

Of Hats and Humility

For the last two weeks, he's attached himself, like a bivalve,
to the right-most seat in the back row.
His blue baseball cap visors half his face,
and I'm not sure if I've ever seen his eyes.
He's as big as a boulder, and with his constantly crossed heavy arms,
I get the feeling that soon, sooner than I can imagine,
he's going to come avalanching towards me—burying me
in some sort of thick and severe silence.

I don't like this Kid in the Hat, as I call him.
All my words and commands sluice off him.
In his silence I know that I can read several things:
disdain, disorder, disloyalty, and discomfort,
and that's only if I'm lucky.

You see I've taught the Kid in the Hat before—at all levels.

At J.B. Thomas Middle School in Hillsboro Oregon,
he was this round-faced kid
whose body was larger than his age,
and his silence filled the room with a sullen quiet
whenever I obliged him to speak.
This kid said absolutely nothing
while he stole everything out of my room.
A Walkmen, pens, rulers, a Swingline stapler,
and even my lunch stalked out of my room,
presumably hidden somewhere in his too loose pants.
By the end of two months, I prayed that he'd start stealing books.
But that never happened.

At Portland State, he was the kid who only talked
to the two friends he sat next to,
and I'm sure that what he said
never had anything to do John Edgar Wideman,
issues of voice, and the assumption that the pen
is mightier than the sword.
During each of the conferences we had during the semester,
he and I circled each other, two gray wolves,
looking for some sort of conversational opening
and some sort of space.

So, you see I knew the Kid in the Hat.
I knew him in the same way an athlete knows
That the knifing burn in her knee—
is a prelude to a pain that begins with a snap
and ends with writhing, crying, and the sure knowledge
that you will never be the same again.
So, I prepared myself, and waited, waited for the challenge.
The moment when I would channel all my false authority
through me like some sort electrified scarecrow—
half fire and half faux-humanity.

The moment came in our first conference,
which consisted of questions (“Where are you from?”);
agonizing pauses (which really put the idea of wait-time to the test);
and savagely terse replies (“I’m from New England.”)
At the end of five minutes, I actually knew less about
The Kid in the Hat than before, and I began to feel
like I was practicing ping-pong with myself.
So, I started to read his paper, his paper about himself,
and I reeled.

He wrote about a love for writing, about how writing
let words flow in and out of him like breath.
He wrote about the paralytic fear of being thought
a “dumb jock,” the silent football player.
At the end of reading three pages, all I could say was “I see.”
And all Eric, the kid in the hat, had to say was, “Okay.”

After this, we fill five minutes with talk of transitions and grammar,
things that interest him—then he rises,
his large frame filling the door,
the anemic fluorescent light of the third floor hallway
desperately trying to circle around him,
and he gives me his hand.
A smile, a nod, and a shake—then an empty room.

Except for me and some ghosts—all of them wearing hats.
These wraiths slip before my face and calmly look at me,
and I look back at them and wonder about thefts,
silence, and words. And honest to God, I’m not sure
if I can tell the difference between any of them,
and the only thing I know about the blue-gray forms
That flash before me is this:
I don’t know anything
about any of them
at all.

