

Fridays, Rumors, and Hard Truths

"The writing is easy; it's the living that's hard."

—Annie Proulx

Fridays always start slowly. This past Friday, I saw the usual groups of students standing in coats as the bell rang, little clusters of talkers at desks. Few had books open; I don't imagine they'd even noticed I was in the room. And then I heard, "There's a drunk kid in the hall," and my attention turned to the noise that had been buzzing outside my consciousness while I was taking attendance and gathering energy for this last day of the week.

He was ordinary looking: large and doughy, an innocent face beneath shaggy hair, but his body was loose. It moved like a marionette—just beyond his control. He bounced into lockers, barely noticing the kids gathering as he tried to right himself.

Kids his age had scattered and he was observed by a growing ring of older students.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I moved to his side. "You all need to get to class," I threw to the students behind me. His eyes startled and he lurched towards a classroom door, mumbling something. I followed. "I'm Mrs. Kittle," I said, "What's your name?" He was sweet and cooperative but embarrassed, as the words slurred together and he fell against the lockers, then righted himself, blinking slowly. I kept one hand on his arm and told him

we were stopping at the nurse's office, just a few doors down the hall.

"I'm fine," he repeated.

"I'm sure you are," I said, "I just need the nurse to say so because you don't seem fine to me." I hoped he wouldn't puke on me; I've only been doused once in my career, but it was memorable.

Our school nurse was on her feet the minute I came through the door. "Hi Peter," she smiled. "I know him," she assured me, "I'll take care of him."

Back to class. My students are anxious for news: is he drunk? What if he fell on you? And I ask them not to gossip, to consider all of the things it could be besides alcohol, and to get back to work. Moments later I hear an ambulance approach the school, slide across the front lawn, and back up near the old front entrance of white pillars and brick. Later I learn that he begged to stay at school. "Please, we can't pay for this," he said as they hoisted him through its doors and took off towards the hospital.

Peter is 14 and living with his sister and her one-year-old son. Their father died years ago and their mother is suffering through her second bout with breast cancer. At our walk-in clinic, Peter was given muscle-relaxants to help with back pain, but misunderstood the dosage. With four times the prescribed dose and a chronic heart condition, he was lucky to be alive. After a day at the hospital for observation, he'll be back to school on Monday.

All weekend I've thought of him.

I can't just shake my head and remember that some kids have it pretty hard in this life. I've done that too many times before. I know there are kids living in campgrounds in the mountains; I know there are children roaming like dogs through our downtown in the evening while parents soak themselves in alcohol or bake themselves with weed. I know there are so many, but this one careened into my life on Friday and I can help him. I have to.

I think our teaching lives are measured not just by the masses we inspire to read and write with passion, but sometimes by the few we stumble

upon, then listen to, and guide towards food or shelter or hope. Not just by the sympathy we show our football superstar who wrenched his shoulder early in his senior season, but by the trays of left-over pizza and sandwiches set out on tables at the end of lunch for anyone who wants seconds. I believe this work is about the struggling readers and the resources that help me help them, but it's also about Peter and Jillian and Miranda and Mathew, who all lost their fathers in elementary school. This work is about knowing, and doing, and being strong enough for both.

Help Shape NCTE Positions by Submitting a Resolution

If you have concerns about issues that affect your teaching, or positions you would like to support, and you think NCTE should take a stand, you have an opportunity to be heard! Propose a resolution that may be voted upon and passed at NCTE's Annual Convention. If passed at the Annual Business Meeting for the Board of Directors and Other Members of the Council, proposed resolutions become part of the Council's position/philosophy on questions related to the teaching of English and can assist the Council in developing action programs.

For further details on submitting a resolution, or to see resolutions already passed by Council members, visit the NCTE website (<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/107214.htm>) or contact Lori Bianchini at NCTE Headquarters (800-369-6283, ext. 3644; lbianchini@ncte.org). Resolutions must be postmarked by **October 15, 2007**.

Free Student Writing Contests

Since 1993, Creative Communication has sponsored student writing contests to motivate and recognize young writers. Now your students can win a \$50 savings bond and a free book that includes their work, all with no entry fees or purchase requirements. Four grade-level divisions each recognize 10 winners: K-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12. Each student may submit one original poem in English, 21 lines or less, and an original essay on any topic in English, 250 words or less. Selected high merit entries are invited to be published in a hardbound anthology. Teachers with 5 students accepted receive a free book. Schools with 15 or more students accepted also receive a free book and qualify to apply for one of our \$250 Language Arts Grants. For questions or to enter, send each entry with the student's name, grade, teacher's name, and school name and address to: Creative Communication, 1488 North 200 West, Logan, UT 84341, or enter online at <http://www.poeticpower.com>.