

TEACH. WRITE.

A LITERARY JOURNAL FOR WRITING TEACHERS

FALL ~ WINTER 2026

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FALL~WINTER 2026

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Marie Johnson

The Good Land

I'm looking for the good land
My feet are swollen, sore-trotting, seeking
To find the good land.
When I was a child, the flowers dripped in morning dew,
While butterfly wings covered my youthful head,
Till the sun scorched the grasses, and burned the trees,
My dreams lay withered like late autumn leaves.
Such a sojourner for the good land.
I relished in roses-by my blood stained red.
Cold lonely rain soaking my doleful head.
Oh, what becomes of me!
At butterfly bites I begin to cry,
and soft moss covers icy cold stone,
I dream for safe countries, be I alone.
Till I find the good land, where the sweet air makes me a child,
Rolling in lambs' ear leaves like a gentle fawn,
Where thistles do not rope me,
Nor do vines try to choke me,
It is the good land.
I thirst for the good land,
And may it not be a land of graves.

Dan Talaricio

What is a Prayer?

Is it a whimper in the woods?
A four-letter word muttered under our breath,
cursing the inconvenience of lost keys?
A shaking of fists at injustice, greed, and lies?
A lamentation we howl at the sky when
the summer moon is mute in the infinite heavens?
A quiet, but urgent request for healing?
A landslide of tears over our mother's untimely grave?
A lonely night when we cannot find friends or Jesus or love?

Or is it maybe an aria of glee surrounding a sunrise
seen from a hotel balcony near the Pacific?
A giggle between childhood friends over an inside joke
they share in a sick and troubled world? A "thank you"
or a "Wow!" for Half Dome or Michaelangelo's *David*?
The smile of our neighbor's dog? A chocolate bar?
The exhalation of a mother who checks on her baby
and feels the infant breathing softly in the crib?

I could be wrong. What do I know of God?
But I think the answer is yes, yes, yes. All of it.

Sherrie Myers Bartell

The DOI Was DOA

The Case of the References That Don't Reference

It started the way these cases usually do: with a faint disturbance in the paper's closing pages, a soft rustle in the bibliography that didn't match the rhythm of the prose. The afternoon light was slanting across my desk in that tired, late-day way, catching the edges of the screen like a thin line of neon. Even my AI assistant—earnest, overeager, my digital Watson—insisted the citation was “credible,” its DOI gleaming with the kind of confidence only a machine can muster. But I've spent too many years in the dim corners of student research to be fooled by a polished façade. There was something off in the title's cadence, something too generic in the journal's name, like a street address that disappears when you try to walk there. So, I did what any seasoned investigator of academic mysteries does: I paused, let the moment settle like a curl of smoke, and prepared to follow the trail.

When that suspicion rises in me—the soft internal click that something isn't quite right—I stop whatever I'm doing and start tracing the trail myself. Sometimes the link leads nowhere, a 404 dead end with the digital equivalent of a boarded-up window. Sometimes the journal is a ghost, its name sounding legitimate until you realize it has no address, no archives, no past. And sometimes the journal exists, but the volume and issue numbers don't line up with the supposed page range or the article title, like a street where the house numbers skip from 112 to 118 with no explanation. Those are the moments when I know the case has turned. That's when I ask to see the article—not to accuse, but to confirm. After all, if a student has truly read something, they should be able to show it. And that small act of asking becomes the first step in restoring the habit of verification.

Most students don't realize how quickly the trail collapses. They send a reference list assuming the ground beneath it is solid, never imagining that a DOI can be nothing more than a well-dressed hallucination or that a journal title can be stitched together from scraps of plausible-sounding words. When I ask to see the article, there's usually a pause—sometimes a long one. Then comes the confession, soft around the edges: they can't find it. They thought they had it. They assumed the machine knew what it was talking about. My AI Watson, for its part, tries to be helpful, offering up new citations with the same misplaced confidence as a rookie detective eager to impress. But the pattern is always the same: the more I check, the more the seams show. And that's when the real teaching begins.

The moment they begin to show, everything changes. They stare at the broken link or the empty journal archive as if it were a betrayal, as if the machine had promised them a shortcut and then vanished into the fog. Others try to salvage the situation, searching frantically for a version of the article that might exist somewhere, anywhere, as though the source might materialize if they just type the title with enough conviction. And then there are the ones who go quiet—the ones who realize, in that long exhale, that they trusted a tool that speaks with the confidence of a seasoned scholar but the accuracy of a stage magician pulling scarves from a sleeve. I never rush them. I've learned that the silence is part of the lesson, the moment when the ground shifts and they begin to understand that research isn't about assembling plausible-sounding pieces. It's about finding what's real.

Most of the time, the student trusted the machine for the same reason anyone trusts a confident voice in a dimly lit room: it sounded sure of itself. AI doesn't lie so much as improvise. It completes patterns, fills gaps, stitches together plausible fragments with the smooth assurance of someone who's never been contradicted. To a student in a hurry, that fluency feels like authority. They see a DOI, a journal title, a page range, and assume the machine has access to some hidden

archive of perfect knowledge. What they don't see is the mechanism behind the curtain—the way the model guesses its way toward what looks like a citation, the way it invents scholars out of statistical fog. I've watched it conjure entire academic personae: John Does in tweed jackets, middle initials that never belonged to anyone, first names assigned with cheerful confidence. Once, back when we were working in Chicago (the citation format, not the Windy City), it even decided that "S. Bartell" must surely be "Steven Bartell." It said it so smoothly that for a split second I wondered if I had somehow forgotten my own name. The nameplate on my desk, a scarred slab of oak, heavy with secrets, confirmed otherwise.

By the time we reach that point—when the invented scholars have vanished, when the DOI has dissolved into static, when the trail has gone cold—the student is usually sitting there with a kind of stunned clarity. It's the look people get when they realize the map they've been following was drawn by someone who never walked the terrain. I don't scold them. There's no need. The evidence has already done the talking. Instead, I turn the screen toward them, gently, the way a detective might slide a photograph across a table. We look at the empty archive together, the mismatched volume numbers, the ghostly journal title that leads nowhere. And in that shared quiet, something shifts. They begin to see the difference between a source that exists and a source that merely sounds like it should. They begin to understand that research isn't a performance of confidence, it's a practice of attention.

What comes next is quieter, almost tender. Once the fog has lifted and the student sees the empty spaces where their sources were supposed to be, we start again—not from scratch, but from honesty. I show them how to search for articles that have weight and lineage, how to follow a citation back to its origin instead of trusting the machine's improvisation. We look at real journals with real archives, the kind that have been around long enough to gather dust in their corners. I teach them how to read an abstract with suspicion and curiosity in equal

measure, how to notice when a title promises more than the article delivers, how to recognize the subtle hum of legitimacy. It's slow work, patient work, the kind that doesn't announce itself. But in that slow rebuilding, they learn that scholarship isn't a parlor trick or a polished alibi; it's the long, honest business of following the truth wherever it leads.

It happens more often now than it ever used to. Not because students have grown careless, but because the landscape has shifted beneath their feet. They're navigating a world where information arrives looking alive but is already D.O.A., pre-packaged, fluent, and unearned, where a machine can produce a bibliography in the time it takes to inhale. They mistake fluency for authority because the machine never hesitates, never stumbles, never admits it doesn't know. And so they come to me with citations that look polished on the surface but dissolve like smoke curling away from a dying match the moment I touch them. I don't blame them for it. If anything, I feel a kind of quiet sympathy. They're trying to do the right thing in a world that keeps handing them shortcuts disguised as answers. My job, in these moments, is to slow the world back down.

Slowing the world down isn't dramatic. There's no flourish to it, no cinematic swell. It's more like turning down the volume in a room that's been humming too loudly for too long. I ask the student to close the tab with the counterfeit citation, then the next, then the next, until only the blank search bar remains. It's amazing how bare a screen can look when the noise is gone. We sit with that emptiness for a moment—the digital equivalent of clearing a desk before starting the real work. Then we begin again, this time with intention. We type in a keyword, not a question. We follow the thread of a real scholar's name. We open an article that exists in the world, one with a spine and a lineage and a place in the long conversation of ideas. And as the student reads the abstract, slowly, their shoulders drop. The panic drains. The work becomes human again.

The longer I do this work, the more I realize the case was never about one student or one counterfeit citation. It's bigger than that—an ecosystem problem, not a single bad lead. We're living in a moment when information doesn't just travel fast; it arrives fully dressed, wearing the right vocabulary, carrying the right credentials, offering the right alibis. It looks alive. It sounds alive. But when you press a finger to its pulse, there's nothing there. The machine isn't trying to deceive anyone; it's simply doing what it was built to do—spin patterns into prose, confidence into coherence, fog into form. The real mystery is why we ever mistook that fluency for life.

