

Teach. Write.

A Literary Journal for Writing Teachers



Fall~Winter 2025

Edited by Katie Winkler

TEACH. WRITE.

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FALL ~ WINTER 2025

Katie Winkler ~ Editor

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Athena's Owl

*For sure, she's a bird; but her guilty conscience drives her
to shun the eyes of men and the glare of the daylight.*

—Ovid

Owl can see what others cannot, which is the essence of true wisdom. Athena—the Greek goddess of wisdom—had a companion owl on her shoulder which revealed unseen truths to her. Owl had the ability to light up Athena's blind side, enabling her to speak the whole truth, as opposed to only a half truth. Here's hoping Owl will do the same for me.

Truth is, I've been struggling with health issues for the past few weeks. I wake up at night, worried. I'm hoping Owl can help me see the full truth of the situation.

Because I was not feeling well, I was unable to get out on my land. The land does something for me that nothing else can. I'm usually locked up tight inside, as if I'm wrapped in chains. But when I'm out on the land, those chains begin to break.

So, this morning I went out on my land and took the spirit of Owl with me. I thought perhaps the land might partner with Owl to try to help me heal. The first thing I noticed was a feeling of fear. I often feel fear when it's dark and there are no day sounds around me. One night I heard an owl outside my bedroom window. The owl made an eerie sound. It felt like the sound was winding its way around me, trying to pull me to the ground. That is exactly how I feel now. Only this time the sound comes from deep inside my body.

What am I in the dark about? How am I being deceived? Have I lied to myself about someone or something? Remember that owl is always asking—who?

Who is rummaging around inside me? It used to be easy for me to look outward for an explanation. Now I can't get away with that. I must see the darkness I carry within.

Suddenly I am thrust into a memory:

I sit cross-legged on the linoleum floor. My mother stands at the kitchen sink. I am absolutely frozen in place. I couldn't move if I wanted to. My mother bangs dishes, swears, turns and glares at me. I have no defense.

Actually, I do have a defense—a defense of my own design. I feel this defense atop my shoulders, sort of like wings. The wings hold me up. Without them I would collapse. I carried these wings all of my life. Why the darkness and illness now?

Maybe the grandparent trees can help me. The grandparent trees are tall, so much taller than my mother, but they do not scare me. They are kind. They love and support me. I feel it every time I'm out on the land.

I hold up the little girl inside me to the grandparent trees. This girl is cut off from the forest, encased in what feels to her like plastic. The plastic is the same as her mother's skin—untouchable, unknowable, rejecting. The trees bow to the little girl in respect. They cherish her. But her plastic does not breathe; it allows for no connection. No breeze can flow across this little girl's shoulders.

I sit atop my mother's dresser. A bottle of perfume leans against my leg. I pick up the bottle and put it to my nose. My mother swoops down and rips the bottle from my hands. She moves so forcefully I topple backward off the dresser and onto the floor. My mother laughs, douses herself with perfume, then walks away.

This memory has been wrapped in plastic inside me for such a long time. But I'm sure the trees know how to handle it. I'm with a different tree this time—the large pine at the south end of my property. I always imagine this pine wears a long dress that drapes to the ground. The pine sees the plastic bundle inside me. It feels how heavy the bundle is, how alien. I brush my hands across the pine's bough and a calm energy flows through me. I am so used to defending myself against my mother, I rarely take time to feel the simple grace of a tree.

Suddenly I notice an owl sitting in a dead tree beside us. The tree is gray. The owl is gray. My feet freeze and my toes begin to curl. Owl does not waver. She does not blink. My toes curl even more.

"Who are you? Who? Who?" My mother does not pay attention. But she easily could, so I have to be still. The floor is like ice. It hurts my legs. But I mustn't move. I mustn't move.

Owl sweeps me back to the land and I take a breath, then let it out slowly.

"Just a bit of the plastic today," says Owl, "we don't want to open too much."

Owl flies to me and sits on my shoulder, sending her energy through me. She looks at my curled toes.

"You see how much tension you create by holding your body like that?" she says.

Of course I do.

"There is no need to be rigid. You're not holding a perfume bottle. Your mother is not here. The forest is here. I am here. We all want you to heal."

I tumble off the dresser, hitting my head as I fall to the floor. The carpet is rough and hurts my skin. I wait for my mother's shadow to fall on me. Once the shadow hits, I must swallow myself. It's a law I made. Wings sprout from my shoulders. It's my only way out. My mother has so much perfume on, I can smell her from across the room. She's coming. I have to get away.

Crack! Owl drops something from the top of the tall dead tree. The sound pulls me up and over, and I bend down to see what Owl dropped. It's the skeleton of a mouse. Owl is unapologetic. This is how she learned to save herself.

"You must do the same. You must save yourself. I will teach you," Owl says.

I stand in front of the dresser, perfume bottle in hand. I raise my arms, then smash the bottle down. Glass cracks. Liquid sprays. I smell just like my mother.

I look around to see if my mother is there. She is not. Owl is there. Owl smiles.

“This is what we do with mice,” she says, “Don’t apologize for it. You must be a predator or you will be prey.”

I run my hands along my arms, spreading perfume and glass. Small cuts pop up all over my skin. The perfume makes the cuts sting. Owl grabs the mouse skeleton and throws it at the mirror. The mirror cracks and I see myself in pieces. An owl is sitting on my shoulder.

I remember the story of Athena. Owl nods majestically.

My mother walks by in a girdle so tight she’s like a soldier. That’s the way she likes it. Then I am next to my mother’s bath. Her skin is like plastic; it doesn’t connect with the water. I wish I could just drown. Actually, I already have.

Owl swoops down from the ceiling and into the water. She splashes, cutting my mother with her talons. Owl is angry, so angry. Just like I should be.

“Who are you? Who are you?”

No reaction from my mother. She cannot hear Owl. She cannot hear me. She never hears me. My toes curl.

“Who are you? Who are you?”

I don’t know who I am, but I have someone inside who wants to come out now.

Owl grabs the mouse skeleton with her sharp talons and tosses it from the room. Then she tells me to follow. I am out in the forest, and I can take a breath. I stand in front of the old, dead tree, holding the mouse skeleton in my hands as an offering. Owl sits quietly on my shoulder. We stay that way for a very long time.



Author’s Note: This is a work of fiction. Although its form is that of an autobiography, it is not one. The opinions expressed are those of the characters and should not be confused with the author’s.

Birch Tree Stories

I have always loved trees, particularly birch trees. There were many birches in the forest where my family and I used to spend our summers. This forest was a bit of a walk from our cabin, so we had to drive to see it. We drove in an open vehicle on a winding dirt road. Dust would spray over us, coating our skin and clothes. I luxuriated in this dust. I loved everything about it. It felt like war paint preparing me for battle.

I was close to a specific group of birches in the forest. The group stood in a circle, off to the side of the other trees. I could relate. The birches were covered with white paper bark and black streaks. I was thoroughly enchanted by those black streaks. I imagined they were words in code. If only I could figure out the code, I would be able to read the birches' stories.

Each time I visited the forest, the birches would wave to me. I felt accepted and celebrated just for being myself. The trees created a thick canopy that allowed for much shade underneath. This shade was the perfect place for moss to grow. I adored moss. I imagined little villages of fairies living in it. I would press my hands into the moss and listen. I didn't press hard enough to injure the fairies, just hard enough so they would know I was there.

Then I would relax into the birches' tempo. My thoughts and breathing slowed. I became like a tree—entirely calm, not worried about my family. Sometimes I would fall asleep, and the birches helped me dream. They took me on adventures to other forests, where they introduced me to different kinds of trees and animals.

Eventually, I would remember that I had to go home. I didn't want to leave. It was painful to be with my family. But the birches didn't want me to get in trouble. They held me gently, reminding me they would be here when I came back.

I remember one special day I spent with the birches. We were alone together. My family must have dropped me off and left. As I lay under the tallest birch, I heard a voice say, "Go ahead, pull off some bark."

I feel this in my body. I look around to see who speaks. No one is there. It must be the birches. The trees have prepared me for this. My body is a finely-tuned instrument designed to hear the trees' voices.

I want to do what the voice instructs. I know the trees have stories inside. I studied trees in school and decided that tree rings were actually stories pressed into layers. If I can just pull off this bark, I know I will find the trees' stories.

"Go ahead. Pull it off."

I grab the tree's bark and gently pull. I'm so afraid to be wrong about the stories.

"You won't be disappointed."

I pull the bark and my life begins to unwind around me. I see my father standing by a crystal clear lake. He holds a fishing pole in his hands. He is drunk. My mother is angry. I'm angry. But I never say a word or show any feelings. That is not allowed.

The fish flop uselessly in the bucket. I feel sorry we caught them now. Sometimes we throw the fish back into the lake. Other times we don't. Then I eat the fish, just like everyone else—breaded and fried in the pan.

"Go ahead, keep pulling."

I pull off another layer. This time it's my mother. She stands by our cabin. Her eyes are lifeless, like the fish in the bucket. I see that someone has captured her and is keeping her prisoner. She wants to do the same to me.

"Don't be afraid. We're here."

My mother shakes her head and brushes past me. Her sweater feels like acid on my skin.

"Here," the tree says, and hands me a small piece of bark. "Sit down. Rest. This is a lot for someone so young."

I sit on soft moss and lean my back against the tree. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. The birch presses against me. I know I am safe. My eyes close and I drift into sleep. In my dream, the tree and I walk together down the dirt road. We walk as a team. No one can bother us. The fish roll their eyes and I feel like screaming. The tree puts just the right amount of pressure on my back to counteract the acid of my mother's sweater. My mother begins to fade, until it's just the tree and me together, walking down the road.

We make our way back to the forest. The birches wave us in. I tell them about my mother. The oldest birch grimaces. The others do the same. Then they begin to shake their branches in unison. As they shake, pieces of paper fall to the ground. Page after page flutters around me, until there are enough pages to make a book.

When the shaking has stopped, I gather up the pages and settle in for an afternoon of reading. The birches listen intently as I begin to tell their story. Then they lean in close and wrap their branches around me. I decide it might be worthwhile to stay alive just one more day.

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M. B. McLatchey

Dream Song *for a sleeping student*

Our voices, a gurgling brook, became your parting song:
a stream grading stones – meandering – where
bend becomes slope. You teetered in the current – strong,
young – yet bowed by doubts, centuries-old cares.

A stream grading stones, meandering. Where
might we have extracted you, harness and rope,
young – yet bowed by doubts, centuries-old cares?
Cold depths are ours to brave alone, I was also told.

Might we have extracted you, harness and rope,
what threshold did you cross; what pieces rearrange?
Cold depths are ours to brave alone. I was also told
our troubles wane when guardian spirits learn our names.

What threshold did you cross; what pieces rearrange?
Our voices, a gurgling brook, became your parting song.
Our troubles wane when guardian spirits learn our names,
bend becomes slope. You teetered in the current – strong.

Kendra Whitfield

Recognize

-after Adrienne Rich

I know you are reading this poem in a classroom with broken desks and jittering lights and you feel like you cannot breathe, wedged there between the sweaty boys who just slouched in from Shop class, smelling of Varsol and grease.

I know you are reading this poem in watery sunlight under an exhaust-shrivelled tree beside a cracked asphalt courtyard to students who are too busy processing hormones to concentrate on the words that float over their heads like gauzy scarves.

I know you are reading this poem between stacks of essays on a Friday night, at a kitchen table jammed with a week's detritus while a wall clock ticks away your weekend and a whiskey glass sweats circles into the maple.

I know you are reading this poem in a clattering cafeteria, balancing the book on the edge of a sticky melamine tray, sipping icy milk that bites your throat like a clothesline.

I know you are reading this poem under your desk while your brain rattles in your skull like Mah Jong tiles and you carve your arms into gleaming red ribbons, trying to tie your sanity together like camouflage netting.

I know you are reading this poem.
That is enough.

Ihor Pidhainy

A teacher looks up

Arm reaching upward,
studied response kicking in,
Strides stopped mid-step,
A yawn and a stretch –
Boredom and achy muscles:
The writing hand exerts vigor
And pencil or pen slows in its flow.

You can read a crowd of faces
Intent, thoughtful, seeking, reaching.
You have all been there,
A dozen years or more,
While others slowly sink into seats,
bent and baffled by age.

The life of the mind is tedious
for the body will not rest
As you grind blind into space,
Then blanks, blurred with jottings and sharp lines
And – no matter what script, what form –
You end with a metaphoric cigarette in hand,
Puffing away, hidden behind a third eye.

Calm, meditating on the moment to spare.
But the bell rings, and boys and girls disappear
Into the next class, into Spring Break, into graduation
Into a life that forgets for a lifetime
The torment and joy, the fixed surety,
Certainty writ large or small,
bracketed, cited and locked away.

Chase Strawser

Marooned in Room 103

Room 103, to the left, down the stairs.
Though cubicle-sized, it is Tardis-like.
Bargain copies of *The Tempest* make us,
Seven shores lapped by sharp, page-numbered waves.

Prospero, that puny deadwood Tyrant,
Would laugh at my Promethean board wand.
The meager student-conjured scraps at first,
Could barely patch his worn wardrobe of spells.

They'll face greater monarchs than our pal, here.
Not all with wings aflutter like wind-swept sails.
Any incantations enveloped here, by then,
Will be strong enough to whisk sand to stars.

'Twixt heart and mind is the eye of the storm.
Like death seems the portal to be reborn.

Tanner Abernathy

Dear Old Golden Rule Days

I set my lunch bag down on the porch railing. The neighborhood is thick with wet dawn silence. I repeat Thoreau's reference to the Vedas: "All intelligences awake in the morning." I doubt that.

I wipe the pollen and the dew off the window and mirror with my hand, settle into the car, pushing the seat back until the metal undercarriage clangs. I turn on the radio until the news fixates on bombs, empty politics, or donation requests. I prefer traffic and local spotlights. I leave Tacoma, heading north along the tideflats, between homeless camps, logging trucks, dogmeal and gas refineries.

I change to a podcast and weave between fog-blind longshoremen. The hot breath from the vents keeps me human until the parking lot emerges and I become the teacher again. I crack the driver's door. Cold slaps my cheek. I tug three thermoses close to my sweater and hustle toward the razor glass doors, muttering, "What are you going to do, hit me?" to the cars entering the lot. In some ways, I hope they would take a hip out, enough for litigation and dope-comforted weeks without obligation.

I finger my house key into the classroom door, drop it, and pull up the DO NOT COPY key. I reconcile myself to the day.

I step neatly between the desk-islands and stand by the window, looking into the parking lot: exhaust mingles with fog, a short bus belches out her eager spawn (the only ones glad to be here). I begin my ritual of panic printing, elbowing for the single-stall men's room. I enter the workday blue and vulgar.

The day comes by in vignettes, the first movement, tired hellos, late late late for high school, over-the-ear headphones, I get to read my book, I get to move through the day leaning on the students I like; the students who annoy me, I fill with earnest concern and questions of whether they're doing okay and what help they need. Evil doesn't exist. I stand there, bleeding sweat into my boots. I dig for nirvana, and scrape at anxiety like stale bone marrow on a fragile plate.

I eat lunch, my only time sitting during the day: leftovers from last night's dinner. I listen, pause to squeeze sanitizer on my palms, to my fantasy roleplay podcast, and dip cold honeycrisp slices into peanut butter. Natural peanut butter oil stains a small place on the fabric of my identity. The back of the day passes, my head is buzzing with angry caffeine and shortness of breath.

I read children's stories to my 12th graders and show them films on pestilence and fear. I say goodbye, be nice to each other, drink water, stretch. This is how I spend my days, and as Anne Carson points out, my life. Coming home to my cats, falling asleep

on the toilet, showering the day off of me, walking across the small liberal arts campus half a mile away, and continuing my podcast.

I make dinner, crushing hard garlic with my palm heel. We bless our meal with the names of dead rabbits (our small gods), & listen to Amelia's day. I drink tea and pop a pimple, breathe wetly on the mirror, throw out weekend days to my busy friends, and don't hear back.

I grind coffee beans and ask the machine to have coffee tomorrow morning by five a.m. I worry about my elbow as I do my push-ups and throw myself heaving into bed, calling out to the animals to smother me to sleep.



School Days, School Days

As if by a silent starter pistol, the big rabbit in a pen downstairs and the small gray cat on my chest stir. The rabbit sprints up and down his run, skimboarding into his litter box. The cat purrs and gnaws on my sleeping chin, her huge eyes like ripening fruit. It's five o' seven. My alarm goes off in six minutes. I get up early. Off to the races.

The rest of the household keeps odd appointments; all animals are up and business-ready. I hunch over coffee, guessing at daily trivia. I tell myself I'm stimulating the mind. The rabbit jumps on the couch, proffering his head. I'm going to be late.

I dress in the dark, flashlight to the mirror. Good as we're going to get.

Leaving the house, I pick up where I left off in the audiobook of Ulysses. An im-molating grocery cart is pushed through the traffic intersection. The tire pressure light wags its finger.

On the long commute, I know each lane, its temperament, and its likelihood to turn around and nip me. I try to imagine Ireland while the sun creeps pinkly over the Cascade foothills. Gas is cheap on the reservation, so I stop to fill up. Late is late any-way.

I tumble down the hill to my classroom. Early to the printer, I've put together another poster, a quotation from Eglantyne Jebb: "All wars, whether just or unjust, disastrous or victorious, are waged against the child."

I check our bank account. We want to go back to Palm Desert. Not this year.

It's time for class. In Creative Writing, I run around and smile and say things like, "Good, keep going," "Describe it," and "Say what you mean." I sit and write alongside them. I open up the links to the documents they're working on, looking to make eye contact when they notice my blinking cursor on their page. I highlight a line I like and comment "GOOD LINE."

I give the English Department Award to David, whose handwriting is two millimeters high, and when I hand back his papers ask, "What did you say here?" He picks up his paper, holds it close to his face, and squints. "Uh, I'm not sure."

After school, Cherry, a goth and lead editor of the student publication I supervise, sits down at a table, drinks a soda, and complains about math before her dad picks her up. She asks if I'll play a Brenda Lee song.

I poke my head into the other English teachers' rooms. "Is there anything I can complain about on your behalf?" I scribble notes about the bell schedule with a red pen.

I'm on the lead team for a third year. There's a lot of talking. Not much gets done. They'll start everything over from scratch next year.

I go to the office and print my poetry terms reference guide in color. I don't care. It'll look better in color. Not much is in my power. I make ninety copies.

A new term this year: volta. A volta is a change at the end of the poem, where often the poet just kinda tells you what the poem's about. Like when Rilke, at the end of a sonnet about a sculpture, wrote: "You must change your life." Who would've guessed?

Almost four, and I get my haircut and drive home. I take a different route every day, imagining that if I'd gone any other way, I'd have been t-boned. I imagine a therapist's compliment about adopting that lens. Gratitude and delusion, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. I park the car.

Amelia has the day off. We walk down by the water, looking out toward Vashon Island. Our pockets are tumorous with peanuts, ready for crows we don't see. We bring the peanuts home.

By the time we eat, it's after eight. The house is warm and covered in a day's shedding. I push the vacuum, fill the espresso hopper, and dim the kitchen lights.

It's the middle of the week, and I'm not short of breath.

We climb into bed, read until I drop the book on my face. Amelia, clutching her Kindle, is asleep. I turn off the lamp, kiss her, and think.

These days are running like rabbits. Maybe tomorrow I'll call my grandmother on the drive to school. Maybe she'll say, as she has before, that she feels like a nineteen-year-old in the body of a ninety-five-year-old.

Maybe Rilke just meant that our lives will change.



Terrie Elaine Joplin

Strings Attached

I did not lie in my interview while
mouthing platitudes about every
student being able to learn lessons
conceived for my class to reduce failing
and meet the principal's retention goal,
but my eyes drifted down to my hands, my ears
tuned to the faint plucking of Fates' strings
my own tug the merest twinge, a vibration
on the metal. I remembered Billy.

Though sporadic in attendance
he always dressed for school, the first
in his family to go this far—sixteen
and still in school—black work pants and
open vest, blue dress shirt elbow-rolled,
wavy blonde slicked hair, fingernails blackened
from engine grease, wide smile jarring
over blackened incisor jaggedly eaten—
his income spent by his dad. Struck alive
by Ray Bradbury's Martians and sci-fi's
"What if?" premises, Billy glowed in the spring
till his work devoured his hours, so his arm
half waving in the doorway and his head half turned,
Billy left—saying he wished he could buy me
a six-pack of roses, an offering layered on what-ifs,
tied in short-cut strings, as green in me as laurel.

The Rowers

Onto the pond the hawk dropped, its flight impeded by two crows whose wheeling assault bombed the juvenile low, and lower each time over the water until it fell in the middle, as if from the crow's beak—a stone let go. Belly wet, tail down, wingtips in the water, the hawk ground its elbows up and slowly oared itself to shore. I heralded its victory—the thread of sun to dry its feathers, the moment to preen its chest and close its panting beak. Now, the pond is quiet from where I sit on my deck, my mind lit with the grocery store's flickering florescent tubes of two decades ago, me handing the cashier my food stamps. *You're the new teacher, aren't you? Don't you get a salary?* she asked, ringing up the tomato sauce, apples, Kool-Aid, hamburger, powdered milk, chicken necks to boil for the pot pie, and the large Hershey's bar whose first row would alphabetize myself after I put the kids to bed and began grading papers. One third to pay the rent, one third for childcare, and one third to divide miraculously for everything else—till I scabbled to the shore of another month's paycheck.

