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1 In the Distance: By My Feet

This activity relates to the importance of close observation, which is one of the recurrent themes in this book. Noticing things is one of the key factors in creativity and indeed of language.

Introduce the activity by having a class discussion about the visual features which can help us to distinguish between one object or image and another. This would include: shape, size, height, distance, colour and tone, clarity of definition, texture, etc. Encourage students to be as specific as possible and to produce examples.

Explain that you will be taking students outside the classroom to an open area where there are long views. If possible, this should be to an area of natural beauty like a National Park but it could be in a smaller park in the city or any area of open ground, like a sports field. If it is not practicable to take the students very far, you can still use the playground or car park as long as there is a field of vision. You can even do this inside the classroom, asking students to do a 360 degree trawl and then to focus on their own desk. One other alternative is to use a picture with long vistas and detail in the foreground.

Students choose a place to stand, then look at the most distant place at the limit of their vision. They note down what they can see. They then turn a quarter-circle to their right, and do the same again. After that, they turn through the remaining two quadrants, taking notes as they go. Now ask them to turn their attention to what is closest to them – things near their feet. Again they turn through 360 degrees, making notes as necessary.

Back in the classroom, collect feedback on what students saw and noticed both far and near. If you want a more explicit language focus, this is a good time to draw attention to the order of adjectives before a noun. For example: *A line of low, stunted, lime-green willows, shrouded in mist.* What is the best order of adjectives?

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Now ask students to choose one image from the distance and one from close to. They then write a few sentences which somehow create a connection between the two images. Their sentences should depict sharp visual images. These can then be worked up as a short prose poem.

An example from my own observation on a walk:

Across a small lake, I notice the low line of willows (see above). I am standing on the shore of the lake and all around my feet there are wood chippings from a big willow tree which has recently been cut down. They look like the orange teeth of a dragon, or pieces of cheese rind, or the scales of a gigantic fish...

It is important to leave time for ideas to cook. For example, in the images above, I first thought of dragon's teeth and fish scales. In the writing, it seemed better to give the scales to the dragon and forget about the fish. I then thought of a dragon with teeth like a chain saw and I linked this with the distant willows, which may be eaten next! So I put the images together:

The chain-saw dragon is hungry
His orange scales litter the ground
Where he has fed.
Across the misty lake
A line of willows crouches
Hoping to escape his attention.

Students share their work and improve it if possible. Make sure it is exhibited as a wall display. Encourage students to illustrate their work, either manually or using computer graphics.