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Slamming poetry

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"BOOOOO!!!" The jeering escalates. "PULL that eight!"

That's Amani Al-Fatah, appreciating poetry. The seventh grader from southeast D.C. is showing a General Education class exactly how much poetry can matter.

The Bentley Lounge is rocking as Washington poets duke it out at a poetry slam, with scores held up Olympic-style by student judges and rules weighted on the side of enthusiasm: be raucous, be noisy, and if you hate the score a friend gets, shout at the judge.

The students in LIT 245: Experience of Poetry will end up astonished at what they see. One will be so energized he'll e-mail the professor a new poem that night. And perhaps, like last year, this taste of poetry in the classroom will even get a few students hooked on the wilder side of words in the D.C. community.

A poetry slam isn't just poetry as performance. It's poetry as boxing. These contenders are an eclectic group, from AU law professor Jamin Raskin to Al-Fatah, hair in braids, standing on a coffee table because she's too short to see over the lectern. Soft-spoken Kahina Robinson ("I am frozen fire/jalapeño ice cream") squares off against a hulking, knit-capped poet with the stage name of D. J. Renegade ("I am in love with a woman/who leaves footprints in the sand of my dreams").

One after another, they deliver their poems, and after each poem is finished the scores are held up. Raskin weighs in with a piece about punctuation marks, "pregnant teardrops . . . a lawyer's best friend," but the pint-sized Al-Fatah slams back:

I diluted my mouth with narcotics
trying to visit the saints . . .
there I was, free of the disappointment of church

And by the time she's into the "metamorphic sanitational cravings" in which clouds are like Palmolive dishwashing liquid, scrubbing the world squeaky clean, she's downed the law professor and his "high-flying semiotic kites."

The poets chew on words, get dismembered by vegetables, see moons as shiny as the side of a tuna, and react to friends' scores in the proper style--"the judges SUCK!" Later, after the poets depart, the students collapse in their chairs as if the door has shut on a wild wind.

In the sudden silence, a plaintive question rises: "Do you expect us to write like that?"

Betty Bennett, literature, College of Arts and Sciences, tells the Gen Ed students not to worry, that all writers have their own voices-although, truth be told, for the moment the students in this class are speechless. "The name of the course is Experiencing Poetry. This is one way to experience it," says Bennett.

A student struggles for words: "The way it sounded-it just sounded like I was hearing their feelings!"

Bennett leans toward him, nodding vigorously: "Right!" She goes on, "Writing is about telling the story of our lives. It's another form of history. The record of our society."

The visiting poets have helped her make a powerful point: Art can take root in spaces opened up with honesty, and that honesty, and not only wordplay, is what poetry feeds upon.

The AU Distinguished Professor is well known for her scholarship on Mary Shelley. While the depth of her knowledge gives her a natural interest in graduate classes, "All the professors in the Literature Department have made the commitment that we'll all teach in the Gen Ed program, because we feel we should be sharing our knowledge at all the levels at the university," she says.

"I find it very exciting. It allows me to meet students at an early stage of their development, and really no matter where they go-no matter what their major becomes-to really introduce them in a meaningful way to the creative side of not only literature but of themselves. And I shouldn't say 'introduce,' because a lot of them write now," she adds. "What I really do is encourage them."

Most of the visiting poets came from D.C.'s Duke Ellington High School for the Arts or Charles Hart Middle School, where, through a magnet program, they take after-school workshops in creative writing and, earlier this year, interviewed AU's Henry Taylor, literature, CAS, and a Pulitzer Prizewinning poet, for their arts magazine.

Bennett brought the young poets to AU for the first time last year-as a way of adding a new dimension to her poetry course.

In April her class will host its own poetry slam, modeled on the March event, which ends in a dramatic playoff between adult poet Denise Johnson and seventh grader Al-Fatah for third place and another battle for first and second places.

It's a nervous moment when Larry Robertson rises to compete against the formidable D. J. Renegade (Joel Dias-Porter), a nationally known poet who has appeared on the Today show and in the movie Slam and is armed with lines like

My grandmother says
Love is stronger than grog,
can convince you to build a house
in a volcano's mouth.

The gangly eighth grader stands up after him, gets as far as

I am into your noise, blackman
cotton-candy-coated appeasing notes

when he chokes on the cotton candy, twice, and decides to change his plan of attack. He'll recite another poem, he's got lots of them, and by the time he reaches the part where he says,

I challenge his intelligence by asking him the square root of masculinity
his mouth drops like the gravitation of Jupiter has joined his false statements

it's clear that Robertson has beat everyone, including D. J. Renegade, who will be his own teacher next year at Duke Ellington.

"Any critics of the D.C. public schools here? That's an eighth grader from Southeast," says emcee Nancy Schwalb, writer in residence at Charles Hart Middle School and executive director of the D.C. Creative Writing Workshop.

The AU student judges later admit they downgraded the adult poets just a tad for being so clearly well skilled. But the fact remains that the AU class was dazzled by this poetry experience and the emotional bravery of its young poets.

"That Larry, I predict he's going to be famous," one student says. "I was like, he's in eighth grade! He's awesome!"

"That girl, I don't even know how she knew so many words," says another, dazzled by the seventh grader who let loose from memory about the "metamorphic sanitational cravings" of clouds and beat out an adult for third place.

"I think we saw a prodigy," says Bennett, putting the experience in perspective. "We can't all be prodigies." But, she says, anyone can enjoy the experience of poetry and let it open a window on other peoples' souls.

And she had another tip for would-be writers in the class: "You know these workshops they're doing? They're working at it. This does not 'floweth.' It 'worketh.'"