



Letter to My Teachers

Jane Borodale

DEAR MR THOMAS,

Your English classes when I was in third year, aged fifteen, were vivid and often unconventional. You made us think, and made us think about thinking, and you treated us like individual humans, with thoughts and minds of our own. You had a slightly wild look in your eye, as though any moment you might turn out to be a defector on the run from the KGB.

Overall, I don't remember much about secondary school. Like many teens (just post-teachers' strikes in the 1980s) I was disengaged and errant, flying in a cheerful way beneath the radar: hiding under the lab bench when Miss Jenkins came round to collect our biology homework, deliberately missing the bus so I could stay at home to read and dream. The whole excruciating oppression of the school day was spent willing the hour of 3:05 to come round: the last bell signalling that I could get back to my proper life, which was basically everything else except school.

But over the years, I've found that one of your assignments has stuck with me. You asked us to hand in whatever we wanted, providing we wrote it in an atypical location at home. You suggested the bathroom, the stairs, anywhere but the boring nests of our bedrooms or wherever we usually sat. You hinted that this might re-energise our purpose.

I chose the back porch to write in, a decrepit lean-to made of bits of wood and corrugated iron, held together with cobwebs and string. It smelt of



weedkiller and dust, and housed debris left by previous tenants: plant pots, rusted shears and broken glass, sometimes a live male pheasant from the nearby woods who roosted there at night.

I brought out a kitchen chair to sit on, and lit a candle. It was wintertime — sharply cold, so that my breath came out in clouds. I was very anti-coat in those days and refused to own one, so it must have been my mother's coat that I wore that night, with my own fingerless gloves in rainbow colours. I remember that the stub of candle was quite old and yellow, but its flame was bright enough to see the pen and page by, as I translated the experience of being there into sentences. It was as simple as that. Listening, feeling, sitting there in that wobbling circle of candlelight, the shadows bouncing round me, and trying to be accurate about what it was.

In some ways I think the particular freedom and concentration of that moment has never left me. An hour in which I felt ecstatically happy: peaceful, productive. You'd taught me, aged fifteen, that as writers we write our moments into being, that we draw on what's around us, if we set ourselves to notice what it's really like. It was a good premise for a piece of homework — to write what exists, and where it exists, and I thank you for that.

Yours gratefully,
Jane