

The Science of Breakable Things

BY TAE KELLER

Mr. Neely just wrote our first lab book assignment on the board in his scrunched-up, scratchy handwriting, and he's getting all excited about this scientific process stuff. I'm not sure why he feels the need to use hashtags and spell perfectly innocent words with a z, but he's one of those teachers you don't bother questioning.

He has big plans for this lab notebook. Apparently, he thinks it's important to teach students "dedication to long-term projects," and this assignment is his grand solution. Basically, we're supposed to observe something that interests us and spend all year applying the scientific process to our capital-Q Question.

As soon as we sat down, he passed out these dorky old composition notebooks and said, "This will be your Wonderings journal! You will record lab notes and assignments, and document the greatest scientific journey of all time— *your* scientific journey!"

We all stared, trying to figure out if he was for real or not. He was.

"You'll spend this year developing your own scientific process, and it all starts with one question—that thing that sparks you to life." Mr. Neely made a weird explosion gesture with his hands, and someone in the back of the room giggled, which only seemed to encourage him. "By the end of the year, *I'll* be the one learning. From *you!*"

Mr. Neely is a new teacher, so he's still all optimistic and stuff, but personally I think this assignment's a lost cause. Last year, our English teacher, Mrs. Jackson, thought it'd be really great for us to keep journals. The only requirement: fifty pages by the end of the year, written from the heart. If you haven't guessed already, that just resulted in everyone writing all fifty pages the day before the journals were due. I mostly filled mine with song lyrics, copied in my biggest, sloppiest handwriting.

And technically, this is supposed to be homework, but I don't see why I shouldn't get a head start. Without further ado, dearest lab notebook, I present Natalie Napoli's Scientific Observations:¹

- Mr. Neely waves his arms in big circles when he talks, which makes him look like an overeager hula dancer. His white button-down—bright against his dark brown skin—wrinkles as he moves.
- He tells us he wants us to “embrace the joys of science.”
- Mikayla Menzer raises her hand.
- Mikayla Menzer answers without being called on. She says, “Science is literally the joy of my life. I am literally embracing it right now.”
- Mikayla Menzer is not literally embracing anything. She's just sitting at her desk, catty-corner to mine, with her hands clasped in front of her, and her thick dark braid twisting over her shoulder.
- Mikayla Menzer smells like sunscreen, which kind of makes the entire classroom smell like sunscreen, and the air in here is damp and hot. I wish Fountain Middle had air-conditioning.
- I wish we had enough money for me to go to Valley Hope Middle, which does have AC, but now that Mom's “sick,” Dad says we need to “tighten our belt a notch.”
- And anyway, Twig's here, even though her family can definitely afford Valley Hope, so I guess this place isn't so bad.²
- Mr. Neely is saying my name, but I haven't been listening, so I just nod at him and give him my best *I'm embracing science* smile.
- Mr. Neely says, “I'm glad you're having so much fun with the assignment, but making observations is supposed to be homework, Natalie. Please pay attention in class.”
- I am paying attention.
- And Mikayla Menzer still smells like sunscreen.

1 Only the most brilliant observations you'll ever read. Imagine you're hearing a drumroll right now. Go on, imagine it.

2 Twig: best friend in the entire galaxy. (Her words.)

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