

KOOSER'S OLD MAN

POETRY OUT LOUD: AN UNLIKELY JOURNEY

BY LAWRENCE HAGGQUIST

"In musty light, in the thin brown air of damp carpet, doll heads and rust, beneath long rows of sharp footfalls like nails in a lid, an old man stands trying on glasses, lifting each pair from the box like a glittering fish and holding it up to the light of a dirty bulb..." - Ted Kooser

Imagine a world without metaphor! How bland our existence would be if words did not possess the power to transform meaning; if the articulation of every thought had to endure the scrutiny of the scientist or logician, like reality being filtered through the dubious mind of the skeptic. We would be reduced to a world of cogitamus ergo sum. We think therefore we are. But, really, what would we be? Limited, shackled, dead! We could not use words to stretch frozen ideas or wrap a thought like pink bubble gum around yellow pencil. Perhaps, in such a world devoid of metaphoric expression, we could successfully describe the notion of biting into a piece of fish, but we most certainly could not transform that fish into a thought; for how could one ever bite into a thought? Absurd! In a world of black and white, a world without poetry, without love, without angels, without possibility, thoughts could never be fish, and certainly they could never glitter!

Metaphor is the beginning of possibility. It welcomes the unlikely notion, the stranger at the door, and invites him in for a cup of java. Why? Because that stranger might just be God, and God would deserve a cup of coffee at the very least, even if you always doubted him. And so you wonder, why this talk of metaphor and God and poetry and glittering fish? Well, over the past three years, I have been blessed to coach three amazing students in the art of poetry recitation: Kylie Batlin, Morgan Brown, and Robert Marchand. Kylie took runner-up in the California Poetry Out Loud (POL) Championship in 2009, Morgan won the

championship in 2010, and Robert is this year's champion. Each of their success stories unfolds like a good metaphor.



I'll start with Morgan's story. In April of last year, Morgan represented the state of California at the POL National Finals held in Washington D.C. One of the poems she chose to recite at the competition was poet laureate Ted Kooser's *In the Basement of the Goodwill Store*, a poem which describes a lonely old man sifting through forgotten items in the desolate basement of a Goodwill store. The man himself is as forgotten as the items he peruses, and the poem's narrator sarcastically ridicules the old man for his lack of taste and disheveled appearance. Using the second person, Kooser's narrator chums

up to the reader and beckons him to join in his comic observation of the old man. The chief metaphor that Kooser employs in the poem involves a pair of glasses, which serves as a tenor for two main vehicles: glittering fish, and mirrors. By bringing these three otherwise disjointed and isolated images together through comparison, Kooser effectively communicates a transformation of emotion that occurs in the poem whereby the reader, having been initially seduced into laughing at the old man, eventually comes to empathize with his awkwardness, loneliness, and even his desperation. Morgan Brown's exquisite delivery of Kooser's poem at the POL National Finals elicited in the audience, among who were judges Garrison Keillor and Alfre Woodard, a range of tangible emotions. As Kooser's subject tried on his "fish" in stanza one, Lisner Auditorium at George Washington University exploded with laughter. But, later, when he flashed his "mirrors" at the reader, the silent gulp of guilt filled its throat. Not only did Morgan successfully convey the poem's meaning, she powerfully transmitted its emotional content.



Ted Kooser's poem *In the Basement of the Goodwill Store* recognizes a certain truth about life: that the rare moments when we begin to perceive the world through new eyes or when we come to sudden epiphanies about ourselves, always seem to happen by chance; as if understanding is somehow guided by the same improbability that gives power to metaphor.

