

Laws and Spirits
Susan Mullens

An arbitrary wind blows and scatters the specks of poppy seeds. They land on the freshly turned earth and seemingly vanish, nature's slight of hand. I sprinkle dirt as fine as ground pepper on top of where they may be. I let the rogue bird-feeder sunflowers, an inch tall and arching towards the light, grow. I smile at the unseen hand or sparrow's beak that sowed them here. They will grow much taller than I in just a couple of months, and from a single seed a spiraling thousand seeds will emerge at the center of every bloom. Such is the nature of nature.

The garden is planted. My face is streaked with mud. My fingernails are clogged with earth. I started the job with my work gloves on, but I can't work that way and soon ripped them off. My husband and boys don't tend the garden. That's my job. I sit on a white plastic chair and admire my invisible work. I can't see it, but I can feel it. I'll soak it everyday, and the skin over the seeds, like baby's toes in the bath water, will pucker and wrinkle. The beginning stems will curve upward like the necks of white cranes, lifting seeds back into light of day, disguised as leaves. The fine capillary roots will snake their way through grains of dirt.

As the sunlight slices through the rotating clouds I feel the energy of things being born; the legs of ants again scratch the earth, honeybees awaken groggily, a white pedal butterfly sways upon a daffodil. I hear the jingle of a dog's collar, a child's voice in the distance, the rumble of automobiles, the buzz through the telephone wires, the hum of an airplane high over head, the sounds and energy of life emerging after a harsh Chicago winter.

Monday morning on the way to school, I click off the radio news and listen to Linda Ronstadt covering a Little Feat tune: "I've been warped by the rain; driven by the snow, I'm drunk and dirty, don't you know, and I'm still willin'." The neighborhood ain't what it used to be. Not that long ago it was cracked and grimy, splintered and peeling. Young boys threw down the crown on street corners and with military cadence yelled, "king killa." Though the dust of tenements newly demolished mingles in the air with the dust of fresh sheet rock, all those high school kids have been scattered by an arbitrary wind to far-flung neighborhoods. Those same kids still make the pilgrimage, waking

before the sun to jostle in trains and buses to Wells High School. They are the ones who are left after the magnet schools and charter schools have sifted out the others. Wells High School is what is left for them after their neighborhood schools have shut down or are just too rough. Many of their parents had been students here back in the day before the neighborhood had been flung to the wind by unseen hands. The cameras with blinking blue eyes, flowerpots, and young, perky white women walking their designer dogs have replaced the gangbangers on the corners.

Inside the school not much has changed. I struggle to open the art room windows to release, into the cool morning air, the trapped musty odors of the 160 teenagers that pass through these doors every day, merged with the smell of crumbling manila paper, twenty-year-old and yet still watery tempera paints, and ancient Elmer's glue the color of old bones. Every scrap is precious.

Outside the window the old crow carries a cigarette butt up to her nest in the maple tree. I'd heard that city birds lined their nests with plastic straws, used tampons, tattered band-aids, and other street debris along with twigs and grasses. That old crow has returned to this tree year after year. She fans her blue-black wings and settles on her perch as iridescent green leaves sway, speckling her with shadow.

Only six more Mondays until this school year ends and the long sacred summer begins. The students and the young crows will test their wings. I hurry from cabinets to tables with Tupperware bowls full of feathers, scraps of fabric, sequins, twigs, buttons, paints, markers, hot glue guns, outgrown toys, other odds and ends. The kids are making magic umbrellas, umbrellas that protect all they cherish from that arbitrary wind that takes and scatters. An array of umbrellas, hot-glued with little green army men and the grainy newspaper grins of Bush and Cheney, dangling rubber snakes, small action figures poised and ready, some of them are crawling with plastic flies, spiders, and roaches. They hang from a make shift clothesline. Dangling upside down, the umbrellas resemble a row of nests. I feel a strong kinship with the old crow.

I turn on the lights. It's time for Sarah to come walking through the door. Sarah's umbrella is held firmly by a plaster cast of her own hand. Vines of blue cloth flowers grow from her hand and wind around the staff and up to the dome of the umbrella. The outside of the dome is painted pale cerulean blue with puffs of angel clouds. Faith,

Respect, Love of Family, Love of God, Hard Work, Loyalty, and the University of Illinois are written in the clouds in perfect gold script. Beneath the dome, in large silver bangles against a black background, are the words Let It Rain! Bring It On. Sarah can handle it, I think to myself.

Sarah is a senior, number four in a class of 200, 4.1 GPA, Law Academy, National Honor Society, student-council treasurer, soprano in the choir, and president of the Faith Club. Every Wednesday morning at 6 A.M., the Faith Club gathers to pray for us all. This morning the world is out of sync. Sarah is late.

