



Letters to My Teachers

Jonathan Edwards

DEAR MRS B,

I wanted to thank you. I wanted to thank you for the time when you got us all to dress up. We put on old dai caps, bovver boots, check shirts, we tucked our trousers into our socks, we fingered mud all over our cheeks. We'd spent weeks working on placards and chants. Vote by secret ballot. Universal manhood suffrage. You led us out of the school, and we walked for miles, re-enacting the Chartist march of 1839. We walked as far as The Welsh Oak, where the Chartists stopped for beer and we stopped for sandwiches and photos. Mrs B, I didn't know what it was you were giving me. I thought it was a day out. I thought it was dress-up. Now I write poems about Chartism and ironworkers and all of the lives, everyone who grew up here, in these valleys. I can't shut up about it, and the rhythms of these poems are the rhythms of that day, the walking, the chanting. I wanted to write and thank you because you're not here for me to say it to. When my mum went to visit you in hospital a few weeks before you died, no more than a year into your retirement, you said you felt cheated, that you'd never done anything on this earth you wanted to. I want to tell you you did everything Mrs B, that it was a day here in this valley, quite sunny, and I took my dai cap off as I walked and now here I am, still reaching up to wipe the sweat from my brow.

DEAR MR P,

I wanted to thank you. I wanted to thank you for being my hero. When



I was eleven and starting at big school, grim-faced and scared senseless, you had the room where we read Roald Dahl and Gerald Durrell. You had the room where we wrote stories. Your bright purple MG was parked outside, and you ambled the corridors, tie at half-mast, your long, long hair dangling behind you. In afternoon lessons, while we were reading, we'd hear a sound like an animal growling, a motorbike starting, a great machine suffering, and look up to see you sitting there, your head tilted back like a Pez dispenser, so soundly asleep that an earthquake wouldn't wake you. Once when I was twelve you led us all out of the lesson, down onto the playing fields, with notebooks and pens, and you gathered us all at the hedges, the river, the side of the road, and in each place we had to make notes for a poem. We had to close our eyes and listen – *No, really listen* – then find some way to write what we'd heard. 'Words are sounds', you said. *Words are sounds*. I have all my exercise books from each of your lessons, each bit of writing I did with you, scrawled with your beautiful, your indecipherable feedback. Poems about football and stories about murders. I've been writing ever since and I wanted to write now to you, to thank you for afternoons of being lost in stories, a breeze through the window, and somewhere in the background, the gentle sound of snoring.