

Poems

Noel Sloboda

Failed Test

Unspeaking, we stare at the empty
blue book between us.

She did not write one word on her midterm,
and I want to know why. I know

she knows Buck and Steinbeck inside out;
I know she can do the work. She reads

everything assigned and more—
more than anyone in class.

She has the vocabulary
of a college student. Finally, she breaks

the silence, asking in a small voice
if I know *As I Lay Dying*—

she wants to talk about Dewey Dell.
I lie and say I don't know, rolling

my eyes toward the clock.

The Future-Scholar Confesses

My brother held pages hostage.
He would snatch from my hands
whatever I was reading and tear out
sheets to sell back to me later.

I gave up my wireless headphones
to find out what sent Holden Caulfield
over the edge; it took two weeks allowance
to learn how Gandalf became white.

My brother only stopped
snatching words away
when he learned
they could be dangerous.

After he broke his arm playing football,
as he dozed one afternoon,
I scrawled “Bless thee, Bottom!”
along the length of his cast.

Even though he didn’t get
the allusion, the deed
was worth three weeks
confined to my room with my books.

Teaching *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the First Time

Although English Eight is nearly over,
I think I still have time to recover.
The boys have at last tired of their game—
punning on part of Titania's name—
and I can see an escape from this wood,
back to Athens, where all act as they should.
Yet before I can begin to redeem
my unit on Shakespeare's pastoral theme,
I encounter still more spritely ill luck:
fresh play with rhyme and the mischievous Puck.

Profession

Never allowed to address
father after he returned
from a day at school,
I silently circled him,
as he cleared
the threshold, studied
white marks scored
across his sagging shoulders,
scanned the lines, looking
for shapes I had learned
formed my name.
I rarely discovered
more than one
of the letters I sought
in the jumble
before father spilled
papers and books
to the floor, groaned
and shrugged free
of his jacket and language
for another night.
Years later, when asked
why I pursued English,
I always grumbled
it was a family calling.