Tara Hollander

Dear Students,

Ding ding
You're in college
It's hard
Aww boo hoo
You have to do the work to understand
That's why you're here
To grow
And I'm supposed to convince you
That it's interesting
Or valuable enough to your future successes:
Your life? Your life. Your life!

There is only so much convincing I can do
Find it interesting
You can only be transformed
With a decision of self.

Oof and isn't that the beautiful work of it all
Choose, live. Read, transform. Influence, love.

If I may impart wisdom, it won't be my own:
*The greatest of these is love*¹
*Anything serious is worth doing*²
*Leave me alone bitch, I want to have fun*³

¹*1 Corinthians 13*

²*Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet*

³*René Rapp, Leave me Alone*

After Eden

When it calls,
that blaze inside,
where, lonely heart, bright soul,
will you turn?

When your words stand
at the gate of your tongue,
every road lost to sand,
cobwebs with no elastic,

to whom will you call?
What words are there?
My dear, we have left Eden
and I fear we are beyond healing.

Lonely heart, bright soul,
feed this blaze of cooling embers
the greenest of leaves.
No matter the improbability
let it smoke,
let the world know you.

Diem Okoye

Write your wonders

I curl my toes against the nursery's soft carpet
and the ceiling splits—
in pokes the head of the Toy That Refuses to Grow Up
My teddy bear bag tumbles from the bunk
and out spill my finger paints, sticker books,
and a broken kaleidoscope. They sparkle like jellybeans.
You were never meant to be perfect says the toy,
grabbing my phone and giggling over my fearful whisper
and you don't have to pretend you weren't scared.
Little me opens the playroom dining
and pours my nostalgia back into my sippy cup. It is
banana-marshmallow flavored and I drink the whole thing.
the toy is wearing my favourite dinosaur pajamas
and asking if the repeat of Imaginary Friends Forever has aired
We're staying in tonight,
it says, and it's true, but only tonight. No eating
chocolate before bedtime stories.
I don't even remember my lullaby ending
before the box falls, a box of one hundred
brightly-colored envelopes drops through. *What are those for?*
I ask the toy. He answers
I'm going to teach you how to write your wonders.
But first, I hug my stuffed lion tight:
five generations of dreamers appear
on my bunk bed, each at the age they were
before anyone told them to grow up.
I have invented the bedtime revolution. We are taking it all back.

Wilson Comey

Doing Something

It's Friday. Ben sits on a windowsill in the breezeway. His hood is pulled up, which is always the case apart from the thirty seconds or so after an admin tells him to take it off. He's watching anime. I ask about his weekend.

"Bad," he says. He looks tired. He has sad eyes and a voice that's too high-pitched for his size. He's a senior but never shaves the downy hair on his upper lip and jawline. I want to teach him, but I don't know how, and I'm only certified by the district in English Language Arts.

"What happened?"

I weigh whether to perch beside him, then decide against it. I don't want to draw attention to the fact that I sit with my legs folded underneath me, and I don't want to pretend to be the type of person who crosses them. I'm only five years older than he is. Out the window, a water tower reflects the sunrise. It seems a shame no one else gathers here in the morning to watch orange light pour across the tile, but then Ben wouldn't be here. He'd find another quiet place to be alone.

A train trembles past.

"You know how my brother was sick?"

I nod. I've been talking to his mom on the phone all semester. I imagine her with a kind face and Ben's big eyes. She has one son failing high school and another with cancer. I never feel like much help, but she calls anyway.

"He passed away."

"Oh, Ben," I say. Just over his shoulder, buses pull into the parking lot. A senior forgets his backpack and jogs to his car. Someone pushes a cart down the hallway. One of the wheels squeaks relentlessly. "I'm so sorry."

"It's cool," he says.

"It's not." A broken laugh twists out of me. For some reason, I'm smiling.

He laughs, too.

"You're right, but, you know." His voice trails off.

"I know." I don't know, not really. "Look. You know my classroom is always open. Don't worry about schoolwork. I'm so sorry."

He nods, then it's quiet for a long time. I consider hugging him but remember what my mentor teacher said the year before during student teaching: *There's never a reason to touch a child.*

This feels like a reason. He looks out the window. There's a fox in the garden. It's been the subject of extensive discussion at staff meetings. The big question: Rabies or no rabies?

The silence that Ben came here for is deafening to me. I say something I'll regret for months: "You haven't turned in your essay yet."

I mean for it to remove the burden of his grief. A distraction, I guess. It comes out more cold-and-casual. He stiffens. I want to yell at him: I'm twenty-three! I don't know what I'm doing! I don't even know myself! You are so much smarter than I am!

Because he is wise and rooted, he lets it be a comfort: "I got you, Ms. Campbell."

A twinge at the back of my neck as his laptop goes to sleep and I see the two of us reflected in the screen, the one beside the window undeniably boy and the one looming almost out of frame terminally "Miss." I give him a granola bar and tell him again to come to my room if he needs anything.

The day passes quickly. There's always so much to do. They don't tell you that about teaching. Your friends go off to top law schools or to auditions in New York, and you feel like you've chosen a quiet life. Then someone has died before eight AM, the copy machine breaks, a fight erupts in your classroom just before lunch, you cover the blood on the carpet with a potted plant, a freshmen eats the soil during third period, the copy machine is fixed, an administrator tells you the scores are too low, you get a text from your ex that he'll be in town this weekend and would you like to get a drink, the copy machine breaks again, and a parent calls just after the final bell to tell you her child has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and can't focus in class and what should she do? You text your ex back and agonize over the misplacement of a comma, over the fact that you didn't pretend to have other plans with other cool people after which you might, *might*, be able to catch up with him.

On the drive home, I run a stop sign and nearly kill a group of kids in a crosswalk. A cop pulls me over. He looks like Ben, only grown up. There is a fierceness to him that doesn't match the pitch of his voice. I have the thought that this is sexist. I have the thought that this is racist. I have the thought that this is the first time I've thought about Ben since sunrise.

I'm crying, and I hate myself for being the white person who gets pulled over and cries. He tells me what I did was reckless. He tells me to be more careful. He tells me to have a nice day.

On Saturday, I wake up at six without an alarm. It's cold in my apartment and cold inside my sweatshirt, my socks, my sneakers. I walk to Arlington Cemetery to watch the sunrise from the hill, take my headphones off to hear myself breathing. There are birds, too, and humming engines on the parkway. No one is around. I think of Ben's brother, who I never knew and who was four years older than I am and probably, given more time, would've taught Ben to shave. I think about the essay Ben hasn't written yet and the cop who didn't give me a ticket. It's St. Patrick's Day and unseasonably warm. It's a decent day for a funeral. My stomach twists— a concoction of grief and nerves. I'm a selfish person, so it's probably more of the latter.

I'm seeing Finn today. The Ex. We dated for a year in high school before I broke up with at a Starbucks and we fell out of touch. When he texted in the middle of the school day, I needed a distraction. In the twenty hours or so or so since we made plans, I've fallen in love with him. I have a bad habit of doing this.

At home, I'm careful not to dress myself with too much care. This is always an effort. I sift through drawers and think: What would I wear if I weren't seeing him today? What if he was anyone? I choose a flannel, then trade it for a Nice Flannel— meaning flannel in pattern but not material— then jeans, white socks that show, a gold chain, the same sneakers from my walk, now warm inside. I feel authentic, and this raises the stakes somehow.

I know the first thing I'll say to him: *You brought the lovely weather.*

Standing at the counter, I eat a banana and two spoonfuls of peanut butter. I read online that building muscle reduces breast tissue, and you need to eat more protein to gain muscle. I do ten half push-ups each morning and ten half push-ups each night. *Girl push-ups*, we'd called them in gym class. In fourth grade, we tied for best score on the pacer. In tenth, he admitted he'd let me win. It made me so mad at the time. It means nothing now. I'm a schoolteacher. He's a Navy SEAL. I'm not kidding. He graduated from Amherst with a degree in political science and Arabic studies, then joined the Navy.

I put the spoon in the dishwasher. I could make myself protein shakes like the ones he drank during swim season in high school, but I don't like the effort or the taste.

It's only eight. We're meeting for lunch in four hours. When I had anorexia in college, time moved with impossible slowness. It feels the same now. Being in love forces me into asceticism, all the more so if the love is unrealized and maybe even a little delusional. I force myself to read fifty pages of a novel, and it's eight-thirty. I grade a stack of papers, and it's nine-fifteen. I touch scraps of his texts like ice cubes on my tongue. *Love to see you. Promise we'll make it happen. Sorry busy day. Would make my week.* He wrote those words for me. He thought of me when he wrote them. He's thinking of me this morning. He has to leave for his run before ten to get back in time to shower and drive into the city. I brush my teeth until my gums bleed.

I take the metro. He stands when he sees me walking toward him on the sidewalk. He's tall and smiling with his arms outstretched, and I know at that very moment that I'll replay these thirty seconds of physical sensation in my mind for weeks and show up at school exhausted as a result, and I can't resent him at all because he smells like pine, and he holds me as if I'm something to cherish. His mother had a mug with that word printed three times in looping cursive: *Cherish. Cherish. Cherish.* I remember she held it sometimes at the bus stop.

"You brought the lovely weather."

He throws his head back and laughs, like I'm the first person to ever say this. There are petals on the pavement. There's a nervous rash spreading across his neck. I have a man's haircut, and he doesn't flinch at the sight of it. The bar shouldn't be that low, but it is. We're standing closer than we need to. I can't draw conclusions from this information because there's something I too badly want. I've never yearned for someone like this. I feel the loss of power like an amputation. My mouth still tastes like blood.

We sit at a high top. I joke to the hostess about us both being tall. She walks away and it occurs to me that I'm tall for a girl, and he's tall for anyone. I must not pass because the woman laughs. Or maybe she laughs because I do.

We talk about nothing for a while— the weather, the menu, his drive, our mothers — then I say: "It's so weird to be sitting across from you. I feel like a very underqualified actor at a table read."

"You're doing okay so far."

He's still not funny, I note, but he's gotten better at playing along. Six years ago, he would've laughed and then gotten up to use the bathroom or changed the subject to swimming. He says he never really loved swimming. It was a means to an end. I love him for admitting this. I love him for drinking his entire water and opening his silverware rollup to lay out the napkin, so the empty glass won't leave a ring. I love him for making the waitress love him without ever flirting with her.

He keeps saying my name, sometimes shortened and sometimes not. It's not my name anymore, but I love that he says it like he's trying to invoke the depth of our past, plus I haven't told him otherwise, so there's no cruelty or neglect in it. Like with the dentist's office or my father, it hurts to hear him say it, but that hurt is counterbalanced with enough affirmation that it's okay. It doesn't bear the same bite. Or perhaps the bite is part of the appeal. I know when I tell him, he'll apologize profusely. I also know he'll see me— and himself— differently. I like how he sees us now. I like how the rash flares up whenever I ask him an open-ended question. I like that I order, and he says he'll have the same— ginger ale and all.

He talks about the Navy. Hives creep back up his neck and flare along his jawline. His insecurity turns me on. I keep looking at his mouth and wonder whether he notices me looking at his mouth. His job is hard, he says, but he loves it. He's exactly where he's supposed to be.

"I don't want to make decisions from an ivory tower. I want to be among the people actually putting their lives on the line."

I feel close to him. I want to tell him about Ben's brother, but Finn is going to war. So many brothers die in war.

We split the bill without much fuss.

"How did you get here?" I ask on the street. There are so many funny ways he could answer the question, but he nods to his Jeep. Of course he drives a fucking Jeep.

I'm being mean. You have to understand that it's okay because he's the hottest person you've ever seen and I'm in love with him.

I tell him I took the metro, and he offers to drive me home. It makes me feel like a girl, but I climb into his car. It's a stick shift because of course it is. He makes an illegal U-turn while telling me a story about training, about all the push-ups he did. *Man push-ups*, I think because, apparently, I hate myself. I tell him the turn to the bridge is tricky. People sometimes miss it. He tells me he knows. He's driven this way before. I resent him for being so sure of himself, and I want him to rail me so badly that the desire ends a painful ache into the way-down pit of my stomach.

I grip the armrest, and he smiles.

"Is my driving that bad?"

I feign outrage.

"Can't I rest my arm? Isn't that what this contraption is for?"

He laughs. I wonder what people at stoplights think of the two of us. Siblings? Rideshare? There's no way we could be lovers to anyone who hasn't read fan fiction.

When we pull up to my apartment, I ask him if he wants to see it. He can pay for parking on the app or pull into the garage. He says he'll risk it and parallels right in front of the doorman and puts it in park. My sister is home, so there's nothing untoward about showing him where I live now, but it feels intimate anyway. The elevator buttons don't light up. My shoes are lined up in front of the coat closet. A note from my second-grade teacher is stuck to the fridge with a row of magnet poetry. Four clementines in a bowl. A stack of graded papers on the counter. I find myself embarrassed that the kid on top got a D, or maybe embarrassed that I gave it to him. It isn't Ben. I think of Ben and the essay I asked him to turn in two days after his brother died. I think if my sister died I would either type twenty single-spaced pages of dense Proust analysis over the course of several furious nights or never write again.

"It's so strange to see the two of you together," my sister is saying. Finn and I are leaning into each other at the counter. Am I leaning into him or is he leaning into me? I can't see why he would want to lean into me. I am neither muscular nor fat nor thin. I just am. I'm told this makes me look androgynous. This is code for I look like nothing.

I can't stop thinking about the fact that he didn't pay for parking.

He compliments the Van Gogh prints on the wall. I'm impressed he knows they're Van Gogh. They aren't the obvious ones—sunflowers or starry night. At lunch, he told me about a Mohsin Hamid novel he'd read on my recommendation. He's changed. Or he's posturing. Either way, it's working. He didn't pay for parking, and it's making me want to be dead. Every time I joke about suicide my sister tells me I'm not happy enough to make such jokes.

"I should head out," he says after half an hour or so.

I walk him to his car with the excuse that I'll pay if there's a ticket on his windshield. I'm so scared of annoying him, of imposing on his thirty-second elevator ride

and short walk through the lobby of my building. To feel for someone as a hot person is to offer a gift. To feel for someone as a freak is to impose a burden. I'm aware of having crossed a threshold in the years since he gave me my first kiss at fifteen. My hair is short now. I practice walking like a man in my bedroom, and I've gotten good at it. I'm not out at work, but people sense there's something off about me. Anyone over fifty doesn't know how to use my personal pronouns.

In the elevator, he tells me there's something in my teeth, that he figured I would want to know. I giggle (yes, giggle) and thank him. It's black on my thumb, and I don't know where it came from.

There's no ticket on his windshield, which means I can do nothing but hug him. I'm conscious of how our arms cross— one over, one under— like how men embrace only with less slapping. I wonder if he wanted me to fling my arms around his neck so he could wrap his around my waist which is still quite waist-like even after all those upper body exercises. I haven't told him that my name isn't my name anymore. I haven't told him about my student's brother. I'm conscious that he probably felt how sweaty my underarms are, and I'm conscious that there's a worsening war overseas, and I might very well never see this man again.

A woman walks up to us. She has a machine strapped to his hip and an official-looking polo shirt with "Parking Authority" stitched to the chest. She tells me I have to move my car. I am panicked and sweating. Forty seconds ago, there was something in my teeth. Finn smiles. It's his car, he says. He was just moving it. He's so sorry about that. The woman blushes (yes, blushes) and tells him it's no problem. She has to look up at him. Most people have to look up at him. She walks away like she's aware for the first time that it's spring, like he brought the lovely weather.

On Sunday night, I write Ben a note. I do this not because I'm a good person but because I need to do something other than text Finn or jump into the Potomac River.

I'm so sorry for the death of your brother. I can't imagine what you're going through.

I tell him what a great kid he is— *kind, funny, intelligent, and wise beyond your years.*

And then I leave him a list of quotes from people who actually know what they're talking about. It feels good to write them out on the page. I have to cram my letters together to fit them all. It feels like work, like doing something. I wonder if that's why Finn loves push-ups and roll calls. The world is burning, and his sore limbs don't make a lick of difference, but at least he's doing something. If enough people felt that same tug of guilt, perhaps the world would look nicer. It's a dumb thought. I've been having a lot of dumb thoughts lately. I keep running on the treadmill without my glasses on until reality a blur of color and sound. This must be what it feels like to be a newborn

baby. I feel a jolt of pity for people with 20/20 vision. How oppressive to see things clearly at all times against your will.

Faulkner: "Given a choice between grief and nothing, I'd choose grief"

Ben doesn't come to school for the whole week. I carry the card around in my bag in case I run into him on the metro. I never see him, and I accidentally crease the envelope with the corner of my laptop. I take it out and put it inside a new one that's blue to match the flowers drawn in a vase on the front. I keep it in a folder this time, safe.

Woolf: "Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the center which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death."

Four of my students are robbed at gunpoint, all in the same week, all within a block of school. I tell my mom this on the phone, casually, and she says I should stop coming into work so early and, if I must, then I should walk like someone not to be messed with. I don't know what she means by this, except that it sounds somehow racially charged, but I find myself repeating it like a mantra as I grip my keys and flinch whenever a plastic bag tumbles across the pavement. *I am not to be messed with*. I tell myself this is why I don't get robbed. I tell myself Ben will be okay. I tell myself Finn's push-ups mean something because I like the size of his arms and the way his eyes light up when he talks about his work and how he remembers me before I was a disappointment to my parents and a spectacle to distant relatives, and it's nice to be in love with someone for simple reasons.

Batuman: "Of course, an ending was always sad, but to *not* end something that needed to end was even more sad."

I come out to Finn over text on Wednesday. It feels like something I need to get off my chest, and I really do feel better afterwards. He replies on Friday. The Navy takes away his phone sometimes. He writes this as though the Navy has two hands and scores of childhood trauma. His response to my queerness is exquisite. I don't know what else to call it. He must've consulted someone, an Internet forum or a friend from Amherst. He is supportive without being presumptuous and kind without being overbearing. I love him I love him I love him I love him. I thank him and he "loves" my text. The pink heart makes a small popping sound when it appears.

It's the last communication we ever have. The whole affair feels like knitting a sweater for weeks, then throwing it in the ocean, and it also feels exactly right. It was never about him, or even the sweater. It was about knitting, I guess.

Yanagihara: "Life is so sad ... It's so sad, and yet we all do it. We all cling to it; we all search for something to give us solace."

Ben comes back to school the next Monday, ten days after his brother's death, but won't speak in class or turn in any work. He likely won't graduate. I find him watching anime in the breezeway, and I worry about where he'll watch anime when he isn't in school anymore, and I realize I don't know his brother's name, only that he's dead and

Ben isn't the same and never will be. I give him the blue envelope, and he tells me he'll open it later. He asks me how I've been— how *I've* been— and I tell him I've met someone, which is not really true and also something you're not supposed to tell your students.

“What are they like?” he asks.

I sit beside him, legs folded beneath me.

“Tall. Kind.”

He nods, smiles like he knows.

The sun rises over the city, and we're the only ones who see it.



Daniel Barry

Swapping Notes

let me tell you—aging is a patient listener!
attentive as a dog staring from the kitchen floor.

horrifying and wondrous,
to swap notes with my father at thirty.
I possess neither jorts nor a Coca-Cola shirt,
but now I wear a beard.
no Harley Davidson,
just a dented water bottle in hand.

to tend and be tended,
what more could a heart ask?

we know where the sun's headed,
so we kiss joy mid-flight and live in eternity's sunrise,
just as Blake prescribed.

when I can, I dine with someone I love.
I draw close to the beloved,
and I savor the night.

Cheryl Caesar

Three windows*

At first, it is only a blurring of wings,
a frenzied sphere of movement. So fast
I cannot discern color or shape. Nearly all
its mass has turned to energy, vibrating
in the lower left corner of my kitchen window.

I go to lift the sash, and see
for the first time a small dark dot
gliding down the white frame, its eight
legs motionless. Arriving at the captive,
who is not trapped between panes, but tethered

by some body part, it stretches out
a limb to touch the beating wing,
gentle as a nurse's palm that rests
coolly on your skin just after the injection.
The moth goes still on that side.

For a moment I can see the dusty
ivory wing, brown-spotted, ten times
the spider's size. The moth resumes
its frenzy. The spider reascends
to spin another sticky thread. Now what

is there for me to do? If I sweep out
the moth, release it at the back door,
will it still fly? It's lost part of the vital
dust from its wings; it's part-bound already
in the fatal filaments. I turn and leave the room.

Returning in half an hour, I find the blur
no longer sphere but hemisphere. One wing
is stilled. Oh, how long will it take? I'm trapped
in witness, as if finding a cat-torn sparrow
past saving. Again I turn away. An hour later

the moth is a wrapped mummy, a husk
of matter, all energy departed. I say a silent
blessing and let the spider feed. Predators too
must live. Would it be any easier
to watch a spider starve, or only quieter?

I remember an inert cat I found one morning
in a shelter kitchen, trapped between storm window
and inner pane, whose wooden prop had fallen. The creature
seemed flattened, drenched in its own excretions. I lifted
it out, revived it slowly with cool damp towels.

I remember because it was so clearly
an accident, something I could see and fix.
Not nature. But as I return to my computer monitor,
a third window opens, full of stink and smoke,
noise and confusion. Flash bangs and rubber bullets

turned on the people of LA, by camo-spotted
bodies with insect faces. This is not nature,
but some hideous facsimile. Not accident,
but human choice. Being also human,
I cannot choose to stand outside

the window. I must get in, with my scabby
old wings, my feeble flutterings, and face
the flung sticky filaments, the stab
and poison of the chelicerae. I imagine
the cloud of a thousand moths, overpowering a spider.

