

“Loaded Gun”

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## Loaded Gun

Mrs. Finch, my High School English teacher, wore her hair in a teased and sprayed poodle-tuft. She read Emily Dickinson aloud to the class while I scanned her scalp for a single cowlick, knowing that all human hair begins somewhere. The growth pattern was unnatural, swirled and fussed into a tumbleweed that never moved, not even near the vent in our small, windowless classroom. Dressed in modest floral dresses and gaudy brooches, she hovered before the whiteboard like a ghost while discussing the ways any novel could relate to the story of Christ.

“Emily Dickinson was a lonely woman,” she said. We read poems about flowers, about nature, about subjects that bored me to the point of tears. I wanted to cry out for a piece of literature to which I could relate, something written in a language that seemed more my own. A poem written by someone who didn’t die a million years ago. A novel about a 15-year-old boy angry at the world for giving him less than so many of his fellow classmates in terms of wealth and opportunity.

*Assignment: write a letter to a poet we’ve read. Present your interpretation of one of his or her poems, and comment on the poem’s significance to you.*

*Dear Emily,*

*September, 2000*

*This letter is so pointless. You’re dead. And I don’t know what your goddamn poem is about. Maybe you should have explained it while you were alive so my teacher didn’t have to give this lame-ass assignment. Jesus. I’m looking up at Tia Comb’s silver watch right now cause she tossed it on her desk really loud so everyone could hear it clang on the fake wood. I hate my stupid clothes. I really don’t get your poem. Why is the meadow significant to me? Better question, why is a meadow significant to anyone? All I’m thinking is that right now I could be working an extra shift and making \$7.50 an hour plus tips. I hope an old possum crawls up your snatch and dies, Finch.*

Lafayette High School was designed to be a filter catching the underprivileged—teenagers of whom little was expected, students from poor families, sons and daughters of immigrants—while lifting those of adequate means to the next level of learning and opportunity. I had fought hard to study in advanced English classes only to be ignored by teachers and the more popular students because of my second-hand clothes and shyness.

At the top of Lafayette’s tiered learning model, I now faced instructors with no passion for teaching, unimaginative educators going through the motions of another academic year. There was Mr. David, who was known for sleeping with the girls in his Biology class, Mrs. McDougal, who sat silently ambivalently behind her desk in Newspaper while students were walking out the door to leave, and Mr. Goddard, who included lectures on the UK Wildcat’s basketball season in his U.S. History class. For me, school was a waiting room. I eyed the other patients nervously, listening for someone to call my number.

*My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun—  
In Corners—till a Day—*

At least once a month, school was cancelled due to bomb threats or potential shootings telephoned in by students who felt angry for their own diverse personal reasons. I only wanted to graduate without having to play sports, go to prom, or serve detention. The silence that shrouded me like a cocoon was exacerbated by the popular reluctance to talk to me—I was awkward and uncoordinated.

After the shootings at Columbine, every leash tightened. The halls were patrolled by more security officers, and my friends were frequently asked to empty their book bags or submit to a metal detector simply because of the way they dressed. The rich, popular students were ignored in this process. Those whose clothes didn't quite fit, those with coats too big or oversized rain boots were stopped.

A friend of mine was suspended for carrying a bag of weed she never saw. Her mother later had her tested; the urine analysis came back negative. The powers that were decided to relocate the ESL classes to a secluded space on the third floor, rendering some more of my friends all but invisible. I was sentenced to Saturday school, along with fifty other students, for participating in an anti-war demonstration on the front lawn.

During the eight hours we served in the gymnasium that sunny weekend, we were instructed to write an essay exploring appropriate ways to express ourselves politically. I tried to sleep, but the sound of whispering ricocheted off the brick walls and waxed wooden floor. Our principal, Mr. Gentry, strolled between the aisles, his enormous army boots plodding and squeaking with every turn. His gray whiskers looked like a leveled forest or a desert full of spiny cacti.

*Dear Principal Gentry,*

*April, 2001*

*I have reflected long and hard upon ways to express myself politically without offending you. Here's my idea. I'll need a few things.*

- 1. a tattoo gun*
- 2. a stencil that says NO WAR IN IRAQ*
- 3. your mom's ass*
- 4. my goddamn G.E.D.*

The teachers and administrators patrolled with a thirst for nothing less than blood, their matronly pants drawn high below their breasts, their glasses on the tips of their noses, their potbellies balanced on their buckles, their black guns dangling by belts. I didn't view them as authorities, only as threats. Instead, I gave up on learning based on intimidation, skipping school in order to avoid not only the thugs my own age, but the ones twenty or thirty years older than me masquerading as educators.

