When it came time...

for Martha Skogen to visually articulate her poetry, there was only one option: children.

This book represents a unique collaboration between a writer of minimalistic poetry and children from grades 1-9. The result is a reversal of the normal roles of artist and poet, adult and child, creator and recipient.

The Glass Tree is a beautiful demonstration of how adults and children can work together. It also shows the astonishing capacity of children to use their artistic creativity to interpret the world as it is seen through the eyes of a poet.
So much of ourselves
Named by no coincidence
Reach into deep earth

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Part I
As you lay waiting
Under my glass tree,
Did you know peace?
Reasons to exist
Diving between molecules
Bring forth wonderment

b.
How difficult to embrace
Each quiet, twinkling moment
Sheltering between our thoughts
Blades of pewter grass
Slice edgy, crisp silhouettes
Into indigo nightshade
Sunlight twiddling in treetops

Worn forest floors

Painting
To be truly free
How many selves
must I rip out
To construct from scratch?
O Chartreuse borealis,
Witness foam tumbling
Along riverbanks
swirling with magenta.

Conversations reflected
NOTES ON THE ART

a. Que Zhu, Grade 3

This illustration not only captures the essence of the poem, it transcends it. The tree appears to be three-dimensional and translucent with light shining on all sides of the tree. Importantly, light is depicted predominantly on the side away from the sun. This young artist solved a well-known, advanced artistic challenge that artists have studied for centuries. You inherently understand that this is exactly how light behaves when moving through glass. The figure, although small in size, grabs our attention due to its strong contrast and distinct shape. We are pulled into the composition to understand more. The person is depicted as alone… yet somehow the artist communicates that the person is not lonely. It appears that the central figure has indeed found peace.

In a wondrous and delicate way, this child has unwittingly provided an answer to a very big question in my life. It is an answer that I will never know for certain.

b. Ferdinand Wahba, Grade 9

This poem conveys the magic of opening our experience to multiple perspectives. For the illustration, this artist seems to employ a wonderful metaphor: the abstracted image appears as if it is being seen through a microscope. Of course, there was nothing but this student and his imagination. In looking at this composition, I can easily feel the sense of discovery and little burst of joy that occurs when the soft, diffuse view suddenly pops into focus.

c. Danait Mahari, Grade 3

This illustration made me speechless when I first saw it and it continues to surprise me. The abstract interpretation is simple, elegant, and striking. Indeed, making a composition visually “simple” yet interesting is very difficult to do. It takes genuine courage to choose such a restrained and minimalistic approach, especially for someone so young. Furthermore, one of the greatest challenges of creating art is knowing when to stop, and this child has accomplished it magnificently.

The poem describes the threshold between thought and non-thought, and all the potential that occupies that infinite space. This artist chose to show this boundary as defined, yet also slightly blurred, with a soft, gentle breach that punctures the beautiful white space above. This is an intriguing solution that deepens the theme of the poem. This illustration has forever altered the way that I imagine the concept of consciousness itself.
This is a visual story that invites the reader in for interpretation—mine is as follows. Each element in this composition is loaded with meaning. Notice the three figures that represent the three stages of life. They even hold hands suggesting connectivity, while the oldest (with cane) is at the top. I wonder: does this imply that wisdom triumphs, or perhaps death is near? This is an composition from a first grader and like all the other children, this boy simply listened to the poem, chose his media and went to work. I was thunderstruck.

Compositionally, the interplay between the gigantic moon and the similarly-sized mound create an interesting dynamic. These dominant shapes form a visual relationship that encourages our eye to alternate between them. The high-contrast lines in the mound keep the interplay well-balanced while directing our eye upward towards the figures. The figures are pivotal to the composition as they bridge the earthly and heavenly aspects in visual, literal and metaphorical form. In the upper right corner, the small astral objects serve to counterweight the larger objects below.

The poem addresses the antiquity of life. This young artist amplifies this idea by presenting the progression of life as it exists between heaven and earth. He provides room for us to project our own meaning as well.

How thrilling it is that this very young child could address such a profoundly universal theme with this degree of insight and sensitivity.