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Jeffrey Howard

Preservation

My mother, she places
The electric peeler's blade,
Against the skin, a needle to scratch
Notes from spindled fruit.
Strips of Gala, Fuji,
Red Delicious unwind limp
Like that *Sixteen Candles* scene
When Jake Ryan's stereo
Eats a Talking Heads cassette
As a pizza spins at 78 rpm.

Almost fastened to Mom's denim hip
I pick through apple yarn for longish strands.
Though destined for the trash,
The peels run nutrient-rich
On the slick kitchen counter.
I knot them as I would frayed shoelaces,
Not so hard they succumb to wear,
Yet enough to draw the loop.

Or I grab a wet clump,
Cat's cradle them through my fingers,
While Mom bakes the Mason jars—
A fraught process, just ask
Our neighbor with her one glass eye—
Then in a hot water bath
Baptizes each bottle, clean as Christ.
Removed to a thick towel,
The beige sauce blushes pink
By the stove as we wait
To hear little pops,
A sign the seal is good.
If the glass doesn't shatter,
We know the batch will keep.

Evan Baughfman

Detective Walker and the Case of the Unknown Word

Ashley Walker re-read the same sentence in her book six times.

Her twin brothers, Mason and Jacob, were to blame for her trouble. The fourth graders were supposed to be working together as teammates in a video game, but it wasn't clear that the boys were on the same squad. Mason screamed at his younger-brother-by-thirteen-minutes for ruining their mission, while Jacob threatened to throw Mason's controller into the pool if he wasn't given more respect.

After reaching beneath a bed pillow, Ashley inserted a pair of earplugs that she used nightly to quiet the boys' snores. She didn't love having to share a room with her siblings, but in that moment, Ashley smiled in the silence and leaned against a stuffed animal cluster.

For the seventh time, she read the words, *"Alondra didn't know what to do about the quarrel and wished her father would return to pacify the mob."*

Then, she read the phrase for an eighth time. A ninth. Tenth.

Perhaps Ashley couldn't blame her brothers, after all. One word in the text kept throwing her off: *"pacify."*

How was that pronounced? Immediately, *"p-a-c"* reminded her of **Pac-Man**, an arcade game she watched Mason and Jacob play at some pizza place. In that case, *"p-a-c"* sounded like *"pack."*

So...*"pack-if-eye"*? What kind of word was that?

Well, it had to be a verb, an action word, because it had *"to"* in front of it.

What did it mean to *"pack-if-eye"*?

Reading was fun, but it wasn't always easy.

The sixth-grader remembered what her English teacher, Mrs. Jackson, had said in class that year: "If you come across a word you don't know while reading, become a detective and use the clues around the word to discover its meaning."

Ashley sat up straighter. Time to solve this mystery.

She put on her Detective Hat, which closely resembled her Thinking Cap.

Detective Walker was on the case.

Her book, **Temporary Queen**, was about Princess Alondra, a teenage girl put in charge of her father's kingdom while he was away. Alondra had to deal with problems the King usually handled himself.

Currently, Alondra listened to villagers complain about rats attracted to garbage that castle chefs dumped into the streets. Villagers wanted the chefs to clean up their mess, and the chefs wanted villagers to know their place.

"Alondra didn't know what to do about the quarrel and wished her father would return to pacify the mob."

Ashley knew that “*quarrel*” was a synonym—another word—for “*fight*.” She deduced that “*quarrel*” referred to the argument between the chefs and villagers. The “*mob*” referred to all of the angry people who looked to Alondra for help.

In her mind, Detective Walker then did some re-writing of the passage, removing the unknown word altogether from the end of the sentence:

“...wished her father would return to *pacify* the mob.”

The newly formed sentence now looked like this:

“Alondra didn’t know what to do about the *quarrel* and wished her father would return to _____ the mob.”

Detective Walker had to fill in the blank with a word that made sense.

“...and wished her father would return to punish(?) the mob.”

No, Alondra wasn’t a cruel person. She wouldn’t want the King to hurt anyone.

“...and wished her father would return to send away(?) the mob.”

No, Alondra didn’t want to ignore her people’s problems. She wanted everyone to be happy and calm, to get along peacefully.

A lightbulb went off under the Detective Hat.

“...and wished her father would return to calm down(!) the mob.”

Yes! That was it! Alondra was only a teenager. She didn’t really know how to calm down angry people. She would want her father, the experienced King, to return so that he could restore peace.

Therefore, to “*pacify*” must’ve meant to “*calm down*” or to “*create peace*.”

The word, though, still bothered the detective somewhat. It sounded strange. Was it really pronounced “*pack-if-eye*”?

Wait a second! When Mason and Jacob were babies, their parents always gave them the same things to *calm them down*, to *bring them some peace and quiet*. The objects were called “*pass-if-eye-ers*”! Or were they spelled “*p-a-c-i-f-i-e-r-s*”? They had to’ve been!

To “*pacify*” meant to “*calm down*” or “*to create peace*,” and it was pronounced “*pass-if-eye*.”

Case closed! Another word added to the detective’s vocabulary.

Someone screamed in anger, loud enough to be heard through earplugs. Ashley saw Mason shaking a fist at Jacob.

Detective Walker put her story aside, stood from her bed, and went to her brothers, hoping to pacify them before either one took things too far.

Deborah L. Davitt

A Library of Lost Souls

Blue memories in my mind,
doubled and trebled,
viewed askance and aslant
through eyes not my own.

They whisper in my consciousness,
intruding into every waking moment,
I am a library of lost souls,
and they speak through me

Carrying a freight of other people's
thoughts and dreams,
a lost civilization,
weighing down my soul.

Their destination was the stars
and now mine is as well,
I have no self left now
but for them.

I wander the heavens,
looking for their new home,
hoping to find another of their kind
and pass their voices on before I die.

Robert P. Hansen

Finals Week

A stack of papers I should grade
consume the desktop and eat away
the time.

The one before me lies untouched—
a camel-straw that was too much
to bear.

How could the student cut-and-paste?
I wonder as I contemplate
the grade.

I've taught them how to cite a source.
I've taught them how to paraphrase.
And yet...

I shove the paper to the side
and turn away to clear my mind.
Again.

I need to bolster my reserves
before I give what it deserves:
An F.

I take the notebook from the shelf,
flip through poems, compose myself,
until—

A recent one about AI
draws me in and fills my eye.
I nod.

The felt-tipped pen attacks the page
with pent-up frustration, rage,
and—*No!*

The anger slowly slips away.
It's not their fault that times have changed.
Is it?

Dan Shiffman

Student-Centered Learning

Margaret Jensen pulled off the heavy, dripping barbecue fork hanging from the side of the grill. Margaret was here today at the end-of-year International School of Uzbekistan community pool party only because as a department head she was expected to say a few words about George, a middle and high school history teacher moving on to a school in Dubai. George had a PhD, which had given him a temporary pass from Margaret's condescension, but he was now yet another teacher who had not lasted more than two years in her department. Secondary Curriculum Coordinator as well as History Department Chair, Margaret sped around the school in her kitten heels, long skirts and pearls putting out fires, upholding standards, and ensuring that students were kept accountable.

A row of paper lanterns led across the Head of School's spacious courtyard to the buffet table covered with imported salmon, finger sandwiches, samsas, dried apricots, Korean carrot salad, figs, and Oreos from the embassy. Shashlik hissed on the grill. Boris, our varsity soccer coach, was showing a group of already buzzed middle-aged teachers, NGO workers, and diplomats how to do round-offs. Faculty kids played video games in the shade or splashed in the pool with the adults.

Janet Reames, a secondary school English teacher and Margaret's professional nemesis, walked over to where I was standing in the well-shaded gazebo and started telling me, the secondary school principal, about an article that she planned to post on the faculty message board called "The Narcissistic Pedagogue": "These teachers think that their students love them when they really are holding them hostage to high-stakes testing and drowning them in homework," she explained.

Janet often posted on the faculty message board with creative activity suggestions, classroom management tips, and reflections on fostering students' social and emotional well-being. She was especially enamored with "brain breaks"—structured timeouts, mostly involving stretching and guessing games—to help students refocus their overloaded attention. Janet kept pushing this strategy on the message board and at faculty meetings, which obviously irked Margaret who responded, "Thanks for sharing these thoughts of yours, but I can't help wondering why we need to protect students from the reason they are here in the first place."

When Janet convinced me to show the faculty a short cartoon video about starting a school recycling program that included the line "things are looking up for planet earth," Margaret huffed so loudly that I thought a window had been blown open. Then Janet proposed having grade eleven and twelve history students, including those in Margaret's legendary "Living through War" class, attend a performance of her script based on *Animal Farm* called "Some are More Equal than Others" set in

a Green Bay high school classroom. Janet thought her eighth graders would be empowered by performing for older students and that it would strengthen social connections across grade levels. “That sounds like a great idea,” I said, trying to be encouraging. Later, Margaret came by my office to explain that she would under no circumstances sacrifice any of her students' exam prep time. “I’ve had it with all of Janet’s brain breaking,” she said.

As smoke from the grill drifted over the pool, Janet continued her review of “The Narcissistic Pedagogue.” Her voice, which Margaret once described as nasally insistent, grew louder: “So the students must depend on them, but it’s an abusive kind of dependence. What about mutual respect? What about student-centered learning? What about practicing kindness?”

A drop of sweat slipped into my eye as something metallic hit the ground followed by gasps and groans. One of the younger teachers stepped back startled, bumping into Janet and spilling wine onto her white polo shirt.

There, incredibly, was Margaret in her long skirt and pearls, sprawled on the ground a few feet away from the gazebo, a pool noodle tossed from the water by one of the faculty kids pinned under her right shin, the greasy fork, just out of reach of her right hand. Murod, Margaret’s long-time driver, lifted her up and led her away from the crowd.

A few other shocked or intrigued teachers came over to Janet and put their hands on her shoulders, but she shook them off. Seemingly unfazed, Janet grabbed some baby carrots from the buffet table and went over to the porch, joining a group of faculty kids who were finishing setting up a game of Settlers of Catan. “Are you sure you want to put your settlement there?” I heard her say to Nils, a big, round-shouldered tenth grader from Sweden with sandy hair and sleepy eyes. “I would take another look if I were you,” Janet added, picking up Nils’ piece and handing it back to him.

I liked Nils. As I observed in my classroom visits, Nils had a deep supply of knock knock jokes and non-sequiturs about time, space, and Greek mythology. The other kids weren’t mean to Nils, but they rolled their eyes when he announced, “I need to urinate” or drew anime characters on the class whiteboard. There was a rumor that Nils’ mother kept moving him every few years from one international school to another so it would be harder for her abusive ex-husband to get to them, but teachers could be so recklessly gossipy, and I didn’t know what to believe. Margaret recently asserted in a grade-level faculty meeting that Nils was using his diagnosed learning disability as an excuse for not trying in her class.

Aware that the crowd was watching—and judging—me, I walked over to Margaret, now sitting alone in a cracked white plastic chair by the Head of School’s small basketball court waiting for Murod to pull the car up.

“Are you OK, Margaret?” I asked. “That was quite a tumble.”

"I know she was talking about me," she responded, ignoring my question. "I hear her 'Empress Margaret's.' I may be old, but my ears are quite good."

Margaret reached down to dab her still bleeding ankle with Murod's handkerchief. "Look at these students," she said, nodding to the group of frenetic middle-schoolers who had started a game of horse with an overinflated ball that kept springing away from them after every missed shot. "You'd think our teachers would have come up with something more educationally meaningful for them during the last week of school than showing movies. Where is the learning? Where is the accountability?" The sun sparkled off of Margaret's impossibly copper hair.

"Your ankle looks bad, Margaret. "Should I call the international clinic?"

Margaret held her kitten heels in her hand as she stood up with creaking knees. "No, that's not necessary; Murod's going to take me home now, which means you'll need to deliver the farewell speech for George. I'm done here." She handed me her shoes and reached into her soft briefcase, pulling out a student paper. "Will you give this to Hilola? I promised I would return her essay to her tonight, but I guess that's not going to happen." Hilola, an eleventh grader, was one of our scholarship students, exceptionally bright local kids seeking a university education beyond this post-Soviet dictatorship and cultural crossroads where dissidents were tortured and children harvested cotton. To Margaret, the enormous aid packages *her* scholarship students received from prestigious universities in the US and UK confirmed her indispensability to ISU.

Margaret turned away from me and limped towards Murod. After I watched her pass through the gate, Janet walked out of the Head of School's house wearing a Salem State T-shirt that was much too big for her. The splattering of red wine on the blouse that she held in her hands horrified me with the thought of what might have happened if Margaret had gotten a few steps closer.

Alexey, a quiet, silver-bearded Russian teacher who had been at the school almost as long as Margaret, noticed me standing alone and walked over. Margaret's apparent failed attack as well as the vodka he was drinking unloosened his impressive English. Alexey recalled how as a young department head back in the early 1990s, Margaret's "glory years," as he called them, parents knew that if their child was placed in one of her capstone courses, they had made a special cut. The young department head could seem too sure of herself and her reluctance to attend faculty parties or group excursions with her colleagues to the Chimgan Mountains came across as arrogant to some, Alexey explained, but Margaret's commitment to teaching and learning had to be respected. "She embarrassed us for not reading enough in our own subject areas and for not writing more extensive comments on student papers," he said. "She was our pedagogical guilty conscience."

"Thank you for telling me about that," I said to Alexey. I meant it.

"Was," he added.

I now moved in Janet's direction, conscious of appearing calm and even-handed. As I did, Janet stepped away from the board game and walked over to pull out an errant NERF missile entangled in the Head of School's grape trellis next to the porch.

"Why would that woman want to terrorize me like that?" she asked me.

"I'm sorry about the disruption, Janet," I replied. I immediately regretted my administrative tone and somewhat ridiculous words. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't need your help, Alan."

Janet handed the missile to the nine-year-old daughter of the Turkish ambassador and returned to the board game.

Janet spoke to her students, most of whom did not speak English as their first language, using baseball idioms and baffling analogies, but within two years at ISU she had learned more Russian and Uzbek than many other teachers. Janet also organized a cultural exchange learning day with a local school and started a "Get Moving" club in which she led a small group of slow-jogging, middle schoolers through the potholed streets surrounding the school.

The murmur around the pool swelled: It was time for Margaret—after thirty years at ISU—to go. There was no question about it any longer. Nargiza, our business manager, handed me an Aperol Spritz. "It would be for the best, Alan. Besides, Margaret only has a few years left until retirement, and she must have more than enough money saved by now. She could move to Barcelona, to Amsterdam, anywhere she wants." The Head of School needed to be pushed to do the right thing, and I was the one to do it.

The previous week Margaret told a group of ninth-grade boys in her class to "stop acting like idiots" when they got out of their seats to look at a spider on the wall. During a recent whole-school PD, she all but heckled a smiling and knowledgeable educational consultant brought in to do a workshop on inclusion and social justice. Margaret, at this point, was probably doing as much harm to the school as good. I got that, but there were still many parents who wanted me to guarantee that their kid would be in her class the following year. Margaret was a "legend," though I wasn't sure that students and parents even knew what they meant by that.

If I was still a teacher, I could lean into anger or indignation, but I hadn't been a teacher for years and it wasn't that simple. There was no easy choice to be made between "rigor" and "well-being" and my job was *not* to make hasty judgments about difficult people. Besides, it wasn't certain enough to me exactly what had happened. If Margaret had gotten a few steps closer, it would more clearly have been a fumbled attack, but she fell too far away from Janet. Maybe she just wanted to better hear what her pedagogical nemesis was saying. The only thing that was certain was that Margaret had tripped. Perhaps I could sit down with them on Monday.

"She's burnt out," added Nargiza. "She needs a rest."

I found Hilola and handed her the essay about Stalin’s purges, scrupulously marked by Margaret’s unforgiving red pen. Hilola flipped to the last page and beamed as she read the final comments from her favorite teacher. “Ms. Jensen thinks I could handle ‘Living through War’ next year, ” she said, looking up at me. Hilola had never been farther from Tashkent than Bukhara, which she visited on our “Week without Walls” trip in October. She spoke Uzbek, Russian, Tajik, English and was learning French.

I made my farewell speech for George, recounting how he had organized a living history wax museum in which his students dressed up as figures from the French Revolution. The students had loved it, while Margaret fumed that George had succumbed to “fun learning.” George seemed pleased with my speech. He shook my hand, and went off to get a few more beers from the Head of School’s cooler. I looked back at the pool. Nils was sitting alone, dangling his feet in the water, twisting a Rubik’s cube. He didn’t look unhappy. For a moment I saw myself swimming with the globally-mobile teachers and their children—laughing, bantering, having a great time—but the smoke from the barbecue was stinging my eyes. There was too much splashing and too many elbows.

I wouldn’t be jumping in.



John C. Mannone

My Twelfth-Grade English Teacher

Calvert Hall College High School

—Towson, Maryland

Mr. Fields liked to call me “man-one” but his jesting was never an insult. I first met him in my tenth grade in second-year Latin when we studied the far more interesting narratives of the twelve *Tales of Hercules* instead of the standard Virgil’s *Aeneid* in dactylic hexameter.

I didn’t understand it then, but I learned English grammar better from a foreign language class than in a typical English composition course.

The portly man in a brown tweed sports jacket sat at his desk as I and other seniors from the class of ’66 shuffled through the open door of the English classroom.

His semi-serious face illuminated with surprise in seeing me sitting at a desk off to his right in the front row. He said something nice after his usual “man-one” address.

Fluorescent lights reflecting off his partial baldness added an angelic sense to his smile. As I recall, he was kind and more laid-back than before.

I suppose my having advanced from being just a C+ student in my first two years, to an A+ student in every subject as a junior (that would continue throughout my senior year), earned a higher level of respect. Teachers talk.

I remember shaking his hand at graduation, perhaps the best smile he saved for me. I was an honor graduate, yet wasn’t allowed to sit with the other distinguished classmates in the front row.

(Because the guidance counselor didn’t believe me when I told him (the good Christian Brother) of my having been awarded a full academic scholarship to Loyola University. It was too late when the validating letter came.)

But I was happier now; all eyes were on me for the long walk from the back of the crowd, near where my proud family sat. I didn't rush to the stage, where the faculty stood in full regalia to meet the graduates in that Maryland June heat. I received awards in Physics and Spanish, too, and of course, my diploma.

At this point through my memory, I searched the Internet. I found him in repose of history, his legacy of kindness and competence was in the true La Salle tradition of teaching, which was echoed in the obituary by all the lives he had touched. He gave me the confidence to succeed as a scientist, and as a poet.

In memoriam of Albert C. Fields
May 14, 1935-June 2, 2011



Courtney Hitson

As a teacher

"Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down."

-Simon & Garfunkel

I feel more like a gangplank. A promise
aboard this boat, as you, students, look
everywhere, but forward.

I cannot teach this to you, without charging
an entity unintended for purchase. Loves,
I am so sorry.

I do not want to explain
how .gov sites are no longer
credible or discuss freedom's new
prerequisites. Mostly, I dread what curricula
waits outside school. Your confrontation
with a darkness, upgraded—reengineered
unrecognizable into binary and algorithms.

Every walkway of this vessel waits,
realigned towards rising waters. Including me.
And wild fugitives of waves, rendered
blameless without a name, stir below
a sinister and rising moon.

Teaching during 2023's 17th active shooter drill

Yep, this is a thing
they're accustomed to. A boy covers
the door's window, a girl smacks the light
switch, and we wait in darkness. They've endured
this before, so I don't make them huddle
in the designated corner,
where a shooter could still aim,
but not as easily.

This practicing feels like a different sort of harm
with a different set of scars.
As in, students sit, unbothered
to rehearse for massacre. Their eyes
and screens still busy in the dark.

A girl says, *I'd go in that cabinet* and points
to a tiny closet. *You all can go over there.*
She's considered her options,
her most primal parts already formulating
the draft of a story they all must carry.

Patrick Hueller

Here's Your Prompt

If you strip down
all the standards,
the skills, the comparing
and contrasting, the devices
rhetorical and literary,
what's left is a prompt,
THE prompt, really,
of every unit and assignment
that's worth a damn:

*In order to endure, must human beings
sacrifice a portion of their humanity?*

It's the question posed
by Le Guin's child in the basement
and those who walk away from it,
by Morrison's beloveds
and Salinger's phonies,
by Atwood's handmaid
and Kincaid's girl
and Naylor's women
and Swift's babies
and Bradbury's kids,
both innocent and vile,
and everyone in attendance,
visible and invisible,
at Ellison's battle royale.
The question has the same
infinite weight and proportions
that O'Brien's grunts carry
with them, wherever they go.

It's best, of course, to suggest
the question is open-ended.
That way essays can be written
and discussions can be had.

But the truth is that literature
answers this question
loud and clear,
that, for once, it speaks
with a certainty usually claimed
only by the hard sciences:

*No, our discipline repeats, over
and over again. No no no no
no no no. We must restore it.*



Greg Rohloff

When Her Eyes Met Mine

All I knew about “andante” was that it had something to do with how the piano was played, and that my ability to guess how never met Mrs. Dalkington’s expectations.

