

Slam Poetry from the Student Writers' Workshop 2005

Exorcism of Chains

By Lisa Tannenbaum, Grade 9, C. Milton Wright High School, Bel Air, Md.



Lisa Tannenbaum

I sit down to write.
Sounds and images caress my mind,
escape with my breath.
Trees growing, flowers blooming,
rain falling.
I sigh.
I dream,
Words unwinding, unfurling, uncurling,
Trailing letters through my brain.

I touch my pencil to the paper.

Voices explode.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
WHY ARE YOU WRITING?
WHAT’S YOUR IDEA, STORY, PLOT, CLIMAX,
AUDIENCE, ACTION?
WHAT IS YOUR FORM, PURPOSE,
INTENTION, STRUCTURE?”

I try to shut my ears.
The pencil makes a mark.

“WHAT LETTER IS THIS? WHAT WORD?
YOUR HANDWRITING IS HIDEOUS, YOUR
SPELLING ATROCIOUS,
YOU’RE WASTING SPACE! WASTING PAPER!
KILLING TREES!
ONLY FORMULATED FIVE-SENTENCE
WHO-WHAT-WHERE-WHEN-WHY-HOW
PARAGRAPHS ALLOWED HERE!
NO SMUDGING THE MARGINS,
NO DOODLES,
NO UNAUTHORIZED WORDS,
OR SENTENCES, OR THOUGHTS!”

I recognize the voice.
It is my eighth grade grammar teacher,
A harpy feeding on the rotting corpses of
empty poems.

She screeches, “NO!
STRUCTURE, CONJUNCTURE,
CONJECTURE, DEFECT!”

THERE –
YOU’LL NEVER AMOUNT TO ANYTHING IN
THIS WORLD!”

I grow angry, seething, breathing
fast and shallow, in great bursts.

And I retort:
“What are you doing here?
Keep your filthy comma-claws away from me!
I can write for myself.”

“I’M HELPING YOU!” She screeches.
“NOW, POETRY –
HAIKU, SEVENTEEN SYLLABLES, BLAND,
AND EASY TO UNDERSTAND –
MUST UNRAVEL THE MYSTERIES OF
THE UNIVERSE,
OR ELSE IT’S AN AUTOMATIC F!”

“Leave me alone!” I shout,
“Take your hyphens and parentheses
And editing knives and
Get back into the dark, dusty mothballed hell of
a prison

Where I first held your book of blasphemies in
my hand!
I never did learn anything from grammar.”

“THAT’S WHERE YOU’RE WRONG!” she cried –
“FLOWERS FOLLOW A FORMULA –
RAINBOWS ARE CONSTITUTED BY A PREDE -
TERMINED ARC –
THE TREES PUT DOWN SQUARE ROOTS, AND
144 BECOMES 12 BECOMES 3.464 –”

“GET OUT!” I scream,
“Any flower you tried to dissect
Would wither at your touch, and
Any tree would die!
These lilies bloom in the dark, rich loam
Of emotions and audiences
And concert hall filled with thunderous applause,
Not the dark quadratic mire!
And sunflowers –”

“THE AVERAGE TEMPERATURE OF THE SUN,”
she croaks, “IS –”

“The burning flame of Truth!” I cry
The hot dizzying pulse of ecstasy in the veins,
The emotion or the drug,
It doesn’t matter which –
The quivering throb of a beating heart –”

“LEFT AORTA, RIGHT AORTA,” she cries,

“There is no right!”
I shriek.

“How dare you impose your narrow chalkboard world
on me,
Sprinkle your

Yellow-chalk pixiedust
As a poison on my thoughts;
So beat me with rulers,
Carve numbers and rules into my flesh
With the point of a compass,
Bind me with
Thin-thread-gluestick-haiku-iambic-pentameter chains!

I will break free!
I will smash statutes to pieces,
Rip rhymes in half,
Grind grammar into the dust!
But I will write,
And
I
WILL
BE
HEARD!!”

My shout fades.
The echoes ring.
The clock hums and binds the world to itself
With Time as its chain.

I pant.
Sigh.
There is silence.
My breathing slows.
I sit down,
And I write.

Lisa Tannenbaum participated in the 2005 Student Writers’ Workshop. This poem was one of her projects.