

*High School**

PENNY KITTLE

Then one of my students with the bleached hair and the sad, eye-linered eyes
says high school to him is a maximum-security prison

Where people follow too close behind whispering words like “gay-boy” and “fag”
and you can’t tell who’s willing to make you bleed and who just says they are

And I consider how to live as a teacher in this place that suffocates some
teenagers and stews in a poison so corrosive it can boil you from the inside out

I remember Chris buried by a sister half-dead from licking acid off tiny Sponge
Bob stamps who shot herself in the living room on the day of their father’s funeral

And he came to school pale and feverish with shock, sat before a naïve teacher
analyzing the language of the Puritans, the prison bars shut against his soul.

I look at that boy with vacant eyes peering out from beneath ragged bangs
his thin fingers clenching opposite elbows, alone and silent at a broken desk

And I think I am asleep in high school too, allowing this cruelty by my own
passivity and self-involvement, and I don’t remember how to wake myself

I recall John Dewey said, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own
child, that must the community want for all its children.”

But how to wake this community to the potential and passions of the teenagers
who live within these walls? How to wake myself from accepting indifference?

Yet how can they imagine Linda scraping the last nuggets out of the dog’s bowl
or what kind of nightmare it might be for her to come to school hungry and afraid

Each day I watch the beauty of youth crushed by the hostility of ignorance
and the dismissive disrespect of adults who neglect instead of nurture them

And yet here I am. I return each fall with hands clasped around my notebook:
bring me your stories, your lives, your spirits. Let us write these truths together.

*With thanks to Tony Hoagland for “America”