A catch in the breath. How Stargirl dancing off into the night at her senior prom with a string of students behind her doing the bunny hop, for goodn ess sakes, is a passion scene driven by this young woman the totally original Stargirl having been pushed out of every traditional societal group in the school, but who is now leading these same people into her outcast world, into the darkness of the school playground. Listen to your heart. Or the catch in your breath. memories, such feelings.

No wonder, having that courage, having the permission to let go to both conscious and unconscious inclinations, writers arrive at something transcendent. Something that in its moments and in its story are over the top, out of the ball park, that break through.

I often say to writers: you are going to write, open up the windows, let the breeze blow in gently across your face, smell the lavender in from the field; the wind may bring with it - a moment in your childhood, y our teenhood, yesterday. Not consciously, unconsciously. Let it play on your fingers at the computer. Let it play on your storying.

I have been intrigued lately with reviews. With how articulate reviewers are.

"Immediately readable. and moving., An affecting story of human triumph. " A review on *Little Bee*.

"An exquisite, sometimes painfully touching tale." On *Sarah Plain and Tall* in New York Times.

"A magical and heartbreaking tale..." Starred Kirkus review on Stargirl.

"No one should miss this remarkable and moving experience," Andrew Clements reading *Mockingbird*.

"This will grab you by the heart and throat, give you a good shake, and then set you cheering for the human spirit.

"Jim Trelease, author of Read Aloud Handbook, on *Mockingbird*."

"Wildly inventive...A smart jigsaw puzzle of a novel" New YOrk Times on *Holes* and

"A dazzling blend of social commentary, tall tale and magic realism." Starred publishers weekly. (Also *Holes*)

Listen to these superlatives: Wildly inventive. Dazzling blend. Grab you by the heart and throat. Exquisite and painfully moving. Affecting story of human triumph.

Can you begin to see that for your book to receive these kinds of acclaim, you must as a wrier – in delicate moments and not –go far enough

I am trying to shake you up this morning. I want you to begin asking yourselves questions.

What about your story will hit a truly emotional note?

What about your story will make us sigh: dazzling, moving, exquisite, outrageous, remarkable? Think

I hope you are sitting in your chairs thinking? Can my little story, can my novel, can my nonfiction book hit an

Do you know how to let go to ecstasy?

Recently, I gave a speech at Manhattanville college, donating the books I have edited to their special collection. In it I admitted that an editor is something of a cheerleader to her writers and editors. Okay, I admit it. I am unabashedly a cheerleader for you this week. I don't know where you are in your writing; perhaps you are have discovered all that I have said already. I hope so! If you have not, I cheer you on beginning a new journey. A journey away from the ordinary, to the Jungish lands and people that are so key to our most basic selves that they become extraordinary. Story that has not construed power, but has genuine power. Story that, like the shudder of a butterfly's wing, can make a difference to a child or to many children or to the reader reading along with the child.

I am cheering you, and giving you permission this morning to go to a new place as a writer, using more of yourself than you may have used before. To transcend. My dear writers, surprise yourselves this week. Surprise us. Thank you.