

Public Education

Two hands went up. The Poet Laureate of Pennsylvania was used to such reception. Mild signs of life in a sea of indifference. Nobody really cared about poetry, especially not high school students, who were subjected to a smattering of bad analytics every year in their English classes; yes they were exposed to the classics, but if Emily Dickinson or Robert Frost walked into the library at that moment, the most reaction they'd receive would be soft murmurs. The Laureate wondered if anyone at any point in history became overwhelmed with excitement over a poem and he couldn't think of any. His tenure was winding down, only six weeks till someone else could wear the crown, though he suspected that he'd be appointed again. Or at least asked to. And was it so bad? Two semesters sabbatical from Pitt, constant travel, readings in high schools and universities and Rotary Clubs and weren't all these people, if nothing else, friendly? His old mainstay would accept him back if he spent a decade as the Laureate because it was a way of selling the decaying English Department to the dwindling batch of hopeful romantics that would chase the dream of becoming writers. And what better way to train than under the tutelage of one knighted with the honor of Laureate. Perhaps Pitt was so generous in their loaning out of his time because he was young – relatively at least – and could expect him to walk the halls and lead workshops for the next thirty years. So what if he peeked early? There was the slimmest of hope that this run as the Laureate could lead, with the right string of successful books and enough appearances in *The New Yorker*, to becoming the nation's Laureate. That was no small honor and he would join the ranks of poets he admired. Robert Penn Warren. Elizabeth Bishop. Randall Jarrell. Louis Untermeyer. Maxine Kumin. Mona Van Duyn. Louise Gluck. And so on. Although it wasn't a natural progression to make – state laureates

transitioning to national laureate – there was nothing wrong with holding out hope. It made days like this, inside the library of Martin Luther King Jr. High School in Philadelphia, a little more tolerable.

It wasn't the kids' fault. They were certainly happy to be out of class for an hour and yet by the looks on their faces, some regretted ever feeling this way. At least in class they could doodle in a notebook or talk to their friends. There were too many adults present at this event and any behavior deemed out-of-line would be sentenced with detention. Whether they had read any of his poems prior to their hour together didn't matter, because he, based on the advice of the woman who held the position prior to him, always tried out new material. "Don't make this your greatest hits tour – if you do, you'll stop writing new stuff and you'll never get it back". Strangely enough, working through new poems kept him on his toes and invigorated him to spend his free evenings scribbling away in his notebooks. All of it needed editing and that would happen eventually, but for now, he could share first drafts with the world. Oftentimes he made notes as he was going, taking dramatic pauses to do so, hoping that the crowds perceived this to all be part of the performance. He remembered something from the second stanza that he wanted to change and he tapped the breast pocket of his wrinkled denim shirt, then all the pockets of his black jeans, and realized he didn't have a pen. He caught the eye of the teacher that organized it, a young ambitious teacher who would be gone in less than two years, and made the universal "I need a pen" gesture with his right hand. She surprised him by throwing it and he was glad that he caught it. This got more reaction than anything he read or discussed. The Laureate made a quick note then turned his attention back to the drowsy crowd. It was still the same two hands raised high. He pointed to the hand that was flapping

eagerly. The hand belonged to a chubby girl with blue and yellow beads at the end of her braids; she shifted her weight to her right leg, protruded her right hip, and turned to look at the girl next to her.

“Someone, I won’t say who, wants to know if you’re all black,” said the girl.

Laughter spread throughout the room and the lead teacher, now with flushed cheeks, tried to silence the students with a crop dusting “shhhhhhhhhh”. The Laureate waved her off and let the laughter die down naturally. He stepped away from the podium, displaying to the students that he was ready to engage with them; no boundary would separate them. The Laureate cleared his throat.

“All black as in *all* black?” said the Laureate.

The girl looked at her friend, then back to the Laureate. She shrugged her shoulders.

“Now there are some rumors floating through my family. Who knows what I’m talking about?” he said.

Half of the heads nodded.