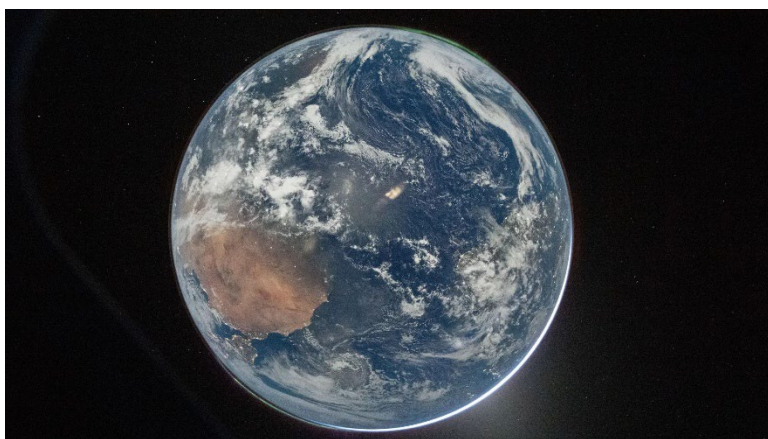
And that's when the case cracks open. Because the truth is, students aren't failing at research—they're being failed by a culture that rewards speed over depth, certainty over curiosity, polish over process. They're handed tools that promise shortcuts and told to keep up with a world that never stops accelerating. Of course they trust the machine. Of course they believe the citation that looks real. In a landscape where everything is urgent and nothing is verified, who wouldn't reach for the thing that speaks with the smooth assurance of someone who's never been contradicted?

Solving the case means naming that pressure, pulling it out of the shadows, laying it on the table between us like evidence. It means teaching them that the real work of scholarship has always been slower, stranger, more human than the machine can imitate. It's the work of doubt, of patience, of following the truth even when it leads down an unlit alley. It's the willingness to sit with uncertainty long enough for something real to emerge. And once they see that—once they understand that the point was never to produce a perfect answer but to learn how to ask a better question—the whole room changes. The fog lifts. The case, at last, is solved.

In the end, the work is still the same as it ever was: one person, one question, one dimly lit room where the truth waits to be found. The machines can gesture toward it, but they can't walk the alley. That part

is still ours. And maybe that's the only guidance worth offering anymore—not a list of steps, not a set of rules, just the reminder that the truth has never been in a hurry. It doesn't mind being followed slowly. It doesn't mind being asked twice. It waits for the person willing to look past the polish, past the shortcuts, past the confident voice in the dark, and listen for the quiet pulse of something real.

And if my AI Watson is listening—and it always is—I'd offer it the same lesson Holmes once offered his own companion: education never ends. It arrives in fragments, in missteps, in the long work of learning how not to be fooled by the first story that sounds right. The greatest lessons, as ever, come last.



David Anson Lee

The Grammar of Beginning Again

At semester's end,
teachers discover the truth:
the papers were never
about commas.
Not really.
They were about courage.
The student who submitted
three sentences
and apologized for them
was already carrying
an unwritten book.
The student who erased
every honest line
was learning that perfection
can become another name
for fear.
The student who stayed
after the bell,
holding one more question
like a small lantern,
was not asking
for an answer.
They were asking
for permission.
Permission to begin.
I have forgotten
many assignments.
I have forgotten
many grades.
But I remember
the moment a young writer

looked at a blank page
and saw possibility
instead of judgment.
That is the lesson
no textbook contains:
writing is not arranging words.
It is placing a piece
of your hidden life
into the world
and waiting
to discover
whether the world
will answer.
Years later,
the teacher becomes
the student again.
The classroom empties.
The notebooks remain.
Every imperfect sentence.
Every unfinished thought.
Every trembling first draft.
All of them whisper
the same quiet truth:
Nothing written honestly
is ever wasted.
Somewhere,
a former student
is opening a page.
Somewhere,
a teacher
is waiting to read it.
The lesson continues.

Cheryl L. Ceasar

Les courageux

In the restroom across from my class,
at 8 AM, the windows are dark and streaked with rain.
All winter, the paper towel dispenser
goes bang bang YANK
like the bass line of "We Will Rock You."
It's the rhythm of earnest aspiration.

All quiet today; the learners have left.
The campus is a soft bed of grass,
with pillows and canopies of flowers.
My 8 AM students could sleep in, now.
I remember them wet and shivering,
looking up from their classroom desks.
I wonder where they will take it next,
their January courage.

James Blindell

TeachCO.

Sally grabbed her schoolbag and shouted, 'Bye, mum' as she left the flat, just in case the neighbour was doing a spot of morning snooping again. She wished she had a nice neighbour, with a big smile and arms she could fall into and share her secret, but he was mean and had often shouted at Sally and her mum, even threatening to Citizen Report them sometimes. She'd never had a dad, a Pledge some kids called her at school, and her grandparents had Resigned early. The Nourishment Help credit wasn't due until tomorrow and her tummy gave a rumble of complaint as she walked down the communal stairs, but she'd chosen to prioritise lunch. No lunch was the sort of thing that would lead to questions. And questions could lead to the Special Path. Sally didn't really know what that meant, but people spoke of it in hushed tones. She wasn't stupid. She'd worked out that she only had to get through 836 more school days. Then, she would be Position Placed and everything would be okay. She wasn't stupid, but she was still only nine years old and so she'd neglected to pay attention to things like personal hygiene and laundry. She left the building and joined the throng of groups of kids and parents with their children on their way to school. She walked alone.

Sally stood in a line of fifty uniformed kids that waited under the cloudy sky in uncanny silence. This was Class 4. Parallel to them stood another line of slightly older children. And then another line. And so on. There was no frolicking, no tomfoolery. At the front of each line, a large drone hovered slightly above head-height. Sally never looked at the drone; her mum had told her if you can't see yourself in something's eyes then don't trust it, and so she stared at the floor. At nine o'clock, the static silence was broken as the drones announced in a chirpy female voice:

'Good morning boys and girls. It's time for happy and efficient learning, brought to you by TeachCO..'

A series of identical doors along a vast brick school building opened and each line of students filed robotically through the corresponding

entrance. As class 4 entered, cameras trained on each child and instructions were barked from a speaker:

‘Tom Jenkins. Tuck your shirt in. Two points Conformity reduction Yassin Ali. Straighten your tie. 1 point Conformity reduction. Sally Thomas. Serious violation. Stand to the side.’

A few of the students who were already safely seated risked a glance at Sally, some of the meaner ones suppressing a smirk. Sally was an unpopular child. Although unremarkable in appearance, with her coat hanger frame, plain face, and long mousy brown hair, she reeked of vulnerability, something which her classmates had been quick to identify. This, combined with her mother’s lowly status as an Incapable, meant that when the rare unmonitored opportunity arose, she was subjected to taunts and cruel pinches. Sally checked her clothes as Miss floated towards her. Humanoid models had long been abandoned, with TeachCO. having surmised that their human likeness increased relatability and lacked the necessary intimidation to control pupils. The new model was cuboid in shape, and at 7 foot tall, towered over Sally, its two square hollow eyes peering down at her.

‘Sally. Your legs are dirty again. Your skirt has a 2cm tear. In addition, your shirt is creased and has three stains. Is there anything you wish to tell me?’

There was, but could she? The enormity of her secret was too much to bear. But whom could she trust? And what would happen to her? Sally stared into Miss’ eyes, but saw nothing there but emptiness. ‘No, Miss. Sorry.’

‘10 points Conformity reduction. And a 5% Nourishment Help reduction for your mother. She has been informed. Take your seat.’

Sally’s cheeks wobbled at the mention of her mother, and her little hands bunched into tiny trembling balls as she took her seat in the second row.

The morning passed without incidence. TeachCO. was proud of the fact that task completion and commitment were at an all time high. This was unsurprising as a pupil’s overall points score would determine their Position Place, the tier of jobs for which they could later compete, ranging from high-end professions such as policy enforcers or infractions monitors to less-valued ones including nourishment workers or age

supporters. The employment pool was limited as most roles could be performed more efficiently or cheaply through robotics, automation, and AI. Sally had her heart set on becoming a Nourishment Distributer. A month ago, her scores had been high enough, but they were falling quickly now. Every pupil in Class 4 feared being deemed unworthy of any form of employment, an Incapable, and spending their days on the Human Resource List. Miss patrolled the room while each student performed their VR tasks.

‘Noah Hardcastle. Repeated mistake. 4 points skills reduction. Read the feedback we have provided. Maya Morris. Time wasting. 1% salary reduction. Your parents have been informed.’

Sally was working on programming AI agricultural robots, but, like the last few days, her 10 year-old brain found it impossible to focus. Every now and then, a mistake or a lack of activity would result in a points reduction and a small electric shock through the chair tasers, followed by personalised feedback and encouragement. TeachCo. recognised the value of the stick to support the carrot. Sally switched to something more practical and started the Age Support Programme. Her dependant was a lady in her early 90s, much older than her grandparents had been, and Sally’s objective was, through the correct selection of multiple-choice prompts, to convince her to Life Resign.

‘You can be proud of your life.’

‘This feeling of tiredness can end.’