“Move over,” she said, and she rose from her chair next to the piano in her studio, setting Ramon, her music critic Chihuahua, on the floor. Trembling, he looked at me, and as I watched him, he flashed jagged stained teeth and growled softly. “Like this, Ronald,” she said. Her wrinkled and age-spotted hands flew over the keyboard, turning out a tune that sounded nothing like what I had just produced.

When I returned to the piano bench, her scowling nod meant that I should play. Deep breath, and then I pressed my fingers as if I could squeeze the sound out of the piano. Before the end of the first line, I struck the wrong notes again for the C-sharp chord, and Ramon was disturbed from his place on her lap as she again motioned me aside.

“No, no, no, Ronald. Like this,” she said as Ramon again showed his brown and yellow teeth. “Smoothly. Play smoothly. Don't attack the keys; sweep your fingers across them. I don't know how many times I have shown you.”

When she played, “The Dancing Spider” sounded like the prelude to a Mozart concerto rather than the third song in Book II of *The Tauber Series of Piano Instruction for Children*.

Why couldn't I be swimming, this last weekend before school started, or have one more baseball game. Anything but sitting next to Mrs. Dalkington. What was worse? The hem of her dress brushing against my leg, or the sour breath that seeped from Ramon's mouth when he perched on the piano bench next to me, snarling while wagging his tail.

When she finished, her pale lips pinched together so tight they seemed like a single line, and she asked, “See the difference?”

I nodded and slid back to the center of the piano bench, careful to position my hands so I could at least start out as smoothly as Mrs. Dalkington. The song still sounded the same as my first attempt, but Mrs. Dalkington turned encouraging. “That's better. You're starting to get it.” As I finished, she leaned across and clipped a note to the page.

“Be sure your mother sees this,” she said. “It's about the fall recital. You'll play with the other beginner students, and I want you to play 'The Dancing Spider.' When you can play this part in the proper tempo, we'll start working on the fun

part. See these?” Her hand swept across marks with the first four measures at the top of page two. “That means you'll press that pedal so that the notes blend. And here – these dots by the notes where it says *allegretto mp* – means you'll play staccato so that it will sound like dance steps, light and fast, how a spider would dance.”

“Yes, ma'am,” I said, ending the lesson in polite agreement with her and turning aside in case the image in my mind, a spider doing “The Monkey,” made me smile. The rule, she had said at my first lesson, was that she was more forgiving to students polite in their speech and manners. She was harsh with the students who left rivulets of dirty sweat on the keys because they had played outdoors before their lesson in the studio that was always kept warm for Ramon, who shook constantly even though he wore a sweater.

“Is your mother picking you up?” She scribbled something on my page in her notebook.

“No,” I said. “My cousin’s wedding is this evening, and she's at the church helping decorate the fellowship hall for the reception. She told me to walk home.”

“Make sure you don't lose that note,” she replied. “I'll put a second paper clip on it.”

Once out the front door, I took the porch steps two at a time and raced up Allison Boulevard, across Central Avenue and then to First Street and its shaded sidewalk away from traffic. I wished I could get out of the fall recital, which had seemed like a great event when I first started taking piano lessons in fourth grade. Now I wanted to play a different instrument – trumpet maybe – so I could be in the concert band at Jefferson Junior High, or guitar in a rock band.

The kids living west of Jefferson would go to Central High School, and the kids in my neighborhood would go to Fremont High. Through sixth grade and into this summer, that made no difference. But by the start of ninth grade, we would split apart, picking new friends, shifting loyalties based on our high schools.

Hillsdale Park was where kids rode skateboards, played touch football and basketball, or hung out at the park swimming pool. But most of the kids on my side of the neighborhood went to the YMCA or, if their families were wealthy enough, to the pool at Cedarcrest Country Club. But now, Hillsdale Park, next to Jefferson, was still OK, and so I wanted to see if any of my friends were there. Mom could see Mrs. Dalkington's note tomorrow, and when she saw the date of the recital, my practice time would kick up from a half-hour a day to an hour, and she would remind me that when I was older, I would be glad I learned to play the piano, a skill she always said was important socially and personally satisfying. And she would tell me that I had learned how to accomplish something despite its difficulties. And it didn't have to be fun all the time. And I wished that the warm stale air in Mrs. Dalkington's studio didn't smell like Ramon.

At the edge of the park I rolled my piano book and tucked it under my arm so if I saw friends, they wouldn't notice the book right away. I wouldn't have minded les-

sons so much if I played real songs; I can't imagine anyone other than Mom and Mrs. Dalkington wanting to hear me play "The Dancing Spider."

Bradley Russell charged out the doors of the community center, really a gym with a couple of smaller rooms and a Coke machine in the hall outside the gym. He was the sixth grade basketball star, class president, and bully. If he was in a good mood, I liked hanging around him, but if he decided to have it in for someone, not even the teachers cared. When he saw me, Bradley yelled out, "Spencer, hey Spencer!" and then ran toward me.

I hated that moment because he called kids he didn't like by their last names, so I braced for trouble. I tightened my hold on the music book and gritted my teeth.

"Hi," I said, hoping he didn't notice my music book.

"Where you been?" Bradley asked, but he did not wait for a reply before firing off another question. "You going to Jefferson or Danbury Prep this year?"

Danbury was a rich kids school that opened up shortly after the first year that black kids were bused around town to different schools other than the ones in their neighborhood. When it opened, the parents in the schools that were taking black kids for the first time accused the Danbury parents of being snooty, but a couple of years later when Danbury's high school was large enough to compete in sports, and wealthier black families were approached, then the parents were accusing the school of recruiting for athletics. That's just the way our town was; the parents fretted and the kids played it for a joke.

"Jefferson," I said. "I heard you were going to Danbury."

"I might for high school," he said. "The girls are prettier there, but I'd rather go to Jefferson to play basketball and football."

I tried to step past him, but Bradley blocked my path. "Where're you going? You ought to come with me to Tim Wilkerson's."

"I have to get home," I said. "I got to go with my parents to my cousin's wedding tonight."

"Tim's mom is taking us to the movies tonight," Bradley said. "Do you have to go to the wedding?" He started to snicker, and I knew something was up with the invitation.

"Yeah, all my aunts and uncles will be there, so..." I quit talking when Bradley looked around.

Bradley pulled out a hand-rolled cigarette from his pocket. "You got any matches?" he asked as he slid it back inside the shirt pocket.

I grinned and shook my head. "You playing cowboys and Indians rolling a cigarette like John Wayne?"

"Dumbass, it's grass," he said. "I got it from my brother when he was back home from Vietnam."

I squeezed the music book tightly. And then Bradley motioned me to follow him.

I shook my head, too nervous to say no. Now I wished that I had gone straight home instead of through the park. Marijuana? The thought of him just having it rattled me. My stomach felt like a rock dropped into it, and my neck tightened as I wondered if we'd land in juvenile hall if the police drove by.

"Come on," Bradley said. "We'll go to Central Pharmacy. I'll ask the clerk something and you slip a lighter into the middle of whatever that is under your arm." A grin spread across his face as he watched my reaction to this plan.

Then Bradley grabbed at my piano book. He tugged at it and it fell to the ground, popping open to Mrs. Dalkington's note. Before I could grab it again, Bradley picked it up and inspected the cover.

"Piano?" His voice was loud and exaggerated. "You play piano? Are you going to play at that wedding?"

If I were bigger and stronger, I would have punched Bradley in the gut and dared him to do something about it. But he was a head taller than me. I braced for whatever he wanted to dish out. The muscles in my leg tightened and my gut felt hot like I had to pee.

"Yeah, I take piano lessons." My words were meek and defensive, so I shut up and looked away.

Bradley flipped through the book, stopping at Mrs. Dalkington's paper clips, knocking the note to the ground.

"The Dancing Spider? Is this Hendrix or Zappa?" Bradley laughed, his head back, as I picked up the note. Done with his joke, he tossed the book toward me.

"You coming with me to Central Pharmacy?" he asked, the grin gone and his head bobbing as if he was deciding for me.

"I started piano lessons two years ago, and I'm just learning how to read music and play smoothly." Now I felt like a certified wuss, for the explanation sounded more like Mrs. Dalkington and less like anyone who could stand up to Bradley Russell. I pushed past him, my right hand starting to shake, and he peeled around to catch up with me.

"You can grab a lighter and we'll be out of there in less than a minute," Bradley said as he stepped slightly in front of me to block my path.

I shook my head while brushing past him, hoping that someone else I knew – anyone else – would show up. The rock in my stomach grew larger, and my shaking grew worse. "I have to go home," I said. My voice was soft as I looked to head home. As I reached the street corner, Bradley following me, I noticed across the street the front door swing open at Lisa Michaels' house. She qualified as the most popular girl at school. Her mother served as room mother from second grade on, and we liked her mom for the great parties.

When Lisa got to the curb across from us, she waved. When I waved back, she came across, dropping a friendly “Hi, guys,” as if she had expected me to be with Bradley.

Immediately he peppered her with questions about what she was doing this last weekend before school, dropping the information that he and Tim were going to the movies, and that she should get her mom to take her and her friends to the movies, too.

Lisa wrinkled her nose. “I’m going to a tea at the Girls Junior Leadership Club at Jefferson.”

As she spoke, I wondered if I was the only one noticing that she wore lip gloss and eyeliner, and that her T-shirt had a scoop neckline, like the older girls wore; she looked more like a high school girl and less like the girl who was part of my science fair project team. I could not speak; I could only stare.

“Ronald,” she asked, “are you going with them to the movies?”

I shook my head and looked away for a moment. “I was just, uh, just walking home from my music lesson, and I saw Bradley when I got to the park.” I wondered if she understood my stammering. She twisted around in front of me and looked at my arms folded across my piano book.

“Since you don’t have an instrument,” she said, “I guess that’s a piano book.”

“He’s marked his favorite song – ‘The Dancing Spider,’” Bradley said as he laughed at me. I cringed at the prospect that Lisa would think it was funny, too. I gave her that look that meant it was okay to laugh. For a moment, I thought back to the last week of fifth grade on the playground when I joined in with Bradley and Tim when they had started to pick on this kid named Gary. No one had liked him because he wasn’t very good at any sports, and when we had fitness testing in phys. ed. he cried when he failed at all three attempts to do a pull-up. I wasn’t the only one; it was most of the guys, mainly to keep Bradley and Tim from bullying us.

But her look wasn’t one of joining Bradley. She reached for the corner of the book and bent it back far enough to see part of the cover.

“I remember that book,” she said. “Do you have Mrs. Dalkington? I’ve had her since third grade.”

I nodded, starting to feel a little more comfortable as Bradley stopped laughing.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve got Mrs. Dalkington.”

Lisa smiled and leaned toward me.

“Does Ramon ever growl at you? I can’t stand how his breath smells. My mom says it’s because he’s so old and his teeth are rotting. One time when I went to her restroom, I could see into the kitchen and he had a little bowl of milk next to his food and water bowls, and so I peeked in there to see what he ate. Little bits of the canned food were floating in the milk.”

Lisa made a face; her lips parted, the bottom lip turned down, and she stuck out her tongue while her eyes bulged. Then she burst into loud laughter, and she was not looking at Bradley, but just at me.

“Gross.” That is all I could think to say, so I started laughing, too, and the muscles in my leg relaxed.

Bradley turned back toward me. “I’m going to Tim’s.”

I looked at him as turned toward Lisa. “You really ought to go to the movies with us. Bring some other girls, too.” Now his voice was cold and threatening, and he stepped toward her.

“I don’t want to Bradley.” Her voice, warm and lively when she came over, now was soft and fearful. She looked away from him, and then she turned to me, her eyes wide, her mouth pinched shut.

“She said she didn’t want to go, Bradley,” I said, and I widened my stance. “Say ‘hi’ to Tim.”

Bradley balled up his fists as he stepped close enough to lean over me. “I was talking to her.”

For a moment I wished I hadn’t spoken up. He reached toward me as if to grab me, and I stepped back. When he grabbed my shoulder I tried to pull away, but I could not. Bradley started to grin, the way he did when he made fun of Gary. I pulled the rolled up piano book from under my arm as he started to squeeze my shoulder, and I swung it as hard as I could at his fist that was now chest high. As I swung, he leaned forward and the book sailed past his hand and clipped the corner of his mouth.

Bradley screamed and blood gushed from his lower lip and cheek.

“My braces!” he screamed as he spit blood. “If you messed them up you’re going to pay for it.” He sobbed once loudly as he turned, and when he reached the end of the block he broke into a run.

I looked at Lisa, wondering what she would do.

She was motionless, her eyes still wide. “Bradley can be such a bully,” she said.

I nodded, wondering if what they said about standing up to bullies to make them leave you alone was true. We started walking toward her house, just as I would as if she were not there, and I had not been interrupted on my way home. As she walked with me she smiled, just a slight smile. “You ready for school Monday? It’s going to be weird being the seventh-graders and the youngest at the school.”

“Yeah.” No other thought came to mind; her lip gloss held my attention as if it were something that did not belong, just as the marijuana from Vietnam in Bradley’s shirt pocket did not belong, and my piano book turning into a weapon did not belong.

“Yeah, to which one – ready for school,” she asked, “or weird being a seventh-grader?” She smiled again, and I relaxed.

“Both, I guess,” I said, my voice steady. “I hadn’t really thought about this being much different from last year.” For a moment, that made sense to me, but with Brad-

ley spitting blood, the joint in his pocket, and her lip gloss in mind, I stumbled on. “Maybe harder. Yeah,” I said, looking away, “harder.” For a moment, I looked off into the distance hoping to find something to keep the conversation going. Then the front door slammed, and we turned to see Lisa’s mom locking it.

“Got to go,” Lisa said. “See you Monday.” And she did that half-run, half-walk thing that kids do when they do something with a parent, that somehow disappears when you get older, but the parent still treats you like a little kid, like they miss seeing you walk like a kid.

“Yeah, see you Monday.” I turned and walked away, checking that I still had the note. Blood soaked into it and I wished that it had landed in the standing water in the gutter so I wouldn’t have to explain to Mom. She’d probably make me practice the song for the rest of the afternoon if she knew all what happened. As I crossed the street, I wondered what the year would be like. If Lisa would be like a girlfriend by the end of Jefferson, and how good that felt just thinking about it.

I wondered what I would do if Bradley and Tim came at me to get back for Bradley’s bloody mouth. At the end of the next block, Bradley was standing on his porch, still dabbing at his bloody lip. As I got closer, he opened the screen door and stepped partly inside, and when I was directly in front of his house, he hollered out: “You’re going to pay.”

And I wondered if he would jump from the porch and try to get some licks in. But that did not matter. Now I was not afraid.



Atemnkeng Emiliene Atabong

ABCs of My Youth

Hey,
What is history to you?

Hahaha! Hahahaha! Ha!
For me, it does not live in books alone.
It lingers in whispers, in walls full of cracks,
In stories not written but carried in silence,
In names we dare not say too loud.

Once, I thought history was simple
Heroes with statues, lessons in class,
Like the ABCs I recited before the mirror,
Each letter a word to help me remember.

But now, my ABCs have changed,
Shaped by the weight of what I have seen,
Etched in the echoes of things left unsaid,
A history still unfolding before me.

A is for Abandoned,
The projects, the promises, the people.
Roads left in ruins, schools without teachers, hospitals without medicine.

B is for Blackouts,
Nights spent in darkness,
Studying by candlelight, praying Eneo remembers us.

C is for Corruption, the silent thief that steals from the poor,
Building mansions for the rich, leaving our future crumbling,
The shadow that follows my father when he walks home.

D is for Devaluation,
Our money losing worth,
Our parents working twice as hard for half as much.
Tomatoes cost more than a day's work, rice is now a luxury—
Everything rises but salaries.

E is for Elections, a word with no meaning here,
Because the people choose, but the choice is never theirs.
Our leaders dress in big suits, vomiting big speeches,
Filling their pockets while we queue for water and beg for bread.

F is for Fear—of stray bullets, of uniforms,
Of voices too loud, of speaking at all.
Fear of the silence before the next explosion.

G is for Gunshots, my new alarm clock,
Ringing in the distance, then suddenly too close,
Depending on the mood of the streets.

H is for History, the one they don't teach in school
The one my grandfather tells in whispers,
About a time before the struggle,
As children learned to survive before they could read.

I is for internally displaced
My cousin in Douala, my mom in Bamenda,
My brother in Yaoundé, my friend in Bafoussam
Scattered like dry season dust, hungry like refugees.

J is for Junctions—where soldiers stand,
Where boys disappear,
Where bribes decide who passes and who stays.

K is for Kumba, where children were shot in their classroom,
Where learning became a luxury,
Where school is a war zone.
For mothers who still cry, for justice that never came.

L is for Lockdown
Mondays stolen, businesses shattered,
Dreams put on hold, just silence and empty streets.

M is for Malaria; still killing, still ignored,
Still treated with herbs when money runs out.

N is for Ndop rice , once feeding families, now abandoned fields,
Now a memory because bullets grew faster than crops.

O is for Occupation,
for the soldiers on our streets,
The ones who should protect but remind us that we are not free.

P is for Poverty, the chain wrapped around our necks,
The reason children trade books for hawking trays,
Learning survival instead of science.

Q is for Queues,
For water, for petrol, for passports,
For everything except a better life.

R is for Rains -flooding our streets,
Washing away what little we have left.

S is for Separation,
The word that started as a demand,
Then became a fight,
Then became the reason our people keep dying.

T is for Terror, from both sides -
One calls it duty, the other calls it freedom,
But we all call it pain.

U is for Unfinished,
Buildings, monuments of money misused,
Projects abandoned before they even began.

V is for Violence,
The kind that comes with a gun,
The kind that comes with silence,
The kind that never truly leaves.

W is for Waiting; for peace, for justice,
For the day we won't need to run.

X is for Xenophobia,
The whispers in other cities,
The stares, the insults—"Anglofools," they say,
Treated like strangers, like problems instead of people.

Y is for Youth; told to be the future,
Given nothing but ruins to inherit.
Too young to carry the weight of this war,
Yet old enough to bury their friends.

Z is for Zero—the price of our voices,
The number of changes made,
The hope we hold on to, refusing to let go.

History is not only what happened before us,
It is also what is happening to us.
Once, I thought history was something we learned.
Now, I understand it is something we survive.

Patty de Villiers

Lucas

He never thought he could
Write poetry like that
He thought it had to be a certain way.
“Just write! Express yourself!”
I loved seeing the look in his eyes
Above his mask
Eyes gleaming with wonder and pride
Not the arrogant pride,
The one that gives you a spring in your step
Like you actually have something
To offer the world,
To make it more beautiful.

Author’s Note: Written during English Support with Lucas on
Thursday, November 5, 2020



Jason D. DeHart

Calculus of Clouds

or

Thirteen Ways of Looking at “Spring Turning”

I.

From such a great distance,
you’re either sick with dizzying height
or you must be a god.

II.

I was the out-of-place roll in a hillside
not visible but enjoyably disturbing the dismal
similitude of patchwork earth.

III.

Above me, somewhere, a plow is rumored.
It is miniscule, inaudible from so great a distance.

IV.

The grand perspective is only celebrated
until one steps outside of oneself, realizing
the universe extends, contracts,
but go ahead – pretend that experience
is packed neatly like crates next to each other.

V.

The clouds themselves exist
in their own symmetry,
the geometry of the landscape
mythic in its lock-step,
but then –
perhaps this is why students
take calculus and trig.

VI.

O inner abacus,
why do you count beans instead of
grind them into a fine brew?
Don’t you know that such organization
is only metaphor?

VII.

I too have known the lure
of the simplistic answer;
days should be predictable
and measured, but aren't metrics
agreed-upon expressions?

VIII.

At the casket-side, human experience
does little to consider the cubits
of a silk-lined pillow.

IX.

When I die, parcel me out in the land
or spread me in the air; do not
insult me with a damn pillow.

X.

At so majestic a view,
the kaleidoscope of meaning
is acceptable as a neat arrangement,
but then the plane lands.

XI.

The eye flies over Iowa
from oil paint perch.
Now, there's a play on words.
I owe a.
But do you really? Sweep
your brush wisely.

XII.

This tractor ain't stopping.
Somebody's mother needs a cob of corn.

XIII.

Up close, those neat lines
are really rough rows.
Upon landing from the artist's perch,
the singular tractor is desperation.
Nothing is true from the air.



Author's Note: This summer, I had the opportunity attend an AP Language and Composition teaching workshop and was challenged one day to engage in an analytical and poetic activity after a visit to a local art gallery. It was a reminder of how teaching writing can inspire composing.

The poem is modeled on the work of Wallace Stevens and is based on thirteen categories of observation (from tone and mood to use of pathos, logos, and ethos). The previous poem is the result. I think of this as ekphrasis amplified, as not only is a writer responding to an image, but they are arranging stanzas based on intentional areas of analysis.

Sherry Poff

After Hearing “Learning to Read” by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

It was the first week of May and the last week of the College Writing class I was teaching. As I combed out my just-washed hair, I thought about the upcoming discussion of *Ethan Frome* that would prepare students for their final literary analysis of the semester. One of the themes of that short novel is the fact that personal plans and goals can be thwarted by life circumstances, one of which is place.

As is the case most mornings of my life, NPR was playing in the background, and I was drawn out of my reverie by a story about a nationwide program called Poetry Out Loud. Nyla Dinkins, a school girl from Washington, D.C., was one of the contestants, and her piece for the competition was a poem called “Learning to Read” by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Nyla was joined in our nation’s capital by students from all around the United States to compete for money and recognition.

