

Sons and daughters

A daughter
caring, nurturing,
nothing to please
to serve,
even her brother –
who has already
learned that he's
the type girls
will want to
take care of –
he's in training.
and so is she.

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## To-Be-Teen-ager

I see a girl  
and remember  
the importance of  
t-shirt selection –  
which rock band, which image –  
that day –  
to complement the previous days'  
to make a statement  
of what? Of who I was  
or wanted to be – or  
wanted merely to think I  
was.

# From High School, Where Poems Are Said to Go to Die

## Mike Filce

Forgive me, as I'm no poet —  
just a humble piece of that oppressive institution called "high school,"  
shoveling dirt and rocks over the unmarked graves of so many poems —  
and poets; let's not forget that poems come from people —  
doing my part, reputedly,  
stacking bricks in those walls, painting those halls  
designed almost exclusively toward the demise of poetry.

It's satisfying — I suppose — for a poet laureate  
to sit on high and unleash easy snark  
upon easy targets —  
public schools and teachers —  
for snarky is always in style  
and what passes for wit is  
always ripe for poster pickings.

And so, Billy Collins says that high school is the place where poetry goes to die —  
and wouldn't a poet laureate know it?  
And so, clever designers slap images behind his pithy adage,  
or is it an epigram — worthy of Oscar Wilde?  
No matter — as the posters proliferate.

No poet, I scan these varied scenes that pay homage to his words —  
majestic mountain peaks, foaming tide pools,  
towering cliff faces, arresting sunsets,  
and — I'm not making this up —  
a wooden stairway descending into the mists —  
and questions arise:  
Who makes these posters?  
and did their poetry die in high school? —  
as it did — I assume —  
for Billy Collins?

Or perhaps for Billy, poetry drifted down like leaves about his head and shoulders  
and did not rise up off the pages of old textbooks  
or stumble from the lips of wrinkled old men  
where most of us found it . . .  
in high school.

And I admit, when I heard this line —  
I recognized the poet — had read the poet

but not much, to be fair,  
And so I went reading — to find the poetry that wouldn't die . . .  
“The Art of Drowning,” “The Best Cigarette,” “Boyhood” —  
a dozen and more —  
and I hoped — after all, a real-life poet laureate —  
to be fairly bowled over.  
I hoped to find poems I could bring alive for my high school students, in fact;  
poems to be read aloud — as poetry must be.  
I read eagerly . . . and I read some more . . . wanting to be impressed.

I hoped for something that spoke to the universal —  
as a poet laureate would do —  
something that rose above the self-indulgent pandering of most  
(though surely not a poet laureate);  
after an hour (I did not lose track of time)  
— perusing, not skimming —  
I closed those poetic tabs,  
and wondered if Billy was right —  
maybe his poetry did die in high school.

I considered the poster versions, interchangeable in purpose and intent —  
with artsy fonts to evoke authoritative genius,  
and further I wondered about the relation between text and image  
because try as I might, I failed to grasp what these designers intended —  
(and isn't it all about intention?) —  
just how the unspeakable beauty of nature complements derision.  
Do they imagine themselves in partnership with the poet —  
sardonic soul-mates?  
Or perhaps they have no time to notice the irony —  
unintended layers, irrelevant contradictions . . .  
But I'm no poet — laureate or otherwise —  
and it all eludes my pitiful understanding down here,  
shovel in hand, in the bold light of day,  
burying poems by the bushel.

And the real question nagged,  
like the cat that plucks at my bare shoulder at three a.m.,  
wanting God-knows-what-a-cat-ever-wants:  
Who hangs these on their walls?  
— for there must be buyers;  
who is it that finds a kinship with this slogan —  
feels it deeply enough to type in a credit card number,  
have it sent over the miles to their doorstep —  
to then wander around the house,  
looking for that perfect place to hang this Essential Truth,  
so vital as to need reminding often —

above an office desk perhaps? The den? A child's bedroom wall?  
Or is it for the workplace —  
so colleagues cannot miss their appreciation of keen wit?

Or are they — oh, wow — teachers,  
who buy it for their classroom wall, God forbid?  
— reveling in their ironic display,  
picturing themselves the ultimate satirist —  
the iconoclast who mocks even what they do,  
disdainful, for all to see,  
and to show, above all else,  
how they just might be the next Sir Ken Robinson.

Or is it — more likely? — a loose collection of Real Poets, these customers —  
the kind that sell books full of their own poems,  
read their own poems to crowds of people who pay to be read to,  
of The Poet, by The Poet, for The Poet —  
the kind that could even become poet laureates;  
Are these, I wonder, the ones who punch in their credit card numbers,  
to remind themselves they're rebels —  
that they can share — and imagine they participate —  
in this wit —  
at the expense of what?