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.
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.
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