As a result, I became habitually truant. During a typical day, I would slip out after lunch to work an extra shift at my after-school job, linger at bookstores, or wander downtown. I skipped the month of March. No one cared. Those were days spent reading Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, books displayed at the local public library. I also found the voices of the Beats during that time and felt an immediate kinship with their struggle to free themselves from a shrinking world of supervision and restraint—one that, I concluded, resembled my own. I wrote vain, trite,

thoroughly adolescent poems. Strangely enough, I felt as though for once, I wasn't wasting my time. At the suggestion of my friend Laura, I started attending a poetry class at a local literacy center on West Second Street.

*And now We roam in Sovereign Woods—  
And now We hunt the Doe—  
And every time I speak for Him  
The Mountains straight reply—*

I was accepted into a creative writing program operating under the School for the Creative and Performing Arts in my hometown. By "accepted," I mean of course that I auditioned, sat on the waiting list, and was finally admitted despite the elitist bureaucracy of the program's committees, which was intended to keep the right students in and the wrong students out by a process of privilege retention.

SCAPA only accepted two students from the public school system each year, and although the program was free, it was obligated to accept all incoming students from SCAPA Bluegrass, its elementary and middle school branch. Thus, ninety percent of the creative writing program was occupied by students whose parents paid for them to attend private schooling at a young age—a luxury most families in the community could not afford.

All the same, I wrote. I filled entire notebooks in no time flat. This teacher was a type I had not met before, one with no interest in favorites—one who wouldn't bump up a grade for the football player or head cheerleader. Mrs. Johnston forced us to write for at least an hour every day of class and required that we turn something in on a daily basis as well. Looking back, the quality of the writing wasn't necessarily the most important thing to her. She wanted us to dedicate ourselves. She wanted us to learn to love the act of writing. Mrs. Johnston taught me to enjoy learning again and allowed me to reflect on my grievances, providing me with enough distance and perspective to better understand my situation.

Only in my writing did I begin to observe the trends, the threads of power dictating the future failures or successes of so many young lives. We were like instruments of the forces that shaped us, policing each other based on their guidelines, judging one another using the criteria of the masters. A small group of queer youth, including myself, banded together to form a fragile chapter of the Gay-Straight Alliance. We were unpopular; we were frequently harassed. Our application for recognition as an official club was denied on the basis that our organization did not pertain to academics. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes, however, did qualify.

Only a month away from my senior year of high school, I considered dropping out entirely. I figured Mrs. J would still allow me to attend class anyway, whether or not I was actually a student at Lafayette. I deliberated the consequences seriously during a vodka binge.

*To foe of His—I'm deadly foe—  
None stir the second time—  
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye—  
Or an emphatic Thumb—*

Dear Emily,

May, 2008

*The other day, someone told me he hated Emily Dickinson's poetry because it was all so tired. He said, "I guess I was just burned out on Dickinson in high school." Yes, he said that to me. A professor also told me that all American poets are of either the Dickinson school or the Whitman school. To be honest, I'm not particularly fond of the reductive grouping of anything, especially poets. Still, if I had to make the choice, it wouldn't be difficult.*

*It's your gun, Emily. The finger lingers on the trigger. You load the barrel and blow off the top of my head. It's amazing to see you alive and well. I swear I saw your mangled body rise, stitched together by taxidermists day after day in my High School English class. I heard a scalpel hit the floor, the creaking of a telescopic lens.*

*Emily, I've become rather serious about poetry. I read a lot of poems; I write a lot of poems. I've read a certain poem of yours many times, and I've come to appreciate your ambiguity. The poem is a world; it doesn't need you. All the same, I wonder if you could tell me whether or not you ever felt terrified of being someone's tool. How would you have fared in the public school system, Emily? Your gun and I are unlike in some ways, similar in others: one can never really mold the human voice, of course, but the notions we learn when we are young stay with us for the long haul. There are many kinds of violence in the world.*

*I wonder about Mrs. Finch sometimes. The poor woman was just doing her job, and I felt the need to attack her, not knowing that she herself may have hated that school and those assignments. Not once did I consider her frustration. Never did I stop to think of the anger infesting that place, making students and teachers afraid of themselves and each other, forcing us all to watch the clock. I think I can learn to forgive. There is an eventual but necessary letting go.*

*Though I than He—may longer live  
He longer must—than I—  
For I have but the power to kill,  
Without—the power to die—*