

Quarterly West



P O E T R Y E X T R A

THE COAT

Eighth grade. Mrs. Jaffrey's class. It was always cold in Mrs. Jaffrey's class. It was always freezing in there. And every day I wore my coat to her class she told me not to.

"Why not?" I asked her. "It's cold in here. I'm cold."

"Because you're not supposed to wear your coat to class," she kept saying.

Seemed pretty stupid to me, so I kept wearing my coat to class. I was cold.

After a few days, Mrs. Jaffrey told me to hang my coat in the principal's office. Told me to stay there for the rest of the afternoon. Told me to write her a five hundred-word essay on why I shouldn't wear my coat to class.

"Why?" I asked her. "I can't do that. How'm I supposed to do that?"

She looked at me over her horned-rims. Her lips were white. She had her arms folded. The north wind coming up off the practice fields outside glazed the windowpanes along the wall with ice.

"Be creative," she said.

I sat in the principal's warm office and wrote a hundred sentences, like the ones I'd written on the detention hall chalkboard for Mrs. Jaffrey after school:

I will not wear my coat to class because someone might mistake me for a bear and shoot me.

I will not wear my coat to class because I might sweat so much the class will flood, and somebody might drown.

I will not wear my coat to class because I might get so hot I'll catch fire and burn the whole junior high down.

That kind of thing. It was more than five hundred words. I thought it was pretty creative.

Mrs. Jaffrey didn't think so, though. Neither did my old man. Next day, he showed up outside Mrs. Jaffrey's class with my essay in his hand. Checked me out of school. Told me to put on my coat.

"It's in the principal's office," I told him.

"Leave it then," he said.

It was cold outside. Ice coated the trees, the rooftops of houses, the windshields of cars parked along the curbs, the sidewalks, the streets. The old man drove too fast, dodging fallen tree limbs in the road, his pickup truck sliding all over, down to Pecan Park. He told me to get out. Told me to open the tailgate. Told me to set the essay there on the tailgate in front of me. Told me to bend over and read each sentence, one at a time.

There was a new two-by-four in the bed of the truck. The wood was white. He picked it up, stood behind me. I read a sentence, and then he hit me one. Then I read another sentence. He hit me again. There were a hundred sentences. He kept hitting me. The wind blew up hard and it started to sleet, and all around the park tree limbs groaned and creaked and snapped off. I didn't have my coat on. I was cold. Ice fell all around me.

“The Coat,” *Quarterly West* 38 (Winter/Spring 1994): 16-17.

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