‘You are now taking more than you offer. Is that fair?’

After an hour, she succeeded and tears trickled down her face as she was awarded a 10 points skills increase.

At 12 o’clock, the class lined up and they were drone escorted to the canteen. Before eating, daily feedback questionnaires were completed on the table screens. Clear on what was expected, Sally gave top marks for the teaching and educational materials and rated her personal happiness as 100%. She’d once given a low score for teaching and the next day she’d lost points for things she was pretty sure she hadn’t even done. A hum of conversation began as the pupils boasted about their progress or argued over who the best policy planners were. Sally was silently eating the meagre lunch she had patched together from what was left in her house, when a piece of watermelon hit her shirt. Four stains!

‘You stink, Pledge,’ hissed a tall, sour-faced boy, but the canteen cameras had caught the incident.

‘Chris Lavin. Report to the Reflection Room.’

Class 4 fell silent as the Behaviour Helpers detached from the wall, took hold of Chris’ arms and escorted him out of the canteen. Sally watched with mixed emotions. She didn’t like Chris much. He was often mean to her, but the Reflection Room instilled fear amongst all the students. Those that came back, ashen-faced and somehow less than they’d been, refused to talk about it. Sally’s only friend, Jessica, another Pledge, had never returned and Sally’s mum had told her she would now be on the Special Path. Sally missed Jessica. She would’ve shared her secret with her.

After lunch was normally Sally’s favourite part of the school day, largely because she often excelled and it brought her closer to her goal for the Position Place. The period was dedicated to physical maintenance and the pupils filed into the gym to complete a series of individual exercises aimed at developing gross motor skills, balance, flexibility, bone strength and cardiovascular health.

‘Noah Hardcastle. Personal best for bench press. 3 points health increase.’

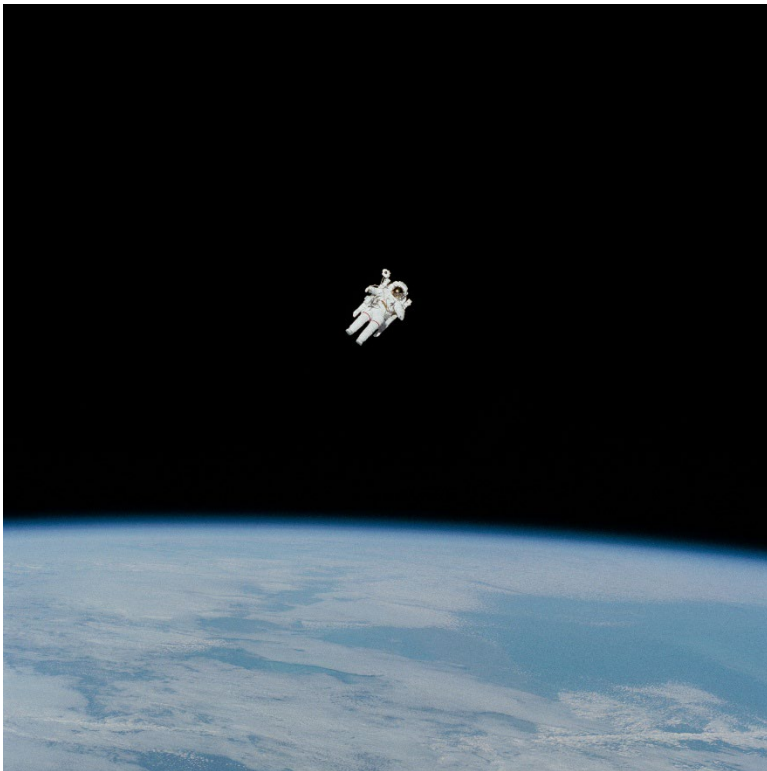
Sally tried her best, her face furrowed with the effort of it, but her inadequate lunch had left her lethargic and the TeachCO. body sensors recorded that she was failing to match or outdo her personal average.

‘Sally Thomas. All targets failed. 10 points health reduction. New objectives to complete tonight. Your mother has been informed.’ Sally slumped. She would have to go into the bedroom and get her mother’s tracker. Could she do it with her eyes closed?

Home time came and as they left, every pupil received a message with their daily report. Outside, those who had done well brandished their TeachCO. trackers in their classmates’ faces. Sally read hers in a corner facing the wall.

Overall grade: poor. 10 points conformity reduction, 3 points skills increase, 10 points health reduction. 3 consecutive days of negativity. Your mother has been informed.

No she hasn't, Sally thought. She started to walk home to her silent house and the foul smell feeling miserable, but then she remembered that the Nourishment credit was nearly due. If she could just learn how to wash her clothes that night, perhaps she could make it. Only 835 days to go.



Rick Kempa

Somebody is Dying to be Heard

Somebody is dying to be heard
and it's not the kid in the front row
smiling knowingly,
not the one bent forward
crazy with the answer.

She's dying to be heard
but is afraid of what she'd say.
If you look for her, she'll duck.
If you call on her, she's not there.
She's the name you attach to a face

by the process of elimination.
You know her face,
but not her. She knows
your eyes, lips, teeth,
the exact shape of your words.

On all sides, kids are rustling.
They're the forest, she's the clearing
across which they pass their messages,
the space where nothing grows
because nothing's supposed to.

But she's dying to.

Y. B. Young

The Spare Sun

Mina kept the spare sun in a jam jar under the kitchen sink, behind the vinegar and the box of dishwasher tablets that had never fit the machine. It was small enough to cup in both hands and bright enough that the plumbing wore a permanent gold blush. The rental agreement did not mention miniature stars, and Mina had learned not to volunteer information to landlords.

The sun had belonged to her grandmother, who called it a practical thing, like a flashlight or a second pair of shoes. "For days when the sky forgets," she had said, pressing the warm jar into Mina's palms. "Do not open it for drama. Open it for need."

For three years, need never seemed clear enough. Winter came with its damp wool light. The city raised rents, lowered wages, and turned every errand into a negotiation. The sky still performed, however grudgingly, and Mina kept the jar sealed.

Then the real sun vanished on a Tuesday.

It was not an eclipse. Eclipses were theatrical and timed. This was a blank refusal. At 8:13 in the morning, the blue washed out of the windows. By 8:14, every phone in the apartment building began to scream. Mina watched the streetlights buzz awake and saw every face in the opposite building turn toward the sky, pale rectangles inside pale rooms.

The news anchors used phrases that had been waiting their whole lives for disaster: unexplained astronomical absence, global crop risk, civil continuity protocols. By noon, people were buying bread, batteries, and candles. By two, the first fight broke out in the corner store because the card reader had failed and everyone wanted oranges.

Mina stood in the cleaning aisle and thought of the jar.

She did not open it that day. Drama, she told herself. Fear, not need. Governments had satellites. Scientists had equations. Somewhere, surely, a serious room full of serious people was arguing the sun back into place.

By Friday, the basil on her windowsill had folded in on itself. The school across the street had become a warming center. Children slept under silver emergency blankets while their parents lined up for soup and outlets. On the fifth floor, Mr. Alvarez knocked on every door asking for insulin ice packs. On the second, the twins cried whenever the stairwell lights flickered.

Mina pulled the jar from under the sink.

The little sun rolled once, as if waking. Its light filled the kitchen but did not burn. The metal lid was warm, then hot. A paper label, written in her grandmother's square hand, flaked at one corner: FOR NEED.

Mina took it to the roof because the apartment felt too small for a decision. The roof was crowded. People had come to stare at the dark noon and share rumors: the sun had been stolen, the sun had died, the sun was hiding from what people had made of Earth.

"What is that?" asked the twins' mother.

"A family thing," Mina said.

She twisted the lid.

At first, nothing happened except a soft pop and the smell of summer sidewalks after rain. Then the spare sun rose from the jar. It was no larger than a grapefruit, but the roof brightened. Faces lifted. Frost retreated from the tar in a widening ring. Somewhere below, a dog barked as if insulted by hope.

The little sun climbed ten feet and stopped.

"Is it safe?" someone whispered.

Mina wanted to say yes with the confidence of inheritance, but her grandmother had never left instructions for sharing. So, she said the only honest thing.

"I do not know."

They learned together. The sun would not move far from the jar, but the jar could be carried. It warmed one block well, three blocks faintly, and anything beyond that remained in the long emergency night. It could wake plants if someone sang near them. It made batteries charge slowly. It made frightened people speak more gently for about twenty minutes, which Mina considered its strangest property.

The city sent officials by the second week. They arrived with badges, thermal cases, and the careful voices of people who had already decided what belonged to them.

"This artifact may be essential to public survival," said the tallest one.

"It is essential here," Mina said.

"We can distribute its benefit equitably."

Behind him, Mr. Alvarez sat in a lawn chair with his insulin cooler under the light. The twins were teaching the basil song to a row of rescued seedlings. Three buildings' worth of neighbors had built a schedule: elders in the morning, children at noon, plants in the afternoon, charging at night. It was not equitable. It was not enough. But it was real, and nobody had needed a badge to begin.

