

Reasons for Not Forgetting

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Zac's drawing was still missing and I hoped to photograph it. I looked one last time and could not find it. The week before when Zac, a second grade boy, showed up at school I was looking for him. I met him and we went down to the art room. We walked around the room, uncovering and clearing just about everything from newspapers to art work to that day's school bulletin, in hopes of finding his drawing but didn't locate it. His drawing of his brother's First Communion was not to be found anywhere.

I was sorry it was lost. I told Zac that if I found it I would tell him. I thought he did not feel this loss as much as I did. Letting me know that he would rather draw it again than spend another minute looking for it, Zac said he appreciated my help but would not miss the drawing.

I could scarcely understand why he did not miss this drawing, but I then realized he had done many drawings and he would do many more. Zac went on his way to class and I continued to photograph art work the children had made that fall semester.

It was a day that I looked back on what had transpired in art class, investigated the bends and curves of the curriculum - how inquiry into things that matter by one child, coupled with a comment to me, seemed sometimes to change the course of things for a whole class. I photographed work and collected together my ideas on what to do in the spring with the children, now that a whole semester had come to completion. Going back through their art, uppermost on my mind was the content of their work: friendships, pets, relatives, first times, personal adventures, trips, special days. And this was why I hoped to find Zac's drawing and to take a picture of it. Zac's drawing swelled

with an incredible story that he told his class and me:

This is something that happened that I had a dream about after it one night: It was the day of my brother's First Communion. My brother invited my friends and our cousins over to his party. I don't have many chances to go over to my cousin Nick's house. He lives somewhere else. Me and my cousin were walking behind my yard. We have a big pond there. Nick and I were walking by the pond. Nick comes over by me and when I'm walking by him, he trips me and I fall into the water. I yell, "Nick! I'm in the pond and the water is up to my chest." I said, "Nick, this is hard to swim in; it's freezing!" Then the ice started coming over me. My body started to freeze. I yelled, "Nick, Nick, get me out of here!" Nick threw a rope that was in the grass. I grabbed it. He pulled me out of there. I turned around, there was the shape of my body in the ice. Then in my dream that night I said, "Nick, do you want to go into the pond?" He said, "No!" And then I pushed him in. Then he goes into the water and freezes automatically. Then I'm thinking to myself, "What happened to Nick? He froze." Then my brother runs for help. My mom and dad aren't home though. And then my house, it wasn't around anywhere. I'm saying to myself, "This is weird." Then my house comes back and my brother is in the water swimming.

I knew that a handful of stories from my boyhood like Zac's carried enough flavor to make me appreciate a bushel of other ones like them. Five more experiences, ones sprinkled with a few discoveries of things hidden deep in them, and I thought Zac would have tasted enough to go back, time and time again, out to the fringes of what he is drawing and as he pushes a little further to pull back real meanings: he, too, might become an artist.

After hearing Zac's story of his drawing, what happened to him seemed to me a hundred times stronger than it had before he made that drawing. It was as if he increased the meaning of that day by interpreting his drawing. As I saw it, he made a drawing of that day and he took his understanding and brought it further along in his life. Zac tied incident to drawing to story, together. Jumping back to his drawing with his story, Zac went back and forth between the content of it and the incident at the pond, weaving a meaning larger than existed for him before he made his drawing.

It was because of this - because what happened to Zac a year ago was expanding for him - that it was really hard to understand that he did not miss his drawing. But I had seen this happen before, children not worried about art work, that I so much loved, when it was lost on the trail home. I don't like to see things die that way. But, some things get lost for good.

Also at this time - the middle of December - I was investigating my ancestral heritage. And, after hearing some stories about my relatives, things I had never heard, I began to think about what children at school would remember from this time of their lives when they were older. This is where wondering about Zac's loss crisscrossed with my inquiry. I thought about my father, who when I was very young, told me stories about thunder. Remembering these stories vividly, I often asked where they came from. "I don't know, my mom or Irene or Emerine (his aunts) I suspect," was my dad's answer. Well, in December I found out that many more of my ancestors on my dad's side, both my grandma and grandpa, and their parents and on back were American Indian. My grandpa was Seminole and Cherokee. My grandmother, Osage. When I began looking into this history I rediscovered the stories my dad told me back when we sat on the front porch and watched the storms. I heard why thunder was our friend from my dad. From what my great aunt told me it was clear that he learned the tales from her and his great-grandma. Long ago these stories began

