

*Don' Like*

Charles Harper Webb

The Arabs who invented Algebra can't have known  
Miss Seitz would teach it, any more than Einstein  
knew he'd be the Father of Catastrophe.

The Miss which prefaced her name proudly  
(would no man have her, or would she have no man?)  
brought to mind Mistake, Mischance, Misshapen,

Miserable, Misfit, Missing Link, Lord of Misrule.  
Only the fiends who stoked the furnace of 8th grade  
were glad to see her hunched at her desk, gutting papers

with her bloody pen. X's identity was nothing to her,  
next to perfect headings: student's name, class name  
and period, *her* name, and the date in that order,

starting exactly three lines from the top, margins  
one inch, paper creased in perfect thirds (no  
crooked ends, no refolding), or she would fix you

in a basilisk stare, shove back your work, and snarl,  
in a decades-past-post-menopausal croak, *Don' Like*.  
What math we gained is gone now as Del Shannon's

"Runaway"—as Billy Tilly's spit-shined shoes,  
and the blade Ray Montez applied to my throat, hissing,  
"Gimme all your cash, you little fruit"—gone

as the mush-burgers Ms. Hairnet slapped  
on our lunchroom trays—as Teddy Jones,  
falling between the granite blocks at Freeport Jetty,

crawling back up, extending the glass stump  
of his new Pfeuger rod, groaning, *Don' like*.  
The words remain: an anthem as I near Miss Seitz's age.

Hip hop and bottles crashing next door after 9:00—  
the candidates, woman and man—  
the way my clothes fit, and the barber cuts my “hair”—

hot salad and cold soup served by a pretty waitress  
who thinks my (old) manhood's a dirty joke—  
Time's scaly hand, Xing, in red, my dwindling days . . .