

RADICAL TEACHER

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Poetry

If the Tiger Sleeps

All I Desire

by Peter Neil Carroll



PETER NEIL CARROLL
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If the Tiger Sleeps

My first students came on buses and subways, Chicago's maw spilling out second-generation ethnics, first in their families in college: Greeks, Italians, Ukrainians, Jews from the north side, south side Czechs and Blacks, an Assyrian who often drove me home in a beaten Triumph. Months after the big riots of the Sixties, the kids were hip, energetic, troublesome, some serving time in jail on weekends. One beardless boy pursued by the FBI for draft protest got nailed at graveside prayers when his mother died. One young lady said her father hated short skirts and asked my opinion of her thighs. A recent bride failed to deliver a paper because the groom had a nervous breakdown, begged to pass the course, and still owes me ten pages on Jonathan Edwards. We were in this mess together—Vietnam, civil rights, women's liberation—an era of stress. I was the rookie with a PhD.

Groovy, said the Assyrian when I spoke of *enthusiasm*—the god within, separating self-claimed Puritan saints

from sinners who abounded. He knew a thing or two about speed, pot, acid, ecstasy that accompanies spiritual birth. Once I began class with questions no one answered. Sensing torpor I assumed they hadn't prepared, scolded them, stalked from the room. But the Assyrian insisted it was my fault. You're the ringmaster. If the tiger sleeps it's your job to wake him up.

In every classroom, I see his face imploring me to teach. I see too the graduating senior cramped in her one-arm desk writing the final exam, pinned to her blouse a red-white-&-blue RFK button as her candidate lay dying in Los Angeles. We lived for hope. I taught my heart out for that class, everyone passed, even me. I hope that bride finishes her paper on Edwards soon. I might not last much longer. I just found the Assyrian's obituary, surprised me how old he'd become.

All I Desire

My students come with their problems:
Dyslexic, epileptic, the gaunt mother
without hair, the swimmer who crashed
her skull at the bottom of the pool, can't
remember when the papers are due.

I've heard them all: every apology,
alibi, excuse, stranger-than-life story,
every reason not to be present, pleas
for exemption, extension, amnesty.

All I desire is truth. Their lives are hard
enough. I love them in their frailties, efforts
to be whole, normal as the homecoming queen
with a D average who crossed her tan legs
and asked, "Professor, how can I get an A?"

I will do anything to ensure their spirits stay
unbroken. Sometimes they return, ecstatic,
grateful, humble. Sometimes a student's obituary
reminds me that grades are not important.



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