

To My Favorite 17-Year-Old High School Girl

Do you realize that if you had started building the Parthenon
on the day you were born,
you would be all done in only one more year?
Of course, you couldn't have done that all alone.
So never mind; you're fine just being yourself.
You're loved for just being you.
But did you know that at your age
Judy Garland was pulling down 150,000 dollars a picture,
Joan of Arc was leading the French army to victory
and Blaise Pascal had cleaned up his room
– no wait, I mean he had invented the calculator?
Of course, there will be time for all that later in your life,
after you come out of your room and begin to blossom,
or at least pick up all your socks.
For some reason I keep remembering that
Lady Jane Grey was queen of England when she was only 15.
But then she was beheaded,
so never mind her as a role model.
A few centuries later, when he was your age,
Franz Schubert was doing the dishes for his family,
but that did not keep him from composing two symphonies, four operas
and two complete masses as a youngster.
But of course, that was in Austria at the height of Romantic lyricism,
not here in the suburbs of Cleveland.
Frankly, who cares if Annie Oakley was a crack shot at 15
or if Maria Callas debuted as Tosca at 17?
We think you're special just being you –
playing with your food and staring into space.
By the way, I lied about Schubert doing the dishes,
but that doesn't mean he never helped out around the house.

– Billy Collins

High School Training Grounds

At 7:45 a.m., I open the doors to a building dedicated to building yet only breaks me down.
I march down hallways
cleaned up after me every day by regular janitors,
but I never have the decency to honor their names.

Lockers left open like teenage boys' mouths
when teenage girls wear clothes that covers their insecurities,
but exposes everything else.
Masculinity mimicked by men who grew up with no fathers,
Camouflage worn by bullies who are dangerously armed,
but need hugs.

Teachers paid less than what it costs them to be here.
Oceans of adolescents come here to receive lessons, but never learn to swim,
part like the Red Sea when the bell rings.

This is a training ground.

My high school is Chicago,
diverse and segregated on purpose.
Social lines are barbed wire.
Labels like "Regular" and "Honors" resonate.
I am in "honors,"
but go home with "regular" students
who are soldiers in territory that owns them.

This is a training ground
to sort out the "regulars" from the "honors,"
a reoccurring cycle built to recycle the trash of this system.
Trained at a young age to capitalize letters,
taught now that capitalism raises you,
but you have to step on someone else to get there.

This is a training ground,
where one group is taught to lead and the other is made to follow.
No wonder so many of my people spit bars because the truth is hard to swallow.
The need for degrees has left so many people frozen.

Homework is stressful.
But when you go home everyday and your home is work
you don't want to pick up any assignments.
Reading textbooks is stressful.
But reading does not matter when you feel your story is already written,
Either dead or getting booked.
Taking tests is stressful.
But bubbling in a scantron does not stop bullets from bursting.

I hear education systems are failing,
but I believe they are succeeding at what they're built to do,
to train you
to keep you on track
to track down an American Dream
that has failed so many of us all.

- Malcolm London

Poetry Cafe:

A Spoken Word Experience

Spoken word performance artists thrill their audiences with fresh, raw readings featuring their poetic prowess. We're soon going to share this experience with our own Poetry Cafe.

Assignment:

1. Find a poem. It can be a published poem that you photocopy from a book in the library. It can be a poem that you find on the internet and print a copy. It can be an original work that you type up and submit.

2. Include the poem's title, the full poem, and the author's name. Also, write your name on the paper.

3. The poem must be at least 10 lines long, but no longer than 40 lines.

4. Keep it clean. Choose (or write) a poem with school-appropriate content. If you wouldn't read this poem aloud in front of your grandparents or the school board, then it's not an appropriate choice for this assignment.

5. To thine own self be true. Your poem can be funny and light or heavy and profound. Just choose a poem that speaks to you and that you would be willing to read in front of the class.

If your poem is selected, you will perform a reading of it to the class. Due to time limitations, not all entries will be chosen for performance. Chosen poems/readers will receive bonus points and the admiration of your peers for your efforts. Props, body language, and energy are encouraged. Please note: **Readers DO NOT have to memorize their poems.** You may read from a paper. This experience is supposed to be fun, not stressful, so have a good time with it.

Poem submission due date:

Poetry Cafe performance date:

