**How to Teach Poetry in Jail**

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Leave your purse, laptop, and iPhone in the trunk of your car next to the unraveled yoga mat and Trader Joe bags.

Enter a building that’s awash in grey. Relinquish keys and I.D. in exchange for generic visitor’s badge, class list, and packet of bare, naked pens; pens whittled down to thin plastic ink-filled cylinders. In jail everyday objects are potential weapons.

Remember to count these naked pens, for you must collect all at the close of class. If one is missing the unit will be locked down.

Marvel that your students are able to grasp these pen slivers in their burly big-knuckled hands and write.

While waiting for your guard escort, twist your wedding ring to obscure the diamonds because you’re embarrassed by your own riches in so sparse a setting.

Follow the deputy through a rumbling slide door into a windowless musty hallway. Appreciate how his smile lessens your fear of the holsters strapped to his waist.

Scrawl “Power in Poetry” on the white board in the cinderblock classroom and welcome the diverse group of men filing in; for you are glad to see them: their ponytails, buzz cuts, baldheads, corn rows. Men in their 20’s and 30’s, except for the gray-haired whiskered guy they call Gramps.

Give the new student the clothbound composition book you bought at the Dollar Store, remembering that spiraled ones with curly-q wires are prohibited.

Don’t ask the guys why Matt doesn’t show that day. You aren’t supposed to care. Remember when you asked too many questions and were suspended for a month. Pretend not to worry if Matt’s been sent to San Quentin prison where the long timers go.

Try not to tear up when students read their poems about the drug money that paid grandma’s rent. The gang markings they want lasered off. The truck accident on 17 that killed the father but spared the son.

Know it’s okay to laugh with the class when, after reading Edgar Allen Poe, a student rolls up his pant leg and reveals a large raven tattoo.

Read poems from “The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry,” a book Cal brings from the jail library: Bukowski, Kerouac, Ginsburg.

Notice how much you are learning from your students.

Applaud the men when their poems are read aloud at the Spoken Word festival in Portland, a presentation you all watch on zoom. Be moved when a viewer writes “hello, dad” in the chat to her incarcerated father.

Welcome the photos they show you of their children. Smile at the boy in little league uniform. Tell a first-time father the newborn has his eyes. Try not to ask if he’s held the baby yet or wonder what kind of parent he can be behind bars.

When Doug tells you on his last day in jail that he appreciated your poetry class, be sure to say you’ll miss his sense of humor and his impish grin - because you will. And wish him good luck. Maybe shake his hand. You won’t know then but a few months later, as you drink your cup of coffee and peruse the morning newspaper, you’ll read that Doug was murdered. That his body was sliced with wounds and discarded in the woods. And when you write a letter to the editor to declare that Doug was more than the crimes listed in the article, more than a rap sheet; that Doug wrote poetry, and his poems sometimes made you laugh and other times made you cry and readers should know that too. Don’t expect a response.

Be sure to walk away when you come upon a red-haired young man in flannel and jeans asleep on the ground near the downtown parking garage. Walk away even though you know it’s Jesse. Even though you recall how excited he was reading aloud his poem about his release date. Walk away because jail rules prohibit volunteers from having contact with students on the outside. Walk away, though you want to cover him with a blanket. Walk away wondering if his clothbound composition book is in the worn backpack he holds tightly to his chest, like a teddy bear.

Keep walking and tell yourself that next time, when you leave your purse, laptop and iPhone in the trunk of your car, you’ll need to lock away your heart as well.