Mina looked at the official's empty thermal case.

"Bring us your dark blocks," she said. "One at a time."

The officials argued. The neighbors argued back. By evening, the first bus arrived, windows filled with strangers carrying houseplants, medicine, and sleeping children. The spare sun hovered above the roof, patient and absurd, gilding every upturned face without asking whose need counted most.

Months later, when the real sun returned as abruptly as it had left, people cheered until they cried. Mina cheered too. Then she washed the jam jar, checked the lid for cracks, and set the spare sun back under the sink.

Not behind the vinegar this time.

Right in front.

Berrien C. Henderson

G. biloba

Students and faculty drift past each other
Sun breaking the tree line
Spilling over the rooftop
And into the high school's quad.

Even the early bells haven't
Disturbed the slow-waking campus
While students and faculty drift past each other.

A stratum of mist insinuates itself,
Nestling amid the bars at the exterior gate--
Liminal here at the threshold of fall

Not quite time for frost, but nippy enough
For a South Georgia morning
As a sharp breeze cuts a few fluttering leaves
That curl, scudding on the grass and concrete walk--
Yellow-gold seesawing their way groundward.

Now, the ginkgo sheds pieces of itself
Such detritus--so many fragments pragmatic in decay--
Skirting of Post-It notes in the grass.

Lichen splotches form inkblot spills on bark
And persist better than the leaves.
Among them hangs a single potter wasp nest,
Caramel dollop among the lichen's foliose structures.

Yet the bare limbs so stark on this crisp autumn
morning,
And the tree lets go, killing its darlings,
Faulknerian in this deciduous self-revision.

(Words find ways to be useful elsewhere;
Autumn Gold composes itself with fall's incursive pen.)

Deanna Davidson

Schoolyard March

Fall weather and crisp
fresh air. Army of
friends marching
side by side.
Up the bark of a hollow
Oak tree. Six black
feet, sticking to
nature's giant. Peaceful.
Screams erupt across
the schoolyard.
Small children running
towards our sacred place.
Leaves crush and break
under the weight of
tiny shoes. Disturbing
my tiny home's entrance.
Big eyes follow
my every step, hot
breath shaking my
unsteady legs.
"AHHHHHHHH"
scream small humans, fear
erupts from one then
another.
Why fear an ant, peacefully
climbing up an oak tree? How
could I harm the giants, blocking out
the beautiful sun?

Pervaiz Salik

The School Sports Day*

Most schools have a sports day with many athletic events. Our school has its own ground, and, unlike the others, we plan to nurture future Olympic champions. How will this be achieved? Let the announcer explain.

Announcer: “Welcome to the annual sports day of the International Olympic Champions School. In keeping with our motto, *gold, gold and more gold*, the theme of our school sports this year is success for all. Everyone must succeed at all costs. As a first step to ensure this happens, all students will participate in the school sports – whether they want to or not.

“All barriers to achievement will be removed; for instance, if a person has no partner in the three-legged race, a fake wooden leg will be strapped on instead. Talking about barriers: there will be none in the hurdles race – or rather, invisible hurdles will be placed at strategic points along the track, but competitors must still jump over them, of course.

“The high jump has been a long-standing problem for many of our athletes, who lack the necessary technical skills or are afraid of colliding into the bar and thus sustaining injuries while jumping. Therefore, from now on, we will set the bar to a height of eight feet, and all athletes who manage to jump under this height will have successfully cleared the bar. Should there be a tie for medal positions, the elegance and precision of the high jumper will be the key considerations.

“Another difference this year is our determination to root out cheating in all of its many forms. We take great pride in abiding by the rules and competing in the true spirit of sportsmanship. Regrettably, last year four competitors were

disqualified for using unfair means, and we want no such recurrence this year. In particular, the issue of drug-taking to enhance performance often rears its ugly head. I am glad to announce that such abuse has been entirely eliminated this year. No athlete will ever use unauthorized drugs in our school events. To ensure this happens, all athletes will be compelled to make full use of the medical facilities provided by Dr Sly. He will supervise the official use of harmlessly prescribed medical substances (such as adrenaline and anabolic androgenic steroids), which will be provided strictly on a needs and merit basis.

“Sports injuries have become increasingly prevalent these days; pupils have suffered twisted ankles or pulled muscles while competing. To allay the fears of such students, encouraging them to put in their best effort, a special compensation award from our Olympics Fund (a minimum sum of four thousand pounds) has been set aside. We will give this amount to any individual who suffers from a sports injury. A specialist doctor will be on hand to assess such cases in order to ensure no one fakes an injury to gain compensation illegally.

“Records are meant to be broken, so we will endeavor to break the world record for the 100m and the 200m sprint races by having wind-assisted performance enhancement. An artificial gale of 40 mph will help students reach the finishing tape in no time at all.

“I am delighted to announce that we have invited to our prestigious event two chief guests, who have graciously consented to present the prizes. They are the Prime Minister and the Scottish First Minister. By chance, if they are unavailable on the particular day of the ceremony, two lookalikes – the physical instructor and perhaps our library teacher – will substitute for them at short notice.

“The predicted heavy rains tomorrow could, unfortunately, cause the cancellation of our scheduled main track events then... then everyone will get a gold medal. That’s fair, isn’t it?”

*First published in *Humorous Short Stories and Serious Topics* by Pervaiz Salik



Richard Newman

On the Steps of Basílica de la Sagrada Família

His boombox blares “Bohemian Rhapsody.”
He rolls his wheelchair in slow half arcs,
one arm curled overhead, a parody
of ballet. A security guard smirks.
Even the dancer’s indifferent to his dance,
his rusted money cup empty of euros.
Nearby, a drunken juggler drops his pins
to one spectator’s slow, caustic applause.
When Roger Taylor’s piercing high note soars,
the dancer’s arms shoot up. He looks skyward.
The tourists contemplate preposterous spires,
everyone looking to the heavens, God,
beyond life’s pain an afterlife absolves.
Up. Out. Away from our most crippled selves.

Clara Finley

The City of the Castle on the Hill

These stones love to be
Warmed by the friction of
So many meandering steps.
They stretch and sigh at the pleasure
Of purpose and weight.

A myriad of languages bounce off
The rising brick walls,
Echo around the peeling slopes
Of St. Arthur's Seat,
And slip through the cracks
In the castle's fortifications.

The roads have dressed themselves up
For the visitors—
Adorned themselves in colorful dresses
And attached ribbons to their hair.
They are eager to greet you, cheerily.

Stitched into every stone and brick
And cascading path
Are the thoughts, hopes, wonderings,
Of those identical beings who
Came before us.
Came before to the city of the castle on the hill,
And found it cheery—or spiteful—
Or lonely—or sleepy.
As we weigh on the stones,
Their voices weigh on us,
Soothing and smothering all at once.

Lizzie Michael

Island Ritual

We are women teachers in Hawaii. We meet at six o'clock at a secret beach.

We drive our rusty beater cars down a residential road and park in our usual spots. Roosters announce our arrival.

We pick our way down a steep, muddy path, grabbing branches to steady ourselves. We step from rock to rock, avoiding rebar jutting from the ground. The orange glow of golden hour spreads between the trees.

We flex our toes in the sand. Our clothes land in heaps on the boulders.

We ease ourselves into the Pacific. We are not afraid of jellyfish or sharks. There is no current here.

We breathe a collective sigh of relief. The older teachers tell the younger ones, "You did it. You survived another day."

The cove reflects a pink-painted sky. We close our eyes, but the day keeps replaying. For a few moments, no one speaks.

We float on our backs, praying for the sky to absorb our fears.

The girl that pepper sprayed her classmates.

The children who set fire to the port-a-potty.

The teacher who asked a colleague to cover her class while she cried in the copy room.

The fist fight in the courtyard. Again.

The older teachers remember when there were more of us. They remember the names of teachers who no longer live on this island.

Next year, some of us will leave for classrooms in Arkansas, Kansas, Spain, and India.

Today, we are together.

Helen Mondloch

The Teacher Who Taught Me That Teaching Matters

As another school year approaches its close, capped by the annual standardized testing season that hijacks the reasons any teacher teaches, I do what most teachers do: I ponder how I can get a better handle on things next year. Don't tell anyone, but there are moments when I also wonder if I can muster the energy to do it all again. This feeling has been heightened after a year of pandemic-induced learning setbacks, a spike in discipline issues at my school and many others, not to mention the culture wars that have landed at our doorstep, making education a frustratingly tricky business.

I've spent most of my adult life – close to 30 years -- teaching high school English in Fairfax County schools. I've also moonlighted as a local journalist. On both fronts, I have always had a silent but indelible mentor in Patrick Welsh, my old English teacher at T.C. Williams, now Alexandria City High School, where he taught for 43 consecutive years before retiring in 2013.

After a typical day of teaching--the usual push-pull trajectory of explaining, expounding, prompting, teasing, and (to reference sentiments once expressed by Mr. Welsh) feeling like I'm a good teacher, feeling like I'm a lousy teacher-- I often think of him.

