

her, I would not possess the faith in humanity I have now, would not walk in the world the way I am able to now, would not be the woman I have become. Everything I am I owe to a teacher who, without even knowing me, made me see that I mattered.—*Marika Brussel*



## **FROM ROCKS TO RHYME**

I'll never forget the day my college English professor read the poem that determined my fate. It was spring 1982. After a year of dabbling in a variety of subjects, I had finally settled on a geology major. Learning to distinguish between metamorphic and sedimentary rock formations, deciphering the meaning of layers in cuts along the road, were accomplishments of which I, a wife, mother, and returning student, was especially proud. Being a geologist had a certain ring to it. It meant adventure, prestige, and, quite possibly, a great deal of money.

In order to get my degree, of course, I had to take a number of classes outside my major. I had always done well in English, earning A's in high school and even tutoring other students who were struggling, so I welcomed the requirement—not because of great interest but because I thought the class would be easy.

That school day began like any other, with geology lab. We were studying topographic maps, which represent earthly structures with spiraling lines and concentric circles. From the beginning, I had been having trouble understanding the configurations and visualizing the earth below. The map was a flat surface while the earth was three-dimensional, and I could not mentally bridge that gap. Dizzy and starting to sweat, I looked around at the other students and saw no signs of confusion in their faces. They all appeared to be answering the assigned questions with ease. Meanwhile, I watched the clock, eagerly awaiting my escape. How, I wondered, could I ever be a geologist without grasping this most basic knowledge? I left the classroom bewildered.

Dragging myself to English, I contemplated dropping out of school. I had succumbed to the Peter Principle, I decided, rising to my level of incompetence. School was fun, but I was kidding myself if I believed it could ever be more. Why should I even bother going to class? But I was already at the door, and anyway, I needed to sit down.

Professor Heffernan, a wiry, middle-aged man with an edgy intensity, began class on time, as always. The topic of the day was the poetry of the nineteenth-century British poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. I was only half-listening as Professor Heffernan talked first about the poems' structure and then about the innovation for which Hopkins is known.

There he stood in his jeans and running shoes (he'd often mentioned his need for a daily run), completely unaware of my pain. A truly good teacher, I thought, would have picked up on it.

Despite my preoccupation, I perked up a bit as he recited the first lines of Hopkins's "Pied Beauty": "Glory be to God for dappled things/  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;/ For rose-moles all in stipple  
upon trout that swim;/ Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings . . ." I briefly marveled at the inventiveness of those words, the unique use of alliteration, the vivid imagery. By the time he had finished the poem, however, I was back to brooding.

But then came Hopkins's "Spring and Fall." "Margaret are you grieving/  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?" began Professor Heffernan. The poem centers on Margaret, a young girl who sadly observes the falling of autumn leaves. The speaker initially wonders at her sorrow—"Leaves, like the things of man, you/  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?"—but ultimately attributes it to an unconscious, "ghost guessed" recognition of her own inevitable death. The poem concludes with the line, "It is Margaret you mourn for."

Here Hopkins was at the height of his powers, and so was Professor Heffernan. Sitting on one of the desks, body contracted, voice resonant, he delivered the poem precisely as I imagined Hopkins would have

decreed, illuminating with impassioned restraint the simultaneous loss and hope the poem expresses. Professor Heffernan, in fact, was the perfect vehicle for Hopkins's craft: his cadences, rhythm, and tone left me not dizzy or sweaty, but breathless.

Falling leaves. Now, these were symbols I could understand—symbols of life's brevity, of nature's tragedy as well as its beauty. With his reading of Hopkins, Professor Heffernan opened up a world, one in which I instantly knew I wanted to immerse myself. Immediately, I abandoned the lines on the map and embraced the lines on the page, lines whose meanings were not limited by terrestrial forms but liberated by the infinite range of human experience.

Today, nearly two decades later, I am a professor of literature myself. On my office wall hangs a hand-written version of "Spring and Fall," a gift from my husband and a daily reminder of the teacher who changed the course of my life. Some might say that anyone could have performed that reading, that I was ripe for a conversion. The latter is no doubt true, but I also know that only this particular man could have brought my conversion about. It was his interpretation that spoke so profoundly to me that day, taking me in a single, breathtaking moment from rocks to rhyme.—*Ona Russell*