



Featured Poet

Ben Berman – Five Poems

Covers

I didn't know how to turn a fallen tree into a lean-to or transform dry debris into a makeshift cover but I was convinced that shivering through a night of light rain would introduce me to the *world of pains and troubles* that Keats wrote about, *school my intelligence and make it a soul*.

Once, though, after catching a chill, I spent half the night quaking in fetal position, attuned not to the mystery of the world but the misery of it. Yet even then I struggled to admit to struggling – as though the path to self-actualization involved covering up the actual experience.

I'd somehow expected all of nature's revelations to just reveal themselves, yield endless grace and wonder – didn't realize that I'd first need to accept my own nature, embrace self-discovery as the life-long process of exposing myself to myself.

Terms

Even before the midterm I had minor doubts about my major, and as I sat in that lecture hall answering questions about evolution and adaptation – how organisms thrive by constantly altering their functions – I couldn't help but see it as a sign.

But it wasn't just a matter of subject matters. The English exam, later that week, was equally disheartening – quote identifications and essay prompts on characters I didn't care about, two pages of questions on literary terms that measured nothing but my short-term memory.

A few weeks later, I handed in my leave-of-absence forms and bought a ticket to Kathmandu, traded a life of exams for tests of character – most of which I ended up failing. But at least I failed them on my own terms.

Impressions

I loved the challenge of making a distinct impression in a mere eight minutes – that need for crisp, compressed narratives and revealing details – though there was something refreshing, too, when we'd skip the rehearsed introductions and go-to lines and just chat freely without any desire to impress.

And because I was already married, was just there as a wingman for a friend, I found myself winging a new story every time we switched partners – first, I was a brew master with an interest in wild yeast, then a fortune cookie writer on sabbatical. The trick was to

create distinct and convincing personas, to think of each one as a serious exercise in character building and not just some humorous impression.

The prettiest woman there, though, told me she was on to me, had noticed a thin impression on my ring finger at the open bar and didn't care, we were all escaping something and she was okay with meeting up on the sly. I wanted to tell her the truth, but it suddenly felt dirty to come clean, and I spent the rest of our time together staring at that imprint on my finger, troubled by that fine line.

Rates

After some other teachers and I heard there was a website where students were rating us, we agreed to look each other up. *Textbook use* and *exam difficulty* weren't relevant to my classes but even *clarity* seemed a bit off for a subject so replete with paradox. Still, when we met up at a bar to share what we'd found, I ordered a couple of tequilas so that I could take the feedback with a grain of salt.

I was prepared to dismiss the entire thing as a space for the irate and irrational and wasn't quite sure what to make of the balanced mix of adoration and disdain – all those compliments complementing the complaints – as though my classroom, too, was but a compilation of contradictions, the histogram of my stars shining like Orion's club and lion.

And yet it was the scorn that stuck. You'd think that after twenty years of teaching I'd have developed a thick skin or the ability, at any rate, to tolerate a little failure with aplomb. But for the rest of the week, I couldn't stop my mind from spinning, couldn't resist the pull of that black hole.

Currents

I'm not really sure how I ended up on a *Design Thinking* panel in the first place but the other presenters had somehow moved on to discussing Picasso and his influence on current exhibitions in Paris while I just sat there playing with my frilly toothpick, longing for more cubes of cheese.

I don't normally mind jumping into unfamiliar waters but I was struggling to navigate all the crosscurrents of my mind. Even when the facilitator threw me a paddle – asked me to describe my own process – whatever thoughts started to flow quickly capsized in a small eddy just before they reached the base of my mouth.

After the panel came the reception and I feigned great interest in some bite-sized crackers and a box of red wine, was desperate for the next morning and the thrill of sitting alone in the dark for hours with nothing but the electricity of a couple of ideas, current pulsating through some words.

Ben Berman's first book, *Strange Borderlands*, won the 2014 Peace Corps Award for Best Book of Poetry and was a finalist for the Massachusetts Book Awards. His second collection, *Figuring in the Figure*, is recently out from Able Muse Press. He has received awards from the New England Poetry Club and fellowships from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and Somerville Arts Council. He teaches in the Boston area, where he lives with his wife and daughters.