**Sample poems from “Negative Aspects” (dancing girl press, forthcoming 2020)**

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF PERFORMANCES FOR CHILDREN

You have to *get* to them. Squeeze them in between birthday parties and soccer games.

If it’s on TV, the performance also shows the audience. That audience is a captive audience. It has to sit still and look straight at the performer with adoring, worshipping faces. The kids outside the TV are allowed to glance away or wrestle on the rug but the kids inside the TV are performers themselves. And they’re been told beforehand how, literally, to act.

If you look at the TV kids as a group, you see the required enthusiasm and just-enough spontaneity. But if you zero in on *any* *one* of these kids you just might see bored, withdrawn, alienated. You look for a smile but it might not be there.

FIFTH GRADE

We began changing classes, meaning different teachers, different classrooms for different subjects. Also, men teachers. And they began to give us more responsibility, things to keep track of. Reports due, notes home and then back, lunch and money for school trips. On those trips I’d look longingly at kids who were there with their families. And I was always worrying, the way adults worry about job interviews, dentist appointments. If something was due on a particular day I’d divide all of time into before and after.

I actually *called* them my worries. And as soon as one worry was over, another worry had already begun.

CHILDREN’S BOOKS

Everyone wants kids to read. Everyone thinks reading is what people do when they want to be alone. Everyone seems to *equate* reading with being alone. Maybe everyone equates reading with *thinking*.

And everyone wants people to be told, by books, what their feelings are. True, books can be affirming but if people spend all their thinking time reading, where’s the time to develop anything to affirm? Suppose we feel things that no character in any book ever felt? Does that mean we haven’t read enough books?

EXCERPTS FROM MY FIRST MEMOIR, AGED ELEVEN

“My mother read to me a lot; sometimes I also looked through the books on my own. One illustration showed a little girl in her room playing with her toys. ‘Where’s her mommy?’ I asked… I was worried about other children… sensitive to little things that I heard about other children, who to me seemed to lead strange, perhaps unhappy lives… I felt sorry for my friend Maureen because her family had potatoes instead of rice with their fried chicken! And I would look through what seemed to be pep-talk-y books designed to help children feel comfortable with different cultures. Such books made me feel suspicious. I wondered why, if everything was so okay, have a whole book about a kid’s daily life, a book in which nothing *else* happened, no plot. I used to ask my mother ‘does she play?’ By that I think I meant ‘Is she okay? Is she happy? Is she loved? Is she a regular child?’

“In another book from my pre-school years there was a story about children drawing pictures. I recalled the phrases ‘they made flowers’, ‘they made tables and chairs’, and then ‘they made themselves’. The book meant they *drew* themselves, and I probably realized that. But somehow the sentence ‘they made themselves’ is what stuck in my mind. I remember feeling troubled. How could they make themselves?”

And now, sixty years after writing that memoir, I ask: Which part was the maker and which part was the made?

HOW CAN WE ENJOY OUR CHILDREN WHEN WE’RE DOING THINGS WE DON’T ENJOY

I hated fingerpaints. I hated Shrinky Dinks. Also science experiments. When Devin and I did Health Science for the home-schooling log we just *read* about the experiments, we didn’t actually *do* them. “Okay,” I’d quip, “I believe them!” Devin did too. He didn’t need slime and he didn’t need noise in order to believe in science.

ONE POSITIVE SCHOOL EXPERIMENT

Mrs. Glover told us to go home and make a musical instrument, bring it in the next day. I chose musical glasses. I got eight kitchen glasses and marked with a pencil a different level on each glass. When I got to school I filled them with water, each up to the pencil mark. Then I tapped the glasses so they played Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.

I could play Twinkle on the piano but it didn’t twinkle like the musical glasses.

Musical glasses weren’t noisy and they weren’t slimy. And they didn’t need milk or vinegar or anything from the fridge or cabinet or store, just-plain water in glasses played Twinkle just fine.

PERMISSION TO NOT-TEACH

When Barbara was seven and I twenty-two, we were both interested in sewing. I was going to teach her how to make herself a dress. We went shopping for the material and then went over her house to make the dress. But as soon as we got started I realized I didn’t feel like teaching, standing over her while she slowly fumbled with pins, ripping out at least one seam. Very quickly I simply got to work on that dress while Barbara watched.

As she watched she asked questions, handed me various items, cut along various lines which I’d penciled in. I gave myself permission to not-teach and I gave Barbara permission to not be taught. I felt a little guilty, maybe selfish. But “those who can / do. Those who can’t / teach.” I don’t entirely believe that but still, I was one who could. I was not one who couldn’t.