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HONORABLE MENTION

MR. BERTEL POEM #3, OR SMART-ASS-LOGY 101

Ryan G. Van Cleave

Dustin Bertel, a.k.a. “Bertie from Room 30,” was originally the shop teacher, but cutbacks made him my seventh grade science teacher, then later, my English teacher, where our first project was writing letters to our elected representative of Illinois, Sen. Paul Simon. The purpose of the exercise: to demonstrate that our opinions matter. To this date,

none of those letters received a response. We didn’t hate Bertie, not really, but it was me who slapped bumperstickers onto his brown Plymouth Duster one night: “So many cats...so few recipes!” and “Don’t piss me off! I’m running out of places to hide the bodies.” I admit that he had a sense of humor about being forced into a roomful of teenage freak shows,

but all bets were off when he said one afternoon that, “A narcissist is someone better looking than you are.” He adored jazz, often playing Coltrane tapes in the background while we read poetry he assigned, usually frou-frou stuff like melancholy bouts of madness and leaves that turn red and golden then ease to the ground on their own quick wings. When

we switched out his Satchmo cassette for Van Halen, he erupted, flinging himself onto his desk and hooting like a barn owl. The next day, we had Mrs. Chow instead, who didn’t speak English well but read us real-life headlines from a joke book all period. “Body Search Reveals \$4,000 in Crack.” “April Slated as Child Abuse Month.” “County Wants Money

for Taking Dump.” Time is the great equalizer, my father told me, and he’s right. Being a teacher now, I understand Bertie’s pain, having recently received essays with lines such as: “One of the causes of the Revolutionary War was the English put tacks in their tea,” and “Writing at the same time as Shakespeare was Miguel Cervantes. He wrote

*Donkey Hote*. The next great author was John Milton. Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*. Then his wife died and he wrote *Paradise Regained*.” After a long day of teaching, I sip Sahara martinis and listen to Maynard Ferguson wail old Charlie Parker tunes.

The night softens into a blouse of dark, and I think often of Bertie, how he had the brown eyes of a good-hearted

beagle and told us that it was through the imagination that we twist over the wet rocks of the world, an idea I only remember now as the geese are slanting south again. Bertie returned after the Coltrane thing, quieter perhaps, but game enough to reroute our interest by telling us, “Tears are made up of almost the same ingredients as urine”

and “In Yukon, Oklahoma, it is illegal for a patient to pull a dentist’s tooth.” Still, we poured green food dye in his classroom humidifier and called him Dirty Bertie when he started dating the hot-mama lady janitor. Just today, though, I found an entire banana stuffed in my Blazer’s tailpipe, and a bumpersticker on the windshield.

“As long as there are tests, there will be prayer in public schools.”

My wife thinks it’s funny. My father, knowing the rap sheet of my juvenile years, says it’s karma. But in the brisk and shallow restlessness of mid-autumn, I come to terms with the weed-choked shore of my life:  
if Bertie did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.