3-1-2001

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Poetry in the Dark

Josi Brewer
first place personal essay

All the books I read
are full of dazzling heroes,
always sure of themselves.
I die with envy of them.

So wrote Pablo Neruda in 1958. I thought of these lines as I drove myself to Blanding the day I started my first real teaching job. I was to teach a summer reading and writing class for a program called Upward Bound. The goal of the program was to give at-risk students a head start on higher education. The high schoolers I would be teaching had agreed to come to the College of Eastern Utah for a month during their summer vacation to attend college courses that they would receive credit for and, we hoped, confidence from.

Most of the students whose profiles I’d seen had unusually rough things to deal with in their lives. Abusive step-parents, drug and alcohol abuse, juvenile detention—the list was unfairly long for kids so young. Upward Bound was, for many of them, their one chance to avoid rewriting that list and their one chance to go to college.

I thought about them as I drove. I’d watched Dead Poets Society until late the night before. That week I’d also seen Mr. Holland’s Opus and
Stand and Deliver. It was a tradition in my family of teachers to psych ourselves up like that. The teachers in the movies were my “dazzling heroes.” I wanted to help students overcome immeasurable odds as those teachers had. I wanted to ride a white horse into my classroom with my standard of knowledge and the beauty of ideas and rescue those in educational distress. I had been instructed to challenge my new students and encourage them at the same time. I had been given no curriculum, and as I had constructed one I had prayed for guidance. Gripping the steering wheel hard that first morning, I found myself again murmuring, “Lord, please help me know how to help them.”

An hour later I paused outside the door to my classroom, breathed, straightened, and walked in. Twenty pairs of eyes turned to me. “Good morning, class,” I said.

There were a few scattered responses. I wrote my name on the board. I called the roll. Two students were missing. I was already worried. The rules of the program said that the students must attend each session of every class they had signed up for.

Twenty minutes after class began, two boys entered the back of the room. They were dark boys, one tall and lanky, the other shorter and thin. The tall boy shot a look of contempt at the group of his peers up front and he and his friend sat in seats on the back row and started talking. I took a deep breath and went to them.

“Gentlemen,” I said in what seemed like a teacher’s voice, “join us up front. We’re getting to know everyone.”

“I don’t wanna know them,” the short boy sneered, gesturing at the group in front. The tall boy laughed—a short, sharp exhalation of breath that had no real mirth in it.

“Come on up,” I said, hoping to sound stern. I turned and walked away as if I expected them to follow. To my relief, they did.

The students sat in a circle and as my eyes lighted on each one, I saw enormous potential. They had been chosen from schools in our district, the San Juan County School District, and from the Moab schools, though those schools are in Grand County. San Juan County is one of the largest counties in Utah, and it is also one of the least populated. The majority of these students were from the Navajo Indian Reservation that starts just below Blanding and runs south until I lose track of it in
Arizona and New Mexico. I surveyed the smiling eyes and flashing teeth of each of my students and grinned myself, however unprofessionally, until I glanced at the two newcomers.

Where there was light in the faces of Russell, Tom, Alicia, and Lorraine, there was first vacancy then darkness behind the eyes of the new boys. Their names, I noted from the roll, were Wilson and Robert.

The next day my supervisor, Danny, came to talk to me. He was concerned that Wilson and Robert were using methamphetamine, but he had no solid evidence and he wanted me to watch for symptoms. He transferred Robert out of my class to split them up, but Wilson stayed.

Wilson Hatathle was the taller boy. He had hatred behind his eyes and his features were always drawn into an expression of disgust. He curled his lips back from his teeth and grimaced when spoken to. I was sure, though, that somehow the beauty of the literature we studied would touch even this sullen kid who looked more like a middle-aged man hardened by life. I had seen communication heal. I had seen knowledge enlighten. I believed in the power of the written word and the strength that came with learning to express oneself. I knew that I could help him.

"Remember," I told myself, "Langston Hughes’s Prayer:

Oh, God of dust and rainbows, help us see
That without dust the rainbow would not be.

“There’s more to him than the dust," I said, “I’ve got to see past it.”

