

What I Didn't Learn about Reading in High School, I Try to Teach My Students Now

Dante Di Stefano

That meaning rests in the margins and waits
to waylay you, that music is a verb
and verbs waltz like the Russian debutantes
in a Tolstoy novel, that all reading
is misreading and re-reading what's been
misread, that misreading is the highest
form of writing, that words are more akin
in their couplings to a Chagall painting
than to a Jackson Pollack—see them fly
above the thatched cottages with the angels,
the lovers, and the livestock—that your ears
read more than your eyes ever could, that smell,
touch, and taste might help you to navigate
the page, that your heartbeat when you're reading
a line of Whitman does more work than eyes
and mind together, that all gerunds are
bicyclists in the Tour de France, that nouns
are dollhouse cathedrals without bishops,
that a word spoken lives eternities
in air before it alights on paper
again, that all print is a form of braille
and all readers are more blind than Milton
or Borges, that conjunctions are the stems
the sap shoots through, that a gap in the text
presages resurrection or works like
a flock of doves in the belly, that I
am not the I who reads this line, but have
become a cardinal in these branches,
that conversation is the most ignored
form of reading—listen to the moonlight
discourse on the pasture fence and talk to
the stray cat meowing around your front step—
that stories have warbled us all into
being, that being requires retelling
the sorrows of the locust tree, the joys
of the ladybug, and the constancy
of the sparrow showering in the dirt,
that a book is a lullaby the wind
ricochets off tombstones, that a poem
is a canoe—paddle with me—we will
brush the leaf off, the web off, decay off,
this ink, our commerce, this meaning, the page.

My Canon Dante Di Stefano

When I was a kid my grandmother read me *Don Quixote*
and *Treasure Island*, Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg,
Beautiful Joe and Captain America comic books.

Although she never learned to drive and only had
a high school education, the Sierra Morena
and the high seas unfolded from her porch stoop

as she read about pirates, pastures, and Chicago
in the fog. When she read, the yellow and brown house
surrounded with Hosta plants on Linden Street

seemed less than a leap from Frost's Hyla Brook.
I laughed when Sancho got tossed in the blanket
by the innkeeper and his patrons. I cried

when the evil milkman in *Beautiful Joe* cut off
the dog's ears. I wished I could throw a shield
like Steve Rogers in Captain America,

winging it off the Red Skull's head and catching it
on the fly. Curled on her lap, on the porch swing,
I loved the way those comics leapt from panel

to panel in bright blues, deep reds, and beiges.
I wanted a life that flew like that shield,
narrated in her sweet soft tones, or that turned

like the pages of those big old books,
whose faded sheets smelled of attic, and where
enchanters, cool tombs, and crossbones

jumbled together with magic boats, dappled horses,
and crumbling stone walls. When Sancho
called Don Quixote a word vigilante and Don Quixote

called Sancho a language butcher, I didn't know
what either meant, but I had already decided
to be both, had already decided that reading

is an act of love and that books belong
on a front porch where the wind can ruffle
their leaves and words can drift into the street.



Dante Di Stefano teaches tenth- and twelfth-grade English in Endicott, New York. He has won the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Award, The Ruth Stone Poetry Prize, The Phyllis Smart-Young Prize in Poetry, and an Academy of American Poets College Prize. He currently serves as a poetry editor for *Harpur Palate* and he was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He can be contacted at dantedistefano@gmail.com