

Poetry in the Basement

MEGAN E. FREEMAN

My teacher for fifth and sixth grade was Beverly Glassford. I adored her. She smoked Virginia Slims and insisted on being called *Ms. Glassford*, never *Miss* or *Mrs.* She was strict and uncompromising and taught us delicious words like *isthmus* and *ingot* and *interloper*. Students in other classes found her terrifying, and we didn't say or do anything to contradict them. We rather enjoyed the awe she inspired. She believed in us, and we accepted that high expectations came with a degree of ferocity.

Our northeast Los Angeles classroom was in the basement, across from the boys' bathroom. The only windows were high up on one wall, and through the wire mesh covering the glass, we could see feet and ankles walking or skipping along the sidewalk. Hardly anyone came downstairs except to pee, and most students just held it until they got home. The basement was Ms. Glassford's domain. Interlopers were rare.

Then one day, the poets showed up. There were two of them, and they weren't professionally dressed or

neatly coiffed like Ms. Glassford and the other teachers. They wore peasant shirts and fringed moccasins, batik skirts and quilted vests. They smelled musty. In contrast to Ms. Glassford's rigid, exacting presence, they were loose and relaxed and, well, groovy.

I know I wasn't the only student who went home that night and reported at the dinner table how weird they were and how dumb this poetry business was. But my father, a dedicated Unitarian Universalist and poetry fan, took seriously the principle of affirming every human being's inherent worth and dignity.

"Perhaps," he offered, "instead of thinking of them as weird, you could try thinking of them as different. And perhaps thinking of them as different will open your mind to what they have to offer, instead of closing your heart to the gifts they bring."

Why I listened to my father in that moment I don't know. Maybe the generosity of his invitation deflated my preteen arrogance. Maybe I secretly wanted to like the poets but needed permission to diverge from my peers' judgments of them. Whatever the reason, when the poets returned the following week, my mind and heart were open.

Their names were Georgia and Ameen Alwan, and they read to us and gave us prompts and frameworks in which we could write poems. As we wrote, they walked through the dimly lit classroom with open dictionaries, pausing at our desks to whisper different words in each student's ear. Our task was to work the words into our poems, and we marveled later at how the words enriched the poetry without seeming the least bit imposed. Sometimes as we wrote, Georgia improvised melodies on her flute.

After each weekly session, the Alwans gathered our poems and huddled at one of our learning centers in the basement hallway. They read through that day's writing, circling poems they wanted to talk



Megan kept a copy of her class photo from 1977, when Ms. Glassford was her fifth-grade teacher: she's in the second row to the left of center, with her hair pinned back with barrettes.

about the following week. Then the poems were sent home with volunteer room mothers who typed them on Ditto masters. Sometimes, Ms. Glassford chose me to go to the office and make copies on the Ditto machine. I loved turning the crank and watching the poetry roll off the drum, the pages sweet-smelling and damp with purple ink.

The next week, we'd come in from lunch, hot and sweaty after playing kickball, to find the Alwans waiting for us with stapled packets of original poems on our desks. If our work had been selected, we read our poems aloud to the class. Ameen asked us questions about our writing and pointed out noteworthy phrases or lines. Then we wrote more poems to new prompts and the weekly cycle began again.

At the end of the school year, the Alwans collected the best of the student poems from all the schools they worked with and published a poetry anthology illustrated with student drawings. Everyone in the class received copies of the book, and our parents could buy more, if they liked, which of course they did. We were published poets, after all.

When I was in sixth grade, the Alwans invited a few of us to read our work at Beyond Baroque, a well-known poetry venue in Venice Beach. The English teacher from the local high school drove us, and it took so long to get there I was sure we were being kidnapped. The room was smoky. We stood at a microphone that had been lowered to our height and read our poems to adults seated around small tables. The audience listened and nodded their heads. The English teacher made little humming sounds when he heard a poem he really liked.

A dark-haired boy with dark eyes and long eyelashes read after I did. He was a year older, and we fell in love that night. We didn't see each other again until the next year, when I started seventh grade at the junior high. He played drums in the jazz band and walked me home after school, even though he lived in the opposite direction. He still wrote poetry and wanted to read mine.

