

All Poems Are About Death

They're talking about tying
teacher pay to teacher performance,
and tying teacher performance
to student outcomes. They like to use words like
outcomes. They probably don't read
much poetry, whoever they are,
and wouldn't know a good line if they wrote one.

I remember Mr. Westrich, though,
my 7th grade English teacher, who died
in a boating accident the summer I was 12.

I remember his performance—his
performances—the way he'd make us all laugh,
the way he'd interrupt us whenever we said
um or *er*. “Don’t burp,” he'd say
(he called *um* and *er* “burps”). We had to put
a penny in the jar every time we burped.

When the jar filled up he would buy us
a cake, he said, and we'd all eat it together. He was as good as
his word. I hated school but I loved
Mr. Westrich. Whenever we said *y'know*
he'd interrupt us and say, “No, I don't know,
tell me!” Our outcomes, if anyone cared
to measure them, spanned a lifetime
of not burping, of saying what we meant
instead of saying *y'know*. But his greatest performance
was dying like that, in high summer, on a sailboat,
or under a sailboat—I don't remember
how it happened, only that it did, only that he died—his final
act. His perfect disappearance. No one I knew and loved
had ever died. He was the first one. It taught me
what can't be put into words. It taught me
the ineffable. It was around that time
I first started making poems.

Chicken or Egg

We were talking about chickens and I said,
How did we get onto chickens?
And you said, Why do you always do that?
And I said, Do what? And you said,
Why do you always want to go back
in the conversation and retrace your steps?
And I said, Because I want to know
how I got here. And you said, Why not
just be here now? And I said, Because
Ram Dass already wrote that one. I want
to write a different one. Maybe I'll call it
Be There Then, or *Chicken or Egg*. You didn't
know what to say to that, so you didn't say anything—
you just got up and walked out of the room
without saying where you were going or why
you were leaving. And I thought to myself,
How did I end up with someone so incurious,
so humorless, and so different from myself?

Lost Erections

I'll never forget that first one,
how we looked for it together
everywhere. Thinking

she was the one who lost it,
she apologized.
But it was mine to lose, I told her.

It's our loss, she said,
ruefully buttoning up
after doing yeoman's work

to find it. I never
saw her again and it remained
lost forever. Robert K. Merton

coined the phrase 'self-fulfilling prophecy':
"The specious validity
of the self-fulfilling prophecy

perpetuates a reign of
error," he wrote.
Which may explain why,

after losing that first one,
the fear of losing was hard to master.
In fact, it made a (write it!) disaster

of my sex life for decades after,
undermining every love poem
I ever wrote. "This could be

a love poem," says the attractive
elderly woman in the poetry workshop
where I am workshopping this poem.

“Perhaps what you need to focus on,” she offers,
“is the balance between imagination
and memory, letting the latter

remain in the shadows,
letting the former
win out.”