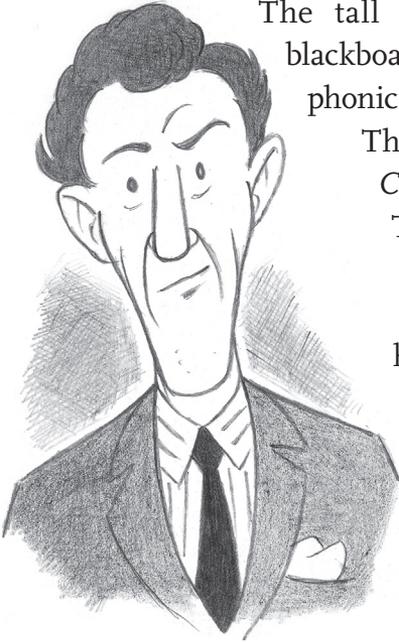


# Mouth Moths



The tall teacher leaned against the blackboard. “Now, class, take out your phonics books and pencils.”

The rows of desktops opened.

*Crack! Crack!*

The desktops came down.

*Smack! Smack!*

The workbooks landed on the hard surfaces.

The teacher was about to give further instructions when a voice blared from the second row.

“What page?”

The words came from a skinny boy with curly black hair.

He was batting the cover of his phonics book back and forth between his hands.

The tall teacher turned toward the blackboard. Inside the doghouse he wrote *Paul*.

“That’s your warning, Paul,” he said. “Remember, raise your hand if you want to ask a question.”

Next, the teacher wrote *AW* and *AU* on the blackboard. “Who can tell me what sound these letters make?”

Twenty-four hands went up. Only Paul opened his mouth. Out came the call Tarzan makes while swinging through the jungle. “*AWW-A-AWWWW-A-AWWWW!*”



The teacher spun around. He dashed off a check mark next to Paul’s name in the doghouse.

“You just lost five minutes of recess, Paul!” he said. “Raise your hand before you speak.”

“Awww,” said Paul.

The teacher took a deep breath before continuing. “Now, class, who can give me a word with the *aw* sound in it?”

Again a forest of hands rose into the air. But before anyone could answer, the curly-haired boy in the second row called out, “Paul! My name says *awwww*. Pauuuul!”

The students sat in silent suspense. The tall teacher’s ears were red, a sure sign that he was boiling mad.

“Your second check mark, Paul!” he said through his teeth. “Stop interrupting! Give others a turn! Now, ah, who knows a word with the *aw* sound?”

One by one the students who had a hand raised were called on, and one by one they answered.

“Author!”

“Law!”

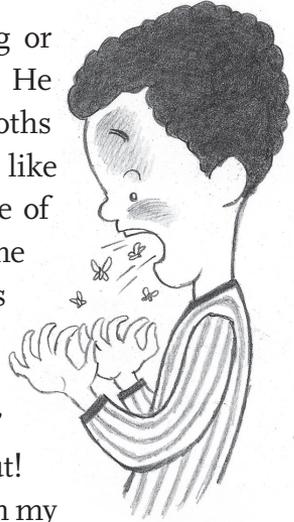
“Daughter!”

“Creepy crawler!”

“Moths!” shouted Paul. He was waving a hand in front of his face.

The tall teacher frowned. “Yes, Paul, *moths* says *aw*, but with an *O*, not with *A-W* or *A-U*. And I said raise your hand, not flap it in front of you.”

But Paul hadn’t been answering or even paying attention to his teacher. He was trying to catch three small moths that were fluttering before his face like pieces of confetti. Each was the size of a thumbnail and had pink wings. The moths moved in quick *O*’s and *V*’s no more than three inches in front of him.



“They came out of my mouth!” Paul told himself. “I saw them fly out! One, two, three! The moths shot from my mouth the last time I opened it!”

While Paul continued waving, the class continued calling out *A-W* and *A-U* words. Apparently, no one else saw the fluttering creatures.

“Yawn!”

“Jawbreaker!”

“Caution!”

