

I FELT A
FUNERAL,
IN MY
BRAIN

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PUSH

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START

I turned in the response when it was due, on the last day of school. It was just an “effort” thing, you know. It could be whatever. Five extra-credit points on the final, as long as you turned it in. *Respond to one work of literature we studied over the course of this year.* Nothing serious, or it wasn’t meant to be. But I kept thinking about Vardaman and that one-sentence chapter from *As I Lay Dying*—“My mother is fish”—and I couldn’t stop myself—I tried very hard. I worked on it all night.

When the final was over, we were all just sitting at our desks. Ms. Poss walked to the front of the room.

I figure we'll start here:

Ms. Poss: “Class, I am in *love* with this response here, listen. One of you has penned a poem inspired by *As I Lay Dying*. It's called ‘I'll Never Eat Fish-Eggs and Why,’ and I bet y'all will pick up on the reference to Vardaman's famous chapter—shh, class!—the one with the famous ‘My mother is a fish’ sentence—quiet now!—I'll read it to y'all.”

Ms. Poss (*clearing her throat*): “‘I am vegetarian. I make no exceptions for fish-eggs, no— / though fish-eggs, some argue, is, was, were, depends / are you be, will you be, have you been / eating them? If so, will soon— / Once hardly, if ever, was truly a fish.

“‘My mother is a fish, or so she / drinks, I mean / “thinks.” / We aquarium on weekends together, and she believes / they are our ancestors / Pink, bright

blue, and yellow slippers— / “We were bright-colored like that too once,” she says.’”

Someone fake snoring.

“Stop that now! Have some respect! ‘My mother is a vegetarian. / My grandpa is a fisherman. / So that is complicated. / At family dinners, our plated ancestors / my mother and I both, staring down at ours. / And my grandpa’s longtime girlfriend is there / like a grandmother / insists / “Eat! *Eat!*” / My mother says we were bright-colored like that too, once.’”

With Ms. Poss reading it aloud, the whole thing felt much longer than I thought it would feel.

I mean, I had spent the whole night working on the poem. But on the page, once I printed it, it had turned out to be so short-looking—disappointing really—all that work and so much feeling, for it to turn out to be so small.

But then, when Ms. Poss was reading it out loud, it had felt like it might never end. It was the worst of both worlds really. I felt flattered that she liked it, or at least that it stood out amid the other responses. But some people were laughing, so I also felt embarrassed about that. They didn't know it was me, but I was sitting right there.

And then Luca, who was looking right over at me, like he'd known all along—maybe he had.

If you knew me at all, you might know it was me. But Luca was the only one who really knew me.

“I can't believe you had the balls to write about her drinking like, I mean, what if Ms. Poss had decided to, like—” Luca paused. He started to whisper. “*Call authorities?* Also, since when do you write poetry?” I was going slow, packing my things. I wanted to talk to Ms. Poss about the poem, so stalling. Someone kicked

my desk, right beside my hand, but I won't say who. Doesn't matter. Since it's the last day of school, they go away shortly. (Except for Luca, who stays.)

“Well, call me on Susannah when you get home,” Luca said. “Susannah” is what we named my landline. I don't have a cell phone. “I have some news,” he said, “I think you'll like to hear.”

Ms. Poss had a special bookcase. Ms. Poss was standing in front of the special bookcase when Luca left, finally.

“Thank you for saying that about my poem, Ms. Poss.” *But maybe, next time, ask my permission first, before you read it aloud to the whole class.*

“Berryman, Dickinson, Dove,” Ms. Poss narrated. “And why not Ginsberg and Myles”—she put a book called *Sorry, Tree* onto the stack, and I loved that title so much I could have cried—“Oh, and Frank

O'Hara! It's summer, after all. Why not have a little fun? And if you're writing about the mother, then you've got to read Sexton—and Plath. So we've got the Plath, and here's the Sexton. And here's Adrienne Rich—you'll like her." A stack of six became a stack of seven, became a stack of eight, became.

A stack of nine.

I stared.

Was it too much?

She wanted to lend them all to me?

"Are you sure, Ms. Poss?"

"Oh, sure. Just bring them all back when school starts." She flicked her hand back over her shoulder. "I really did love the poem, Avery. You have a voice, you have talent."

Pal, my grandpa—and the fisherman from my poem—was waiting for me in the parking lot.

Murky grit on his *I'd Rather Be Fishing* bumper sticker. Truck engine off.

Sometimes if he left the truck engine on, somebody would say something. Always made him feel bad.

He loved trees. Loved water.

(*Gone Fishin'* reads the bulletin)

(one bulletin for each person who pays respects)

(nervous we printed way too many)

(nervous he wasn't loved as much as we feel he deserved)

(as much as he deserved)

Now Pal, as most of you knew him,

actually founded an organization in 2005 called The Great Outdoors, a gathering of progressive outdoor sportsfolk, and we'd gather every month to write our government officials about the dangers of oil, of littering, overfishing certain bodies of water—you name it. We gathered once a month every month for the entire duration of George W's second term.

(he pronounced "W" like Pal always did)

("Dubya")

Now if it offends any of you all that I'm getting a little political here, allow me to speak for our dearly departed—our dear Pal—when I put it bluntly, "I don't care."