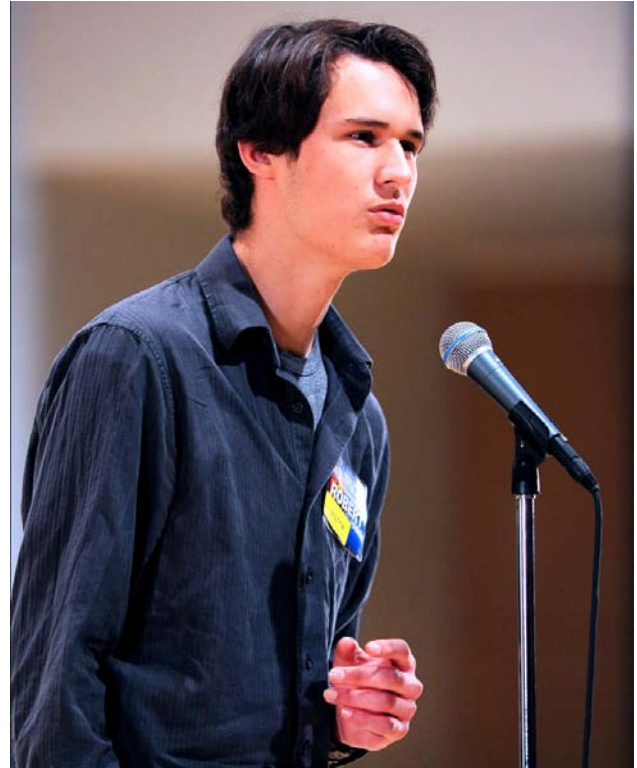


Only in a world where glasses can indeed become fish is it possible for rockets to fly to the moon, or strangers to fall in love, or Buddhists to reach Nirvana. This lesson about how metaphor relates to life is one that Morgan Brown knows all too well. Not only did Morgan spend incalculable hours with me reviewing the content of Kooser's poem (as well as a host of other poems), but her very passion for the art of poetry sprung from an unlikely convergence of circumstance. Morgan's first foray into the world of poetry involved an activity entirely unrelated to my English class or Young Writers' Club. As a student in Pacific Grove High School's Leadership class, Morgan was assigned to be my Secret Santa. Aware that I enjoy reading poetry, she kindly wrote a few simple rhymes to accompany the gifts she gave me throughout the Secret Santa week. One of the memorable verses she wrote reads: "Chocolate is made of yummy stuff/ We taste it with delight/ The more we eat the more we want/ Some say this isn't right..." Of course, I delighted in receiving the poems and gifts from Morgan and persuasively encouraged her to join the Young Writers' Club, a club for which I serve as the advisor. Not many weeks later she decided to participate in the POL Program, and her love for the art writing grew exponentially from there. Morgan has since had her work published on several occasions; she has received multiple awards, and now wishes to pursue creative writing as a minor in college.

Just think - if Santa Claus didn't exist I might not have privilege to write these words praising Morgan's accomplishment. Life certainly is unpredictable!

Kylie Batlin's story of success is equally remarkable in its unlikelihood. In November of 2009 I was scrambling around campus trying to stir up interest in the POL Program that I had recently learned about through a local friend and poet, Garland Thompson. Garland was in charge of organizing the Monterey County POL competition, and over a cup of java he somehow cajoled me to take time out of my already overloaded schedule to promote POL on the campus of Pacific Grove High School. Kylie was literally sitting in the hall outside my classroom eating lunch when I started my recruitment campaign. I mentioned to her that she'd be excellent at poetry recitation and that moment marked the beginning of her love affair with poetry and the spoken word. I successfully recruited 16 students to complete in the program that year. Countless hours and many poems later, Kylie was our school champion; she went on to win the Monterey County Championships, and finally took runner-up in the State competition, which was held on the Senate Floor of the State Capitol Building in Sacramento. Kylie was greeted by Assembly Members Bill Monning and Abel Maldonado that day. Along with her award, she brought home a lifetime of memories and a newfound sense of pride and accomplishment that never would have happened had Kylie Batlin not decided to eat lunch near my classroom on just another foggy day in November.

Unlike Kylie's and Morgan's stories, Robert Marchand's experience with the POL Program follows a much more conventional route. Robert is active in the school's drama program and has a creative writing professor as a father. He was the 2010 runner-up performer at our high school, finishing a close second to the eventual state champion Morgan Brown. Robert relishes every opportunity to get on stage and is custom-fit to be a champion in poetry recitation. He recently won the California State POL Championship, and everyone in Pacific Grove will be cheering him on when he competes on April 29th in Washington D.C. for the chance at a national title.



Robert will be performing three poems at the national event: Chicago by Carl Sandburg, Buick by Karl Shapiro, and Dover Beach by Matthew Arnold. Should the stars align and speak through his voice on that day, he may very well be awarded the top prize of \$20,000 in scholarship money. Regardless, he will emerge a champion. The power of poetry will have changed his life forever!

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Photos by Brian Baer

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