

Elise Chadwick

English Class, 1985

He sat in the back row
next to the broken window,
the one for which I sent a weekly work order
fearing the guillotine decapitation of a class clown
trying to climb out the window for a few laughs.

He watched his classmates from this post
a quiet presence
a rare participant
and sized me up, too.

With the arrogance of the newly minted teacher
I thought I knew him,
thought I recognized his type,
unobtrusive,
conscientious ,
respected by his peers,
handsome in a wholesome preppy sort of way
destined for an ivy—or one tier down,
non aggressively athletic
tennis or squash or golf
the periodic head swing
lifting the sheaf of thick brown hair
out of his eyes
so that ours could meet
when I handed papers back to him
or he asked for an extension on an assignment,
family problems he'd explain.

He was nothing like the attention seeking football players
who filled the front rows,
their letter jackets with white leather sleeves
status symbols sprawled over the backs of their chairs.
They raised their hands
even though they hadn't read the book,
had nothing much to say
but needed to be noticed
by everyone in the room.

It was early May,
the time of year when students and teachers alike
can taste the stretch of freedom that awaits.

We'd just returned from a fire drill
where we gathered in the parking lot
waiting for the principal's voice over the loud speaker.
This was decades before lockdown drills
and fears of active shooters on campus
or cell phones.

With 15 minutes left on the clock
we returned to the classroom,
a still life of abandoned books
and scattered backpacks,
chairs untucked from their desks,
scribbles on a chalkboard
memorializing a conversation
that had just begun to gain momentum.

*So, what does the color purple mean,
I ask, not only in our ordinary life
but here in this book
to Alice Walker
and to Celie and to Shug?*

A debate ignites quickly
sparks of smug certainty,
skepticism smolders,
a question challenges
*how do you know
that the color purple relates to being gay?*
someone asks.

Just moments before the bell rings
imposing an end to our discussion
he rises from the back row
and in voice I barely recognize declares
I know because I'm gay
and strolls out of the room.

Elise Chadwick taught English at Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, NY for 30 years. She lives in NYC and spends weekends caring for her 200 year old home in upstate NY, coexisting with the deer, groundhog, fox, bats, rabbits and squirrels, who got there first.