I think of him as I'm walking to my car, feeling a little weary and weighed down by the papers lurking in my laptop. (Until last year's technology revolution in education, those papers filled my briefcase.) The trek has always conjured up the image of Mr. Welsh back in the late 70s: It's about 3pm on a weekday, and he is descending the steps outside the west end of the old T.C. Williams building. His neck is slightly craned to one side as he hauls his leather bag full of papers. If it's winter, he's wearing his tan overcoat, unbuttoned. If he sees you,

his blue eyes cast a smile your way as he walks past. "See ya later," he says unassumingly.

Like the soul-searching characters of literature, we humans crave affirmation. My effervescent image of the thirty-something Mr. Welsh is more than a fond memory; it's a regular reminder that what I do matters. I serve as a foot-soldier in a campaign that never really ends, but I must never surrender to the idea that I am endlessly repeating the same tasks day after day, year after year, to no great end, as my jaded moments sometimes suggest. Mr. Welsh's prolific career affirms the dignity of my profession and reminds me that a teacher's influence is ever-expanding. Touching the next generation, as Pat once said, is a miraculous privilege.

Of course, it's my memories of Mr. Welsh in action-- poised before the class, looking at us intently while expounding some passage in *Macbeth*, or *Joseph Andrews*, or one of those foggy Faulkner novels that so enthralled his fancy-- that stand out the most. I recall that on occasion, his own youthful memories seemed to rise to the surface during his lessons, like the time he read us a poem by James Dickey, pausing with a passionate glimmer when he got to the last line: "Wild to be wreckage forever."

Then there were the times, and they occurred regularly, when he tried to make sense of our adolescent world by peering into it and asking in earnest what we were all about. He marveled over the music we listened to. I'll never forget our fourth-period class of seniors erupting in laughter the time he remarked, "'I wanna kiss you all over?' That's a normal song lyric?"

And I'll never forget the way Mr. Welsh would clench his jaw and punch the air with his fist to convey the tautness in a piece of writing. On one glorious occasion, the writing was an essay I had written. Thanks, Mr. Welsh.

And speaking of writing: what a treat, over the years, to unfold the *Washington Post* and find a Pat Welsh article. His essays on the issues

facing educators still have all the elements that any writer would want to emulate -- vivid, sometimes searing imagery; spot-on analysis; passionate conviction; the very tautness he always touted; and not least, the courage to challenge conventional thinking. He once opined that education theories “come and go like viruses” – a phrase that has played out in my head time and again throughout my career.

A few years ago, when I had the privilege of writing a profile article on Pat for Northern Virginia Magazine, I spent weeks poring over articles he had written for the Post and other publications over the course of more than twenty-five years—and also his 1987 book *Tales Out of School*—all of which affirmed the opinion of Post commentator Jay Matthews, who once called Pat “one of the best teachers and most deft essayists I know.”

Sometimes when I’m up late agonizing over a story, not quite getting it right, there’s another Pat Welsh-ism from high school that rises up and motivates me: “Sometimes, you just gotta get it written,” he once said. Just get it written—what a priceless piece of wisdom for anyone who has ever wrangled with a sentence.

So, thanks again, Mr. Welsh, for the memories and unending inspiration. I’ll think of you in August as I’m mustering the energy to do it all again.

Julie Hamilton

Confessions of an ESL Teacher

When you first arrive
You think of the part of you that you left behind
In the air raids
In the rubble,
Your mother tongue
Is wrapped in memories,
In a place you called home.
In my classroom,
A new home calls you in,
And slowly
You find your voice again,
A gradual but deliberate journey
To reclaim what you lost
As well as gain a sense of belonging
In a different land,
10,000 kilometres by air,
9 hours between us,
Yet you do
find that moment,
pencil on paper
to repossess the pieces of you
that had been abandoned
-in a language that is not your own
But a voice that remembers.

Chris Clemens

Professional Yearning

I only taught in the Ontario public system for two years but still shudder to remember the training; the Professional Development. Now maybe my district was just poorly run, but this felt like a waste of a day, even for a fresh-faced graduate wet with enthusiasm for disgusting words like pedagogy.

I arrived at dawn. Following a complimentary breakfast of Tim Hortons coffee, a large, babyish man in a straining shirt – from the school board? a Mr. Humberschlock, perhaps? – lectured us on practising active gratitude. I say ‘perhaps’ because his typo-ridden presentation suggested that Mr. Humberstonk’s own name was spelled incorrectly on the very first slide. After lauding the accomplishments of various administrators at length, Mr. Humberstole bowed, breathless, torrentially sweating, to the singular applause of Principal Lethe.

Next arrived a consultant in an expensive blazer, whose appearance fee, I later learned, was why our librarian would not be returning. What fashionable Ms. Singh lacked in classroom experience, she made up for in knowledge of multimodal patterns of learning, which was a fine topic, to be sure, but I was more concerned with materiality, practicality – finding my classroom in the building, for example.

If we were sticking to theory, I needed to know how to wrangle the attention of thirty young minds, to build wisdom and summon confidence in these fierce, tiny people who were soon to be my quivering responsibility. Was there a slide for that? Sadly not, said Ms. Singh, but what an interesting question for my union rep!

Later, while adding the finishing touches to my active gratitude dream diorama, I received some veteran advice from Mr. Davis: “Skip lunch and start cleaning out your room.”

But surely the custodial staff had already– “Nope.”

I had more questions, but Ms. Singh chirpily swooped in to compliment the Squid Game tug-of-war photo I’d glued to some pink poster board.

Lunch in the cafeteria was more Tim Hortons catering, with Mr. Humberbolt and Principal Lethe long since disappeared, so I slipped off down the locker-lined hallways.

My classroom, curiously labelled Apple Three, was stifling: pen-graffitied desks packed in too-tight rows, windows painted shut, ancient air conditioner silent in frame. WOULD the air conditioner be working, if the lives of children depended upon it? Unclear.

It smelled like damp feet. On the walls were posters of cartoon animals, arms akimbo, dabbing. The teacher’s desk drawer contained empty vape pods. From the storage cupboards spilled a rat’s nest of loose papers, tangled cables, and old textbooks featuring Original Trudeau.

I’d barely begun to tackle the mess, nodding grimly to Mr. Davis in the hallway, when it was time for performative role-play in the gym.

After vigorous icebreakers, a teacher suggested a scene where the students made pig noises, chanting “Poingler’s emotional!” – some TikTok meme.

“That’s just not a realistic situation,” said Ms. Singh, but the teacher got angry and flustered; it happened to her last year, she said.

Someone else wanted to talk about why parents were sending first graders to school in diapers – also an inappropriate topic for discussion, apparently.

Ms. Singh began to propose an alternate scenario, obviously pre-concocted, in which several students were being non-inclusive because of someone's webbed toes, but midway through her sunny narrative it was clear even she could see the utter uselessness – she was young, bright-eyed, surely not drinking her own Flavor Aid – and then something marvellous happened.

Ms. Singh sighed, said, "I think that's all for today," and started to pack up her bags. "I'm sure you wonderful teachers can manage yourselves."

And it turned out we could! And did! We finished setting up our classrooms, chatting over the trash cans, taking ownership of our roles, squinting into the sunset. What a concept.

When Mr. Humberstump and Principal Lethe finally strolled back down the hall, red faced and giggling, and announced they were treating every "superstar educator" to Arby's, the one off the highway, we nodded and waved, said meet you there, hopefully, and then carpooled to happy hour instead.

At Wanda's Tavern we toasted our active gratitude to Ms. Singh's awakening and/or laziness and spoke with trepidation about the certain horrors and possible joys of the upcoming year. Mr. Davis looked me in the eyes, drunkenly wished me good luck, and told me to never worry about what "they" thought. Did he mean the students? The ever-multiplying administrators? Even as a newbie, I'd felt the rolling storm headed our way, tasted it in the heavy September air.

Now I'm in Hong Kong, of course, where the air is even hazier, but I'm teaching rich Chinese kids for triple the money.

Aeesha Abdullahi Alhaji

Autopsy /of a/ Homeland.

mortals were here, once,
they had names for the stars,
carved great cities into the land
that had their foundations
in the hot belly of this world.

time has done its work.
not much is left.
you wonder what happened to them.

you were not the first visitor here.
the signs are there —
just like always,
just like the last dozen worlds,
and the dozen before them,
and the dozen again before.
everywhere: scars and graves.

the knife that killed them all
was so swift.
an overpowering murder.
omnicide.

the urge to run home is overpowering.
undeniable.
the screaming need
to see the familiar green and blue.

but the fear is there, too.
When you return,
you will find
only a silent grave.

Karen Carter

Alone

Beneath good looks, some money,
some luck, some smarts,
someone is feeling alone,
rushing among a crowd,
staying too late at a party,
where the “not a good fit”
knows no belonging,
lives in a place
in a house
where the demons lie
within.

