

Chris Butters

NOTES FOR A CLASS

less a lesson plan
than notes
for a class

less a class
than a call
for a response

the kids seated there
one raising her hand
another looking out
the window

Martina
Alex
Freddie
Jamal

even if the response
takes long
even if all of us
are gone

even if some are down
the pipeline

and I am gone
to the next gig as a teacher

the hope that something
sticks
something prickles
like a trick of light

that they follow through
on their science project
that they not take no
for an answer

outside the drug dealers
and police
outside the parks
and museums

the city
as classroom
the classroom
as city

on the backboard
a globe
of the world

Washington
Lincoln
the rest
of the pantheon

one photograph
added on

Martin Luther King
and Malcolm X
together
smiling

the lesson plan is
that the thigh bone is
connected to
the tail bone

that in order to pass
you must speak in
Mr. Butters class

that Jamal can
diagram a sentence
if he can do
the hip hop dance

that we are going
to pass through the fire
of this eighth grade thing
Black, white, Latino, Asian

as testified to
by Toni Morrison
and William Shakespeare

and Walt Whitman
and Gil Scott Heron

that whole, glittering
mosaic of voices
to be studied
this year

each voice amazingly
the same
each one dazzlingly
different

as splattered
and scrawled
upon the city
subway walls

love rage
obscenity poetry

the kids who tread
these mean streets

never crossing
each other's blazing
moment
in the darkness

the graffiti

ALL THE CLICHES

All the cliches come true,
but with an odd twist to them,

either the boy gets the girl,
only he is gay
and she is another man,
overwhelmed after a long search
by an unexpected tenderness,

or a man discovers the kingdom of god
is an infinite ocean within him,
only when he returns to his hometown
he can't go home again,

All the clichés come true,
but with an odd twist to them,

whether a woman leaves her husband
for the glittering image of another man
only to find
the same bastard there,

or a man and a woman say the same thing
they vowed 50 years ago,
I love you, in sickness and health,
but with a new emphasis.

All the clichés come true,
but with an odd twist to them,

it has all been said,
it has all been done before,

whether we sell
ourselves out,
and then unexpectedly want

to buy ourselves back again,

or we fight city hall,
and lose,
but change the world
in the subtlest of ways,

laying the basis
for future struggles,

All the clichés come true,
but with an odd twist to them

and the moon rises over the city,
beautiful as the moon in Timbuktu
but even more beautiful
to the people strolling by,

because it is actually
happening
on the street
where they live --

everyone writes about Paris, France
or Timbuktu,
not about Duluth, Minnesota
or Lake Hiawatha, New Jersey –

Beauty is truth
and truth beauty, Keats said,
that is all you need to know on earth
and all you need to know,

but working people don't quit
their day jobs yet,

there is beauty
in solidarity,
and solidarity
in the struggle for justice,

and truth in organizing
against the bloodsucking bourgeoisie --

people can reach
for the stars,
or dwell in the bowels
of hell,

people can go either way --

All the clichés come true,
but with an odd twist to them,

as if the dog that barks
our long walk home
those twilights of our
childhood

is the same dog that barks
as we make our way home
now working
for a living,

strange to think,
and yet we hear him so clearly
after all these years,
like a voice from the subconscious,

nothing is new
under the sun,
although every night the block is still
with the climax of many dreams

and the stars rise
over the skyscrapers
and the moon rises
over the glimmering river

and a breeze from the west

sweeps the leaves from the trees,
and shimmies them
down Eldridge Avenue.

I love you.

TIMESHEET

Each day I signed out
was one more day
of solidity,
one more day they did not
fire me,

one more day
it was a little harder
for them to fire me,
another day of seniority

and sick leave, it was all
so satisfying
as I marched out
the door.

But what was I thinking,
this was a Hollywood movie
based on a book
by someone else,

this was the cavalcade
of my life passing by,
suddenly I would stop
and catch myself,

my joys and fears,
my friendships and enemies,
my struggles,
my triumphs,

passing through the waist
of the hourglass,
energy withdrawing from me
like the stars.

It was one day closer

to my death,
one day closer
to my longed-for retirement,

one day closer
to never again
seeing the friends
I had made,

Bobby,
BJ,
Tanya,
Fred,

although when they did not astonish,
they drove me out of my mind,

seniority,
sick leave,

what the hell was I
thinking,

that they could they shield me
from the emptiness,

tick tock
goes the time clock,
when the energy goes
it is gone,

outside
the leaves of the maple tree
were vermillion
in late autumn sunlight,

birds sang,
people bopped,

the cocker spaniel

walked,
its brief moment
in time,

and then
there was me,
making my
mark,

going to work
each morning,
coming home
each night,

I would suddenly stop
and catch myself,

before signing
out the slavery line,
before marching
out the opened door,

this day would never come again,
tomorrow was
a perfect storm cloud
on the horizon,

what the hell
was I even thinking,

seniority,
sick leave,

I didn't know whether
to laugh or cry,

life, death,
living, dying,
that flowing
relationship,

oh, signing

was so
bittersweet.

that time sheet

16th STREET

Every time someone paints
their house on 16th Street
it is part
of a greater conversation.

It is a conversation
not just with the owner,
but also with the house
and all the other houses on the block.

When you paint your house
on 16th Street
it is a serious business.

You are not just choosing
a color different
than the other houses.

You are also choosing a color
that builds upon the history
of all the colors
that came before.

It is as if the houses themselves
are conversing,
as each is painted, the color fades,
is repainted again, coat after coat,
year after year.

In a few years
someone else's house
is the faded one
that needs repainting.

Afterwards the people are proud
of their house,
now freshly painted.

The neighbors are glad
because the color
reflects upon all the houses
on 16th Street, not just theirs.

The older painted houses
are sad now,
but they are also
happy too;

sad ,
because they have been
eclipsed,

but happy too;
happy because
they have been part
of the conversation.