

Tapering off: A life with words

by [Martha W Hickman](#) in the [September 13, 2000](#) issue

The child is sitting up in bed, propped against pillows. She is six years old. Her homebound teacher, Mrs. Williams, is due any minute. She is fond of Mrs. Williams—a white-haired lady with a pleasant quavery voice.

What will Mrs. Williams bring with her today? Last time she brought a magazine and that tan, pasteboard-covered notebook. Together they had looked through the magazine—a magazine such as her mother had, with pictures of green cans of cleanser and a woman in a starched, white-capered hat. Pictures of two women hanging out wash on two lines. One of them is smiling, the other is frowning. It seems that the frowning woman's wash is not as sparkling white as her neighbor's and she is upset about it.

But those pictures are not what interest Mrs. Williams. There is a house not unlike the house the child lives in herself—though she has not seen the outside of the house for a long time, confined to bed as she had been for most of a year. Mrs. Williams also brought a pair of blunt-edged scissors, and some mucilage—a thick, brownish liquid that oozed out through a slit in the rubber-slanted cover when you pressed on it just right.

Together she and Mrs. Williams cut out the pictures of the house. The edges are a little jaggy, but it doesn't seem to matter.

"Now let's paste it in the notebook," Mrs. Williams says. They have done that, smoothed it out as best they could, lined up the bottom of the grass in front of the house with the lines printed on the notebook page.

"Now you've pasted it in," says Mrs. Williams. "What is it?"

"It's a house," the child says—an easy question to answer.

"Good," says Mrs. Williams. "Now we're going to print the word 'house' under the picture."

The child nods in acquiescence, then watches with the utmost concentration as Mrs. Williams prints out the letters—H-O-U-S-E. “Now, you see, we’ve spelled house. Can you read?” she asks.

“House,” the child says, watching the word carefully.

“Now, *you* write it down, just as I have, under my letters.”

The child takes the pencil. It is short and grubby, but she writes, looking at each letter on the line above as she forms her own. She prints it out laboriously. “HOUSE,” she says.

“Good,” says Mrs. Williams. “Now, read what you have written.”

“House,” says the child. Her pride rises in her throat. “House,” she says again. “I can read the word I wrote!”

Mrs. Williams leans over and hugs her shoulder. “Yes, you can,” she says.

“Now”—she picks up the magazine, the shreds of paper hanging from the side where they had cut, and puts it on the table beside the child’s bed. “What I want you to do before I come next week is look through all the pages of this magazine and see how many pictures of houses you can find. Then cut out each one and paste it on a page in our book”—she pats the tan, pasteboard cover of the book, also on the bedside table—“and print underneath each picture the word HOUSE. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” the child says, and nods soberly. She can do that—find the pictures, paste them in, write HOUSE under each.

In ensuing weeks she and Mrs. Williams add other pictures, other words—girl, dog, family, flower, sun. Each word she writes with great care. She continues during the week. Sometimes her mother watches, telling her what fine work she is doing.

One day Mrs. Williams brings her a book. The child opens it to the first page and looks at the first sentence. “‘The sun is up,’” she reads. “‘Oh, look! The sun is up.’” Mrs. Williams stands there, watching. Her mother is there, too.

“I can read!” the child says. Mrs. Williams is smiling. There are tears in her mother’s eyes. “It is the most thrilling moment,” Mrs. Williams tells her mother—“when they find they can read.”

After that, she reads and reads. She is not yet allowed to go back to school. She reads her sister's school books. She reads a book from England a cousin has sent her. She reads a book about Twistem Tommy which she does not like, but she reads it anyway. Her favorite book is called *Poppy: The Adventures of a Fairy*. It is about a small fairy who lives with a family and is found one morning asleep in the toe of the father's slipper. He is called the "Gentleman Giant." One day, in the story, Poppy did something naughty and was put under an inverted colander for punishment. Somehow she got hold of some cheese and filled all the holes in the colander with it. Another day she got to ride on the engine of Big Brother's electric train, zooming around the track.

The child begins to imagine her own stories. She memorizes poems and makes up a few of her own. One of them she sends in to a contest. She does not win. Her mother is very critical of the judges. "Yours was much better," she insists.

Gradually, the child gets better. She is able to walk around, be outside. For the most part she has stopped printing and pasting in the notebook Mrs. Williams gave her. Every once in a while, though, she sees it in her closet. She remembers overhearing her mother talking on the telephone. "They never expected her to recover," her mother has said. "They said she had something like a 100 to one chance."

A thrill goes through the child when she hears that. She is some kind of miracle. She did get better. Didn't she learn to read, printing those words? And to write her own stories? In some mysterious way, writing had become for her a passage away from dying, an escape from the death she was expected to die.

She has been healthy and strong, has a husband, children and grandchildren she loves—and she has been a writer. But now, she no longer has anything in her heart to say, nothing she has not already said. Her friends and family urge her, "Let it go. An occasional piece, maybe. But not big projects anymore. Enjoy your life as it comes to you."

She agrees. Perhaps it is time to sit looser to writing. She is beginning to have a few health problems. She does not want to feel driven. She is comforted by the fact that one or two of her books may even outlive her. She has been richly blessed.

One day, in a group, she quotes a line from C. S. Lewis: "We read to know we are not alone." There is a murmur of assent and then one of the men, a writer himself, asks, "And why do we write?" He answers his own question—"Isn't it to bear witness?"

Again a murmur of assent, but she is not satisfied. The fit is not quite right, not for her. What alternative then?

She ponders the question and, to herself, suggests her own answers. "We write to keep our head above water. We write to make sense of things, to make order of our chaos."

One morning, waking from sleep, the answer to why she has felt driven to write comes to her with the clarity perhaps only possible through dreams: "If I don't write, I will die."

How foolish. At her age, she may well be not that far from death at any rate. She is not afraid of death, though she would just as soon put it off for a while. But thinking back over all the years of achievement (and some failures), it is the image of that six-year-old child printing those words in the pasteboard notebook Mrs. Williams gave her—*book, house, family, girl, bird*—that comes back and back. All those years ago, writing had been a slap at the face of death—*See, I am not coming with you*. Now that death could legitimately come at any moment, isn't it time to give that furor over? That battle was won. She tells herself she will pace her work for this time, relishing the road as it goes by, making due note of the gifts of *house, girl, dog, family, flower*, as they are given, still given, in their own presence, in their own right.