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Poets In The Schools

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POETS IN THE SCHOOLS

In a way, it's a radical idea: a poet (not dead) in the classroom, talking, listening, reading, applying jumpercables to some young school-cramped imaginations. There's a directness, a lot less energy-loss; the potential is great. I'd like to see more of it seep into the system: a furniture-maker, a cook, a biologist, steeped in his or her own craft or discipline, holding up a handbuilt rocker or a lighter than air soufflé or a frog's heart, with such energy the room bristles; teaching by personal example, teaching not so much a subject as an enthusiasm for it. Unrealistic, perhaps.

With the Poets in the Schools Program during the past year and a half, I've met in the vicinity of 500 classes, first grade through seniors. I have to admit there are a few days when my journal reads like lousy existentialism, when I come out muttering the same grunts of frustration every new teacher (and the best old ones) does after a bad day in that landscape of boredom and sameness that too-often passes for education. Sure. But then there are the other times, when the rapport grows thick in the air, when you can hear chains dropping everywhere. What a joy to give people a thing that's really already theirs: their own voices, a way of valuing their own experiences. How many times has every poet who's ever worked in the schools heard: *I hate poetry, but this stuff is great!*

One recent incident sticks out: a sixteen year old girl brings me a poem in one of my conference periods. I read it. What do I think? This answer is tough. I reread it. It's, well, *airy*, laboriously rhymed and metered, oddly vague. Whatever the real poem, it isn't happening on the page. We set the poem aside for a moment and talk, narrowing in gingerly on the poem's emotional reality. Finally, the scene, the story. It comes out freely now, in her own words, which are suddenly precise. It's elegant, rich in image and in the ambivalence of teenage hassles. I suggest *that's* the poem. She's not sure—was she one of the legion who had to memorize "Hiawatha" in the seventh grade?—but after a minute, she's beaming. Yes! Magic in every life!

As the poet Phillip Lopate says, a poem that doesn't deliver the emotional goods is a waste of time. Getting the emotions out, letting them put the spark to one's language is the goal, and it can be tough in school. Peer pressure and an environment that, despite softening,

remain formal can be pretty suffocating influences. And anyway, how many of the world's great poems got written in Miss Fly's senior English? Somehow, though, the drawbacks are overcome; the rewards are strong and mutual. Many times the most interesting writing comes from the least obvious corners: the heavy-weight wrestler, for instance, or the kid in the back of the room with the Bunker for President sweatshirt on. Sometimes you find students that everybody's kind of given up on suddenly writing their hearts out. We're all shy about showing our insides, our fears, dreams, cravings, but this barrier melts too. Soon it becomes apparent that this isn't just another subject, it's a way of seeing, a way of being.

Montana's Poets in the Schools Program is in its fifth year, administered by the Montana Arts Council under a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In one form or another, the program exists in every state. The approach varies: some states concentrate their poet residencies in and around the big cities, which allows for saturation at the expense of the rural areas. Montana's a different kind of state—for one thing you can be 600 miles from home and still be in it; so we travel and it's a virtue. This year alone, eight of us—Ann Weisman, John Holbrook (Missoula Elementary Schools), and myself, full-time—have been in 52 schools, from Great Falls and Billings, to Glendive, Baker, Opheim, to six reservations, to one and two-room schools in spots where there's only a grain elevator and some magpies.

Most of the work in the classroom involves starting poems, finding some ways to get that thing inside of you out. Sometimes, though, you find poets in the high school who have already made that connection, that commitment you have, whose writing is remarkably strong and real, whose lines you want to take home with you. I am honored to be able to present the work of two high school poets here. Knowing and working with Donna Swank (Billings) and Mary Anne Miller (Ronan) has been a true high for me. Though their poems differ in attitude and voice, they share an emotional energy and a freshness I admire.