Children can be highly aware of global issues and art provides an important tool through which they can communicate their feelings about these issues. Initially, it was a surprise to me to see that this child interpreted the poem as an environmental concern. Yet it fits the poem.

Here, a diver fetches trash from the seafloor while her irritation is obvious through her thought bubble and use of symbolism: an asterisk. We do not see her face because we don’t need to—she could be anyone. That was clever. This artist rendered the poem in a sophisticated way and then chose to make a powerful social commentary about it. The starkness of the pencil drawing only strengthens her message.
Part III  BRANCHES

bb. Emilia Yakovlyeva, Grade 2

This is a powerful drawing filled with symbolism. Look closely: there is a small knife next to the severed tree. These two objects symbolize a vast range of meaning that can address many issues. The tree stump is a somber visual element, yet the figure has a happy expression. I want to know what is going on here. The combination of these elements is unsettling and makes me think.

cc. Betsabé

Love changes us. Distance grows or shrinks, boundaries stretch, things become distorted. As two become one—or one splits into two—our ability to understand is thwarted. Our warped perspective can cause us to feel upside down. This illustration captures the feeling of confused reality in a clever way that utilizes the entire page, including its edges.

dd. Finn Galloway McCann, Grade 5

Like so many other children, this artist drew his illustration with bold confidence, decisiveness, and efficiency. This artist simply put it away when he was finished—no questions asked. From what I could tell, there was no self-judgment either. It makes me wonder: when, how, and why does that change as we mature?

ee. Anonymous, Grade 4

When was the last time you looked up at the clouds and saw a mythical creature? I like to think that they are still there, waiting to be rediscovered. I enjoy the mysterious written word in this composition. It is an integral part of this illustration and forms a trompe l’oeil as the dragon’s other wing. The word counterbalances the figure and shows the beauty of typography. I suspect it is the creature’s name, but it does not matter: it is a strong compositional element in itself.

ff. Ferdinand Wahba, Grade 9

This abstract illustration captures everything and nothing at all. The conundrum of life is vague, unbounded and diffuse. Yet there is something to it, represented in this work by one, central dot. This was a challenging poem to illustrate and the artist did so wonderfully. The result is a harmonious description of the poem’s central theme: the self-contradictory surreality of life itself.

gg. Mihika

How do you visualize eternity… if not like this?
SELECTION PROCESS

I could see very early during the workshop that the selection process was going to be enormous challenge. After I laid out all the artwork in a large dining area, the selection criteria became more clear. I had prepared myself to make tough decisions yet at times I just had to let the decisions rest. The artwork drove the process and the selection criteria arose organically.

First, the child’s artwork needed to relate to the poem in a relevant manner. This did not mean that the artwork needed to match my idea of the poem’s meaning. Some of the images included here were those that caught me completely off guard. A number of the artworks surprised me by how they amplified the poem, or how it sent the reader in an unanticipated direction. To me, this is the real power of the creative collaboration. The children demonstrated pure creativity in their interpretations and ability to manifest a poetic idea visually. Some images simply stunned me.

Secondly, the artwork needed to represent the child’s investment, either through time to create the artwork and/or their dedication to it. Finally, the drawing needed to show a hard-to-describe aspect: the child’s emotional commitment to the poem. This is difficult to describe in words because for me, it is only possible to see—and feel it—through their visual communication.

After the poetry reading, the teachers helped children choose a poem to illustrate. We did this by projecting the poems onto a large screen. Each poem had a unique code that the children wrote on the back of their art. Students were able to choose between three types of art: watercolor, pastels or pen & ink. Only once during the day did a child ask me what a word meant.

I stayed present at each work session and only moved to the next only after a work session concluded. I was impressed by how independent the children were, from 1st grade onward. Once they began their artwork, they showed ownership of the process. They also seemed to enjoy it.

WORKSHOP METHOD

Trondheim International School (ThIS) is an International Baccalaureate World School (2008) in the city of Trondheim, Norway. Beyond their inspiring pedagogical approach, ThIS encourages interaction between the student and parent communities through active involvement on local, national and international levels. My collaborative workshop was possible because the school is genuinely interested in parental engagement. Below is an outline of steps that made this project possible.