“It’s not my fault,” she says as she huffs into the classroom. “It’s not fair. I’m going to fight this. They’re going to be sorry.”

“Just tell me who it is Sarah, I’ve got your back,” I say in jest.

“It isn’t funny. I was passing through the metal detectors and they took my water. It was nice and cold; I just bought it on the way to school. It wasn’t even open.”

This is a high school where once or more a month the paddy wagon and the ambulance arrive. I watch it all from my crow’s eye view of the street below. I gather the news, as does the rest of the faculty, from the impeccable gossip of students. In this high school, the sweet smell of cannabis wafts through the stairways and escapes from locker rooms. Here we have lockdowns, code red. You’ve seen us on the evening news. Here Sarah’s complaint doesn’t seem to warrant a fight.

“Did they say why they took your water?”

“They say that last week some kid had a water bottle filled with vodka. I don’t see what that has to do with me. Don’t they know how hot it gets in here? They don’t need to punish us all because of one stupid kid. Those kids will keep doing it anyway.”

I remember something that happened in a sixth-grade class when I was paying my dues as a substitute teacher in the early 1980s. The cool boys wore the red vinyl Michael Jackson jackets with a dozen zippers and one white glove. They tried to break dance in the cloakroom. The cool girls wore big hair, leggings, and torn sweatshirts, strutting like Madonna, who was nothing like a virgin. Most of the kids wore their glasses, braces, ponytails, and changing bodies with awkward self-consciousness.

The morning was going surprisingly well. That meant nothing; it wasn't until after lunch that things usually got crazy, something in the school lunches no doubt. I had, on the sly, gotten the page numbers of the next assignment in each textbook from a girl in the front row with a very neat desk. I wrote those on the board, told them their teacher had left them the work. I threw in a story about a chapter quiz in history, planned for tomorrow, that they should study for if they finished up early. I gave the neat girl a wink, and she smiled the smile of conspiracy.

I kept my eye on Joey, a suave boy with light brown hair, cut long in the front and short in the back in an Elvis style. He was as polite as a Marine or Eddie Haskell from Leave it to Beaver. I didn't trust him.

"Miss Mullen," he asked, "can I put my can of Coke on the window ledge to keep it cold for lunch?"

"Make sure you close that window when you're done." The outside window ledge was covered with snow. I knew that trick -- leave the window open and in no time snowballs would be hurling in my direction.

"Yes, Miss, I will." And he did. "Thank you very much for being so cool Miss Mullen."

What a nice boy, I thought.

Sometime in the middle of spelling I noticed the red Coke can in a little girl's hand hid behind her open workbook. I watched her kick the chair in front and slip it to a boy wearing glasses. He ducked down for a sip and passed the can to another conspirator. That can was making its way around the room. One sniff and I knew why. The kids were having a little rum and Coca-Cola with their weekly spelling words. I took the can. I knew things were going too well. I did what I had to do. I buzzed the office.

"Oh please don't, I swear it will never happen again. Please, be cool. No one will ever know. I thought you were cool." Joey pleaded.

I didn't want to get Joey in trouble. I knew if Joey looked bad, I looked bad. It never would have happened if his regular teacher had been there. She must have told them that she would be out or they would never have planned such a thing. I was the weak link. But I could see in my mind's eye tomorrow's newspaper. "Teacher allows drinking party in sixth grade classroom," as I buzzed.

The principal was the first one up. I handed her the can and ratted on Joey. Within a few minutes the police were in the classroom putting the cuffs on Joey. “Who else was drinking?” the principal asked.

This is just a scare tactic. Surely they weren’t going to haul him away. A week of detentions and a parent conference would do. No one was asking my opinion. I sure wasn’t going to let the little girl with the pigtails in the third row, the boy with the glasses, or my conspirator get haul off to the slammer. “I’m not sure,” I said. They questioned Joey while the silent class held their breath. He didn’t squeal. He was a good kid. I was the rat.

I used that Joey story on the first day of school when I had gotten my own classroom. I was scared to death that they would walk all over me, so I said, “I’m not a teacher who likes to yell and act tough but I think it’s only fair that I warn you. Just because I’m not screaming and yelling at you doesn’t mean you can get away with anything.” I then told the wicked tale of how I had gotten an entire classroom of sixth graders locked up for sipping a little Coke and Bacardi on a snowy afternoon. I remembered hearing a student in the back whisper, “It’s true bro, my cousin was in that class.”

“Don’t let the smile fool you. I’m not as nice as I seem.”