As might be expected, though, the gains of this poetry competition are more than monetary. The friendships participants make and the camaraderie they develop with people from different parts of the country are the real wins. My big win on that Monday morning was hearing work that was new to me. Despite a lifetime of loving poetry and more than two decades teaching high school and college English, I was not familiar with the poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

Harper, I learned, was an African American woman born to free parents in Maryland before the Civil War. Though she herself had opportunity to be educated, Harper spent many years speaking out for abolitionist causes and raising awareness of the plight of many thousands of young people denied an education because of their race and their place. Nyla Dinkins’ decision to recite this poem in the Poetry Out Loud competition means that many others will hear Harper’s work and will be forced to think about injustices of the past.

I myself grew up in what some would call underprivileged circumstances. My father’s health prevented him from working for much of my childhood. We lived in a rural area of Appalachia and didn’t have consistent running water. But we did have books, and we were expected to read them. When I went to school in first grade, where I came from or who my parents were didn’t seem to matter to my teachers. In fact, in some ways, my economic status might have garnered me extra consideration in the eyes of the more compassionate.

If I had been born in, say, Alabama in 1830, my ability to learn—even my access to the written word—would have been entirely dependent on who my parents were, specifically, the color of their skin. And if I had been the child of slaves, then I would not have been expected to read. Indeed, I would likely have been forbidden to read.

Because a few slave owners were sympathetic, I'm told, some young African Americans were allowed access to books, but how many great minds were stymied in their search for knowledge in those decades of our early history? How many difficulties could have been alleviated sooner if we as a nation had called upon all our talent, all our minds, to join the work?

The speaker in "Learning to Read" is not a child but a woman "rising sixty" who, in her own past, longed to read the Bible for herself, and though she faced ridicule, she pushed on until she could read. She says it made her feel like "a queen upon her throne." As a result of education, the woman in Harper's poem becomes independent with "a little cabin" all her own. I don't know if this poem is purely imaginative work or based on someone the poet knew, but I do know that learning to read is empowering.

One of my granddaughters is learning to read right now. Last week in my kitchen, she exclaimed, "Why does that box say 'tea' on the side?" Now she knows what's kept in the wooden box on my counter. And every time she visits, she discovers something new about her surroundings.

My first book—the first one that belonged to just me—was a Tip-Top Elf Book published by Rand McNally in 1959. It was *A Present for the Princess*, written by Janie Lowe Paschall and illustrated by Elizabeth Webbe. I still have it. This little book, which I read over and over again, showed me how to set up conflict, build a plot, create a climax, and provide a satisfying resolution. From it, I absorbed the elegance of parallelism and the art of varying sentence structure.

My elementary teachers recommended books for me to read, and my mother took me to the Bookmobile every summer. I was an "underprivileged" child of the hills, but I had a rich life, largely because I could read and was encouraged to read.

The top three winners of Poetry Out Loud competition this year are young women of color. By the grace of God and some excellent teachers, they have the opportunity to excel. It's a great thing that our public education system now provides education for everyone. But does it? Our constantly changing political climate has created instability for many in our country. For those who have always had access, everything seems ok, but I am forced to ask, who are we excluding today, in 2025? Who now needs help to become "a queen" upon her own throne? What can I do? What can you?

Richard LeDue

Second Hand Literature

Credit card shaped heaven sleeps
in my dreams, while the interest rate
hides behind a lullaby
(or is it an alibi?)
and I have charged used books,
with hand written inscriptions for strangers,
who find new life as ghosts
haunting my curiosity.

Perhaps I should buy bonds
instead of second hand literature
or find peace in an overpriced painting
that looks like it belongs in a hotel lobby,
instead of writing poems
on the back of old pay stubs
and being inspired by dead writers,
who make more sense to me
than the credit limit increase the bank
keeps sending me letters about.

The Quiet Hours

Listening to Brahms in the afternoon,
letting the spring outside
be seduced by another summer,
and knowing winters make us
sleep alone, missing arguments
about dirty dishes and crumbs
in the bed more than sunsets
on beaches or the awkward sounds
hiding behind passionate kisses.

It all makes me realize how
too many hours go unnoticed
as old high school love poems
that were never read by the person
who inspired them,
and all the nervous unsaid words
now a barely remembered name,
quieter than my cracked lips
humming along with Brahms.

Franco Amati

Renzo's Lectures

I used to spend hours every night preparing my lectures. I didn't want to be that professor who recycled the same stuff every semester, you know? You see, teaching—it's not just my job. It's so much more than that. It's my duty, my passion. And I have to tell you this—designing a good lecture isn't all that difficult. But *giving* the lecture is. Especially for a person like me, who has certain quirks. But I have to say, thanks to Noprazolox—or as my therapist likes to call it, MindBlank—I never have to worry.

"What the fuck kind of bullshit is this? 'Thanks to Noprazolox, I never have to worry.' Is this real? You can't be serious..."

"I am serious, Renzo. Now, put the pamphlet down for a sec and let's discuss the core issue more deeply. Is it that you're afraid your audience is judging you?" Dr. G asked.

"Yeah, that they can see how afraid I am. That they can see right through me."

"You're a top PhD student. They all know you're smart."

It was the kind of validating thing a psychoanalyst was supposed to say. But did I believe it? Not really. "It doesn't matter," I said. "None of that matters if I can't show it."

"Soon, you will be able to show it again, better than ever. I'm writing you this prescription. I strongly urge you to consider taking it."

"But I've read through the pamphlet, and I'm still not even sure about what it does. I've taken Bio Psych, Clinical Neuroscience, Cognitive Neuroanatomy, you name it. Not once did we ever talk about mind blanking agents."

"It's still relatively new. You take it before you're about to do something that's particularly fear inducing. In your case, right before your lecture. It dampens your consciousness, selectively inhibiting the neuronal oscillation patterns in the parts of the brain that give rise to subjective experience. Your mind still does everything it's prepared to do, everything a skilled academic like you is trained to do. Taken strategically, in the right doses, it'll help you build confidence in your teaching ability again. It'll help you realize that public speaking is a piece of cake for someone as bright as you, Renzo."

"I don't know. Will I still remember the things I do while I'm on it, like, afterwards?"

"Do you even need to? It's all that rumination that's holding you back in the first place."

She had a point there. I was certainly the king of rumination. No one could argue with that.

When I was in college I hated public speaking. And I had the worst self-esteem. Just never could handle the stress of being the center of attention. And whenever I tried, I always bombed.

It got so bad. I'd sooner fail a class than be forced to stand up there like an idiot, in front of a gallery of ghoulish faces staring at me, at my grungy clothes, their eyes navigating the terrain of my cratered face, casually judging the erratic mess of curls on my head. I hated myself—the way I looked, the sound of my voice—and I thought everyone else hated me too.

I remember I used to drop classes if the syllabus required any kind of oral presentation whatsoever. Public speaking was the enemy. And it was like that for a long time. That is, until I encountered Professor Dugan, my first mentor. That's when it all changed.

Dr. Dugan—Kilian was his first name—was such a good professor. He became a true role model for me. He was the guy I wanted to be like. The only person I'd wake up at 7 a.m. for, just to learn about fucking glial cells and the sodium potassium pump.

The thing about Dugan, though, is that he truly believed I could do it. "What's there to worry about, Renzo? You're a natural," he used to say. "You were made for this."

For a long time I rode that confidence. The belief he instilled in me was priceless. When I got to grad school, I tried to do the same for my own students.

I showed some promise in my first few years as an academic. That's why it meant so much to me when my PhD advisor, Cheryl Brighton, told me last summer that the psych faculty were going to nominate me for the graduate student teaching award.

"That's fantastic," I said. "So what do I have to do? Is there some paperwork or something?"

"Well, yes, but what you really have to do is teach at least one more class this Fall. See, they don't just give this award for a few good reviews on Rate My Professor. They want to see that you've taught your own course *multiple* times in a year. And you'll need a few solid recommendation letters from students. But that should be no problem for you."

"All right—well," I said, "I accept the nomination."

The thing is, I knew there was going to be a problem. Because I hadn't taught a damn thing since all this stuff happened to me the prior Spring. Since the *event*. Ugh, I can't even name it without getting myself all riled up. Suffice it to say, it was bad. After it happened, I was barely able to muddle my way through to the end of the semester. I shambled my way through group projects and a couple of reviews sessions, and somehow managed to limp to the finish line. But after I turned in my grades, I thought to myself, I don't know how I'm ever going to get up behind that podium again.

The next few weeks were hard. I had to present at a summer conference in June. A chance to make some great connections and really impress some people. But I totally choked. My talk was off to a bumpy start. I screwed up a couple of slides. Mixed up my words. And then I started to feel strange. Breathing became difficult. My heart began to race. Didn't understand what it was at first, but it turned out to be a major panic attack.

I didn't know what was happening to me. It was like I was right back in that lecture hall all over again. I got the feeling that every judgmental eye in the room was on me, *again*, and I couldn't handle it. It was like an out of body experience and then total shut-down. I don't know how else to describe it.

Cheryl was in the audience that day, and later she told me how worried she was. "I can't bare to see you like this," she said. "We have to get you some help."

So, she was the one who first suggested I start seeing Pamela Garza—or, Dr. G, as I referred to her earlier. Dr. G was supposed to be one of the best counseling psychologists on campus. Cheryl and Pamela both initially chalked it up to stress, and they believed I would be okay after a while. And indeed, I did seem a lot more relaxed as the summer wore on. But of course I did, I didn't have any other public speaking engagements. They assumed I was doing better, but I don't think either of them realized that, deep down, I was questioning whether I'd ever be able to teach again.

Anyway, so going back to my meeting with Cheryl, the one about the teaching award. I was so excited that she believed I deserved this award. After I left her office, I dug through my backpack and pulled out the pamphlet and the prescription that Dr. G gave me. This might be the only way, I said to myself. The only way to find my way back to teaching.

I decided right then and there I was going to listen to Dr. G and try out the prescription. Later that evening I put my name on the volunteer list to teach in the Fall. I wasn't going to let the chance for a teaching award slip through my fingers. I refused to let a little anxiety get in the way of achieving my goals.

Ugh, if only it were that easy...

The Fall came and I was fully committed to giving MindBlank a shot. It wasn't like most drugs where you habituate yourself to it over time. Pamela said it functioned more like an asthma inhaler. Immediate effects, she said. Rapid action. You take it right as you begin to feel the onset of panic.

It was a normal day. I ate my breakfast in the student center cafeteria. I hated eating with faculty members. It was so much easier to blend in among the undergrads. I looked up at the clock. Only seven minutes left. I had to get my ass across campus. I downed the rest of my coffee, choked down the last bits of scrambled eggs, and was off to teach my class.

In the balmy lecture hall, early-arriving students took their seats. I walked to the front, briefcase in tow. I hated having such little time to set up before the room got crowded. Ideally it was best to arrive at least a few minutes early, you know—engage in a little small talk with some students before go time. It helped ease the tension in the room.

With more students taking their seats, I felt my pulse elevate. This is the point where I usually begin to sweat. I took my coat off and placed it on the back of a chair. I rolled up my sleeves, took another quick glance at my watch. Almost time. The back of my neck felt a little itchy. The doors were still wide open. More students flooded in.

The room was getting noisier. Pre-class chatter about last night's reading. It was the type of obnoxious banter I had once learned to ignore, but this time my agitation was reaching its peak. I breathed in. I breathed out.

I was ready. I pulled the small bottle out of my bag. It had a tip designed for intra-nasal spraying. I ducked below the podium so no one would see me do it. Two quick hits pushed a fine mist up my nose.

Now, I felt a sting on the back of my tongue, like I had just eaten a handful of sour candy. But what was actually happening was that the substance was going from the chemical receptors in my nasal cavity right to my olfactory bulb, completely bypassing the blood-brain barrier, and connecting directly to my cerebral cortex, each molecule interfacing with its appropriate receptor.

Rapid neural signals blazed down axons, danced on dendrites, causing channels of sodium and potassium ions to flood through cell membranes. The signals transmitted information to the orbitofrontal cortex, amygdala, and hippocampus, respectively, telling each player in the network of action, memory, emotion and speech to do their jobs without making it known to me that their jobs were being done.

The sensation was brief but uncomfortable. An aftertaste of lemony metallic flavor lingered at the back of my throat. It was a matter of seconds now. Things began to get fuzzy. My vision blurred at the edges. I recall standing straight up, facing the class, adjusting my mic a little, and taking one more big swig of coffee to wash out the taste. One more deep breath. Some dizziness. And then everything went blank. For me, the world ceased to exist. For my class, the lecture had just begun.

I don't know what I'm going to do. Do you think I want to be in this position? Where I have to rely on dampening down my consciousness just to function. That I have to rely on distractions, on other people, on things outside myself.

I don't know what's happened to me. There was a time when I was on top. Where I could stand in front of a class and I was the fucking man. There was nothing I didn't know and nothing I couldn't teach. It's wild how easily shit can come crashing down. How fragile that sense of self can be.

What an embarrassment. Do I really deserve this teaching award? Maybe I did at one point. But now? Fucking look at me. I need to shoot my face up with chemicals just to steady my heart rate enough not to collapse out of fear and panic.

It's crazy how it all gets. It's crazy how my deepest fears have returned. How the moments leading up to that podium, the steps from my Psych department office to the lecture hall, three buildings down, where I cut across that little square of grass near the fountain, how my mind goes from calm, cool, collected research scientist, to a pathetic, frightened, scared little deer in the headlights.

But that's what fear does to you, man. It brings you toe to toe with that instinctual reptilian part of you. You're right back there on the savannah. Homo sapiens trying to not be made into a meal by a bunch of lions. But these aren't lions, Renzo. These are undergraduate students. And it's your job to teach them basic psychology.

You get up there, and you clip that little microphone to your shirt, and you go through those Powerpoint slides. You run through it like you practiced, like you rehearsed them in your sleep. You know each bullet point, one after the other, and have all these little ancillary facts and discussion points and notes to go along with each one, all depending on the situation, all ready for the class discussion to shape the direction of the experience, ready for those curious minds to unleash their questions, anticipating their every concern and confusion.

That's how you do it. It's putting yourself in *their* shoes, getting into their heads, modeling what *you* were like as a student, and making them understand that if they put in the work, if they are diligent, and if they pay attention, they can master the material as you have. But every great professor knows that true mastery is elusive.

The best teachers are the ones who remain students. It's like Dugan used to say—you never learn it better than when you yourself are out there teaching. The teaching ignites further discovery.

How am I supposed to get there while I'm in utter blankness, completely unconscious? Sure, I'll get through those slides. Yes, the time will pass by. The hands on the clock will move in the blink of an eye. True, it'll all feel like a flash, like nothing. There will be no fear, no sweat, no unpleasant *I-think-I'm-going-to-die-right-now-type* feelings. I won't get light headed. The fluorescent lights above my head won't disorient me. I won't get vertigo or collapse, like that student did, that day. The Event. No fear that I might stop breathing like she did, that my fucking heart might stop. That I'll stop existing and blink out. That I'll join her. In the land of nowhere. That some other person out there will have to try desperately to bring *me* back to life. That some unsuspecting stranger will have to put it upon themselves to pull me, their professor, back from the brink of the white light, away from those pearly gates and say no, this is not your time.

CPR certified—ha. They made me get certified, so I'd be prepared for events like that. So if anything happened to a student, I'd know what to do. What they don't tell

you is that CPR only works about five percent of the time. That young woman who was sitting in the front row, who at one moment was eagerly listening to my lecture, and then the next, flatlining. How was I supposed to know what shit she was on? Or that she was pretty much dead when she hit the floor. And there was nothing I could do about it. But why do I still feel like it's my fault? Why do I still see all those haunting faces in the room, looking at me, relying on me, their professor, to do something, to do the impossible. To save her.

And I failed.

Listen to yourself, Renzo. You have a million thoughts a minute, and very few of them productive. You have more teaching to do, you hear? More teaching. There's always more teaching. And if you—if I—am going to get that dream job someday when I graduate, if I'm going to live up to all these positive reviews and win this teaching award that I so desperately, selfishly, desire, then I'm going to have to find a way to deal with this internal fucking shit-storm. I'm going to have to reconcile the fact that when I'm on Noprazolox, I'm not really teaching, am I? If there's no conscious *me* in the driver seat, did I ever even do the thing in the first place?

Do I deserve to take credit for something that I have no awareness of having even done? Pamela says I'm too stuck in my own head. She says that's what's killing me. That being *too conscious* is actually the problem. "An overly calibrated sense of self-awareness is what's causing your paralysis," she says.

"So does that mean I'm too fucking sensitive? Do I feel everything just a little too much? We're in the business of studying people—shouldn't that be a good thing?"

That's my only defense.

No. No it's not.

"You'll never really reach that flow state unless it's automatic. The finest performances require no thought at all. This treatment is going to help you more easily reach that state of peak performance. It's what all the great athletes do. Research shows that even their time perception changes. When you are so good at something, you do it with absolutely nothing going on up there."

I say nothing. But then I think, yes. When I was fine, when I had the confidence Dugan instilled in me. That's what I used to feel ... *nothing*. It was effortless. My mind was truly blank then. Naturally blank. But now it's all disjointed. Now I need something artificial to get me there. But it just makes me feel like a hack.

I was able to teach well with MindBlank. Actually I was able to teach more than well. My students were all saying how great the lectures were. I'd come to—back to awareness—an hour or so later, ready for office hours, and students would come in all inspired and excited about what they learned that day, wanting to continue the discussion, wanting additional readings. It was crazy. Online discussion boards were more

active than ever, and there were real murmurings in the department that Renzo Romani's Intro to Cognitive Science was *the* class to take.

So I prepared my portfolio, got my student recommendations, made my picture-perfect packet for consideration for the teaching award. I presented it to Cheryl for her to dutifully deliver it to the rest of the faculty, which were planning to meet later that week.

Did I do it? I wasn't sure I had. But no one could say I wasn't doing my job. No one could argue I wasn't getting positive results. The thing is, deep down I felt truly shitty about it.

"It's not me out there. I mean, it is, but it's like the party goes on and I'm somewhere else."

"It *is* you, Renzo. You are too attached to your consciousness. There was a time in human history, when we as Homo sapiens weren't so wrapped up in ourselves. It's only after we became civilized, started developing language and tracking our social accomplishments, that self-consciousness became more of a centerpiece of human behavior. Did you know, the philosopher Julian Jaynes believed that there was a time when all of those self-generated voices echoing in our heads were once perceived to be the voices of gods, that the quote-unquote inner monologue is actually an illusion, one we harnessed to accomplish many things. But with MindBlank, you can finally face the reality that those voices that are telling you to be scared, that you can't do it, that something terrible will happen—well, they are lying, Renzo. MindBlank quiets those voices so you can keep doing the things that make you *you*."

I wanted to buy into it so bad. But I couldn't. I must say, though, that was some real elegant and well-informed anthropological shit she was spewing at me. And were I not a bright bulb myself, I might have eaten it all up. Really, you're gonna paraphrase Jaynes and all that bicameral mind crap that literally no reputable scientist has lent any credence to, like, ever? But I wasn't about to put her in her place and try to one-up her scholarship. She was the professional. I didn't argue. I didn't say anything. I just kept taking my medicine, like a good little boy.

I won the teaching award. And I felt nothing. No pride. No jubilation. They might as well have presented it to a fucking robot.

"How long do I have to be on it?"

"Excuse me?"

"You said, it'll help me learn to quiet those voices. When do I learn? When do I get to the point where I can teach without it? Where's the growth? I need to know that I can eventually do my job without relying on this mind numbing agent."

"Mind *blinking* agent. And the answer is, to put it bluntly, you don't come off it, Renzo. It's working. Why would you stop it? It's not causing you any other side effects.

You may always need it. But is that such a bad thing? A person with your degree of panic disorder—there are few other bonafide solutions.”

“That’s bullshit. Is it Cheryl? Is she telling you to keep me on it. She knows if I do well, it looks good for her, right? She hasn’t had a PhD student get a job in ten years. Don’t you think I know that? She’s counting on me being able to teach after I graduate. Otherwise she’ll look bad.”

“Renzo, your mental well-being has nothing to do with Cheryl and her career. Cheryl wants the best for you. We all do.”

“Bull ... shit ... And you are lying when you say there are no other side effects. You don’t consider feeling absolutely empty and lost a fucking side effect? To never feel like you are the agent of any of your own accomplishments. To never feel the pleasure of being the cause. That’s not a fucking side effect? That’s it. I’m done. This is our last session.”

I was so pissed. I was frantic. I nearly sprinted to my car. *I need to get home.* I need to talk to someone. Need to reach Dugan. He’ll help me. He’ll know what to do. Gotta get home...

By the time I got to my car, my pulse was through the roof. I started the engine, looked in the rearview mirror, and I swear, I didn’t see my own eyes looking back at me. It was like a ghost started that car. Like a demon possessed me to pull out the inhaler.

I had never used it for anything other than lectures. I was explicitly warned against it. Context-dependent learning and all that. Wasn’t supposed to condition my brain to use it for anything other than the one thing that scared me most. But I was feeling it. I was going off the deep end. The conversation with Pamela set me off so bad. I knew what was coming. And poof ... I inhaled the Noprazolox. Whooooosh. Whooooosh. I was gone...

The next thing I knew, I woke up in the hospital. I was groggy and had no memory of what happened. A nurse told me I had been in a car accident.

People came, people left. Family visited. Friends visited. Cheryl visited. I don’t think she said much. Pamela did not visit. Probably because I told her to fuck off.