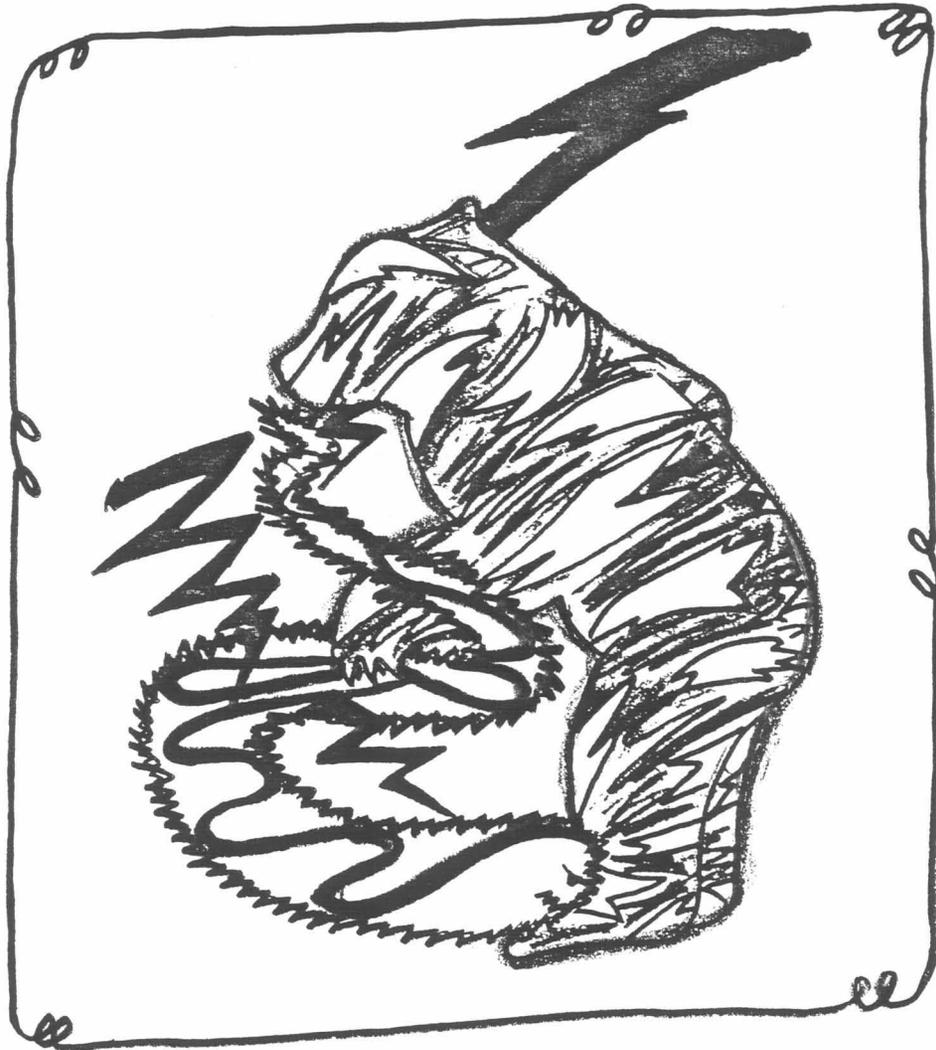
baseball. Waving the gesture of an encompassing arch, he made it easy for me to imagine the shape of the baseball fields he draws. His arms were tracing the outfield walls. Something in what he said quickly allowed me to recall exactly the one drawing - one amongst many - he wanted me to remember. I served him back my recollection of it. A drawing of a crowd-filled noisy game. Looking at the drawing I sense that it is what is beyond the outfield wall that is really most important. There, a whizzing ball soars to images and names of four major league baseball players who, like the Gods of Olympus, appear to loom in perfection, presiding over a game played by ordinary men. Aside from the images of these four major leaguers, everyone else in the picture is a stick figure. And without a doubt Joey thought this drawing would be empty if he did not collect baseball cards. It was plain to see. He put it this way: "Andrea Dawson, Rickie Henderson, Daryl Strawberry and Don Mattingly are the best part of the drawing. If I didn't collect football cards, basketball cards, and baseball cards, I wouldn't be making it - I wouldn't be making any art."

Hearing this I again recalled the affinity among my telling how thunder became our friend, Zac's storytelling and the continuity evident in Megan's art. I understand Joey's drawing as more than an isolated project and, metaphorically speaking, as an ancestor of his, an ancestor of a heritage of certain inquiry that stands and walks in his art making. I recalled something Alice Walker learned. She wrote, "I have absorbed not only the stories themselves but...something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that...stories...like...life...must be recorded."