“You’re right Sarah, they shouldn’t make everyone suffer. They have to do something. It’s not always easy to know what to do. What would you do?”

“You wouldn’t believe all the things that go on here. They probably have the bottle hid in a locker already. They could let us take water in if it’s in a sealed bottle. They could sell water in the cafeteria. The food they sell is crap. They don’t need to be so ignorant. I’m meeting with the principal today after school,” Sarah fumes. “Some people get away with murder around here, some people in this very class and you know what I mean.”

She’s talking about Anthony. I want to slap her righteous little face. Art teacher assaults honor student, story at ten. Yes, I know what she means. Anthony should be walking through the classroom door in about ten minutes. He’ll apologize for being late. He’ll apologize more to himself than to me. He’ll say something like “There’s no excuse

for me being late. I can be disciplined enough to get here on time. I'm going to improve myself everyday. I'm moving forward." After class he'll shake my hand and thank me for a great class.

The first week of school, I was more than a little cynical about Anthony. The class was working on a cut paper mosaic. Anthony had done the sketch in class but wanted to do his at home. I doubted that I'd ever see the finished work, but it was the first week of school and I thought I should give him the chance to do the right thing. Anthony brought his work in the day it was due. He carried it in the room inside a black garbage bag. His face was beaming as he unveiled it. It was a beautifully crafted garden of pink tulips made of creamy onyx tiles and pink and green Venetian glass tiles.

In all my years behind the big desk I had never seen a young man like Anthony. Anthony transferred from Farragut high school on the southwest side. He lived way out of district but nobody cared. How had Farragut let Anthony slip away? Anthony was of Mexican descent, and tall, slightly over six feet. He had a buzzcut and a beaming smile. He was a Golden Gloves contender and a classical pianist. He showed me a photograph of himself in a white tie and black tails sitting at a grand piano in Orchestra Hall, performing at a young peoples' concert. Anthony is that hope that keeps this wobbly world ever turning on its imaginary axis. I had been duped before, but Anthony is the real deal.

There was a snowy day six or seven weeks ago. The students were looking at a slide of a gritty Dorthea Lange dust bowl photograph, a beaten down white woman and her ragged, hungry-eyed children. The kids wrote about the photo. Most of them thought the mother and kids were Mexican. Anthony was slumped face down on the table, his long arms flailed out hanging over the edge. I whispered to him in the darkness.

"Are you ill? Do you need to see the nurse?" I knew we didn't have a nurse.

"No," he moaned.

When the bell rang at the end of class Anthony just laid there. "What's going on Tony?"

"You don't know me. Nobody here knows me," he said between sobs. "I'm a horrible person. You wouldn't like me if you knew me."

“Don’t tell me who I would or would not like. Do you know how you just shine? You make me a better teacher. You make the other kids better students. Just being around you makes us better people. Whatever it is you did, I’ve already forgiven you.”

“That’s cause you don’t know me. I went to Farragut but that’s not where I came from.” He struggled as if his words caught and knotted in his throat.” He hung his head. His breathing was raspy and staccato. “I was locked up,” He moaned. “I’m horrible.”

“Why were you locked up?”

“I stabbed a guy back at Farragut.”

“You need to forgive yourself,” I said realizing that this problem was bigger than any words I could offer. “You need to put this behind you. You are not that person any more. Can you talk to the guy you stabbed?”

“No,” he said between sobs. “He’s dead.”

“Did you kill him?”

He didn’t answer.

Maybe the years I spent in this musty classroom had deadened my sense of smell, but I didn’t realize until he lunged for the wastebasket, and hurled a sour-smelling brew, that he was drunk.

“Give me your car keys, Tony.” He did. “What class do you have last period? I’ll talk to the teacher.” The bell rang. “Stay here, Tony.”

Mrs. Olsen’s encore homeroom was on their way up to my room. An encore homeroom was a group of students who were trying their luck at passing freshman year for the second or third time.

A wiry black boy lumbered into the classroom with one pant leg rolled up and a gold embroidered baseball cap cocked to one side. He took one look at Anthony and said, “Will you look at that motherfucker, he’s drunk off his ass.”

“Take off the hat,” I instinctively replied.

“Shit, if that were me, they’d have me out of here so fast wouldn’t be funny.”

That kid who couldn’t make it out of the ninth grade had the smarts to sum up the whole mess in two sentences. I had to make sure that the powers that be didn’t find out what was happening here. Tony must be on parole. Not only would he be suspended, he’d be sentenced.

