

A Poem About Why I Don't Write Poetry

By Tori Newman

The best advice I've ever received
came from my eighth-grade English teacher.
A wilted flower-child, with a penchant for patchouli
--even now I can still smell it--
Who kept a jar on her desk, labeled:
"Ashes of Problem Students"
and played Pavarotti while we read.
Nessun dorma! Nessun dorma!
She saw my notebook before I could hide it
under my copy of *The Outsiders*.
I wonder now if she had been watching, waiting to catch me
commit the bloodless crime of inattention.
I had been writing poetry, speaking in

broken

lines

staggering my anger and ignoring my rhyme--
And I felt so very clever.
She slid my secret away from me, its pages open
and exposed and altogether opposite of what
I had written on the cover in the most permanent of markers:
"PRIVATE PROPERTY - KEEP OUT"
She did not say anything, but I knew that meant she
wanted to see me after class.

Bell rings and I am at her desk and I am already composing my poetic
revenge,
when she looks at me and says, "So. You want to be a poet?"
In the way that only middle-schoolers understand,
I was too annoyed and ashamed and apart to answer, but
my silence seemed to satisfy her.
I wonder now if someone once asked Allen Ginsberg that question.
Horn-rimmed and Jewish and and even scrawny-awkward as me,
maybe.
Did an answer come? Did it all bubble up and spill out over the long
beard
--which he had yet to grow--

but remembered from the days when he was called Walt Whitman?
All of that disgust and delirious beauty that knew it was all unfair
--all that we call poetry--
lying dormant in a boy in Brooklyn,
waiting to wake from a decades-long nap.
Il nome mio nessun saprà!

“Let me give you some advice.”
She closed the notebook and gave it to my open palms, the pages
heavy with something other than the ink blots that were my words.
The empty room was filling with bodies
warm from dodgeball or young love
--it doesn't matter which--
all to the tempo of Luciano's tremolo.
I wonder now if they were listening then.
“Live your damn life, and write your poetry when no one is watching.”
She wasn't angry, but I was terrified
because I had never heard a teacher swear before.
All'alba vincerò, vincerò, vincerò!

It has taken me a lifetime to learn what she had left
pressing on my ears and burning in my hands.

The notebook was used as tinder that summer
--I didn't mind--
the thirteen-word eulogy was preemptive, but prepared.
Blinking away the smoke of the funny funeral pyre,
I thought I smelled patchouli.
And last May, when I was in her room once more, this time paying my
respects,
I noticed the jar was still on her desk,
and it was empty.
I wonder now if I should've filled it with all that has since been
pressed into
my ears and burned into my hands.
All of the words with meaning and power that tell me I'm worth
something for knowing
Vicissitude,
Palimpsest,
Cicatrix,
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Blackberry,
No.

I should have filled it with those long-ago ashes
when I had the chance
--a memorial to the day my career as a poet ended
and my life as one began.