“The rumor in my family is that my grandfather might have been a quarter Chinese. Now I never met him and nobody has any photos of him because he did some low-down things that we won’t get into right now, but getting back to your question, there’s a chance that I’m not *all* black all black. That might be why I get such good service at the Chinese Take-Out spot on my block,” said the Laureate. Some of the kids laughed. “I hope that answers your question.”

“It does,” said the girl.

The Laureate surveyed the crowd and there was still only one other hand up. He pointed to it. A girl with a halo of fuzzy hair stood on her tippy toes. Her face was all smile.

“You should shave that beard. You’d be a lot cuter if you did,” she said and promptly sat back down. A brief debate ensued between the pro-bearders and anti-bearders and the Laureate waved his hand to silence them.

“Razors are expensive,” said the Laureate. The girl shot out of her seat, ready to demand a better answer, but the Laureate smiled and told her to sit back down. “The beard is staying. Trust me, I hear it from everyone. I like it and I suppose that I could trim it down a little, but I like the rawness of it. Plus I still ball a little and I’m never picked last because of this. The truth is – do you guys want to know the truth?” There were nods and a few clapping hands. The Laureate almost regretted starting with his usual speech followed by two poems routine. But that’s why he was invited to the school and he had honored that promise. These questions, while irrelevant, were so much better than the standards: “how long have you been writing poetry?” “What are some of your inspirations for writing poetry?” “Who’s your favorite poet?” “What do you like most about poetry?” And so on. They were canned questions with canned answers. “The truth about this beard is that it covers something for me. I’m not saying that I’m hiding anything necessarily, but when I was about your age, some of my friends and I got into a – let’s call it an altercation. We were fifteen and stupid. Don’t take this the wrong way, but that’s about the only thing you can be when you’re fifteen. But I was extra stupid. I was stupid with a side of stupid. And I heard from a very unreliable source that this one guy – man, actually – who was always on my block had said some things about me. Had questioned my manhood. Of course I wasn’t a man at fifteen but I thought I was and I wasn’t going to sit back and let anyone degrade me. I was six-foot tall already and 135 pounds and I figured nobody could talk about me and get away with it. After school my boys got me all hyped up, saying I could take him, saying

they'd have my back, saying he was – well I don't think it would be appropriate for me to use that language here. But you've all heard words like it before. So after school I led my boys the five blocks from my school to my block and every step of the way they were building me up. We were like the Warriors. Come out and play! By the time I got to him I was so convinced that I was Mike Tyson that I didn't even bother to ask him any questions. Because remember, I was stupid. I clocked him once on the side of his head, which was stupid, because all that did was hurt my hand, and he stood up, looked at me, and punched me on the side of the face. And I mean the whole side of my face. His hands were like the size of baseball gloves. I spun around right into a chain link fence. The lower part of my right cheek sliced wide open. I didn't feel the pain, because my entire body was throbbing from that punch. I had to wait for my mom to get back from work before I could go to the hospital. Nine stitches sealed up the wound but I'll always have the scar. You can't see it because I've got this beard. If you could see it, you would have asked, and there's only a few people I like sharing that story with."

A sudden thirst came over the Laureate and he retreated to the podium. A collection of water bottles was at his disposal and he chose one. Before he could open it, he looked back to the audience and noticed a boy in the back with his hand up. He pointed to the boy and the boy stood up; his wide shoulders and torso were draped by a football jersey with the number 22 stitched on the front.

"Quick question," said the boy.

The Laureate fumbled with the bottle's cap. He couldn't get a good grip on it.

"Absolutely. Go ahead," said the Laureate.

“In that first poem, you referenced Judas at the Last Supper and James Brown meeting Nixon and the time you brought a white girl to Thanksgiving at your mom’s. Is that about, like, people not being what you expect? Or is it like, something like guilt?” said the boy.

The Laureate finally twisted the cap off the bottle. Some of the water spilled onto his hand and he tried to shake it dry. He smeared his hand against the side of his leg, leaving streaks of black on the black denim. He put the bottle down.

“What do you think?” said the Laureate.