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Value Added Teachers

We feel frustrated
as we rumble around in cramped offices
with all the people shouting
Words don't matter.
Especially when we hear graduates
of the university
referred to as output.

When people become output
there's no need for nurture.
Sewage pipes have output,
as do factories that churn out row after row
of standardized parts.

In cramped classrooms and windowless lecture halls,
teachers are gauged by their productivity—
here every human complexity is reduced
to a series of data points, quantified and measured
success or failure—positive or negative output.

These days we no longer relish
seeing joy or surprise or the flash
of an ah-ha moment on our students' faces.
Instead of planning a field trip to the meadow
for a sensory experience,
we spend time trying to quantify
commitment, measure amazement,
determine a cut score for
how much inspiration is needed
for a journey into the unknown.

Abe the Man Boy

Abe the man boy cruises into the classroom,
reciting his litany of lateness.

*I'm too tired for this writin' jazz;
had to take my sister to daycare.*

Abe from Sierra Leone knows war's haunting face
as well as he knows the latest Def Jam rhymes
or Ravens' football plays.

*War's messed up.
It don't solve nothin'.*

But when Abe reads an essay, his swagger dissolves.
*I never had any reading help. My mom got me outta the country when I
was eight or nine.*

The soldiers almost kidnapped me.
Abe is a junior in high school—reads at the third-grade level.

*I do all right on that multiple choice stuff,
but I'm lost when I gotta read a whole book.*

When I take his case to the supervisor, she tells me,
“Abe doesn't have time to take reading. If he wants to graduate,
he needs two foreign language credits—in one year.
We've got him in Spanish and Italian.”

All They Want Is Another Option

The boys fold white sheets of looseleaf
into paper airplanes with sleek wings.
The only passengers are the complaints
about their expiring chances to pass the graduation tests.

They sit at their desks as if drowning in bucket seats
of meaningless terms like mood and tone.
But when we flee the classroom and
commandeer the parking lot for flight testing

their planes soar high and far, like powder in the wind.
The boys shout out their dreams
as if to boost the acceleration of their jets.
If only the timbre of their hopes

could outwit the arbitrary
prison of the classroom.
Who can't see their mechanical genius
in the circling planes?

Angie at Five

Her brown curls never touch a brush,
her gait clumsy as she skips down the hall
wearing scuffed Mary Janes with one green sock and one blue.
She smiles and hands me a pink rose wrapped in a wet paper towel.

Too young to be wary of teachers, Angie tells me,
My momma says we ain't got no money to buy me shoes right now.
Anyways, I jus' go barefoot all summer long. But sometimes when I play
in the field 'hind our 'partment, I git all cut up from them
glass bottles those big kids leave lyin' 'round.
Her accent a rhythmic fusion of Richmond's streets and Appalachian hills.

When I think of Angie now — years after her kindergarten speech class,
I don't wonder if she ever learned to say *sssnake, sssilly, or ssscoot...* I wonder
if she has a job and if...
she is growing roses.

Andy's Breakthrough

Over in the corner of the special ed kindergarten room
sits a suction machine I use four times a day
to clear Monica's tracheotomy.
Tucked away in the closet—diapers
in case Robbie has an accident.
I have eight students and an assistant
until the morning Andy arrives with a note pinned to his overalls.

*Hi! I'm Andy and I don't talk.
Here's what you can say so I understand
colors and numbers.
Red =mommy's coat
Blue =daddy's truck
One = cat
Two = balloons*

The list goes on for all the colors and the numbers up to 10.
That note rocks me hard
like a shove from behind
when you're first learning to ice skate.

One January day after snow and ice cancel recess
for the third day in a row
my class of pop-go-the weasel five-year-olds destroys my calm—
Everybody sit down, I yell.

Andy jumps up in the back of the room and smiles
like he's found a new puppy,
then points his finger at me and announces, "Bracken angrrrrrry."

The class erupts with laughter.
Andy jumps up and repeats “Bracken angrrrry” over and over.
The kids dance and jump around the room
chanting Andy’s words like the chorus of a new song.
I join in.

Billy Follows Me Outside the Psych Hospital Classroom

Some days at lunchtime
I walk the perimeter
of the school parking lot,
arms swinging, legs pumping,
racing to restore inner
balance before afternoon classes.

Some days I sit outside the school on a stone bench
framed by yellow forsythia bushes,
aching for solitude.
I escape the dark hallways,
the girl pounding on the door,
the boy weeping in the "quiet" room.

Some days Billy with the curly, red hair
and the keen gaze follows me outside.
"You're not going to stay much longer," he tells me.
I eat my sandwich.
Why do you say that?
"I can just tell."

Sometimes I still see Billy's face, that mysterious boy
who raised his brother and helped me teach sewing.
How did he know?
I wonder, should I have confessed?
"I just know you're leaving. My dad left us and I can tell.
Mrs. Green left last year. She was just like you."
I curse my transparent eyes and ask,
What do you mean?

"You're too gentle for a place like this.
I guess we'll have a party for you when you leave."