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I Said Poetry

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I Said Poetry

By Sara deBeer

My students, living on the streets
By the seat of their pants,
Perhaps the only pants they own,
Had read Kafka's "Metamorphosis."
My mentor told me they identified with Gregor.
Like that human-sized cockroach,
My students' presence triggers revulsion.
Strangers despise them;
Kafka understands them.
I understood I had misread
These students' capacity for understanding.

So I said, "Poetry"
But they reacted as if the handout
Were written in some Martian tongue,
As if a poem were a cockroach.

In spite of these protests
I launched into "Choose"
Which I'd chosen
Because Carl Sandburg is my "go-to" poet
For people who resist going to poetry.
His conversational tone
Beckons each reader to come close.
No word-wrestling,
Just idea-engaging.

Our discussion ranged further and wider
Than my narrow reading of his four-line poem.
My students expanded my understanding
Of the multiple meanings
Of faith, trust, survival.

We read poems, we wrote poems, we shared poems.
The last class, a young mother from Nigeria
Told me, shyly, proudly,
That she planned to buy a journal
To continue her new-found pleasure in writing.

Months later, I saw her and asked,
“Did you ever get a journal?”
“Oh yes! One for myself;
One for my son.
We write together every night.”

I said, “Poetry.”
I meant, “Learn from me.”
I discovered worlds upon worlds
Inside each poem,
Inside each student,
Inside myself.

Author’s Note: This poem is based on the author’s experience of teaching mini-courses for Beat of the Street (BOTS) Center for Creative Learning. BOTS, based at the Charter Oak Cultural Center, Hartford, CT, has the goal of making real and lasting changes in the lives of those experiencing homelessness.

Sara deBeer, a former public school teacher, is a published poet and professional storyteller, who offers workshops on a variety of subjects for participants of all ages. More information is available at her website: www.storydebeer.com. Her work has been published in previous editions of the *New Jersey English Journal*.



“Leaves” by **Kendal Shirvan**, a senior at Northern Highlands Regional High School. Her full bio can be found with her other drawing “Sunflower Finger.”