I watched him as he slouched into class late the sixth day of class. He walked with his shoulders slumped, head down, and when I spoke to him he raised those hard eyes to sneer.

“We’ll be doing poetry in the park tomorrow,” I said. They had been working hard, slogging through chapters from A Room with a View and turning in journal entries well over the half-page requirement, so I devised a poetry unit that we would integrate into our curriculum every Thursday.

There was a lovely woodland park about two miles up the mountain and I had spoken to my supervisor and commandeered a van for the outings.

I assigned them to write their own poems, one a week. They commented quite innocently one day that only white people wrote poetry,
so I pulled out Langston Hughes and we began to listen to the voice of the other on the mountain in early summer.

I let the students read as we sat on the grass in the shade of the big cedars in the park. Squirrels and robins came inspecting us, and the students seemed more at ease here than in the classroom. Well, most of them. Wilson never seemed at ease. He was tense and cagey, fidgeting during the readings and scowling when he should have been applauding his classmates for their bravery. I wondered if these were symptoms or just personality quirks, discomfort, or possibly embarrassment that he was reading poetry here, so out of his element.

He seemed always to know where to sit so that our time would run out before he had to read. Grateful he was there at all, I didn’t push him.

The third Thursday, though, brought his turn to read. He sat scowling at the copied sheets, then started on the two poems he was assigned to read. “I, too, sing America,” he started, his voice low and sullen.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,

Wilson’s voice grew stronger, snarling,

And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody’ll dare
Say to me,
‘Eat in the kitchen,’
Then.

Wilson looked at me with those flinty eyes.
“What is Langston Hughes talking about here?” I asked quickly.
"Revenge." It was the first comment he'd ever made.

"Yeah," I said, trying to be encouraging, "that's part of it. What about the voice he uses? Do you think it's effective?" Nobody answered. "O.K.," I said, "think about that. Voice. Think about the conscious decisions the poet makes to say what he has to say in a certain voice. Go on to the next one." Wilson glared at me. Everyone was reading two of the short poems today and he still had one to go. He flipped the page over to the Gwendolyn Brooks poem I was going to use to talk about rhythm. It was catchy. He began to read:

We Real Cool

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Wilson threw the sheaf of papers to the ground and stood quickly. "You did that on purpose," he said, fixing me with his eyes.

"What?" I asked.

"You made me read that so I would feel all bad about being cool." "No—" I started.

"You want me to know I'll die soon?"

"No, I want you to see that poets use rhyme and rhythm deliberately." I tried to keep my voice steady as I watched him pace around the group. My instinct was to stand and be authoritative, but I stayed seated, looking
up at him nonthreateningly. The other students froze. I suddenly wanted to be one of them, not responsible for anyone else, not, for heaven's sake, in charge. I felt my heart jumping. Neruda's next stanza pushed its way into my brain:

But when I call for a hero,
out comes my lazy old self;
so I never know who I am.

Teacher? I thought. I have to diffuse this situation. Wilson stood glaring. I stood slowly. “We've got to get back,” I said calmly and turned toward the van, the keys pressing hard and painfully into my palm. I didn't look back.

That seemed to be it. He sunk into sullenness, quiet seething disdain for me, his classmates, and the time he had to spend with us. While I watched daily the progression of my other students, I watched his regression. He brought his CD player to class and listened to music loud enough that I could hear it at the front of the room. I called him up and spoke to him about it, but every day was the same. I finally had to confiscate it and that day he wrote a journal entry that was black murder and revenge.

Two days later I turned in progress reports. Wilson had handed in three of the seventeen assignments, mostly short in-class writing assignments. Of the three he turned in, two were very well observed, sharp, intuitive, and sensitive. The other was the murder piece. It was dark and not well organized. It showed none of his earlier potential. I had seen him working on the other assignments; he just hadn't turned them in. So when Danny came to me and asked my opinion on dismissing Wilson from the program, I shook my head.