“Australia!”

“This is awful!” Paul cried. And the instant his lips parted, three more moths flew straight out of his mouth.

Paul went cross-eyed trying to watch the small pink swirling W’s. When he waved both hands, they scattered in six directions. Just a few feet away, they were nearly invisible. But they didn’t stay away long. Soon they were back, orbiting his head again as if it were a light bulb.

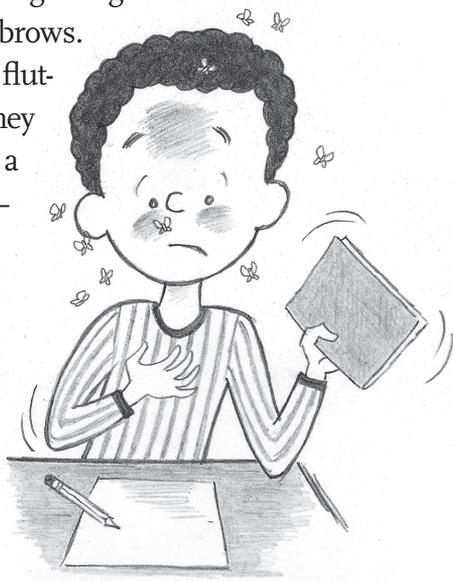
“Fifteen minutes, Paul,” called the tall teacher, adding a third check mark next to his name in the doghouse.

“Awww!” said Paul, and out sailed another three moths.

Zigging and zagging, the pink things flew in a frenzy before Paul’s face. Their batting wings tickled his eyelashes and eyebrows. They darted into his ears and fluttered against his neck. When they brushed his nostrils, he gave a huge sneeze—*Ahhhh-choo!*—and released three more.

“Time for recess, class,” the teacher announced. “But Paul, you’ll stay inside the entire time. What must I do to get you to raise your hand before talking?”

Watching a moth land on



the end of his nose, Paul only shrugged. He dared not open his mouth again.

After the class and the tall teacher had left the room, Paul sat watching the whirling moths. Blowing only sent them flitting in circles. Fanning them with his phonics book blew them outward. But within seconds they returned, fluttering faster than before.

Frustrated, Paul stood and paced the room. The pink cloud went with him. When he passed the computer, an idea struck.

“I’ll check out these moths on the Internet,” he told himself. “You can find anything on the Web.”

With the moths still bombarding him, Paul tapped at the keyboard. A Google search turned up 323,000 sites about moths. Scrolling down, he found a site that looked promising: *North American Classroom Moths*. He clicked

on the blue link and was soon viewing screen after screen of moth photos, each accompanied by a caption stating the moth’s name and description.

“Coat Closet Moth,” Paul read under a picture of a large moth with brown wings and a set of sharp teeth. “No, that’s not the one. Cootie-Catcher Moth?”



Nope. Math Moth? Uh-uh. Chalk Moth? Teacher Coffee Moth? *I don't think so.* How about the Writing Paper Moth? No, that's got white wings with blue stripes, and it nibbles holes in students' writing paper."

Paul continued scrolling down the computer screen until a small pink moth appeared. He studied first the image and then the moth that had just taken off from his chin.

"Aha!" he said. "It's a Mouth Moth."

The caption below the picture read:

*Mouth Moth: Pink wings. One-half-inch wingspan. Visible only at short range. Lives in the Adam's apples of grade-school students. Can come out in classrooms when certain sounds of the letter A, such as aw and ah, are spoken. When inspecting throats, doctors ask children to say "Ahh" so that they can check for Mouth Moths.*

"Awesome!" said Paul, allowing another trio of moths to fly off his tongue. "But how do I get rid of my Mouth Moths? They're driving me batty."

He scrolled down to a section called "Mouth Moth Treatment and Prevention." It said:

*Unlike most moths, Mouth Moths avoid light. If Mouth Moths are driving you batty, keep your mouth open wide. Soon the moths will return to their nest in your Adam's apple.*

*To prevent Mouth Moths from escaping, apply pressure to*

*your Adam's apple each time you speak out in class. Lifting your arm above your head does this best.*

Paul heard voices at the door. His class was returning from recess. Swatting at the moths, he shut down the computer and returned to his seat in the second row. With his head tilted back, he opened his mouth wide as if he were in a dentist chair. In this position he waited.