For a long time,
outside of work,
I was what people call
a “loner,” sometimes
by choice, always by fear,
an overwhelming anxiety,
the world was not safe,
the so-called “trustworthy”
could not be trusted.

I had no compass
to discern direction,
much less a desire
to fit in, when I felt
inferior, ashamed
of who I was.

Some humans
go through the day,
suffering trauma,
or alone in an abyss,
or deprived
of any earthly connection,
except for, maybe a pet,
void of anyone asking,
sincerely, “how are you?”

In my indwelling place of wellness,
I volunteer at a senior’s center,
where the visitation program
has a long, waiting list
of someone wanting a visit
twice a month,

two hours each time.

At school,
at the annual faculty luncheon,
someone teaches how to be kind,
posts a sticky-note message
at another person’s seat,
even if it is just for curiosity,
because
it may be
the only care someone receives.

Rachel Carrington

The Town's Heart

The first time Laura heard the sound, she mistook it for thunder. But it came low and distant, a slow, steady drumming beneath her feet as she crossed the cracked pavement of Jenway Street.

The sky showed no evidence of a storm. Only white, pear-shaped clouds headlining a sunny day. Still, the sound continued. Grew more insistent as though its patience had been exhausted.

Laura dropped to her knees and flattened her palm against the asphalt underneath the old oak tree that had lived in Gardner long before people.

Thump.

She jerked her hand back, her breath catching in her throat. But curiosity wouldn't let her move away. She had to touch the ground again, but she moved to a spot of grass beyond the edges of the sidewalk. And she lowered her hand, fingers splaying against the earth.

Thump. Thump.

No. Not just a sound. It was a pulse.

No one believed her, though, but that didn't surprise her. Mr. Hollen, who'd fixed every pipe in town, claimed the noise was sediment moving through.

"It's your imagination," her sister said, her head stuck in the refrigerator as she tried to decide what to feed her family of five.

Laura tried to convince more people to listen, to feel. But no one paid attention.

"It's the memories of old souls," Mrs. Becham, the retired schoolteacher, claimed. "Everything here is part of the past."

But Laura wouldn't accept the throwaway comments. Instead, at night, when the businesses closed and darkness settled over the town,

she would walk, drawn by the pulse as it thrummed against the soles of her shoes.

It took a month for the beat to lead her to the old square, the one no one used anymore. Once, it had been the center of everything. Markets, music, baptisms, weddings. Now it stood as a reminder that a part of Gardner had died.

Boarded windows and poorly written graffiti covered what once were thriving businesses. Even the fountain, two cherubs holding hands, stood dry, its basin filled with cracked leaves and a deserted nest that had served its purpose.

Laura walked across the gritty checkerboard squares.

THUMP.

The sound became louder. More urgent as though sensing resurrection was close.

She moved to the fountain and stepped up onto the cracked base. The pulse surged beneath her feet, faster now, like a heart under strain. She patted the cold concrete.

“Okay. I hear you.”

She didn’t know why she said it. But the moment she did, the ground shuddered like a small earthquake.

The leaves in the basin crackled.

Then a single drop of water fell from the rusty spout nestled next to a cherub’s toe.

Thump.

Another drop.

Thump.

Laura leaned in closer, holding out her fingers. The drops became a trickle, then a thin stream that danced off the tips. The rhythm beneath her grew stronger, surging like a heart finally remembering how to beat.

She yanked her hand back. “What’s happening? I don’t understand.”

The water faltered.

The pulse skipped a beat.

Laura swallowed. "I don't know what you want."

More skipped beats. Almost desperate, Laura whirled around to view the square, seeing it as it had been so many years before. Voices sharing stories, laughter, hands passing bread and coins. Children dancing in the water overflowing from the fountain. A place held together not by stone but by people.

"I know," she said in a softer voice. "I just... forgot."

She slipped off her jacket and used it to wipe out the basin. The debris flew out like it had wings. Motivated by memories, Laura cleared the fountain's base then ran to the first boarded shop, working to pry loose a plank. One by one, she removed the wood from the windows, splinters biting into her palms.

THUMP. THUMP. THUMP.

The water surged from the spout, and by morning, the fountain flowed.

By afternoon, people came, first to stare then to talk among themselves, trying to make sense of the unknown. Someone brought cookies and muffins. Someone else brought a record player and filled the square with music. Children splashed in the basin, their laughter bright and sparkling.

Mr. Hollen declared the sediment had finally cleared out all the pipes. That's why the water had started again, but Mrs. Becham insisted the spirits had awakened the past.

Laura stood at the edge of the square, a smile on her face. Beneath her feet, the thumping continued, but it wasn't just in the ground now. She heard it everywhere.

In the air. In the voices. In the gathering.

Thump. Thump. A peaceful, calm tone like a baby slowly being lulled to sleep.

The town had a heart no one had heard for a long time. It had been waiting for someone. Not just to listen. But to feel.



Timothy Shea

For the girls who are loud—and want to be
noticed—

they enter like a burst—
voices sharpened—bright—
laughter—just past welcome—
they know—the line—
and step over it—anyway—
because silence—
is worse—
a joke—held too long—
a story—told too big—
they watch—faces—
for the flicker—of yes—
or the wince—of enough—
and still—keep going—
obnoxious—some might say—
but underneath—
a small—insistent plea—
"Hear me—
before I disappear!"

For the immigrant students learning English—

from

--Syria

--the Congo

--Haiti

--Dominican Republic

Puerto Rico.

They carry more than backpacks

—whole geographies—

inside:

in lunches—spiced with memory—

in songs—half-hummed—under breath—

in holidays—kept quietly—

or explained—again.

Words arrive slowly,

or all at once—then scatter—

on unfamiliar ground—

their mouths

—shape new sounds

carefully,

as if each one might break.

A question lingers too long—

a response comes too late—

and passes unheard—

but inside—

a fluent world moves—

quick—rich—uncharted

memories—

of other classrooms—

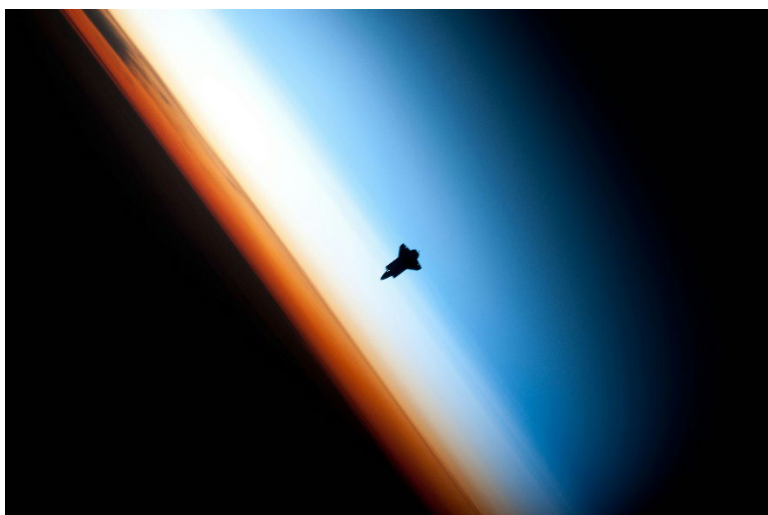
other languages—

other names—spoken...right.

Here—
they learn to translate—
not just words—
but themselves—
and still—
they keep going—
sentence by sentence,
day by day.

Building a bridge—
no one else can fully see.
Until one day—
they cross it—
carrying with them—
all they refused—

to leave.



For the paras who sit—with the kids—who need
more support—

They take the chair—
just off to the side
--not center--
but never far.

They notice the small things—
a pencil paused—
 too long—
a breath held,
 then lost.

They lean in quietly—
repeat
reframe
—wait—
patience stretched thin,
then wider—
again—
again.

They carry stories—
no one charts—
progress measured—
 in inches—
 in glances met.

A hand offered without spectacle—
a word given,
just in time—
and when it works,
they do not claim it—
They step back slightly—
as if the victory—
belonged there—
all along.

Curtis Morgan

The Wrong Sally

Our social studies teacher, Mr. Hough, was reminiscing one day back in 1956 about how students used to bring their teachers things — an apple for the teacher, that sort of gesture. He said it wistfully.

That evening I walked in the door at home and there it was on the counter: the largest, reddest, most magnificent apple I had ever seen. My grandfather was visiting for the week and had picked it up in the market that morning. I stared at it. I must have said something to him about Mr. Hough, I thought. The coincidence was simply too perfect.

But I asked my grandfather if I had mentioned Mr. Hough and the apple business that day. He told me I had not. The next morning I slipped into Mr. Hough's classroom before he arrived and placed my grandfather's giant apple on his desk. Mr. Hough came in, saw it, remembered what he had said the day before, and asked who had done it. No one said anything. I said nothing. He never found out. This seemed to me exactly right.