Tony's second period teacher was Mr. Cerda, the Cuban Spanish teacher. His nickname among the faculty is El Capitan. He governs his students with a sharp tongue and artillery. He can hurl a chalkboard eraser with uncanny accuracy clear across a classroom, leaving white dust in his young victims hair. He patrols his classroom leisurely brandishing a yardstick as if it is a riding crop. He strikes hard and fast, smacking the desk of anyone foolish enough to stare out the window or doodle in the margins of a notebook. Wood shatters, splinters fly, and hearts cease to beat.

I went to his room as soon as Mrs. Olsen arrived. I've watched her with her boys and knew she'd do right by Tony.

I knocked softly on Mr. Cerda's door. A student opened it.

"How many times are you going to bury your poor abuelita Maria, just to dig her up and bury her again the next time there's a test?"

Maria stood at his desk mute and stunned. She finally asked, "Can I make up the test?"

"Of course you can, Maria."

"When?" She sighed.

"Next year when you repeat Spanish One. Go sit down. Mrs. Mullen, how may I help you?"

"I just wanted to let you know that Anthony was with me last period. He isn't feeling well. I let him stay in my classroom."

"How sick is he? He's breathing, is he not?"

"When I left my room he was vomiting in my wastebasket."

"Is he drunk?"

"Why do you think that?" Cerda had that gift. The same gift that my Sicilian mother had, those dark eyes that can see into the heart.

"He's drunk isn't he?"

"Has he been drunk before?" I asked.

"No, I've never seen a student like him before in my life. He is like the son I never had. Do you know he shakes my hand at the end of class and thanks me? In thirty years I've never had a student like him. We've got to make sure the discipline office and the administration don't find out about this. Those cabrons will fuck everything up."

When I got back to the classroom, Mrs. Olsen was on her cell phone. Her boys were playing Uno in the corner of the room. Tony was sitting upright with glassy eyes and a slight grin on his face. Mrs. Olsen was talking to a Franciscan priest on her cell phone.

“Tony’s experiences,” she said, “or rather his response to his experiences, make him uniquely qualified to mentor young men.” Tony, it turned out was a faithful Catholic.

Over the weekend he had gone back to the old neighborhood, hanging out with his boys, drinking all night. He hadn’t been home. He’d come to school straight from somebody’s smoky basement. It brought it all back fresh and raw, hit him square in the chest and sent him down for the count, but he was already pulling himself back up on his feet.

The bell rang and Tony felt well enough to go to his next class. At the end of the day he came for his car keys. He shook my hand, gave me a hug and thanked me.

“I’ve never been anywhere like this,” he said, “where people care.”

“You bring out the best in us, Tony.”

Tony’s family had owned a construction business in the far western suburbs when he was a little tyke practicing at the piano. That arbitrary wind blew into his life with a gale force blast called deportation. It tore his family up by their roots and blew his dad back to Michoacan. Tony’s music, his good grades, and his beaming smile were of little use in the third-floor, back-room flat they now called home. Some young men join the best fraternity to fit in and get along. Anthony joined the toughest gang.

Sarah doesn’t give up. She meets with the principal, who tells her that she can bring her bottled water if the bottles are sealed. The next day the security guards take it away from her. Sarah meets with the Local School Council. Sarah talks to the head of food service downtown at central office. Sarah talks to one of Arnie Duncan’s (the CEO of the Chicago Board of Education) assistant. Phone calls are made.

That sweltering hot last week of school before graduation, Sarah, with pompous charm, pulls out a sweating bottle of ice-cold water.

We hand out the last report cards. We clean up our classrooms. We walk out to our cars carrying geraniums and fans. We gather at the local upscale bar crowded with teachers from other nearby schools toasting the end to yet another school year. I silently

say a toast to Joey who must be in his early thirties. I glance at a young male grammar school teacher sitting at a nearby table and wonder if maybe that could be him. Here's to Anthony playing the Moonlight Sonata at his graduation, and to Sarah who fought the water bottle fascists and won.

I go home and sit in my garden. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes we don't, but like the daisies, impatiens, sunflowers, daylilies, hibiscus, peppers, and tomatoes, they'll grow towards a light much brighter than ours. There was a garden in this backyard before I bought the house, and there will no doubt be one after I'm gone.

Teaching is a lot like gardening. You can only do so much. You can't live their lives but maybe you can help by giving them the right amount of sunshine, water, and just a pinch of bullshit. Find a shady corner for the impatiens. Prune back the hibiscus in the fall. Give the sunflowers all the light they can stand and they will seek out more. A gardener must know her garden well. Maybe we're getting there. I don't know. I'm just hoping that Sarah doesn't forget, now and again, to pray for us all.