

Poetry Selections

Joe Mills
North Carolina School of the Arts

Cutters

When she raises her hand, I try to look at her eyes rather than the raised ridges vining along her arms, the scars that show she's a cutter, or was once, but I know they're there, and I think of my daughter wanting to help her mother and grabbing a knife, how in school we played "bloody knuckles" smashing cards onto our hands until they bled and sometimes sliding one slightly from the pack so it slit like a razor, all those nights drinking, driving, throwing our bodies around like airline luggage. Someone once told me, *What a person needs in this world is a sharp knife and the will to use it* as if the problems of our lives were Gordian knots, each solvable with a quick slice. I used to believe it. But now, when my student's arm rises, I call on her, even if other hands are already up, as if my attention could bind, at least for a moment the damage we do to ourselves we can never cut away.

Learning to Fall

“I think today we’re learning to fall,”
one girl tells her friend who has asked
what they’ll be doing in drama class,
and I’m tempted to say, “That’s funny.
We’re doing that in here too” because
even though teachers pretend to train
artists, scientists, modern Dadeluses,
our job, despite what brochures
and course catalogues say, is not
to teach them how to fly, but fall.
Each student is really an Icarus,
the only question being how far
they’ll get before the inevitable
descent and whether they’ll survive.
But, I say only, “Let’s get started”
and I begin writing on the board
as they groan, pull out books,
brace themselves for questions
that will tumble them earthward.

Dispersal

As my student reads a poem about dandelions,
I think about how this spring my five year old
has turned each walk into a dandelion hunt.
She gathers the yellow ones into bouquets,
but she prizes the white puffs most. Seeing one
she sprints to it as if afraid someone else
will get there first, then she carries it back
to me before blowing. How old was I when
Mrs. Nelson, who lived alone, started screaming
“Stop! Stop That!” at seeing me whistle
white seeds into the air as if I was the one
responsible for ruining her yard and her life?
We used to ask each other, “Do you like butter”
as we rubbed the yellow flowers on our chins,
or we would flick them from the stems as we sang,
“Momma had a baby and her head popped off.”
My college RA made dandelion wine and played
music by the great stride pianist Willy the Lion
When the student finishes reading, I want to say,
“Dandelions are cool.” “My daughter loves them.”
“I once egged an old woman’s house.” I want
to suggest poetry itself depends on the pleasure
of phrases floating on air then taking root; instead
I tell them, “We don’t have much time left,” then
softly blow the question, “What do people think?”