Concept & preparation: After two introductory meetings where I pitched the concept to school administrators, the idea was taken internally for discussion. Shortly thereafter, I was invited to present the idea to all the teachers. Together, we developed a plan for how to organize the day-long workshop while adapting it to the full range of classes. Prior to the workshop, the school provided the students’ caretakers with electronic consent forms. It is notable that every parent/caretaker permitted their child to attend.

Because the Primary Years Program, grades 1-6 (PYP) differs from the Middle Years Program grades 7-10 (MYP), there were two approaches, with a common introduction.

In-school procedure: I briefly introduced myself and explained why I was interested in their illustrating my poetry. I asked students if they had written haiku, and everyone had—some just a few days prior to my visit. I instructed the students to pay close attention to the images that the poems generated in their mind’s eye. I assured them that there was no “right or wrong” interpretation because each child interprets the poetry differently according to their own experience. I was interested in their individual interpretation as an artist—this was not a shared or group activity.

Finally, although I made it clear from the beginning that I would not be able to include every drawing in the book, that was not the point. I hoped that they would enjoy the process of visualizing poetry. From what I could tell, the children were excited to participate for the sheer experience of it. They understood that selection of their work was anything but guaranteed. They were reminded that they could opt out at any time, and not one child chose to do so.

To prepare the children to hear the poetry, I did a brief mindfulness exercise (ca. 3 minutes). When they were relaxed, I read each poem one by one (10-12 per class) while I walked around the room slowly. The reading of the poetry itself took approximately 5-7 minutes. The children were quiet, engaged and respectful at all times.
GRATITUDE

Carefully tending while our outside hearts burgeon. In overflowing, you hold waterfalls.

My deepest thanks go to many people, each of whom played an essential part. Although there are too many to name, I would like to thank in particular:

The students of Trondheim International School (ThIS)  
Gratitude is an understatement. To the students—each and every single one—I couldn’t have done this without you. I saw you, I heard you, and I appreciate you more than I can say. Thank you for embracing this concept, new as it is. We did this together. Even though it was not possible to include every illustration, I hope that I have done well to support your artistic interests.

The teachers of Trondheim International School (ThIS)  
To all the teachers, your kindness in welcoming me into your classrooms and generous support made our workshop incredible. Special thanks go to Agneta Amunsson for writing the Afterword, it means so much to me. I would also like to thank Hope Steen who was supportive, encouraging, and helpful with planning & logistics from day one. Meet the talented staff at www.this.no.

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Gratitude is an understatement. To the students—each and every single one—I couldn't have done this without you. I saw you, I heard you, and I appreciate you more than I can say. Thank you for embracing this concept, new as it is. We did this together. Even though it was not possible to include every illustration, I hope that I have done well to support your artistic interests.

The parents and local community of Trondheim International School (ThIS)  
Without your support, this project would not have happened. My deepest gratitude goes to you for trusting me with conducting a day-long workshop with your child(ren) on a pioneering project. It was an extraordinary day during which I am certain that I learned more than your child did.

Mikael Malik  
Your help with the sorting procedure and our discussions of the artwork made the selection of these works less painful. Thank you for your artistic and musical expertise plus your appreciation of children's creativity. Your compositions add another indescribable dimension to this work.

Poesikveld—Poetry Nights Trondheim  
Although I know only a few of your names, your empathy, sharing and positivity gave me the strength to trust my poetic sense. I heard a few times: “You should write a book.” Here we are.

Helge Rushfeldt—Elusive Worlds  
Your support means the world—your World—to me. I was so lucky to be at that picnic that day.

Jon Davis  
A great teacher instills deep confidence where there previously was none. Our discussions have given me an even greater appreciation of poetry than I could imagine and I am very grateful to have met and worked with you. I am honored that you are an integral part of this book.
THE GLASS TREE

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TEDx: “The Power in Children’s Art”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5_NhBeNry4