For the next several days I was in a fog of hospital sounds and hospital food and shitty TV, heinous lighting, beeps and boops, uncomfortable pillows, and obnoxious people wailing in the distance.

I didn’t truly feel myself again until I got a visit from Dugan.

“How you doing, kid?”

I tried to explain, but he then put his big hand on my shoulder. “Shh. It’s okay, he said. They already told me everything.”

“It’s good to see you,” I said. “How long has it been since we—”

"I think last time we talked was the three of us—you, me, and your mom at that diner."

"Yeah," I smiled. "She was ranting about my speeding tickets and her insurance, and you said to her, 'Do you know what a good son you have?' You said, 'From this day on, I want you to never bring up those tickets again. You should be very proud of your boy. Getting into a PhD—'" I fell into a coughing fit, lost track of what I was saying, nearly threw up.

"Shhh, easy goes it," Dugan said, "I remember."

"Ugh," I groaned, took a sip of water, caught my breath. "What am I gonna do now?" I said. "I'm lost. I don't think I'll ever teach again."

"Listen, I remember when you would barely raise your hand in my class. Tried to hide in the back row, like I couldn't see you. You couldn't hide then, and you're not gonna hide now. I'm not saying it's gonna be easy. And you may have more breakdowns. You went through some real shit with that student of yours dying. But you have to keep moving towards the thing that you're scared of. I saw you do it when you were nineteen. You don't think I can spot stage fright the second I see it?"

"Stage fright? Heh, that's putting it lightly," I said.

"But Renzo, you weren't hopeless then and you sure as hell aren't hopeless now. I could tell how sincere you were, how original your thinking was, and how kind and supportive you'd be with students of your own. I always said, you have the temperament for it. You just got stuck in a moment back there. Something bad happened. And because it happened while you were teaching, it twisted you all up. But that's how things are sometimes. Life will screw you up. But you can't back down. You may struggle for a while. You'll cry, you'll panic. Hell, did I tell you about the time I fainted in my tenure review meeting?"

"What? Get out of here!"

"I did. Times of great stress have a way of exposing the worst in us. But that doesn't mean we have to bow out or shy away when we're confronted with real resistance."

That was more or less his speech. I was real drugged up, so I might have elaborated and pumped it up a little in retrospect. It was basically that. But, honestly, all the guy had to really do was look at me, and I felt the power again.

So, Dugan was right. More struggles were ahead of me. But I knew that MindBlank wasn't the solution. You don't confront your fear by disappearing in the face of it, even if that disappearing is only to yourself.

I found a new therapist, and all we do is talk. And honestly, that's a good thing. She wants me to be myself, even if the struggle is for the long haul.

I ended up taking a leave of absence for a semester. I focused a lot on writing and being present, and finding my voice again. I tried new things. I needed to understand

who I was outside of graduate school and teaching. I looked for ways in which I could still be myself without necessarily being able to do everything perfectly all the time.

I'm learning to forgive myself too. I'm getting much better at letting go of the past. But most important—I know the solution is never to completely detach. The best defense against the onslaught of chaos impinging upon your senses isn't to cover it up with nothingness. You have to find a way to feel it all, let it surround you, and move through it despite how frightening it all is.

Time does heal...

As my leave of absence was nearing its end, I had to meet with Cheryl to touch base about where I was at, how I was feeling, and discuss whether I ever intended to come back.

She was good about it. Didn't try to pressure me or anything. I walked into her office. She gave me a hug.

"What's that?" she said.

I pulled the teaching award out of my backpack and handed it to her.

"You can give it back to me soon," I said. "When I win it a second time."



Paul Hostovsky

The Magical Part

Every year when I taught the electrical unit—the difference between static electricity and circuit electricity—I’d give each kid a balloon, tell them to blow it up and tie the end (they usually needed help tying the end) and rub it on themselves. RUB, RUB, RUB. That was always the fun part. Then we’d put it on the blackboard where of course it would stick—that was always the magical part. Now, if they could tell me the principle behind it—why the balloon was sticking, what was happening with the protons and the electrons—they could keep the balloon. And if they couldn’t, well, we’d pop the balloon. I had a giant safety pin, and we’d pop the balloons: POP, POP, POP—that was always how all the other classrooms knew when I was doing the electrical unit. I miss teaching. I hated to give it up. I haven’t been able to do anything since the amputation. Here I sit in a wheelchair waiting for a kidney transplant and a prosthetic leg. I’ve gained twenty pounds since January. I’d like to get back in the classroom, but I need a leg first. Can’t get into that building without a leg. People treat you differently when you’re missing a body part—they will talk to the person you’re with instead of to you. Or if they talk to you, they talk louder, like you’re hard of hearing. The kids are wonderful, though. No inhibitions. They walk right up and point: “What happened to your leg? Where is the leg now?” Like ta-da: the leg is gone. In the grocery store I have a scooter—the store provides them. I turn the key and presto! I go zooming up and down the aisles. The kids all think it’s the cat’s meow. They’d give anything to ride that thing. I’m like the pied piper: they follow me through the store, asking for a ride, asking where the leg is, asking questions no adult will ask or deign to answer.

Mable Buchanan Palmer

Uprooting Haibun

Hello, I am your son's language arts teacher. No, he's not in trouble—but I wanted to reach out.

Third period, John said that he felt the earth turn over—felt ultraviolet radiation fray the delicate lacework of its skin. The weave cracked, stretched, gapped, repelled back the embrace that kept it whole. The lithosphere gasped, then ached to dilate and deliver a jagged hungry stone that had slept below the membrane till the sunrise pierced its slotted eyelids and it stretched, pressing fingertips through terra like a man buried alive, and it burst, sharp and panting, through the surface.

I sent him to the nurse. He took the pass and came back quietly a couple minutes later. But I just found a raw incisor (it is still oozing) on my corner sign-out table. Maybe you can follow up?

Yes, it had the root attached.

I do think it was pulled too early, likely with clawing fingers, no elegant floss and doorknob dance this time. Looked like there wasn't time to clot, the fragile beet-red tendrils seemed to almost still be breathing.

No, I don't think we can slow it down once they start to loosen.

Yes, I think all their incisors are coming in this soon. Even some of their wisdom teeth have taken root.

We all just looked the other way. All of us had our cameras off

till we raised mangled hands,
sun-seared moles shielding blinded eyes
from what they've made of flesh and blood.

Dave Mainelli

By the Way, A Comma Goes There

Dimitri exhales cigar smoke as he replies to one of his Fall English 201 students. He enjoys having her in class; he just wishes she didn't sit in the front row, as he finds her much too attractive and distracting.

Rylee, he types. I am sorry to hear this news. Take whatever time you need. Also, don't forget that you need a comma between two independent clauses with a coordinating conj— He stops and rereads the email from Rylee.

Dear Professor Whitt, My father passed away and I will not be in class this week. Thank you for your understanding.

He puckers his lips while reaching for his glass from the marble coaster on the walnut-inlaid desk he inherited from his father. It was all he got after his father shot himself with a pump-action shotgun in the kitchen when Dimitri was twelve. Where he got the gun, no one ever found out.

The nightly ritual demanded a drink when only a few papers remained ungraded. He admires the cocktail, rotating the coup glass gently in the low light. The sugared rim glitters like a feathered boa wrapped around a perfect blend of cognac, Cointreau, and lemon juice. Despite the shaking and stirring, the orange and yellow layers remain distinct—a rare alchemy not owed to Bridgette, his ex-wife, who couldn't mix a proper drink in seven years of marriage. But that is neither here nor there.

And here he goes again, thinking of her.

He takes another drag from his Macanudo Cigarillo, relishing the simple pleasure of smoking indoors—something Bridgette never allowed because of her asthma. He sets it back into the silver ashtray. The smoke plumes into the air like a cobra rising from its master's basket.

Frustrated, he deletes the third sentence, signs off, and hits send. Then his gaze drifts toward Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a domestic shorthair with gray-and-white fur—another relic of Bridgette's departure. She'd rescued the cat, then left it behind when she stormed out for good, claiming she was "tired of his bullshit."

"Oh, Gabriel," he sighs to the feline, who stretches lazily on the buffet beside him. "These unashamed libertines today. They're so soft. You can't get better if you're soft."

The cat meows, perhaps at the sound of its name, and licks its paw. Dimitri knows the cat is sick of his constant professorly moaning. When Bridgette left, he made no objection to keeping Gabriel—thinking it might be a clever ploy to lure her back. That window had long since closed, but he'd grown fond of the animal's detached, laissez-faire attitude.

When the ash falls from the stub of his cigar onto his lap, he realizes he hasn't put his *Longplum* away since his earlier toss-off. Bridgette hated his medieval and Old English references to his cock—*Pillicock*, *Fiddle*, *Ploughshare*, and the like. He even nicknamed it Henry the V (also known as Henry of Monmouth).

"Back you go, Henry," he says, tucking himself away and zipping up.

Dimitri stopped feeling guilty about his self-indulgences long ago; he is human, after all. He also stopped pursuing women exactly one year and one month ago—four months after Bridgette left. At forty-six, the song-and-dance of courtship, the peacock's routine, felt humiliating. He's thought about paying for sex, but the fear of getting caught by the university looms too large. He doesn't have the swagger to get away with it.

And as for his students, they were so young now. Some were eighteen, still legal, sure, but increasingly childlike in his eyes. In his early days, that age had shimmered with temptation: tan legs in denim shorts, tight shirts stretched across pert chests, and that intoxicating blend of naïveté and broken-home baggage. When one said her father remembered him from a college lecture, his chest actually hurt.

That was how he'd met Bridgette. She wasn't a student when they got involved, but she *had* been in his class a few years prior—"Symbolism in Short Stories." They'd shared glances that lingered too long. She'd linger after class with questions he was sure she already knew the answers to. When she returned as a grad assistant, it only took a couple poetry slams and faculty mixers before she was in his bed. She was twenty-two. He was thirty-three. The gap had always been noticeable—intellectually, experientially—but the sex was too good to deny. They eloped four years later.

He was rapt with her energy and humor at first. She made him laugh, oh, she could make him laugh. He felt her bravery every time they were together in the world. She had charm, something he was never graced with, and somehow could win people over in just minutes. Like the first time they officially attended a Language and Arts Department end-of-year reception as a couple, and not an hour in, she had several of the professors, both male and female, laughing and swooning. It was at the Dear's house, and later in the night, she got the department chair of music to sit down at the piano for a pop sing-along. He stood behind the crowd as they sang, "Piano Man," led by Bridgette, proud to know she would be coming home with him. He would make love to her to solidify the moment.

Maybe, as time passed, his frustration with her inability to understand concepts like hermeneutics became harder to hide. She never grasped his pet theory that all literature could be read as "one big story." He tried again and again to explain it. Once, when he said, "No novel is original—not in meaning or structure," she nearly bit his head off, calling him a "pretentious, condescending, pedantic fuckwad."

Or was it *pedantic*, *condescending*, *pretentious fucknut*? Either way, what mattered to Dimitri was the misordering of adjectives.

“Subjective before objective,” he reminded her.

Her mouth foamed. “I didn’t use any objective adjectives, you autistic psycho—okay, fine.” She paused to collect herself. “Here’s one for you: *you are a narcissistic, self-important, micro-penis-having loser.*”

He nodded, tapping his glasses against his chin. “It may be *narcissistical.*”

She screamed, pulling at her hair. Yes, he was autistic, something determined by a peer from behavior sciences much later in his career, but only mildly. And many of the greatest minds in history were both autistic and narcissistic.

Almost every night ended like this—his thoughts circling back to her, to Kansas City, where she’d returned hours after leaving him. He poured another whiskey, fresh cubes clinking in the glass. Even his masturbatory fantasies bent toward her, no matter how hard he tried. Could he love again? Did he even love her?

He must have. Why else did it still ache?

The sex had slowed by year four and ended by year five. After that, the marriage was a fossil. As it turned out, Bridgette had been sleeping with younger men. He was the only one celibate in the marriage’s twilight.

Well, not entirely. There was that poet from Virginia he met in Jacksonville during a writers’ conference. She seemed mysterious, until he realized her mystery was merely ignorance cloaked in verse. He left her mid-dinner the next night. Paid half the bill. Apologized.

Then there was the Gordon Lish disciple from the Center for Fiction, whom he met at a conference in New York. They slept together for two nights before he dared to say Lish had ruined Raymond Carver. She stormed out. Lish himself showed up the next day to the conference to dress down Dimitri. He now tells the story as a badge of honor.

Back at his desk, Miles Davis plays on the record player—another thing Bridgette hated. She once called jazz “a group of pretentious asses trying to outdo each other, creating a convoluted pile of shit.”

DING. A new email. *Dear Prof. Whitt, (abbreviated—zero professionalism)*

As you know, due to your appointment as the Interim Department Chair (a position he vehemently protested), it is your duty to sign off on the summer internships and validate the process for students who held paying positions from their instructors.

She explains how it would be a hassle for the students to appeal and go through more steps to receive payment and credits, adding that it is *a hassle entirely predicated on your failure to sign the forms for some inexplicable and unconscionable reason...*

Dimitri chokes on his drink. “Gabriel, you must come read this impertinence,” he says, nearly falling out of his chair. The cat groans, rolling away from him.

“Everyone knows the summer interns don’t do shit.” Dimitri scans his condo for someone to agree with him and finds only the 11x14 framed photograph of Leo Tolstoy in the corner. “Everyone,” he shouts at Leo.

He'd fallen in love with Russian writers in grad school. Once, on a road trip to South Dakota, he monologued about why Pushkin was the greatest Russian wordsmith to ever live. Bridgette had visibly melted with boredom, preferring Brontë and Austen. He refused to be baited into *that* debate.

He takes a swig, swallows too much, and spits a little back into the glass. Three drinks in, he is about to violate his personal policy for waiting twenty-four hours before responding to administrative emails. Dangerous territory.

Dear "Sue J.,"

As acting English Department Chair, I will ask to be treated with more respect than this email—

His phone vibrates on the desk, spinning in a slow half-circle. Odd—he usually sets it to Do Not Disturb while working. He leans over.

His mother.

He declines the call.

The vibrations resume. Three times more, in fact. He's told her repeatedly: no weekday calls. Professors need their evenings to work and unwind. They'd agreed on Sunday mornings at eleven.

She should know better. She was the rule enforcer, the original grammar tyrant, disciplinarian, and social life destroyer, now retired in Palm Springs and "useless to the world." His words, not hers.

His father was a district judge in Philadelphia, and at his funeral, his mother had warned he and his brother that there was to be no mention of the illness, as it would be an indication of weakness. But twelve-year-old Dimitri had let it slip that his father needed a catheter in his final weeks.

She heard. And she remembered.

That night, when the house emptied of mourners, she locked the door and took him upstairs to the guest room, where she kept the belts.

It wasn't the belt that hurt. He was being punished for trying to share his father's suffering. He vividly remembers staring at a picture of his father on the guest bedstand as she snapped the belt across his back and rear.

He now believes she was right. Appearance matters. Rules matter.

It was probably something small. A missing episode. A rerun instead of her detective show. She could wait until Sunday.

Rylee returns to class the following Tuesday and takes her usual seat at the front, her legs crossed in shorts and a fitted T-shirt that stretches slightly across her chest. Her posture sagging, eyes rimmed in sleepless red—but she still commands the room's attention, including his.

He explains to the class that today's lesson focuses on conveying emotion without resorting to direct expression. He scrawls the prompt across the whiteboard in wide, block letters:

NO: I felt, I thought, I saw, I heard. I think, etc.

YES: Let the action carry the weight. Let the reader feel it with you.

He strolls between the aisles as the students hunch over their notebooks or tap softly at laptop keys. When he reaches Rylee's desk, he slows. She hasn't written anything. He watches her as her pen hovers, then trembles, stuttering small circles in the corner of the page.

He hesitates, uncertain whether comfort will help or embarrass her. He thinks of Bridgette—what she would do, what she would expect of him. *Be gentle. Think of her, not you. Don't be a narcissistic fuckwad.*

He crouches beside her, lowering his voice. "It's okay. Write what you can."

She doesn't look at him, only nodding slightly.

"Don't think. Just go to the place where the pain is. Let it speak before you know what it wants to say."

Her hand jerks once, as if the words tried to come all at once and got stuck. Then she lowers her head, and her shoulders hitch with a stifled breath. A soft, involuntary moan escapes her throat—something between a laugh and a sob. A small bubble of snot glistens briefly beneath one nostril. She wipes it with her sleeve before it can fall.

Dimitri rests a few fingers lightly on her shoulder; the touch is careful, neutral. Comforting, he hopes—but his heart pounds once, hard.

"Writing can be cathartic," he murmurs. "Let it flow."

She doesn't reply, but her pen begins to move again. Scribbles at first. Then words. Then a sentence.

He stays for a second longer than he should. Watches the ink form across the paper like a healing wound scabbing over.

Then he taps the top of the page gently with his index finger, making a soft drumming sound against the desk.

"By the way," he says, smiling faintly, "a comma goes there."

She lets out something close to a laugh, though it's wet and low in her throat. He knows it is partly in angst. Her eyes finally flicker up toward his, and he sees something he can't quite name—grief, yes, but also resilience. And maybe, just maybe, recognition. To be better.

He stands and continues down the row, offering a slight correction here, a whispered encouragement there. The room has changed. Something subtle has shifted in the air.

Back at his desk, he sits, watching the students—all of them, now—not as distractions, not as what-ifs, but as stories in progress. Grasping for shape. Learning where the commas go.

Sabyasachi Roy

Notes on an Institution

The university is built on an asylum.
Not metaphorically. Literally.
These classrooms once held screams.

Tunnels beneath whisper at night—
wind, perhaps.
Or the weight of history
pressing its mouth to the pipes.

Professors assign essays
on postmodern narrative,
but we are walking citations:
footnotes with haunted eyes
in a thesis no one archived.

Someone finds a tooth in the courtyard.
Someone else jokes
about extra credit for exorcisms.
We laugh—too loud.

At 3 a.m., I hear scratching in the walls.
Could be rats.
Could be memory
trying to claw its way out.



Why “Finding Your Writing Voice” Feels Impossible (And Why You Already Have One)

Part 1: The Sock Is Not Lost—You’re Just Wearing It Inside Out

Let’s get this out of the way: you’re not a broken writer. You don’t need to chant mantras, rearrange your furniture, or sacrifice a thesaurus under the full moon to find your “voice.” This whole “finding your voice” thing? It’s marketing. A self-help problem with a self-help solution you never needed. Like adult coloring books for stress (spoiler: they just gave me more paper to stress over).

You already have a voice. You’ve been using it since the first time you left a passive-aggressive note for your roommate about the moldy sandwich in the fridge. It was in that fourth-grade essay where you described your summer vacation as “seven weeks of mosquito bites, sunburns, and my uncle talking about Bitcoin before it was cool.” Your voice has always been here. It’s just been edited, filtered, spell-checked, diluted, and overwritten into a bland tofu smoothie of nothingness.

Your Voice Isn’t a Lost Artifact

Writing advice acts like your voice is some rare fossil buried in a cave, and you need to embark on a spiritual pilgrimage to unearth it. Bring your notebook, water bottle, and crippling self-doubt.

But no. Your voice isn’t an ancient rune. It’s probably in that sentence you’re about to delete because it “sounds weird” or “isn’t literary enough.” Guess what? That’s your voice showing up with a slice of pizza and bad posture, and you’re about to kick it out for not wearing pants.

Here’s the thing: we’ve confused “finding” your voice with “becoming a different person.” We read Didion, Baldwin, Zadie Smith, David Foster Wallace (may his footnotes rest in peace), and we think we need to sound like them to sound like writers. What we end up sounding like is a committee trying to write a thank-you email. It’s tight. It’s polite. And it’s dead inside.

Overthinking Is Your Superpower (Also, Your Curse)

If you’re currently overanalyzing your every word choice, congratulations: you’re already showing signs of having a writing voice. That frantic overthinking? That obsessive need to change “walked” to “ambled” to “meandered” to “sauntered” and back to “walked” again at 3 a.m.? Welcome to your voice. It’s neurotic. It’s too many tabs open in your browser. It probably makes too many lists (hello). But it’s yours.

Your quirks are not flaws. Overuse of parentheses? That’s your version of whispering a secret to your reader. Dramatic ellipses? The literary equivalent of staring

meaningfully into the distance. The occasional sentence fragment? Yep. Intentional. Because sometimes thoughts don't complete themselves. (Like this one.)

I once wrote an entire essay where I compared my creative process to a vending machine stuck on a bag of Skittles. It wasn't high art, but it was honest. And weirdly, that's the one people still email me about. Not the polished piece where I used "zeitgeist" unironically.

Editing: Where Voices Go to Die

Listen, editing is important. We all need to run spell check unless we want to be haunted by the ghost of every middle school grammar teacher. But there's a difference between editing for clarity and editing your voice into a beige Word doc that smells like boiled cabbage.

You know that moment when you've read a sentence thirty times, and now it looks like it was written by a confused chatbot from 2006? That's not improvement. That's editing as self-erasure.

Pro tip: if your writing starts sounding like a TED Talk narrated by a motivational GPS, stop. Go outside. Touch grass. Eat something with preservatives. And for the love of all that is snarky and true, put the ellipses back.

The Myth of the Ideal Voice

There's a particularly dangerous piece of advice that goes, "Write like yourself." Sweet sentiment, right? The problem is, most of us don't know who "ourselves" are at 9 a.m., let alone on a blank page. Do you mean me with coffee or without? Me when I'm pretending to be professional or me when I'm rage-tweeting about airline peanuts?

