

Veteran English Teacher: The Chalk Magician

Bill Meissner

His fingers are turning to sticks of chalk. Yes, all ten of them become chalk from deep in the sea. He's deep in thought, writing on the blackboard with cursive that could make the students dizzy. His fingers script book titles and authors, semi-colons and commas, they draw diagrams: rising and falling lines that parallel the ocean waves, circles that describe the rotation of the solar system.

The puffs of dust fly into the air and when the students inhale it, they understand each word and symbol.

No flimsy whiteboard for him. No chintzy colored markers, their ether scent so strong they could make you faint. Just chalk for him: just chalk, plain, simple, amazing chalk, and a solid blackboard that's dark and deep as the night sky.

He writes a word or two, and the whole dictionary appears on the board. He writes the words *skin of a grape* and the students taste it on their tongues. He draws the sun, and the students feel the heat on their faces. He draws a cloud, and cool rain falls on students' heads. He writes the word *simile* and suddenly they see the connection between a spider web and a galaxy. He writes the word *poem* and the students take a deep breath filled with insight and awe.

After his classes, he can't scrub off his thumb and forefinger, his skin permanently stained with pale dust. He could exit through any classroom door, any window and someone would always know where he's been just by the mark he leaves behind. Years later, his students might still feel his spiral fingerprint on their brains.

Just before class is over, he reminds them of those tiny microorganisms that shed their shells and give their lives so we all can learn. *Chalk is everywhere*, he tells them: in the curve of our skulls, beneath our fingernails, hiding inside the white ladders of our spines. Accept chalk, he tells them. Bow down to chalk. Believe in the beauty of chalk. Let chalk teach you about life and death—about sinking to the bottom of the ocean yet still being of use, still rising to kiss a blackboard, a roomful of people gasping at your memory.

As the students file out, he nods at each of them.
He wishes they understood that chalk will outlast us all,
leaving traces of itself long after we are gone.
He wishes they understood that some day when the oceans dry up,
the whole earth will turn to chalk
and leave its huge white fingerprint there,
in the middle of the universe.