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Terri Brown-Davidson

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The Art Teacher: A Sonnet Crown

by Terri Brown-Davidson

1.

The teacher mocks his computer. Shut off,
Shirt ruffled, hair spiked like a hedgehog's,
He fiddles in corners by art cabinets
Layered with shadows whose dark tones
He's mastered. An audit, an adjunct, an academic
Peon, I've enrolled to study ephemeral brightnesses,
Discover why shadows are colored—never black—
Fragile as butterfly wings. I'm avid to learn
About foreshortening, about the way a pencil
Tracing contours can make a body rise singing,
My left hand smearing graphite, sketching a figure.
In secret until my classmates and I—pseudo rapturous—
Draw cones and cubes and cylinders,
Twenty dead objects heaped glaring, unshadowed.

2.

Twenty dead objects heaped glaring, unshadowed
Make me spill coffee. A girl straddling her art horse
Peers at the mess, mouth tightening, lipstick chewed.
No laughing or the teacher's eyes, blue as lightning bolts,
Will shift and kill want in its wake. This teacher,
Tall, gangly, starved as a scarecrow, lopes by
With his shirt untucked, scrutinizes our magnum opi.
In art class or sonnets, there's always a turn; the sonnet shift,
The "volta," refutes an argument via a rafter
Of launched examples. If the sonnet is wrenched,
The "examples" waft clumsily as turkeys escaping a hatchet.
The art class's turn is more subtle than a sonnet's:
The teacher stares; the pencils stutter.

3.

The teacher stares; the pencils stutter.
My master an artist among cockroaches.
In Drawing I we're more mongrel than pestilence,
A cowardice of curs, leaping and licking
Our chops, drooling for each praise scrap
The Art Teacher bestows. Only one student's blessed,
A shy Hispanic woman, greasy black bangs
Slicked down with a comb. Her contour drawings—
Squares, rectangles, spoons and knives, chipped coffee
Mugs—the teacher pronounces superb. Effervescent!
A middle aged parvenue, I try to squelch
My jealousy when he praises her, .
A wind-tunnel of loss.

4.

A wind-tunnel of loss.
Here the students are like refugees
Who haunt freeway offramps, ragged-shoed, rambling,
Grabbing wadded bills, pacing between cars.
Who, like the Art Teacher, wax sullen then explode.
We're all sinners except Ladette, her shy,
Round face gleaming then vanishing.
I join her at lunch, her deft pencil stilled.
Ham sandwiches, Cokes. The sun burns our
Minds. I rise, meander dead-footed inside
The trailer. Ladette watches the Art
Teacher; the computer screen glows. Like me,
She wants only to draw, to tumble into
An Art Hole. Never climb out.

5.

I tumble into an Art Hole. Never climb out.
And here—in the classroom—art holes abound;
Tripping, stumbling, we skirt each crumbled mouth,
Each black abyss, never fall far though
Our teacher's apopleptic because we can't draw
Straight lines, render acute angles, twenty objects aligned.
The Golden Mean represents the teacher's mind:
He gazes, scrutinizing, at our abject faces.
Measuring the distance between our eyes, between
Our cheeks and mouths. Staring into his rage-
Reddened eyes, I'm convinced he can measure
The depth of each nasal-labial fold
I can't conceal with makeup. It's unsettling,
How accurate he is. How heartless. How cold.

6.

How accurate he is. How heartless, how cold.
He meanders among our horses like a nobleman
Surveying his fiefdom. If we quiver, cower,
Who's to say we don't sneak off in secret, keep drawing
At our homes? There, I suspect, the magic buoys us.
There we're as lovely as Ladette the Sinless.
Our pencils fly across reams of shining paper.
We draw ourselves rightside up, upside down,
We render our little stick figures
With a breathlessness that belies true talent.
The Art Teacher has flayed us raw,
Left us unpulchritudinous. But I want
What I've abandoned. At home, I hide in the closet,
Give my warped paper everything I've repressed.

7.

My warped paper reveals everything I've repressed.
By Week Seven, I sit in the class alone. The other students
Have fled. They don't want this sad class marring
Their weekend dreams. They want to sleep
Twitching beneath blankets.
The Art Teacher still shouting at the ghosts
Of his missing students. I sit on my horse, study him.
Ladette the Sinless has abandoned her crown,
Left her pencil stubs. I stare into The Art Teacher's eyes
As he packs his Land's End bag, his beloved cell phone.
He glances at me and shrugs. "Want to stay?"
He asks; I shake my head no. I leave fast
Because I don't want this darkened room
Shining with melancholy, seeded with loss.
The teacher mocks his computer. Shut off.