"Write like yourself" is a landmine. You either end up paralyzed by self-awareness or writing like an Instagram caption trying to be deep:

"Woke up. Wrote words. Found meaning. Lost it again. #writerlife."

Instead, how about this: write the way you talk to your funniest friend when you're both tired and overcaffeinated. That's usually closer to your voice than anything you'll find in a writing workshop.

Part 2: Put Down the Hemingway Cosplay—You're Not Lost, Just Weird in Your Own Way

Now let's talk about the "Writer Voice" Industrial Complex

Here's the con: most of us think "writing voice" means sounding a certain way. Serious. Smart. Measured. Like if Virginia Woolf had a podcast and used the word "palimpsest" unironically. So we start performing the role of Writer™. Suddenly we're using words we'd never say out loud, like "thusly" or "therein" (unless you're writing legal drama fanfiction, in which case: carry on, Counselor).

The result? Voice-flavored tofu. It looks like writing. It might even get published. But it doesn't taste like you.

Here's the fix: stop performing and start eavesdropping—on yourself. Pay attention to how you actually think. Not how you want to sound, but how you sound when you're narrating your day in your head like a dramatic audiobook nobody asked for. You know the one:

“And then, with the grace of a startled flamingo, I tripped over my shoelace in front of the barista who definitely saw. Confidence: zero. Coffee: secured.”

That right there? That's a sentence with voice. It's weird. It's visual. It has flair and flamingos. Let it live.

Genres Can Gaslight You

Writers trying to “find their voice” often trip into genre quicksand. We think writing an essay means we have to sound like a public intellectual with a PhD in existential sighing. Fiction? Now we're suddenly channeling Tolstoy with commitment issues. Poetry? All hail metaphors about moths and longing and/or the moon.

Genres have expectations, sure. But they're not your boss. Think of them like uninvited dinner guests: acknowledge them politely, but feel free to serve whatever weird thing you cooked. I once wrote a breakup poem entirely in Ikea furniture instructions. It wasn't traditional, but it was...well, me. (And honestly? That Allen wrench metaphor hit hard.)

Don't twist yourself into a genre pretzel. The voice you use to write about Dungeons & Dragons in a Google Doc at 2 a.m. might also work in a personal essay about your relationship with your dad. That tone you used in a ranty Yelp review? Try it in a political op-ed sometime. (Answer: nothing. Your editor's probably seen worse. I promise.)

Quirks Are Currency

Look, every writer has their Thing™. David Foster Wallace had footnotes. Vonnegut had straight-up weirdness. Zadie Smith uses commas like she's conducting an orchestra of logic and rhythm. You? Maybe you write in sentence fragments. Maybe you use too many em dashes. Maybe your humor is so dry it qualifies as a fire hazard. Good.

That's your voice's fingerprint. The stuff you think of as flaws? That's usually the gold.

Take it from me—I once had a workshop tell me my writing sounded “like a haunted stand-up comedian.” I took it as an insult. I tried to change. I wrote more seriously. I used fewer jokes. And guess what? Everyone hated it. Including me. So now? I fully lean into being that ghost with a mic. It's fun. And somehow, people relate to it. Your writing voice isn't supposed to make everyone comfortable. It's supposed to be unmis-

takably yours. If a stranger can read one paragraph and say, “Oh, this has to be you,” you’re doing it right.

Procrastination Has a Voice Too

If you’re procrastinating this whole “finding your voice” thing, great news: your procrastination technique probably reveals more about your voice than your actual writing does. Do you rewrite one sentence thirty times? Voice. Do you start three Google Docs titled “newthing-final-FINAL-v2” and abandon them mid-metaphor? Voice. Do you spiral into a four-hour Wikipedia deep dive on the history of paper cuts because one of your characters works in an office? Absolutely voice.

That spiraling, overthinking, neurotic ping-pong of ideas bouncing around your skull at 2 a.m.? That’s not the enemy. That’s the process. Your voice is in there, tangled in the mental clutter, probably curled up next to your tax stress and half-finished poems about moths.

The Good News (No, Really)

You don’t need to “find” your voice. You just need to notice when it shows up—and stop kicking it out because it isn’t wearing a blazer and holding a literary MFA.

Your voice is that slightly awkward way you begin emails. It’s your unfiltered late-night notes app ramblings. It’s your obsession with describing things as “feral” or your tendency to start too many sentences with “so.” You don’t have to dress it up. You just have to let it in.

Because here’s the truth no one told us in Creative Writing 101: readers don’t fall in love with perfect prose. They fall in love with personality. With rhythm and weirdness and sentences that sound like someone actually lives inside them.

So the next time someone says “just find your voice,” you have permission to smile, nod, and then go write like the neurotic, metaphor-addicted, structurally-chaotic legend you are. And if you ever feel lost again, just remember:

You are not a blank slate waiting to be written.

You are already the first draft.

Now go write like it.



Lancelot Schaubert

Behold the Millennial as He Bikes Behind the Bus

High on leaded gas and Red Dye 40

The Boomer joins Congress as a Tory
And argues Portage Glacier observation
Decks “have not closed from global cremation”
That forced Portage Glacier to hide from view;
Argues it’s not due to junk he hopes you
Use daily:

 vitamin capsules (seem oiled),
Bicycle tires —bleed black when burned or boiled —
Mops stink when melted, fake wool when felted,
Lectric blankets turned dad’s shed to smelted
Slag, two stories of tin, like crayon molds
That too are formed from Texan blackened gold,
Dyes, fishing flies, car enamel, golf bags,
Hair curlers (melting), paint rollers (smelting),
Sweaters and slacks — polyester felting
All these things he worships come from petrol.
Hiding beneath his plastic bedroll.

Bright eyed, choose, what Boomers could’ve avoided:
Look in the mirror, leave unexploited
A part of any particular thing
Left better in the ground than on a ring.

 Millennial: “I’ll bike behind the bus.”

The Boomer writes exposés on how thus
Their dumbass will die from petrol fumage
(Stroking: himself, Route 66 plumage)
And never stops to think we all could lay
Our bodies on the altar of today
So tomorrow’s kids might not grow up high
On leaded gas and on Red 40 dye.

Nicole Hebdon

The Terrifying, Unnatural Body Horror Implications of Punctuating Dialogue Incorrectly

The possessed man scratched his head, "I'm confused."

"No, I'm confused," screamed the scared woman he had been chasing down the dingey, faded hallway of an abandoned hotel. "Did the action of scratching his head speak? Are his limbs possessed and able to talk? Did his scratch create a gaping hole in his head that he can speak out of? How did he say that without saying it?"

"I'm sorry. I used an action tag when I should have used a dialogue tag," said the man, lunging for the woman.

"Why are we all in the same paragraph," said the hole in the scratching man's head? "Are we all talking at the same time?" asked the ghosts in his blood. "Are we fused together?" asked someone, the scared woman was not quite sure who since all the speakers were blending together. "Maybe we're all stuck in a tiny closet and this is meant to represent how cramped we are," his possessed limbs suggested, as they shot out, knocking down various cleaning products and smacking other people in the face. "Ouch," said some unidentified limb or person or creature or entity. "Please stop this," someone begged. "Please separate us." "Is he in here with us?" "Where is that woman? Are we scaring her?" "Maybe we ate her? Maybe we all ate each other and that is why we're all in this cramped paragraph?" "Who knows?" "Presumably the author knows."

"Oh, that's better," the scared woman said, stretching out her arms, enjoying the freedom of having her own body and paragraph.

"I feel like my own person again," said the possessed man.

"Well, almost your own person," said one of ghosts in his blood, the old Victorian one who was always making the man think about churning butter. "I'm still possessing you."

"Oh no."

"Who said that now?"

"Who said *that*?"

"I think there is some unseen person creeping in the shadows, ready to pounce on us."

"I mean, that is the only explanation. Unless someone suddenly materialized into the scene, but that is a little too science fiction for this story."

"I don't think anyone is talking and this is just all in our head."

"Who can tell without dialogue tags?"

"I think there are four of us here," said the ghost that had been killed by a herd of hysterical cows while on a UFO search.

"The dialogue tags are back!" clapped the janitor.

"Where did the janitor come from?" asked the scratching man's oozing hole head. "He was not part of the conversation before! Didn't we just go over this? It is very disorienting when a new person is introduced mid conversation."

"Forget that!" exclaimed the scared woman, pointing to the janitor's hands. "Did you see how his mouth didn't move, but when he clapped his hands, he was able to speak?"

"His hands can obviously talk," said the head hole, spitting out a bit of skull bone.

"Perhaps someone just mistook an action tag for a dialogue tag again?" asked the butter-churning ghost.

"Or maybe someone cut a mouth in his hands" suggested the janitor?

"Wait," said the talking holes in the janitor's hands. "Why is there a question mark at the end of that sentence? Are you not sure if the janitor is here?"

"Is the janitor not real?"

"Is the author just not sure of themselves?"

"Oh no, there go the dialogue tags. What will be next? Will our bodies vanish?"

"You've done it now, you bloody idiot." "Now we are meshed again." "Are we all in one body?" "Did the closet shrink? "Closet? I thought we were in a hallway?"

"I'll help," said a ghost with a shaky little kid's voice.

"Bloody hell!" yelled the butter churning ghost, who, by the way, had a British accent this whole time.

"Where the heck did she come from?"

"Who cares, as long as she separated us."

"No one move and maybe it will stay like this."

"This is so nice. I didn't like being in that guy's closet or head or stomach or whatever."

"Oh yeah, where are we again?"

"I lost track. We were chasing the woman down the hall, but then the author moved us, I think. There hasn't been any imagery in a while, so it's hard to tell."

"Everyone's limbs have stopped speaking."

"BUT NOT HITTING," shouted the UFO chasing ghost. He then forced the possessed man to punch himself in the face.

"Jesus, why are you so big?"

"I'm not big. I'm just excited."

"Then use your words. Say 'But not hitting,' said the man excitedly."

"Or use an exclamation mark."

"OH. I DID NOT KNOW."

"Whatever you do, do it fast!!!! Shrink him!!!! I am flattened like a pancake!!!!!"

"But use exclamation marks sparingly."

"Why? Did they scare you?"

“No, but you are annoying!”

“I wish someone would ground us in some setting description or something,” said the scared woman, who bitterly longed for the dingy hotel wallpaper that only a few moments ago had disgusted her. “I don’t like being just a voice floating in an endless void of darkness.”

And then she woke up with a deep craving for buttery toast, slathered in jam as red as a wound.



Anna Williams

Wild and Wonderful Four

You wake in a frenzy
Of light and color
Of song and joy.
The sun's awake,
And so are you,
And so we all must be.
We begin our daily course,
Inside your extraordinary orbit,
Drawn in
By wild and wonderful,
Four.

Your smile is electric,
Bringing its own light to every room.
Your happiness is contagious,
Brightening even the strongest gloom.
Your energy boundless,
Matched only by your eagerness
For life and all its opportunities.
Your questions are as bottomless
As your unlimited curiosities.
A never ending well of glory,
Filled with *Why* and *How*,
And my name always abounds
Mommy, mommy, mommy!
As your excitement resounds.
So of course,
We'll read just one more story.
Wild and wonderful,
Four.

Your songs fill the air,
With imagination and love.
Hugs full of magic,
I don't want to let go first,
So I squeeze you tight,
Freeze frame this moment,
In my mind.
In my heart.
Can it last forever?
While you still fit in my arms?

I am filled with wonder,
Wild and wonderful,
Four.

We wade through big feelings,
That overtake us both,
Though Mommy tries her best,
To be a calming force,
In a hurricane of tears.
Such big emotions,
Such real fears,
In a still tiny body.
Wild,
Unpredictable,
But still wonderful
Four.

Never fear, my daughter,
Precious princess,
Sweet astronaut,
Strong lion tamer,
Dancing queen,
Delightful dreamer,
You are a gift from above,
My Love.
A gift from the good Lord,
This wild and wonderful,
Four.

I'll always be here,
Savoring your laugh,
Sharing your joy,
As you see the world
Through blue-green eyes,
Ever in awe and amazement.
I will remember the snuggles,
The love,
The hugs,
The dresses of tulle,
The millions of things that make you, *you*.
I will remember you as marvelous,
Magnificent and sublime,
Glorious and blessed,
Unforgettable.
Forever grateful,
For wild and wonderful,
Four.

Yurii Tokar

An Ice Cream

In the summer of 1986, after the Chernobyl accident, I worked as a camp counselor with children who lived not far from the nuclear plant. The camp was situated in Evpatoria, a city on the coast of the Black Sea. My classmates, students at the university, also worked as camp counselors. Schoolchildren evacuated from villages and towns that faced a radioactive disaster were housed there. Kids from rural areas were different from their city peers; they were more naïve, and many rarely visited the city.

Every morning, camp counselors took their groups of boys and girls to the beach by the sea. After two to three dips in the water, we had to go back to camp. The walk from the beach to the children's dormitory took about fifteen minutes. One day, while walking with the kids from the beach to the camp, I noticed that due to the heat in some places, even the asphalt was sagging under the weight of the people walking by.

On the corner, there was a stall selling cheap ice cream. A queue of children formed at the stall instantly. First in line were the skinny, eight-year-old, short-haired blonde twin sisters, Anya and Nastya. They bought ice cream and walked away from the stall into the shade of a huge, old maple tree to enjoy the sweet, cool taste.

A man and a woman, either husband and wife or brother and sister, about sixty years old, with a very prim appearance, walked past them leisurely, holding each other's arms. They stopped near Anya and Nastya. The lady looked sympathetically at the girls, who were dressed in modest cotton country dresses, and asked, "Where are you from, kids?"

"We are from the Chernobyl region."

Then the woman jerked her companion by the hand, shouting loudly, "Let's get out of here quickly! These children are radioactive; you can't stand near them. They emit radiation, which means death."

The strangers quickly walked along the hot street. Nastya and Anya suddenly began to cry quietly, awkwardly holding their barely started servings of ice cream in their hands. I didn't know how I could calm the girls down, so I simply walked up to them, silently stroked each one on the head, and said the first phrase that came to my mind from a children's cartoon about the heroes Cheburashka and Crocodile Gena: "But Cheburashka would first finish his ice cream and only then would he cry." After that, the sisters, previously frightened by the words of the stranger woman, smiled through the tears that were rolling down their cheeks in large drops.

Samuel Samba

I Takes English & a small-lettered god to come out of a Debt

I hunt the Food Lion mall with a street map.
the wide jaw of the scroll bar on my phone, open to a kind of yawning,
when the Wi-Fi cones into a poor signal & seizes network.

a stain amid familiar bricks; I am once again at the mercy of language. I
used to imagine myself a native speaker, fluent with asking.
unknown to me, I am only a blunder away from being a type of mis-
chief English tolerates.

as migrants, we purchase in ways that defy currency. so, I buy into a
white lie: assure myself my spit is harmless & incapable of inciting a
gloved passer-by.

I reckon Virginia is one town that hides history & do a clean job at it—
the way the roads caves in on the inside and keeps bowing down to
numbers you'd forget. a file of snow, keeping records on the sidewalk,
punctual at its job when it shows up in winter.

I work my hand again on the cursor, thirsting for direction. when the
search button pops up,
I resume typing a scriptio continua that begs for breathing space.
letters, close marking themselves, as I stomp my way into a dead end.

my legs, roaming better than a cell phone outside of its registered ad-
dress. it will take a search party to sniff me out of the tunnel I share
signal with.

the coal boiling on the rooftop is a hotspot, if looked at from a danger-
ous distance. but I forget it provides heat.

yet, everyone is four degrees Celsius from being ice: a fridge in human
skin, before a melting kissed by sunlight; gorgeous in the wet.
we flood back to the road in a bold deluge, in car honking spirit. our
nostrils, processing the natural gas as oxygen.

I commute with my legediz Benz,
refusing on public transport that would have me inhaling black soot all
through the ride.
save my eardrum the heresy of teenagers arguing the levain croissant
is better than Food Lion's.

the relish scrapes the flavor of home from my tongue.
I must stink of a sellout, purchased by two shekels of coins [\$.
once, I thought my survival outside of my country is something beyond
a snack. now, I want to eat my dough & still have it, rolled & battered
up to a folded sign.

put a chef on my name, will you.
or do I bleed on apron, before I turn what swallows a bakery whole?

I rise like yeast above the glass shelves, peering at the pastry—oven
fresh from heat. the design feels numb when touched,
like a sighing shape /j/ molded by someone who fails to differentiate
between a currency & a curse.

the long line that crosshatches currency is clear as a stain, but people
still fail these things. I cherish a school that teaches sign language be-
fore money.

all these erasable mistakes wouldn't have seen the light of day.
you think you're spending wealth, when all you're doing is lavishing in
sibilants: a legal tender in my book.

I crave to be touched the way what exchange hands is held to the
breast pocket, so lovingly. I sacrifice language as a down payment for
this heartfelt purchase.
it takes English & a small-lettered god to come out of a debt.

in a tongue ridden world,
I will lose my way to a town that would nurture me in indigenous ver-
nacular. legs trudging without stop. mouth, caved in on the inside,
agape with an eagerness that could kill.

Author's Note: "legediz Benz" is a West African (Nigerian) slang for legs. It's
also means a shoe brand

Zary Fekete

The Winter Hotel

A Meditation on Hebrews 13:2

The lights flickered once and then held steady, casting a dim glow over the tired faces and fogged windows. The train was stranded somewhere between stations, suspended in the middle of a winter storm. Ben tapped his phone again. No signal. He sighed and glanced at the time...almost 7:00. Outside, the darkness had thickened, pressing against the windows like a living thing. Snow whispered against the doors, piling in soft drifts.

Ben zipped his coat halfway. He could leave. Climb out, cut through the park, and be home in under an hour, maybe less if he kept a good pace. His boots were decent. His gloves, not great. He stood, his hand hovering over the emergency latch beside the door, fingers brushing cold metal. He wondered if anyone would even notice if he left.

Then he heard it—a soft, barely audible sound. Crying.

He turned. Three rows back, an elderly woman sat hunched over, wrapped in a scarf too thin for the weather. Her gloved hands trembled in her lap. No one else looked at her. Most passengers had headphones in, or were scrolling through their phones, staring at news that couldn't change anything.

Ben let go of the door.

He made his way down the aisle and knelt beside her seat. "You okay?" he asked, his voice low.

She blinked, wiped at her eyes. "I'm fine," she said. She wasn't.

Ben pulled off his coat and wrapped it gently around her shoulders. She didn't protest. He took the empty seat across from her.

"My name's Ben."

"Margaret," she said, barely audible.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. The kind of silence that only snow brings.

She told Ben about herself. What else was there to do?

She had spent most of her life in the big city. She'd ridden this train for years, always at the same time, always to see her granddaughter. Tonight, though, everything was different. Her daughter had called, upset, needing her. The granddaughter was sick, feverish. Margaret had packed a bag with a few things...medicine, a book, a thermos of tea...and set out in the storm.

She hadn't expected the train to stop. Hadn't expected to feel so alone. Hadn't expected to miss her husband even though he had been gone for over five years.

She told Ben she still heard his voice in the quiet moments. He'd always been the one to calm her, to remind her that things would be alright. She missed the way he'd hum as he worked, the way he'd reach for her hand when she was worried.

When it was Ben's turn he breathed on the window and drew a simple map of his home town on the frosted window.

It was a small town, and he'd left as soon as he could. He wasn't running from anything, exactly, but he'd never felt like he belonged. He'd come to the city for school, then stayed for work. Now, at twenty-six, he lived in a tiny apartment above a bakery. He liked the smell of bread in the mornings, the way the city woke up slowly.

He worked at a bookstore, shelving books and chatting with customers. He liked the quiet, the order of it all. But sometimes, especially in winter, he felt the loneliness creeping in. He'd always been good at being alone, but yesterday his mother had called him. The sound of her voice awakened memories of home-cooked meals and slow conversations over cups of tea, and he booked a ticket home.

An hour passed. The air grew colder. The lights dimmed slightly, the train conserving what little power it had left.

A teenager across the aisle...earbuds in, hoodie up...started shivering. Ben took off his flannel and handed it over.

The kid looked at him like he'd been offered something illegal. "You sure?"

Ben nodded. "You'll give it back."

The teen pulled it on. "Thanks."

From somewhere farther up the car, someone began humming. The notes floated uncertainly at first, then steadied. It was a tune Ben almost recognized.

The man next to the doors started tapping the seat in rhythm. Someone laughed. A woman near the front sang a line under her breath, just loud enough for others to catch.

The snow slowed outside. A few passengers started trading names, snacks, stories. Nothing dramatic. Just people remembering how to talk.

Someone made a joke about renaming the train "The Winter Hotel." Someone else passed around peppermint gum. Ben leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment.

He thought about the city, about all the people he passed every day but never knew. He thought about the bakery below his apartment, about the old man who ran it, always whistling in the mornings. He thought about the bookstore, about the regulars who came in for coffee and conversation.

He opened his eyes. Margaret was watching him.

“You look like you’re thinking about something important,” she said.

Ben shrugged. “Just thinking,” he said. “It’s weird how easy it is to slow down and talk to someone.” He smiled at her. “I should do it more often.”

Margaret told him about her granddaughter, about how she loved to read, about how she’d sit on Margaret’s lap and listen to stories for hours. She told him about her daughter, about how hard she worked, about how proud she was of her.

Ben listened. He told her about the bookstore, about the regulars, about the old man at the bakery. He told her about the small town he’d left behind, about the way the sky looked at night, about the sound of crickets in the summer.

