Poetry, the World Book, and the Summer Institute

BY LEE HUDSON

In my parents' living room when I was growing up, a cabinet stood by the front door. It was a plain wooden cabinet, not much taller than I was, and it was painted with layers of white paint. The cabinet had solid wooden doors with square wooden knobs; inside were three shelves full of books. On the bottom shelf, on top of the books, my mother kept newspapers from Nixon's resignation, but the delicate newspapers were of no interest to me. I was after those other things in the cabinet—the encyclopedias.

I was itching to go to school like my older sisters, and our encyclopedias were the closest things I had to textbooks. They were on the shelves in alphabetical order with brown spines that announced their letters. I read them with care and always returned them to their positions. My favorite one of all was the poetry book, one of a bunch of supplemental volumes that we received every year. The poetry book was my favorite because it was gorgeous. In it were photographs and illustrations of flowers and kids and animals plus short things to read. Looking at that book led me to look up poetry in the P encyclopedia, where I found even more pictures and more poems. I spent days in front of that cabinet looking at those books and studying that poetry just like a real student. When I see myself in my memory, lying on the living room floor flipping through our books looking at poetry, I can't believe I am the same person after what poetry and I have been through.

When I finally did get to elementary school, I don't think I ever wrote a poem, but I did get to keep reading them. But from that time on, I don't remember much poetry in my literary diet. In high school, in Mrs. Thompson's freshman English class, we read some Emily Dickinson, and Mrs. Thompson translated for us what she believed the poem was supposed to say. Then we memorized the poem for a reason she didn't explain. I remember sitting at our dining room table struggling to learn one of these poems when my mother stopped by to ask me what I was doing. I told her that I was working on Dickinson's "I Never Saw a Moor," and my mother, after years out of high school and three daughters, sat before me and rattled off the poem to perfection. But that was the last poem I was made to memorize in school.

Entering college, however, I still clung to my love of poetry. I was, in fact, ready to become a teacher of poetry. But in my teacher education classes, we experienced little poetry. We did learn to write an acrostic poem, which seemed to me to be all about form and not much about the heartfelt poetry I had discovered in the World Book long ago. But I was not to be discouraged. I believed that because I loved poetry so much, I could teach it with ease.

But as a beginning teacher, I had few resources. The poetry that was in the students' readers was watered down, and I would never think of forcing them to write something as impersonal as an acrostic. Besides, other teachers told me that poetry was a frill that was reserved for lesson plans after the state testing. I listened to the conventional wisdom of my more experienced colleagues. Over the first four years of my career, I came to accept that poetry was a waste of time. I mean, who ever saw a professional on a lunch break sitting under a tree reading poems? Who ever heard of a well-respected businessperson writing poetry during free time? I was in the real world now, and poetry was out of touch.

On those occasions when I did encourage my students to write poetry, it turned out I wasn't very good at it. I never could figure out how to get them started. I would say in my singsong teacher voice, "Okay, everyone write a poem now!" The students would just stare at me like I had just called their mothers' bad names. So I wiped poetry completely out of my curriculum, my lesson plans, and my classroom. That poetry-loving girl that I once was had become the teacher who cared nothing for poetry.

But then, in the summer of 2001, I entered the West Tennessee Writing Project Summer Institute. I carried with me the opinion that poetry was useless and impossible to teach, but as we discussed writing and poetry, I heard how other teachers actually did teach real poetry—not acrostics or other school-made poetry—and it worked. As I read Nancie Atwell's In the Middle, my attitude about poetry switched; real poetry did have a place in the classroom, and poetry was worth the time before, during, and after high-stakes testing. Students could love and write real poetry, translate poetry for themselves, make poetry from prose, remember poetry to enrich their lives, and express themselves through poetry (which wasn't as hokey as it sounded).

I went into a new school year that fall with a new commitment to teaching poetry. At first, we struggled. Students thought all poetry had to rhyme, and they confused imitation of a poem with "copying"—and they did not approve of copying. As a result, our poems were immature and weak. But we stuck with it. As we discussed and reflected on poetry after writing it for awhile, I discovered even more about it from my students than I had from the experts. We decided that the best poetry we read didn't rhyme, and we made the rule that no poetry would rhyme until we, as authors, were ready. We went further than guided writing and looked at how to parody, not "copy," favorite poets like Shel Silverstein and favorite class library poetry books like Laughter. We studied real-life poetry forms like the tritina, haiku, and observation poetry.

The results were amazing. The girl that studied the poetry supplement of the encyclopedia had students who wrote poetry that sang on the page. They gave their poetry as gifts for Christmas. They published their poetry by reading it out loud and hanging it in the hallway. They copied their poetry into their probes (students' personal collections of their finished writing). A few students even entered their poems in writing contests and won. Now, poetry is not a frill in my writing classroom. Poetry is my writing classroom.

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