

Jim Daniels: February 24, 2017

I remember exactly where I was when I read my first Jim Daniels poem. It was at the main post office on Fort Street in 1988. I opened the Tiger Stadium Fan Club's post office box and found amid the usual donations and membership forms a small parcel in which was a thin volume of poems called *The Long Ball*. As a leader of the effort to save Tiger Stadium, I had received poems set art the ballpark before—earnest, well-intended efforts often in rhyming couplets, the kind of poems I might have written if I hadn't sworn off my poetic aspirations. So I wasn't expecting much when I opened the book on the metal-topped post-office table. After one poem, I knew these poems were different, contacted Jim Daniels, and made it a point to attend his Detroit appearances. Two years ago, when researching an anthology I am co-editing about Tiger Stadium, I discovered that Jim had set one final poem, "Elegy for Tiger Stadium," in our wonderful, historic ballpark, and my co-editors and I are honored that this this poem will serve as the fitting finale for the book which should be released over the summer.

When Marygrove faculty members initiated *Defining Detroit* in 2000, Jim was our first guest. After his stirring reading of his epic poem, "Time Temperature," at a morning class session, the students from Marygrove and local high schools spontaneously stood and cheered, one of the few times I have ever seen a poem get such an enthusiastic response.

This poem, dedicated to James Baldwin with whom Jim Daniels and my colleague Loretta Woodard studied at Bowling Green State University, is a candid examination of racial attitudes in suburban Warren in the 1960s and 1970s. What the students appreciated was the poem's honesty. It doesn't try to hide the racism with which its speaker grew up. (The N-word appears with disturbing frequency.) Instead, Daniels, responding to a challenge from Baldwin, shows the necessity of acknowledging this charged past to move beyond it, and the poem follows its speaker's definite but unfinished movement into awareness. Jim's poems and stories—about people moving in and out of jobs, friendships, and romances; set in Detroit-area factories; in Warren's schools and saloons and on its playgrounds and streets; at his parents' home and that of his grandparents who remained amid the industrial abandonment and poverty of Detroit's lower east side; and, of course, at Tiger Stadium—have this same fundamental candor, this willingness to tell the truth about the lives of people who are not often the subjects of literature. That's why students continue to respond to them, why Jim Daniels's work continues to generate debate and discussion leading to insight.

Jim Daniels left Detroit many years ago, but, as with our other great exile poets—Robert Hayden, Philip Levine, Toi Derricotte, and Lawrence Joseph—Detroit has not left his work. *Rowing Inland*, the book he introduces tonight, is further proof that our region remains a rich field for literature, a region of people whose lives should be remembered, whose stories should be told.

Please welcome, Jim Daniels back to Marygrove.

--Frank D. Rashid