

My daughter reads

My daughter reads the glory of four o'clock flowers. She hears the *ur* in purple. We install a window to make words on paper match chlorophyl and paint syllables. A blue bunting on a stick with a raindrop dangling from its tip. Water leaves crow's feet like *eat*, a dark competitor. My youngest sees a black beetle's shell but she prefers the one in green armor: *een* like *screen*. She doesn't know those emerald wings consume all our ash trees. The letter *c* was her mystery at first until we said it slithers when followed by an *e*. But a *c* with an *a* or an *o* has a catlike prowl. Birds should eschew such curiosities, but what is *ir* if not another *ur*. And *e* followed by *w* is an unpleasant sensation save when it suckles a lamb. I don't know why the word "wonder" is spelled with an *o* but pronounced with a *u*. Something about the latter letter is underhanded which is also a lesson.

Boy with an Aster in His Palm

There was a little boy in Jeanette's care whom she called "my last hope." She said he was unique because he would laugh and shower curiosity on the world. He was the only child who ever tried conversing with her.

She kept a bird feeder by her window that still attracted a bird here and there. She had a few sickly trees in her yard, a clutch of oaks that were the sole tree cover left in the neighborhood. At one time, Jeanette enjoyed seeing dozens of birds every hour. Now, she was lucky to see two birds every few hours.

Whenever a bird showed up at her feeder, the little boy would stop what he was doing and stare. He was mesmerized at how the few sparrows and an occasional finch pecked at the seeds and fat that formed a bell shape. He loved it when a sparrow would hang practically upside down to get the seeds on the bottom of the bell. It made him giggle with delight.

Jeanette told him about other birds of many colors she used to see. She showed him their pictures in a book: Cardinal, Nuthatch, Red-Headed Woodpecker, Oriole, Grosbeak, and Chickadee. He loved the photos, marveling at their brilliant plumage. Jeanette pointed to one of a Painted Bunting, a bird she once saw on a trip down south. The boy ran to the art table and immediately tried sketching one.

One winter afternoon, Jeanette took her troupe of children for a walk. She wanted to find birds and whatever remaining plants might house them. She did not have high hopes of finding either but enjoyed the optimism of the boy who screeched with delight every time something fluttered along the ground, even if that fluttering was a wrapper or synthetic paper. He would shout, "A bird! It's a bird!" And Jeanette would say gently, "No, that's not a bird. But you're right. It *is* fluttering."

When they were standing in the middle of a dull brown field, the boy thrust out his palm and asked, "What's this?"

Jeanette looked at his hand and saw a tiny blue flower embedded in the middle of the palm. The flower, a blue aster, was nestled inside his skin. When she recovered from her initial shock, Jeanette asked, “How did *that* get there?”

“It show up!” the boy said with a big smile.

“When?”

“Now!” he giggled.

Jeanette immediately called his parents and left each one of them a message explaining what she had seen. She said their son was doing fine, that he was happy, but that she would consult a doctor. When she called her personal physician, he dismissed what she said as lunacy. “Jeanette, you are too old to make crank calls,” and he hung up the phone.

“Does it hurt, your flower?” she asked the boy.

“No. The flower feels good.”

“It doesn’t hurt you?”

“Flowers can’t hurt me,” he said.

When Jeanette stopped to consider what to do next, she noticed that none of the other children had looked at the boy’s hand. They stood and stared off into space or kicked at rocks and other ground litter. Jeanette was surprised. She said to the boy, “Can you hold your hand up for the other children to see?”

When he did, the children looked but said nothing.

“Do you see the flower?” Jeanette asked them.

The children looked confused.

“Do you see the little flower in his hand?” she asked again.

They shook their heads. Jeanette was puzzled and upset.

She brought the group back to her house, and the boy stood in front of the window. He waited for the birds to come to the feeder. To her astonishment, they came immediately; many different

birds she had not seen in years. There were cardinals, woodpeckers, nuthatches even blue jays. To Jeanette, this was a miracle, and it made her cry.

The boy with the aster in his palm came over to her and asked, “Why you cry?”

She took a deep breath and whispered, “The birds. I have not seen them in so long.”

“Now they come every day!” he said. “They come see my flower!” The boy raised his hand to the window where a female cardinal, brown and orange, stopped eating for a moment and looked at him. Then another cardinal, her mate in a brilliant red suit, fluttered beside her in the air.

All afternoon, more and more birds arrived. Jeanette went to the boy and asked, “Can I touch your flower?” To which he said, “Yes!”

When Jeanette dragged her index finger across the face of the flower, there was a sudden frenzy of activity at the window. A cacophony of squawks, chirps, and even some singing. She could not recall when she had heard more than an occasional chirp. As the noise grew louder, the boy shouted with delight, and so did Jeanette.

None of the other children noticed.