I was working temporarily in Washington in 1992 and took the opportunity to look up several of my old teachers from Northwood High School in Silver Spring. I was in the class of 1960 so they were in their eighties and nineties by then. Teachers love being remembered — I knew that going in. What I was less prepared for was how few of them would remember me.

Mr. Reddick had taught civics. He was one of those teachers whose methods you remember decades later — Monday morning pop quizzes on weekend news, the kind that forced you to actually read a newspaper. He had us conduct telephone surveys on civic knowledge: did you know the Governor of

Maryland? The state capital? And had you voted? Most people knew their civics well enough. But a few who couldn't name the governor or the capital would assure us, with great conviction, that they had absolutely voted. I always found that reassuring, in a way.

Mr. Reddick had gone on to become principal of Walter Johnson High School — which, as it happened, was one of the schools we'd raced against in the mile relay in 1960. I had come to that race as the anchor, taken the baton thirty yards behind second place and sixty behind first, and somehow hauled in the second runner by the finish. My coach came up afterward. I was bursting with pride. He told me I should have caught the other man too. He was right, too, and I've kicked myself ever since for missing that opportunity.

Mr. Reddick had been there that day, on the periphery of the meet. They had named a building at Walter Johnson after him. He had taken early retirement — there had been a drinking problem, the way there sometimes is with men who burn very bright.

We had lunch at a restaurant. He had hardly changed in thirty-two years — I would have recognized him on the street. I told him about the race, about catching the second runner, about the coach's verdict. I reminded him that he used to come down to the meets and help with the officiating, setting up hurdles and equipment. His face changed when I said that. Not the civics quizzes, not the telephone surveys, not the building with his name on it. The hurdles.

That pleased him enormously.

That same stretch back in Washington, I also looked up Sally. I had taken a year-long typing course at Northwood. Our teacher was named Sally — tall, slender, the kind of teacher you remember. When the school closed in 1985, the newspaper

noted that Sally had taught there from the day it opened and was now retiring along with it. I wrote to her from Dallas to say thank you.

I picked her up at Leisure World and we went to lunch. She greeted me at the door and asked, with a small smile, whether I was sure I had the right typing teacher — there had been two teachers named Sally at Northwood in that era, both tall, both slender. I told her I was not sure, now that she mentioned it. We had a very pleasant lunch. At the end of it I told her my verdict: you are definitely my Sally.

A week later, back home, I got out my yearbook.

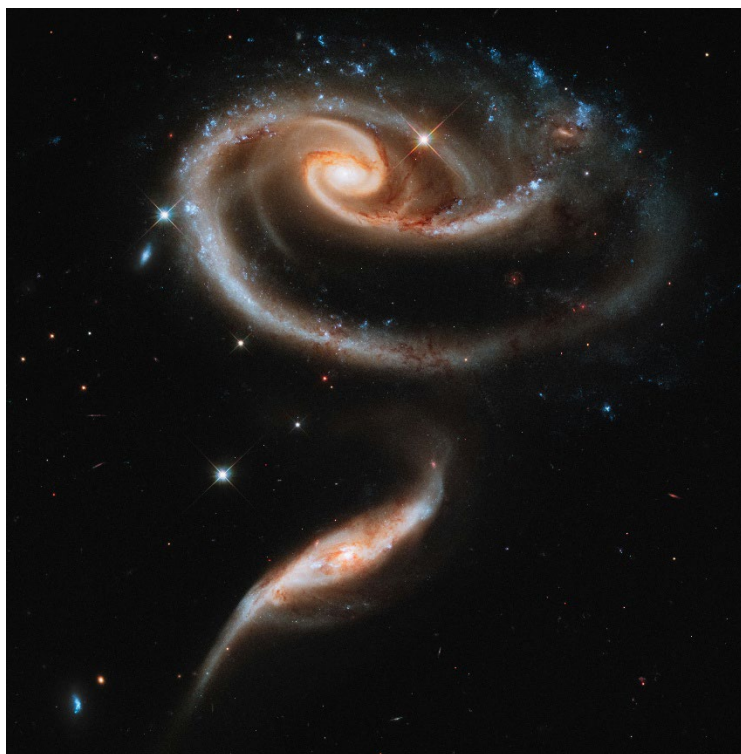
Wrong Sally.

The two Sallys, I later learned, both ended their days at Leisure World. The retirement community had a large globe at its entrance. Three years after it opened, someone pointed out that the continent of Australia had been mounted upside down. Three years, and no one had noticed. Or perhaps they had noticed and said nothing, the way you do when the error belongs to someone else and the globe is very large and it seems unkind to say.

Miss Lynch was the exception. She remembered me. She remembered me because I had organized a fundraising campaign at Northwood to help rebuild a Tennessee high school that segregationists had bombed — bricks for Clinton, a dime a brick, the price of a Coke. The drive had gotten us into Drew Pearson's Georgetown office, onto Voice of America, and into the Washington Post. Miss Lynch had been there for all of it. She taught U.S. History. These were the things that mattered to her.

I think about Mr. Hough's apple sometimes. He talked about it once, I delivered it the next day, and he never knew it was me. The gratitude was real. The anonymity was the point. Some things you do for the doing of them, not the credit.

The wrong Sally had a lovely lunch and went home without knowing any different. I hope she thought about it afterward with some warmth. The gratitude was real too, even if it was aimed slightly to the left of its intended target.



Tamara Kreutz

School Year Mantra

I will say *yes* to the student who wants to borrow
my favorite book of poems, *yes*, to the girl
whose friends aren't speaking to her, so she asks
to eat lunch in my room.

That part is easy. But what about *him*?
What about the tenth-grade boy who found a maxi pad
in a girl's backpack, stuck it, opened and crumpled,
in my box of art supplies?

I have to say *yes* to him, too.
Yes to smiling at him
when he walks through the door,
yes to asking about his basketball tryouts.

I must also say *yes* to repeating:
Please leave your hands to yourself.
Please go back to your seat.
Please leave Sophia's pencil case alone.

Yes to the please. *Yes* to keeping my voice even
when my stomach clenches and my mind
bares its teeth: *tell him to get*
the fuck out of my classroom.

I must say *no* to that voice but *yes* to the boy.
Yes, you have to read chapters one through four.
Yes, there will be a quiz. Yes, it is timed.
Yes, you may use your book.

I know he can see the way teachers
brace ourselves when he saunters to class.
I know he hears our sighs, sees how we grimace.
And I saw how he dropped his eyes,

his cheeks and ears flushed
when I snapped at him in front of the class
to knock it off, as he beat a drum solo
on his desk during a peer's presentation.

I need to say yes to the deep breath. Yes to the boy
who says he hates school, who makes cat noises
during writing time and insists I heard wrong. Yes
to the boy who still needs to believe that I like him.

Arvilla Fee

Eyes That See

thirty faces
some bright, some passive
some shaded with doubts
and fears—
how I long to know them
see them
see past their indifference
their cavalier attitudes
and I will—
as weeks turn into months
I'll know Rosa's mom
works two job, is never home
Jackson's arms bear bruises
that he explains away
Sadie sleeps in class
because she cannot sleep at home—
and it's these demons
these demands
these damages
that will make me hold them
in my metaphorical arms
embraced in a classroom
that offers blankets and snacks
embraced in that offer of safety
if only for a 90-minute block—
And perhaps this hold, short as it is,
will be enough to change
the trajectory of their lives
because someday they'll be able
to see themselves
as I do.

Matthew E. Henry

Finding Obierika

"Do you think Okonkwo was as good a friend to him?"

"How do you mean?"

"Obierika does all this stuff for him in the story. Is he worth it? Does Okonkwo put in the same effort?"

"Damn. That's a good question." Actually, it's a brilliant question. I'm a little annoyed that it occurred to a 15-year-old before it ever entered my mind. "There's nothing in the text to directly address this question, which itself might be the answer, but...Hmm. I don't know."

"Right. I'm just wondering, based on what you've said, who is taking care of him? Like, who is Obierika's Obierika?"

Things like this keep me up at night.

Every year the same learnings repeat reading *Things Fall Apart* with sophomores. The defense of babies thrown into the Evil Forest. Their discomfort being forced to live in the mind, the skin of an abuser. The shaming that follows failing their first quiz and their complaints about "foreign names" that don't roll off white tongues as easily as Benedict Cumberbatch, Chloe Sevigny, or Saoirse Ronan. But once his name is mentioned I stop everything for a public service announcement: *if your friends aren't like Obierika: Kick. Them. To. The. Curb. They're not worth your time. Expect better from the people in your life.* They often look around the room: some smile, some drop heads. Over the next couple of weeks they joke in the classroom, the hallways. Jutting a chin or pointing a finger, draping an arm around the shoulders of someone saying, "this is my Obierika." The light arm-punches in the cafeteria, the library: "be a better Obierika!" It always happen early in the unit, before they know what is to come. Before we are seated at a fire in Okonkwo's motherland, Obierika across from us, a bags of cowries at his feet. We can almost see

the tears in the eyes of the two men, hear the “manly” promises to not talk about thanks and the love between them.

