

Poetry Porch: Poetry

Letter to a Teacher

By Helen Heineman

For Dr. Dwight Durling

Each day you came to class
With large cardboard pictures
Of Wordsworth, Byron, Keats and Shelly,
Propped against the blackboard
As you intoned, "And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts . . .
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns."
I'd never heard a voice like that,
And listening to you read
And watching the face propped on the rim
Of the blackboard, was sure I felt what Wordsworth felt
Surrounded by the cliffs of Tintern Abbey.

"Tender is the night," you read,
Propping the picture of Keats
Listening from his chair at the window
To the sound of the Nightingale,
Compelling us also to hear the song.
And when "the hare limped trembling
Through the frozen grass,"
We felt the meter also stumble.

Though our college was in Queens,
In buildings that were once
A reform school, in that classroom
With its old wooden desks,

Chalk dust graying the blackboard
And the poets' pictures,
I heard the sounding cataract.

Each day, I boarded the Q36 bus
Where, on the long ride home
I read the next assignments,
Oblivious to the views outside,
The neat suburban houses and dense traffic,
Inhabiting instead
“Perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.”