“He's smart,” I said. “He could do the work.”
“But he's not doing it. These grade reports show that he's failing.”
“I know,” I said miserably, “but he could still pass the class if he tried.”
“You told him that. He obviously doesn't care about passing the class or earning credit. Why don't you give him a deadline, say next Monday, and if he hasn't turned his work in then he's out of the program altogether.”
“Okay,” I said, but it was not okay.
I talked to Wilson that day after class.
“You're intelligent,” I said. “You can do this work. I know you have
some of it done already. I’ve seen you working in class. Bring it to me by
Monday and you’ll be fine.” He looked at me with those cold eyes and
grunted a response as he walked away. I was not reaching him.

Danny called right after class on Monday. “Well?”

“No. Nothing. He said he forgot.”

“That’s it then.” Danny’s voice was kind. I was quiet. “You can’t make
him succeed, Josi. He has to do that on his own.”

“I know,” I said.

Tears ran down my cheeks as I signed the slip that said he would fail
my class, just another in a long string of failures that Wilson Hatathle
could chalk up.

“Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair,” I read to the class on our final
Poetry in the Park gathering.

It’s had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—

Bare.

You said it, Langston, I thought. I looked around me at the faces of my
students. They were eager, happy. They’d gotten their grades this morning.
All of them well above the C they had to have to go to Florida for the
culminating summer activity.

“This is the only A I’ve ever gotten! My mom will be so proud!” I
could still hear Lorraine’s voice ringing in my ears as I read:

But all the time,
I’s been a-climbin’ on,
And reachin’ landin’s,
And turnin’ corners,
And sometimes goin’ in the dark
Where there ain’t been no light.
So boy, don’t you turn back.
Don’t you set down on the steps
’Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.
Don’t you fall now—
For I’se still goin’, honey,
I’se still climbin’,
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

I realized I was crying again.
Three months later, on a hot afternoon in Cortez, Colorado, my nephew Kelland and I swung by McDonald’s. My grades were long turned in, and all I was thinking about was the transformer beast borgs Kelland and I would get in our Happy Meals. I glanced up to the window to take the drinks, and my eyes widened as I saw a familiar face.

“Hi, Miss Brewer,” Wilson said with a smile—not the hard, dry smile I remembered, but a genuine warm grin.

“Wilson! It’s good to see you. What’s going on?”

“I got a job.” He gestured with his hand, still smiling. “I moved in with my sister up here, off the Res.” He looked me in the eye. “I just got out of rehab.”

“Wow,” I said. “That’s a tough thing. I’m proud of you.” I didn’t know if that mattered to him or not, but I was proud and I wanted him to know it. “How about school?”

“I’m not going to school, but I plan to go back next year.”

“Good. Do. You have a lot of potential.” He looked shyly away.

“Anyway,” I said, “you look happy.”

“I am,” he said. “I guess I got a wakeup call this summer.” This time it was my turn to glance away. A pang of regret came over me. Many nights since I signed the slip that ended his chances with Upward Bound, I had lain awake thinking of what I could have done, how I could have reached him, how I could have given him a hand out of that pit he had seemed to be sinking into. He had gotten out now, it seemed, on his own. He handed me two Happy Meals and then smiled.

“Here’s an extra toy,” he said.

“Thanks, Wilson.” I situated the food and got ready to pull away.

“Miss Brewer?” I looked up, and his brown eyes were clear, focused. “There’s a lot about the past couple years I don’t remember,” he said frankly, “but I remember when you said I was intelligent.”

The car behind me inched closer, and I smiled at him. I didn’t know
what to say. I wanted to say what Langston Hughes had said:

So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—

What I did say was, "Good luck, Wilson," and I pulled away.
"Aunt Jos?" Kelland asked around a mouthful of plastic as he tried to
tear open the transformer beast borg with his teeth.
"Yeah, baby?"
"Are you sad?"
"No." I took the bag and opened it, pulling out the beast borg.
"I see tears." His brow furrowed, and I reached over and ruffled his
shock of white-blonde hair.
I smiled a little and thought maybe I could hear Wilson's voice and
Langston Hughes's words from "Theme for English B."

But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me—
although you're older—and white—
and somewhat more free.

"Good tears, Kelley," I said. "They're good tears."