Georgia and Ameen Alwan came into our classrooms and did poetry with us

every week for three years. I still have the books they published, filed on the shelf next to other literary magazines and collections that have published my work over the decades. They were the first publications on my résumé, and even then I felt the gravity and importance of what that meant. In those collections of poetry, we reached beyond Ms. Glassford's subterranean classroom. We were interconnected, all the poets from different schools and their families and readers we would never see or meet. We harnessed language and captured moments, ideas, emotions, and images. We made ourselves vulnerable. We made ourselves powerful.

The beautiful dark-haired boy and I both grew up to be professional writers. He became a chef and writes articles for food journals and websites. I became a teacher and still publish poetry in literary journals and anthologies. When my poetry chapbook came out, I dedicated it to the Alwans.

In 2009, I began work on what would become my first published novel. It was a reimagining of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, but set in contemporary Colorado, where I live. I worked on the manuscript for three or four years, but something about it didn't click. The story was compelling, but the writing was lackluster.

I was sitting in a breakout session at a writers' conference, taking notes and trying not to bang my knee on the table leg hidden by the hotel tablecloth, when the solution struck me. An honest-to-God epiphany, bright lights and angels and everything. The answer was so obvious, I had to refrain from laughing out loud in the middle of the session.

I needed to rewrite the entire book as a novel in verse.

Once I started the revision, I knew immediately I had returned to my

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Each year, the Alwans collected poems from the students and published an anthology.

mother tongue. I was fluent in poetry. My character's emotional life and physical experiences opened up. The story became three-dimensional and the voice of the book emerged. I could feel the confidence and certainty in my body, and I wrote with new freedom and joy. I was back in that basement classroom with the wire mesh over the windows and the feet and ankles running on the sidewalk above. Words fell from dictionaries into my poems and flute music played softly in the background. My story had found its form.


I've often wondered how my life would be different if I hadn't been lucky enough to attend that little northeast Los Angeles school in the



Alone, a novel in verse, is a reimagining of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* set in Colorado.

late 1970s. If I hadn't had a father who loved people and poetry enough to model kindness and respect in the face of adolescent attitude. If I hadn't been given the gift of poetry. How would the adult me have understood grief and love and fear? How would creativity have manifested? How would I have navigated and made sense of my place in the world?

Poetry has risen to all those occasions and many more. The gifts the Alwans and Ms. Glassford gave me (*words matter / language is limitless / beauty is everywhere*) sustain me. Poetry has been the forge that shaped the tools of my life. I use them

every day. I see them in every sunset. Every word is gratitude. 



MEGAN E. FREEMAN attended an elementary school where poets visited her classroom every week to teach poetry, and she has been a writer ever since. Her debut middle-grade novel, *Alone*, won the Colorado Book Award, is an NCTE Notable Verse Novel and a Goodreads Choice Award finalist, and is included on over a dozen "best of" and state reading lists. Megan is also a Pushcart Prize-nominated poet and the author of the poetry chapbook *Lessons on Sleeping Alone*. An award-winning teacher with decades of classroom experience, Megan is nationally recognized for her work leading workshops and speaking to audiences across the country. She lives in northern Colorado. Learn more at www.MeganEFreeman.com. Photo credit: Laura Carson

2022 NCTE ELECTION RESULTS

In NCTE's 2022 elections, Tonya B. Perry was chosen vice president. Perry will take office during the NCTE Annual Convention in November.

The Secondary Section also elected new members. Elected to a four-year term on the Steering Committee were Jacquay Durant, San Bernardino City Unified School District, CA, and Rex Ovalle Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, Chicago, IL.

Elected to the 2022-2023 Nominating Committee were Anthony Celaya, Western Washington University, Janelle Quintans Bence, English teacher, TX, and Summer Melody Pennell, University of Vermont.

On the NCTE website, see additional 2022 election results and details on submitting nominations for the 2023 elections (<https://ncte.org/get-involved/volunteer/elections/>).