

Dangerous Acts

Nandi Comer

For Dwayne Joiner and all the risk takers

Sounds

On the street of Joy Road, dope boys pushing work and the
police
are scheming. At night you hear the pistol go boom and the
people
start screaming. It's people across the street getting thrown out
and
the house on the corner burning up.

You hear the sound *whea whea* on the big red truck. It's the girls
fighting on the corner, while their moms are looking out the
door,
ashamed of their daughters. In the winter you hear the Nike
boots
crunch in the snow.

You hear the Expedition go *boom boom* as it goes. There are
many sounds as you enter the hood of Joy Road.

BRITTNEY BLACK

I helped Brittney Black write this poem while I was teaching at Frank Cody High School. I think about this poem a lot because its writer gained a lot of popularity during my time teaching there. Brittney had memorized it and many of her classmates liked to hear her recite it repeatedly. When I read this poem the images depicting the neighborhood surrounding Cody feel somewhat celebratory while at the same time dangerous. Like my students I grew up in the Cody neighborhood, so I'm sure I also return to Brittney's poem because it is representative of a neighborhood that I am familiar with. But

Brittney's poem is not the poem I always return to when I think of my time at Cody.

Actually, I can't publish the poem I most remember. It's a lot like the poem above and does some of things the above poem does in that it also has violent imagery and tension. Both poems take risks, using language to depict haunting experiences. I chose the poem above for its approximation to the missing poem, but the missing poem is riskier than the one above.

The missing poem—let's call it "Loss"—was composed during a writing activity where I asked students to write about an unforgettable event or moment in their lives. After reading Lucille Clifton's poem "The 1st" and discussing Clifton's use of vivid imagery, I lead students through an exercise asking them to close their eyes and return to the place of their memory. Behind closed eyelids students re-created sensory details they associated with those moments. Then I asked students to take to the page, reminding them to include all the sensory details they had just re-created in their imaginations. Once students felt they had something to share, they volunteered to read aloud. Some of them had memories about their favorite birthday or the time they got a new pair of sneakers, but then there was a student who wrote about losing his mother.

The student, I'll call him "David," described a graphic scene where his mother was murdered by another family member. David expressed the pain he felt losing his mother to violence. He also addressed the poem to his mother's assassin, which gave it a complicated voice speaking out directly to the person that had harmed him. David seemed relieved after he finished reading his poem. He seemed as if he had finally allowed himself to directly challenge his mother's death. The rest of us didn't know what to say. Some of us sat in awkward silence.

Some writers describe their engagement with youth who have lost loved ones to violence as a process of healing, but I am resistant towards taking on that role. It seems inappropriate for me to claim to *heal* my students of their traumas. Sure, it helps the students to talk, but I don't think of the writing they create with me as an ointment to rub over a wound until it crusts into a scab, eventually becoming a barely noticeable mark. The writing in "Loss" had a very different

purpose. This was David's way of lifting up his sleeve and demanding that the community look at his scar. Dealing with his mother's death meant naming it. It meant calling out the names of his abusers. That kind of poem is not only hard to write, it's also the hardest kind of poem to hear from one of your students. David was asking us to see him whole. Other students wrote poems that day about falling in love with football, overcoming bullies, and keeping their heads in the books. Those poems can be beautiful, but they are oftentimes safe. David's poem entered the dangerous business of risk taking. This opportunity to address his pain and loss could also put him in danger.

Later I typed David's poem to include it in the school's anthology, but when the time came to choose which poems would be published, it was decided that for his protection the poem could not be preserved as written. He would have to remove all names and incriminating details associated with the loss of his mother in order for it to be included in the book. David and I worked on the poem, but out of frustration maybe, or impatience, he decided to pull the poem and no version exists for the public to read. That poem in its printed form is lost. Gone.

Though that poem is erased from the memory of Cody I think about it often. It took a risk that not many youth are willing to take. Poems like "Loss" say, *Look at what you have done. Look at what we are becoming. Look at our scars.*

Sometimes teachers will say that the poems students write about violence are not well crafted, or that they don't resonate, but I think these kinds of poems make us in the adult world uncomfortable. These are the kinds of poems that place in front of us some stark truths. Students need to be able to write poems that make us uncomfortable because, in truth, they are calling us out. Their writing asks us to see them and their world as it really is and not some edited smoothed-out version. David and writers like him remind us that there are young people who are losing parts of themselves.

David's poem seemed essential to his mourning process. David's poem took a definite risk. I am not sure I have ever taken such risks in my own writing. I still worry for his safety. I worry about the people around him. I remember my experiences with David and his poem. I celebrate him. I say, "I hear you."