

# poems to teenagers

by g gupta

For My  
Angst-ridden  
(because that was the disguise I wore),  
Poetry-writing  
(because it goes with angst and my commitment is sorely lacking),  
Black-wearing  
(see above)  
Moody  
(see above, again)  
Hopeless Romantic  
(because what are we without Love?)  
Ultra-rational  
(because of my parents)  
Irritatingly Argumentative  
(because of my brother)  
Teenage Self:

Who would have thought  
that this would be  
your life?

Dear Teenage Boy

with your hair worn long to be unlike everyone else  
but we know it's just part of your disguise,  
do not make a career out of being sullen.  
I can speak from experience that  
it  
does  
not  
work.

But rather, serves only to make those around you roll  
their eyes when you aren't looking.

I know that your parents are divorced and  
estranged  
and that your father suffers with kidney disease and  
is on dialysis and  
I try to use this knowledge to  
cut you some slack  
but  
I can see your future (at least part of it,  
for it resembles my past)  
and, I will tell you right now,  
it  
does  
not  
work.

Just like the overestimation of your abilities—  
healthy arrogance or just plain  
arrogance?

No,  
I know it is teenage insecurity  
and I would like to save you from it  
but, to be honest, the thought of failure,  
of my advice falling on your deaf ears,  
affects me  
more than I might like to say.

Dear Austrian Exchange student,  
I know you are only here for a year but  
your accented English pronunciation  
of big vowels and half-swallowed Germanic Rs will stay with me  
when you leave.

I will be able to conjure your voice forever:  
this I can promise you and  
no, it's not  
a compliment.

You wanted binary answers. Finality and, perhaps,  
a way to navigate the treacherous waters of  
your future self and choices.

I found this profoundly  
annoying.

And, when you transferred out of my class in Term 2  
because you were only in Canada for one year and,  
of course, you wanted to experience as much as you possibly could  
in that time,  
I was only mildly nonplussed.

Mostly I was relieved.

Dear Children of My Partner,  
I am frequently irritated  
by your high-pitched demands and  
seeming inability  
to wield your knife and fork in any way resembling a human being.

I have read books on caregiving in an attempt  
to understand you. It's futile.

When I was 26 years old, I burned to have a child.  
Then I got a dog  
and the feeling passed  
on to linger small and indistinct in the background of my being.

Many years later when I met your mother  
and she said that she had "progeny" I felt  
as though my fate was being  
resolved.

I grossly misunderstood what struggles would ensue between:  
she and I  
you and I  
I and my-  
self.

I love your mother very much.  
And you both  
are a part of her  
I will never truly understand.

But, I will feed you well  
and care for you  
when you are sick  
and I promise  
not to euthanise you when you least expect it.

You can count on me  
for that.

Dear Overweight 16 year Old,  
the way you interact  
with your surroundings slightly superior,  
normally negative, and  
your tendency toward the manic at times—  
especially when you are feeling as though you might  
finally be understood—  
is laid so bare to me  
as to be embarrassing.

I admit that more than once you have spoken to me directly  
and I have ignored you by pretending  
to do something that takes up my auditory space (like washing dishes)  
when, in reality, I heard you  
clearly.

I will never answer your questions about my personal life  
directly. I do not want us to share  
that intimacy.

It's not that I don't like you  
but, I don't.

And what I mean by this is  
when my position has ended and I vacate  
this space  
I will not be saddened never to see you again.

Two more things:  
It occurs to me that of all the children I teach, I  
probably will see you again because life is like that.  
And,  
your plainly spoken desire to cuddle my dog  
rivals only my own.

Dear Young Russian,  
I know you object to when I point out  
your culture but the fact is  
you are. And your parents  
do not speak English.

You are a study in adolescent behaviours surrounding  
the development of identity.

I like the following:  
You have watched and read *American Psycho* at least 5 times.  
You want to buy a \$700 dollar wallet.  
You intend to wear a two-piece suit everywhere but at school.  
You are real and make no apologies for who you are.

Don't you see? This is rare. (I am speaking  
not to you but to  
the adults who hear and see only the acne-scarred face  
arrogant walk, mistake  
the tone in your voice for anger  
or worse.)

I am happy to see you arrive at my door,  
your protege in tow even  
when the bell has long since rung and  
I am exhausted by your peers,  
speaking of the older girls you like simply  
because they are hot.

You remind me of me.

I wonder what you would think  
if only you knew.

Dearest Troubled Gender Fluid Girl,  
Do not make life harder for yourself simply  
because it isn't.

Do not make yourself into "the bad kid"  
who punches walls and  
wears in-school suspension  
with pride.