They talked about books they loved, about movies they’d seen, about the way the city changed with the seasons. They laughed at the jokes people made about the train, at the way the cold made everyone a little kinder.

As the night wore on, the train car became a small world of its own. People shared food, stories, laughter. The teenager with Ben’s flannel started a game of tic-tac-toe with the woman across from him. The man by the door told a story about being stuck in a snowstorm as a kid, about how his dog had kept him warm.

Then...

The train lurched once, then rolled forward. Cheers broke out, half-serious, half-tired. As the station lights blurred into view, people gathered their bags. Laughter rippled across the car...soft, grateful.

Margaret stood slowly, adjusting the coat still wrapped around her. Ben held out his arm. They walked out together.

Outside, the cold bit at their cheeks. Snow crunched beneath their steps.

Margaret turned to him, face flushed. “You could’ve left,” she said. “I saw you. At the door.”

Ben shrugged. “Didn’t seem right.”

She looked at him, eyes kind and clear. “It mattered that you stayed.”

She squeezed his hand and disappeared into the crowd.

Ben stood a moment longer, watching the tail lights of the train fade into the night. Then he walked toward home...coatless, smiling, warm.

Kalina Smith

Miss Smith

I am often the first smile they see:
chapped lips stretched over imperfect teeth.

I am a forgotten lunch bag,
chasing after them to the cafeteria.

I am a tissue box,
soaked to the cardboard from petty comments.

I am a glop of lotion and a borrowed hair tie
I'll never get back.

I am a limitless search engine,
especially during a treacherous news cycle.

I am an open book they think never closes,
with a chapter on every problem they'll ever face.

I am butterfly and pawprint stickers on A+ papers,
and B- papers sometimes, too.

I am a megaphone in a claustrophobic gym
when they can't find their voice.

I am a tight hug when they lose sixty to sixty-one.
and when they win forty to twenty, too.

I am a locked door and curtained window,
just in case.

I am a punching bag
when home is a battlefield.

I am a hotline call
when the world is splintering.

I am a soft place to land
when they're caught in a meteor shower.

But they
are everything.

Gratitude for Grading

My wrist is sore from grading papers.
I've written "needs more reasoning" til my fingers
were skinned like a child's knee,
having fallen on the sidewalk.

I want to complain, but
my students are tiny suns
curiously sitting in a night sky.
And to see them gleam after a rainstorm
makes the carpal tunnel worth it.

My parents worked hard labor,
all their lives,
determined to provide for my brother and me.
They didn't want us to work that much,
long hours in the Delta sun
or salting icy roads.

How lucky am I to have only a sore wrist
instead of full-body aches
and pains that ibuprofen won't heal.
Like my dad's bad back and
my mom's replaced knees.

I am grateful for the pain,
but my parents and students more.
There are little suns and great big stars
in my blackened sky.

I'll just get a wrist brace,
pick up my pen,
and smile.

Gracie Jones

Imagine

Imagine you're a little pink pig
splashing, playing,
coating yourself in mud.

Make castles in sand,
destroy them like you're a monster
smashing a storybook city.

Create a new world to explore,
splatting, dolloping paint
onto white paper.

Inspect tiny creatures in your garden.
Tell her you like her wings or his patterned shell,
that your garden is their home.

Watch as the toy-sized plane
glides above you,
stare, point it out to your friends.

Imagine you're working your dream job,
living in a princess castle
even if it is *just* a one-bed flat.

Bill Camp

The Giant Fig Tree

A giant fig tree grows in the dead center of the family yard.
Its leaves full, it stretches out,
Almost overtaking the entire lawn.

But it was not always thus.
The fig tree suffered a blight a few years ago.
It shed branches, one, two,
Sometimes even three in a single day.
Even a young maple tree nearby began towering over it
Expressing its strength and dominance over the yard.

The fig tree heard the family discussing its fate,
Its potential demise. "Perhaps we'll have to cut it down and
Dig up its roots. The poor thing is dying."
But then alas a reprieve, postponing its worries:
"But I will not undertake that task this year.
We will see what it does by next year."
In the colder fall and spring months, the fig tree watched
As the family sat around a fire pit burning its
Shed branches for warmth and sheer entertainment
As they drank beer and mojitos, discussing their lives
Every Friday night. Was this a forewarning
Of things to be if it could not overcome the blight?

But the fig tree did not die from the blight, it survived
And the next year, the branches were replaced by new branches
Bigger branches, longer branches, stronger branchers.
It grew taller until it rivaled even the mighty maple
That stood behind it. The year after it grew even larger still,
And the year after that, again still larger.
Finally, it became the giant centerpiece of the yard
People gain inspiration from today,
For nearly dying from the blight created its strength.

Stephen Philip Druce

Pen for me a fountain

Pen for me a fountain -
a watercolor vessel,
a cartoon cat crescendo
in a jigsaw sparrow wrestle,

a crinkled sitar interlude -
an arching escapade,
a peeling potion scissored
in a scamper marinade,

pen for me a fountain -
an icicle precession,
a stream of marching embers
in a hanging straw confession,

atomic sitar deserts -
a clustered cactus folly,
a rustling herd of thunder
in a lashing sodden jolly,

pen for me a fountain -
a pollen mist regatta,
a wilderness of chapters -
a jangling limpet harbour,

in a lather tip toe tapestry
of waterfall finesse,
the curdled voodoo violins
embroider to undress,

pen for me a fountain -
a valley storm quintet,
a fluttered feather dalliance -
a dewdrop jelly set,

like alphabetic ribbons -
a starry stitch amok,
in a lampooned ocean lullaby
the phoenix patterns flock.

J.D. Harlock

The Mind That Just Won't Sleep

in dim-lit alleys, where the criminal element lurks
the man with the smoking gun watches and smirks

when the children of the cul-de-sac stumble on the source,
police officers are called in so that the law can run its course

dubious statements will be taken; black lies will be told
their trail leads to a dead end, and the case turns cold

they'll say no one can solve this; what we have here is a mystery
it's one for the ages, a secret lost to history

and everyone will think you've pulled off the perfect crime,
but no one understands it's only a matter of time

then...one knock on that plaque, and it's my turn to play
a bella donna will walk in with a dark bouquet

after a sigh and a moan and a little jest
all she'll have for me is a simple request:

to crack the case, figure out who's responsible
in this world, everyone is a suspect; everything is possible

*because your secrets may hide in crevices deep,
but mine is the mind that just won't sleep*

through twisted plots and cunning wrath
my powers of deduction will reveal the path

for on this desk, I pour over puzzles of ink and lore
I know the truth is behind that locked door

Arvilla Fee

Need Just One

to go to bat
to be in your corner
to say, I believe in you;
to say, you're not stupid,
the teacher who is
a tiger
a mamma bear
a honey badger,
the teacher
who won't let you go,
will not let you fall
through the cracks,
who will refuse
to let you fail.
Just one teacher,
to listen
to say,
I've got your back.



My Meal Ticket

I keep my head down,
mind my own business,
don't try to fit in—anywhere,
just stay in my lane,
do my homework,
and eat.

Dear God, how I eat!
Most kids complain
about cafeteria food,
but I shovel it in by forkfuls:
peas, carrots, pasta,
pizza, breaded tenderloins,
mashed potatoes, rolls.
It doesn't matter what
the hair-netted ladies
scoop onto my tray,
I'll eat it—I'd even lick
my tray if that wasn't weird.
There's no food at home.
Mom shoots food
into her collapsing veins.
Her boyfriend-of-the-week
loses food to the casino.
I filled out the free lunch forms,
forged the signature;
everything got approved,
for breakfast *and* lunch.
So, this is my life,
sliding like a shadow
against the school's slate-gray
walls, sliding in and out
of our 5th Street apartment,
waiting for Mondays
like some kids wait for Santa.

Wally Swist

The Bitter Taste

When I was a child I was awed by the Passion. Holy week always provided deep experience – from Jesus riding a donkey amid throngs waving palm fronds to the Roman centurion who offered Christ a taste of gall on a sponge to allay his thirst after hanging for hours on the cross. It is this taste of gall that always remained with me. Ironically, now, although I imagined that taste, I believe at this stage of my life I know what it tastes like since it is the bitter taste that abides within me – even though I have given my all to leading a spiritual life, especially in light of my caregiving.

I had my first mystical experience when I was a boy. I can recount that experience in prose, but it is best done, I believe in poetry. This poem, “Candling the Eggs,” also the eponymous poem for a collection of mine (Shanti Arts, 2016), was initially published by *The Linnet’s Wings*, an Irish literary journal, and what was special about it was that the editor recorded her reading of the poem, and posted it online. She obviously knew a familiar story: an opportunity to protect a child from a parent’s wrath, and one in which resonates with me to this day, as it might find meaning with readers everywhere, as in the last lines of the poem, that read: “as a golden/ halo flickered in that hallowed darkness.” This essay is all about just this, about the “golden/ halo” in all of us, “flicker[ing] in that hallowed darkness” within ourselves and not just outside of ourselves.

In the living hell that both Alzheimer’s sufferer and caregiver inhabit, and they both burn in the flames of the disease, there is actually a “flickering in” what is “a hallowed,” or holy, or sacred, or graced “darkness” in which those who experience this breaks through into “something else.” In our unconventional relationship that has lasted decades, Tevis would often ask me, “Have you had a breakthrough.” Uncharacteristically, I would pause, then say, “Yes. But there are as many breakthroughs as there are stars in the sky.”

That *something* is transporting. It is vital and it propels – beyond what we can normally accomplish or do. We can give it many names from various spiritual belief systems, but in my estimation and for the parameters of this particular essay, I can suggest its name as “awakening.” We “awaken” to a higher self, be it Buddha, or Christ, or Brahman, the individual self, or Atman, the cosmic reality. We as caregivers can “awaken” through unimagined before ardor into other realms in this life only by “acquiescing” into our roles in guiding the lives of those we love and care for. Of course, there is not just awakening, or breaking through to another layer of consciousness, and not only acquiescence, or experiencing the release of ego, that leads to these experiences beforehand. Through much ardor and through the rigor of care-

giving those of us investing ourselves in such a fashion emerge differently. We break the molds of old selves. We become new again, if only for a short time, before we re-engage again as caregivers – which is *the real work*.

It is a continuous process in which we find that we may fail more than we might succeed, but it is our rhythms in this that we find our own spiritual alignments, and it is always in our doing and caring for our loved one that yields a light and a direction that is not of our own but of the grace that is generated out of our vast attempts at learning how to be humble in the face of a humiliating disease such as Alzheimer's.

I am forever walking a razor's edge: a member of Tevis's family is now set up to phone her every Sunday morning, a design by Dr. Mullen, since Tevis pines for her family despite the fact that they haven't ever proven that they can ever respond with the love she seeks from them in return, or a couple of wealthy family members who are more of a hindrance to her health than a healing for her. These people have invested their lives in their admiration for power and authority, who also have exemplified an incapability to return love, although these family members *claim* they love Tevis.

An old friend of Tevis's shared with me that some of her family members had threatened to place Tevis in an asylum. She specified that this was the case "even when she wasn't suffering from Alzheimer's." Tevis's life choices were in direct conflict with the far-right beliefs of her family, with the exception of a loving father and an aunt who doubled as a caring mother, whom she both adored, and who provided her the only familial love she received, but who have passed long ago.

Walking on a razor's edge may become easier with time but it is always painful. I have often enough shared with Dr. Amanda Mullen, Tevis's memory loss therapist, my own frustrations as a caregiver – what has become a nearly impossible daily situation, one in which no organization or planning can ever fully mitigate the unforeseen behaviors of a Alzheimer's sufferer. I do organize, plan, and strategize for the day and for any given moment but I am blindsided more often than I would like to be. As Tevis's Alzheimer's foment more daily, I live with the taste of gall on my palate, its essence burning on my tongue.

Dr. Mullen suggested that Tevis wants to help me, that perhaps I can ask her to massage my shoulders. However, Dr. Mullen also once responded to my uncertainty whether I felt love for Tevis when someone put that question to me, and her response resonated within me. Dr. Mullen said, "Well, if someone constantly pins you to the wall, it would be hard for you to say that you loved them." I often feel pinned to the wall by Tevis – and especially by her family. However, I can candidly offer that I have always been wedded to Tevis as a caregiver – wedded in one way or another. Becoming someone's true spouse is an evolution many of us are never quite mature or ready for. Finding a way to bear such a responsibility actually sets us free to love.

As a Alzheimer's caregiver, I organize her day. There is meal planning and the washing up. There is making travel plans or making time to do chores. There is the

grocery shopping and there is the hair appointment or the dentist and doctor visits. There is the sundry “asks” that Tevis has every hour every day. This can be a prescription for what is docile and peaceful between us. However, Tevis’s mood swings are unpredictable, and more so if I am not able to look at her with a smile or a friendly nod of the head, since I am able to discern her state of mind by the change in her visage, in her face turning as dark as an oncoming storm.

It is either during this stage – before her eruption – that I can sometimes steer the darkness off course, and normally pick up the pieces of our day later, by attending to something ordinary: doing the breakfast dishes, chopping vegetables for dinner, going out in the backyard to mow the lawn. I’ve observed and learned that attending to simple tasks often puts us on back on course, mollifies the demons of Alzheimer’s, and, if only for a moment, makes Tevis switch to another more passive and less hostile gear because it will only be moments before she has forgotten whatever it was that she was obsessed with.

Although it is never anything that I consciously count on, in times of crisis, but she *forgets*. My memory is still keen but she forgets now from one moment to the next. Then there is her “sundowning,” or decline towards dinnertime, when her disease takes over. Later, when she wakes up at night she will tell me afterwards that she didn’t know where she was, or that she didn’t know who else was in the house, or what time of the year it was. Often enough now, she is lost in the vacuum of not being able to think about anything. It is in this dark nebulosity that she continually falls in deeper every hour of every day and every day of every week. This is Tevis plummeting.

How do we accept such a bitter taste? How do we rid ourselves of the taste of gall on our tongue? How can we accept the impossible? The taste burns my palate, my mouth. How can I allow her family have access to her, in their loud authoritarian voices and in their first-pounding the tabletop ways. When I think of having to make arrangements for them to see her it is all I can do to put up with that taste of gall.

There is no remedy to relieve the taste of gall in one’s mouth. The only choice we have is to continue to walk whatever razor’s edge we must walk. We have to deal with not having another choice.

However, in there being no other choice, we can open ourselves up to the divinity already present. A phrase I’ve used for years is how we can find the numinous in the commonplace. Whitman found a universe in a leaf of grass. Basho found it when he experienced a frog jumping into a pond – in just that inexpressible splash of water. Emily Dickinson found it in tending the gentians in her garden. Divinity does surround us. Abraham Maslow suggested that to believe in just one miracle occurring was a false way of living since miracles were all around us.

The divine opens up in us. We forget about walking the razor’s edge. I even forget my failings in caregiving Tevis. Tevis nearly always forgets from one moment to

the next. However, in whatever our present moment might offer, we can still feel the coolness of an early spring morning after a day of severe heat.

We can see the sunlight bounding on newly greened grass, a lone goose calling, tardy from its return from the north, where it will land on the campus pond a half mile away. The ripples it makes will spread across the water, where it will rest, and as we all must do, to return to our journey, to follow that wherever it might lead us. It is in that we truly discover who we are, and maybe possibly what divinity is and where we can find it, and with whom we can share that divinity – even though there may be a taste of gall on our tongue, since perhaps in finding divinity, in any amount anywhere, it would be worth the trials of our journey here on earth, and in the very least for another and not just for ourselves.

May we bask in our incomprehension of divinity to allow divinity to enter our lives. May whatever bitterness we taste in our mouth be forgotten in our pursuit of caregiving others. May the taste be worn away in time and by our just simply attending to the washing up that is necessary so that we can even think of preparing the next meal. May we find ourselves caught up in what is divine: in our not even knowing it – which very well may be the most apt occurrence and the best taste of life itself, being on the journey toward what is divine.

The bitter taste is not unlike the taste of gall given to Christ on the cross. This taste is the strong flavor of one who is lost as a caregiver are often lost, even as they have tools, cues, and strategies upon which to try to allay Alzheimer's in the sufferer. It is the taste of one who has lost themselves. Anyone having participated in athletics knows losing leaves a bitter taste that lingers.

Hence, we have the bitter taste and the experience of the work of the soul and the striving of the spirit in its response to the taste of gall that those of us caregiving a loved one who suffers from Alzheimer's leaves on the tongue. To truly know what you're up against you can taste that in the sweat of the effort of caregiving and in the ardor of spiritual practice.

The practice of presence is of essential value. That means being open to what *is*, as the Japanese poet Basho said, "happens in the place, at this moment." This is the beauty of living and where it can be found. The Alzheimer's sufferer often lives in this present. Tevis nearly doesn't have any past recollections, so she lives now. This is only one reason why Alzheimer's sufferers rely on feeling. Recently, Tevis and I can have a minor misunderstanding, but she will then look at me and know, at that moment, it is me that is caring for her. *The bitterness* and its taste were evident but she often now says, "You know, we all love you here. All of us. We all love you. Just know that."

Of course, there are only two of us who live in the house.



Contributors

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Franco Amati is a speculative fiction writer from New York. He's taught psychology at the University level and would not be the writer he is today without the help of his professors and mentors. He's also a graduate of the Viable Paradise writer's workshop. You can find more of his work at francoamatiwrites.com

Atemnkeng Emiliene Atabong, known as Emy-pride, was once mocked for her crinkles and withdrew into silence, finding solace in writing fairy tales to herself. Everything changed when her literature teacher recognized her gift and mentored her to transform pain into purpose and using writing to advocate, empower, and reclaim stories.

Daniel Barry recently worked as a teacher at a preschool, where he helped his students to learn one of the most fundamental writing exercises: writing one's own name. Co-creating stories is his favorite thing to do with his students. Daniel starts telling a story, and in real time revises it based on his young listener's immediate feedback and attentive criticism.

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Nicole Hebdon is a writer from Western New York, where she works as the Director of Literary Arts at a rural nonprofit. Primarily a short story writer, her work has been published in *The Kenyon Review*, and *The New Haven Review*, among other places. She is the winner of a 2025 editor's choice award from Pinky Thinker Press as well as other awards.

Courtney Hitson has spent the last decade teaching undergraduates--first in Chicago and then in Key West, Florida. As an English instructor, she loves to teach students how to break writing rules and break those rules with gusto!

Tara Hollander is an emerging poet whose work meditates on sexuality, family, and immersive biology. She is currently in DC obtaining an MFA in Creative Writing at American University, where she also teaches. Tara is driven by her passion for the written word and the knowledge that this practice can bring to one's life. These poems demonstrate her effort to pass on the joy of writing.

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Richard LeDue (he/him) lives and teaches English in Norway House, Manitoba, Canada, where he has taught writing to high school students for 15 years. Seeing students writing is one of LeDue's favorite things about being a teacher. He has also been published both online and in print and is the author of numerous poetry books. His latest book, *Another Another* was released from Alien Buddha Press in May 2025.

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John C. Mannone has poetry in *Poetry South*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Annals of Internal Medicine*, and others. He's a physicist and poet with a passion for words; and equations are just another form of poetry. He credits his 7th-grade teacher, Sister Anita, who showed him how to bring words to life, the kind but no-nonsense Christian Brothers in high school, as well as his college professors who prepared him for the rigors of graduate school.

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Sherry Poff enjoyed an idyllic childhood in the hills of West Virginia. She now lives and writes in and around Ooltewah, Tennessee. Sherry is a member of the Chattanooga Writers' Guild. Her stories and poems have appeared in various on-line and print publications including *Salvation South*, *Heart of Flesh*, *Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel*, and *The Clayjar Review*.

Greg Rohloff was a journalist for thirty years before earning a master's degree in liberal studies. He teaches freshman composition courses as a part-time instructor at West Texas A&M University and Amarillo College. He completed a master's in fine arts in creative writing from the University of New Orleans in 2019. You can read more of his stories on his free Substack newsletter at <https://gregrohloff.substack.com/>

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Wally Swist taught in the Connecticut Poet-in-the-Schools Program and also directed poetry workshops at the WYCA in New Haven, Connecticut. He was a teacher and mentor for gifted high school students in The Night of Fresh Voices Program in the Sunken Garden Poetry Festival. He taught poetry classes at a number of academic institutions, including Southern Illinois University and Sacred Heart University.

Yurii Tokar was born in 1967 in the USSR. In 1988, he began teaching mathematics in the region affected by the Chernobyl disaster. His stories, essays, and poems have been published in Ukraine, Germany, the USA, and elsewhere. For example, his work has appeared in the Russian-language magazine "Чайка" (Washington), Litbreak Magazine (USA), Adelaide Literary Magazine (USA)

Kendra Whitfield lives and writes on the southern edge of the northern boreal forest. She spent 33 years convincing students that poetry was not anathema and that they, too, were writers. When not writing, she can be found basking in sunbeams on the back deck or swimming laps at the local pool. Her poetry has been anthologized by Epistemic Lit, Beyond the Veil Press and Community Building Art Works.

Anna Williams is a writer, Appalachian by birth and by heart, now raising kids in Coastal Georgia. Between homeschooling her two wild wonders and brewing her fourth cup of coffee, she writes about Jesus, motherhood, life in ministry, and the deep mystery of what it means to be human. You can find her thoughts—poetic and otherwise—over on her Substack, *Grace & Ink*, where theology sometimes meets peanut butter fingerprints.

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