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To Judge the Living and the Dead

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To Judge the Living and the Dead

When reading *Walden*,
the students rage—*rage*—against Thoreau,
like the man shot their
dogs one by one, gangland-style.
They call him a fake,
a phony, a poseur
when they find out his cabin was only
a mile or two
from town;
call him an idiot
for the whole enterprise;
call him a nerd for
having no friends,
a *loser* for his experiment in
isolation.

But would the students say the same
if Thoreau,
in the manner they've
grown up with,
had divulged his personal business first,
if the book didn't start with
"When I wrote the following pages,
or rather the bulk of them,
I lived alone, in the woods,"
but with
"After my best
friend, my brother John,
died—RIP, JT—I needed to be
alone, to build
something, to tend some beans,
just to tend
some beans for awhile, you know?"
instead?

Would they try so hard
to outdo each other's bile
if they paused to remember
that he was a person,
like each
and every
one of us—
a person with a
heart made of mixed media—
part steel but part cardboard,
part stoic oak but part decrepit spider web—
first?

—Mitchell Nobis

Mitchell Nobis is a teacher and English department chair at Seaholm High School in Birmingham, Michigan. He is the current president of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English and is a co-director of the Red Cedar Writing Project. He lives in Farmington, Michigan, where he and his wife spend their spare time playing baseball and basketball with their sons.