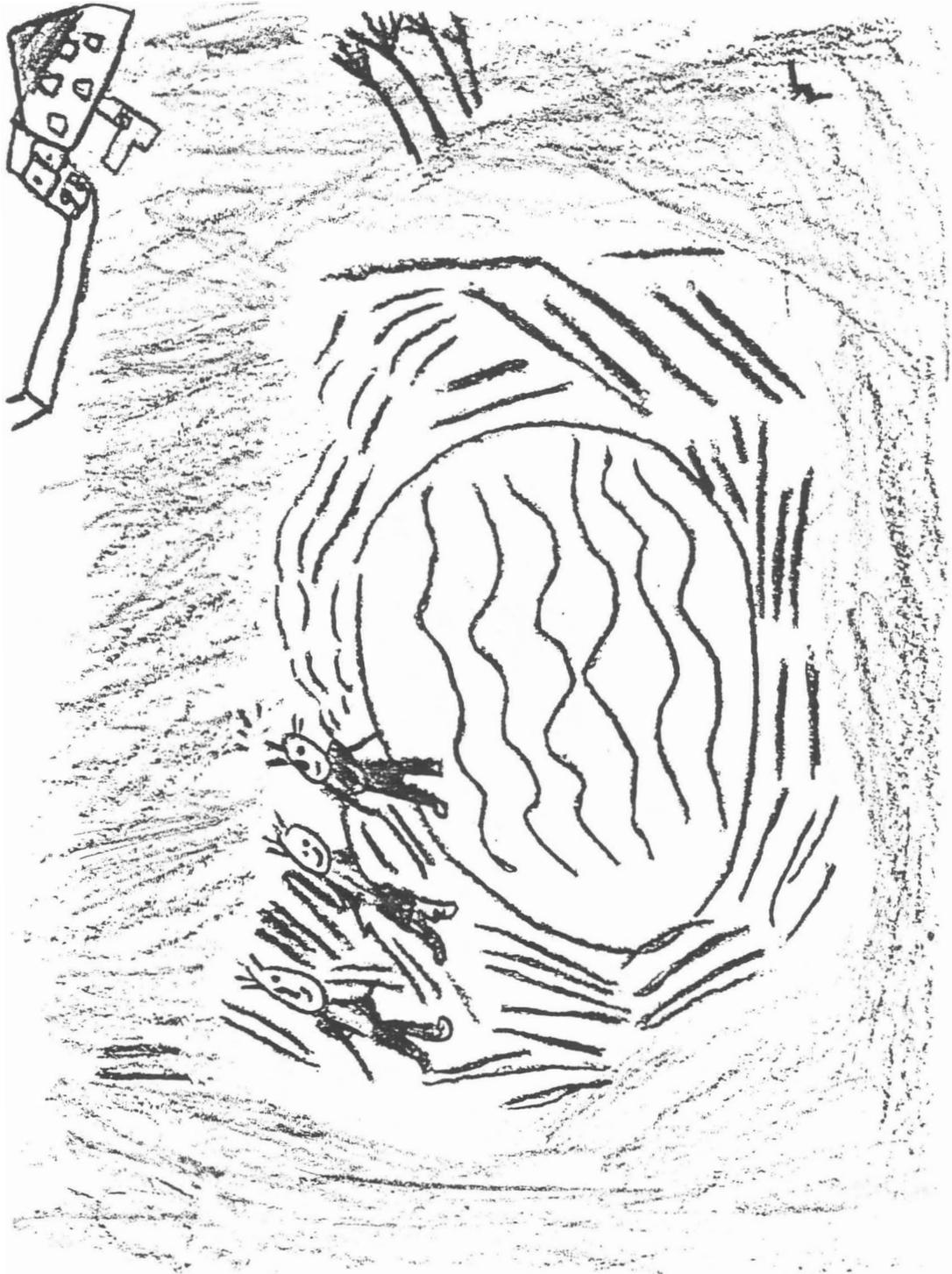
I concluded that children who re-make themselves as they make art cannot, any way at all, really forget the content of their work even if it is lost on the way home or pushed to the recesses of a closet or lodged under corners of beds. I still have questions that reach into my boyhood when I make art and my favorite drawings from those times

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are lost. That one art work is a reminder of other ones in the past and that it urges more to be made is inscribed in the form of my becoming an artist. It was because one art work I did unfolded into another, like a good story, like a creek rolling all day and all night, sweeping its clay banks, aiming to take as much as it can to the river where it's headed that I became an artist. I never found Zac's drawing but I hope that everywhere in the art work he makes he learns that the feeling of life never need be lost.



Thunder Destroying the Ukten



I later told Zach this story. So Zach did another drawing of the incident at the pond. Here it is.