Kimberly led the line of third-graders into the classroom. "Paul looks dead!" she said.

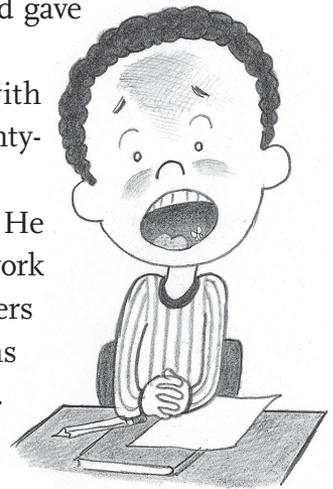
"Or else that's the world's longest yawn," said Zack, staring at Paul.

Despite the taunts, Paul dared not move. A moth sat on his lower lip. It tasted like a lemon drop as it stepped across his tongue. His throat tickled as the moth slid down toward his Adam's apple. Paul thought he might gag, but no—the creature went down smoothly.

The tall teacher entered the classroom. He looked at Paul still with his mouth agape and gave an "at least he's quiet" shrug.

"OK, class, we'll continue with phonics," he said. "Do page twenty-three in your workbooks."

This was good news for Paul. He could keep his mouth open and work at the same time. As he wrote answers in his workbook, the Mouth Moths continued to land on his lower lip.



He breathed through his nose, for fear of blowing them away. One by one, the light, tasty things stepped onto his tongue and slid down to the lump in his throat. After the last one disappeared, he gnashed his teeth tightly together.

“What did that Internet site say?” Paul asked himself. “Oh, yes—to keep Mouth Moths from escaping, I must apply pressure to my Adam’s apple before speaking.”

Paul lifted his right arm above his head. He felt his chest lift and push against his throat.

The tall teacher looked up from his desk and nodded in approval.

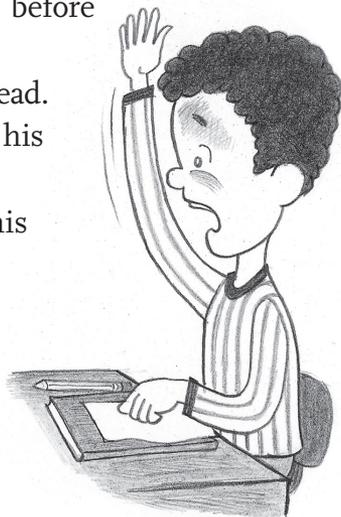
“Can I go to the boys’ room?” Paul asked. “I gotta go awwwfully bad.”

Good—the arm trick worked. Not one pink moth shot from his mouth.

“Sure, Paul,” said the teacher. “And I’m glad you remembered to raise your hand before talking out.”

With his hand still up, Paul stood and stepped into the hallway. He walked down the hall, not daring to lower his arm.

By the boys’ room door, Mr. Leeks, the custodian of W. T. Melon Elementary School, was leaning on his mop admiring the fall artwork taped to the wall. The janitor



studied the boy. “Practicing to be the Statue of Liberty for Halloween, Paul?” he asked.

“Nope, I just don’t want any more trouble with Mouth Moths,” said Paul.

“That’s good,” Mr. Leeks said. And when Paul remained standing there with his hand up, he asked, “So do you have a question?”

Paul nodded toward the artwork. “Awwwsome auuu-tumn drawwwings,” he said. “See, no moths! Now I know how to keep them in my Adam’s apple. Whenever I want to talk in class, I’ll make sure to raise my hand.”

“That’s good,” said the janitor.

Keeping his hand in the air, Paul pushed open the boys’ room door and stepped inside. A short time later the hallway filled with a triumphant call,

“AWW-A-AWWWW-A-AWWWW!”