There is no honour sitting in a rickety desk setup  
against the wall in the office  
amongst the kids who are not  
like you.

But, who am I to judge? What do I know?

I, to whom you gave homemade kimchee  
then made no big deal about it.  
It was a big deal to me. Many things  
you have done have affected me more  
than I sometimes wish  
they did.

I heard that last year you wanted to be called  
by a different (male) name but when asked about it  
sloughed it off like it was  
so last year. Perhaps  
it was.

Or it was  
your mother's fierce  
disappointment that quelled that desire.

Speaking as a (sometimes) mother,  
to me you would not be  
a disappointment and  
you are fierce too.

Wear it with humility.

Dearest Painfully Thin Grade 9 Boy  
who rarely meets my eye;  
whose dark unkempt hair  
is already flecked with grey;  
who wears the same fuzzy-lined hoodie everyday,  
though, you left it in my room over that rainy Spring Break and I despaired  
at the thought of your narrow shoulders being cold;  
who participates in group labs with a sad diffidence;  
who shuffles into the morning class with sleep in his eyes;  
who looks as though he is napping when we watch documentaries but  
always hands in the exit slip;  
who rarely eats but often pulls a multitude of snacks  
from his bag and proceeds to share them  
with the rest of the hungry vultures in the room;  
whose younger brother is in my Grade 8 class and seems to have been given  
all the confidence and handsome good looks whilst, you, the elder got few  
to none;  
whose mother is in palliative care—  
you  
will  
survive.

Dear Self-destructive Hypochondriac Boy,  
We connected over your insomnia, though,  
at the time, I was unaware of the full extent  
of your maladies.

I even emailed your mom when she took off to Europe with your stepfather  
and left you and your sister in the care of your aunt who lives  
an hour and a half bus-ride from the school.

I thought I had a handle on you then.

But it wasn't until parent-teacher interviews  
that I became aware that your experimentation with  
Molly was most likely to blame  
for blowing out your sleep patterns  
and your thyroid.

Why are you so bent  
on pathologizing yourself?

*Dis-ease* does not make you more interesting  
to anyone.

And I will bet that your recent trip to Disneyland  
was fun,  
even to you.

Dear AR,  
I use your initials because you defy epithet—  
not because I can't think of one (believe me, I can think  
of many), but because they are all, somehow,  
inadequate,

like the thin skin of insolence you wear  
with bravado and  
not a little  
self-consciousness.

When you told me (stupidly) that you stole the Coke  
in my cupboard,  
and I got mad (mainly because the can was probably older than you are  
and you have anaphylactic allergies) and said that now I have to lock the  
(previously  
unlocked) cupboard, and that I can't trust you; and you said, "No one can trust  
me.";

I saw the tears in your eyes and I know  
they were not about how  
now I knew you  
like everyone else.

No, they appeared in response to all  
the possibilities  
you suddenly saw fall away  
around us.

I, too, saw them go.  
They were magnificent.

Dear Principal's Eldest Daughter,  
your tiny, barely legible writing  
and insanely fast speech have discerned you  
from your peers,  
regardless of the fact that your class is populated by  
shallow thinkers who refuse to open their mouths.

Your presence is a boon to me  
and when you are away doing one of your many extra-  
curricular activities, I despair  
at the silence that ensues.

A question: Would I have noticed you the way I do  
if not for your lofty affiliations?  
Do I treat you differently because of those same affiliations?  
(Two questions)

Probably. For though  
I am a teacher I am  
a human  
too.

I have no idea how to reconcile these facts and it occurs to me  
that you can see right through me  
to that very same place  
of unknowing.

Dear Undiagnosed ADHD,  
you are more than just another Grade 8 to me.  
There are some kids who just touch your heart  
and you  
for me  
are he.

Yes I know your mom. Her cigarette smoke tinged  
voice and rough demeanor  
are only endearing to me.

I would not necessarily extend this courtesy  
but she is like you  
in many ways and  
her intense love for you shows  
plainly on her face.

You, my friend, are in amazing control of your body  
sometimes and others  
not so much.

But I appreciate your restlessness and  
tacit comprehension of the built world.

Few with whom you come into contact  
throughout your educational career  
will see this genius in you.

You will do wonderful things—  
of this I am absolutely certain.

Let the haters hate. They don't know you  
like I know you.



#### About the Author

gunita was once a teenager herself. Her recollections of this time are disconcertingly vivid. She often questions whether this makes her a better or a worse teacher of adolescents. Lately she is tending toward the view that she has no place in secondary education. She is certain this view will change. It always does.

gunita lives in Langley BC with her partner, her partner's (half-time) kids, and a smallish dog of Mexican-German descent with bulging eyeballs.