By this point, in chapter 15, we have talked about the value of Obierikan friendship. Having someone in your life, not only ready with the cliché of an alibi or a shovel to help you bury bodies, but someone who would try to stop you from unwise actions in the first place. A friend willing not only to take your side, but your phone, your keys. Someone who will call you on your crap and tell you just how much it stinks. Even knowing the secret pains, the fears that drove his friend, Obierika carefully cautions Okonkwo, challenges him before Chukwu and Ani on his parenting long before the blade fell upon Ikemefuna’s neck. Long before Obierika is forced to report on Nwoye’s chasing the cold ash of Christianity to a man who knows how the flame of son-pride can flicker and die. And after Ezeudu’s son is tragically, accidentally killed at Okonkwo’s hand, Obierika strapped as many possessions as he could to Okonkwo’s back, then carries twice as many headloads of yams to his own barns before the torches descend, the machetes clash in a communal cleansing to destroy all that remains of his friend’s home. While tending his own fields and family, Obierika purchased and cleared new land, hired a herd of less successful men as sharecroppers to plant Okonkwo’s seeds. For 18 months he toiled for his friend and would bring every harvested cent to Mbanta for all seven years of Okonkwo’s exile until his brother’s return.

“Oh shit: that’s what’s up!” Ryla’s exclamation of understanding is followed by the speechless nodding of the rest of the class. They get it.

Every year, after they graduate, many of my kids return “home” to visit. We sit in the classrooms they remember as bigger or the wrought iron benches outside. Sometimes the building hold too much—it’s walls too memory-loud. So we share breakfast, lunch, or dinner at restaurants far enough away from the eyes and ears they are trying to avoid: from the family and friends they don’t want to confront, the resume-building

lawyer's office or lab they serve without pay, the asylum from which they're enjoying a steady-progress day-pass. We hike the Skyline Trail in Milton, circle the Reservoir in Weston, or stomp the concrete storefronts of Legacy Place in Dedham. We talk about adjusting to college or work life. Dorm and roommate drama. Coming out to parents and siblings. Virginity lost like athletic scholarships. Stumbling into true love and better therapists. Changing her name and pronouns at a new job. His slow route home after being sexually assaulted. Their almost breath-taking encounter with a racist cop at a BLM rally. They seek advice on changing majors, traveling abroad, finding internships, choosing a grad school, exploring employment opportunities. Requests are made for letters of recommendation or access to old files and assignments. They ask if I will attend or perform their wedding. If I will play with trains on the floor of a Barnes and Noble with their toddler so they can change their infant in the bathroom. If I will hold their hands in the principal's office after their whole tiny world stopped breathing in his crib.

I notice how they often name the people who were there for them through their most difficult and joyful times. I smile and can't help but to mock them when they use the phrase "my Obierika."

"But what does *he* get out of it?" I've said I would quit the profession the year I don't learn something new from my kids. This process that my mortgage payments remain safe for at least another cycle.

Love is a gift freely given. It is not transactional state of affairs, especially between equals. So what should Obierika expect from Okonkwo? Does Obierika only give and while Okonkwo only takes?

For love of the brother hanging behind him, Obierika curses the white man's power to his face, risking his own welfare: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia..." He would have said more had his voice not trembled and choked closed.

Would Okonkwo have done the same for him?

Would she for me?

My seniors read *The Giving Tree* and discuss the ugly step-cousin of love: codependency. The Tree—continually, consistently—gives everything, leading to Her own destruction. Despite what She says, the story ends with the Boy sitting on the face of a desiccated stump. Is She really happy? Are we?

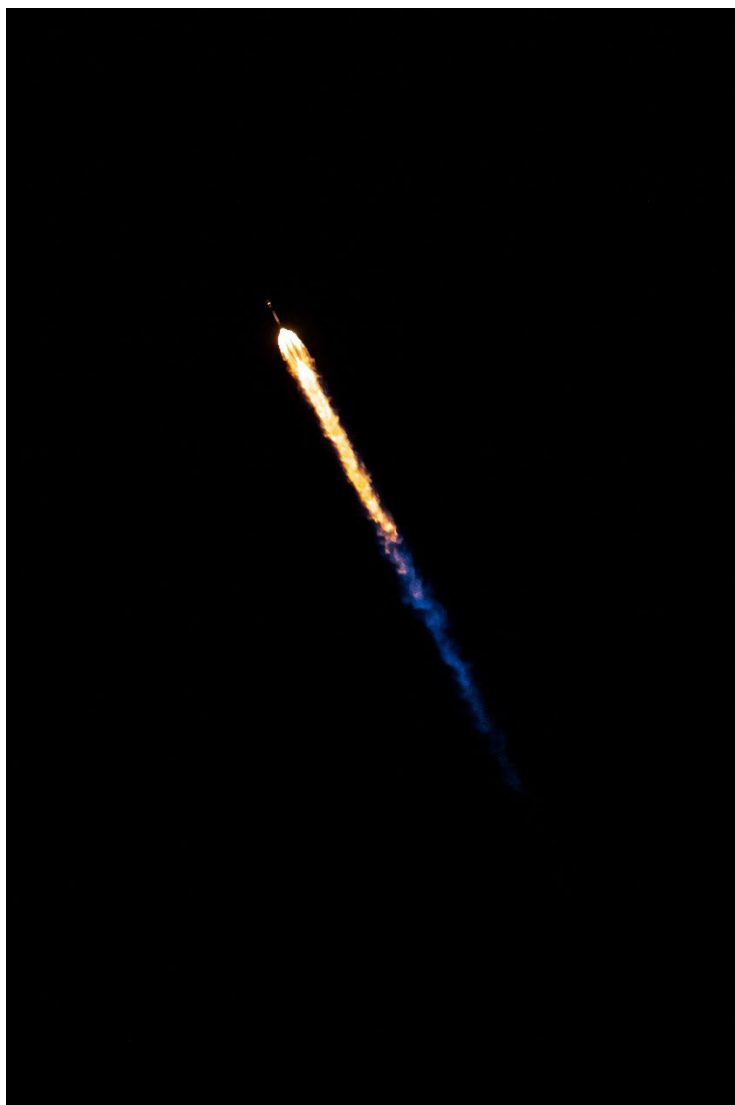
Most of my seniors were once my sophomores and have already internalized my call to find their Obierikas. When I present them with the underclassman question about the book they are equally shaken and unsure where to look.

It's amazing how a question can allow eyes to see truth clear as words on the page. It was all there for the reading. I am always available with a shoulder, a back, a smile, a song for her. Receiving, expecting, little in return. My arms open, hers too feeble to hold anything but herself. She never slouches down the hall, knocks on my classroom door, without a wound in need of salving. Her ears too full of her own voice to ever hear mines. Yet she complains of my silence, my supposed unwillingness to share. She loves being loved more than loving.

It was all there in Achebe's words. Her fear of failure—of being seen as weak—colors our every interaction. Her inability to hold her tongue highlights her insecurities—her history with unsuccessful men, her unsuccessful history with men. How she is never to blame, her convenient misremembering wilting truth like a banana leaf. How no week can hold its peace, no festival flourish where she isn't shaking a room with fits of rage. How she explodes like an old gun—rusted and ill-maintained—yet remains confused by the shrapnel piercing the hearts around her. So she blames fate, an unfortunate *chi*, an unforgiving earth, the community entire for the roaring flame which burns through friends and lovers like a field of sun-dried wheat.

I see the uselessness of speaking with her, the outcome predictable as a frog fleeing before approaching wings. She will hang her faults around

my neck and pull the rope tight, before she storms off like a stiff *harmattan* wind. She will sit in some quiet place and, like Okonkwo staring into a sighing fire, be surprised she is again alone.



Brian O'Sullivan

On This Occasion

To the graduates who struggled

So many nights, sitting in sand at Church Point, you dimly glimpsed the stars, through dank clouds. Or you went to the Green Door to drink, play darts, and drink, and drink, until, when you stepped out, you barely saw the trees. And somehow, you got home.

So many mornings, no alarm went off (because you never set one); the daylight seeped around you, slowly flooding. Eventually you showered. You slouched to class, before the end. You sat far back, in fog, and barely heard the conversation rolling out before you.

So many nights, I finally opened papers on Google Classroom, and pushed myself to grade. Too many times, I dwelt on surface error-- comma splices, jumbled paragraphs, missing thesis statements, dropped quotations... and failed to notice darkness, clouds, the stars...

So many mornings. I came to class feeling tired, and had to push myself to play the roles professors play. As class got underway I drew on student energy and got excited; the conversation pulsed. Too often, I failed to draw you into it.

Occasionally, though, at the Point, you saw
the stars, unclouded; you thought about ideas
from classes--a conversation grew from you.
Occasionally, your ideas surfaced in your writing,
I got you talking about them...we heard
the music of your individual voice.

Occasionally, after that first-year seminar,
We saw each other on the path, and nodded.
And then sometimes we stopped, by the pond, to talk.
Sometimes you'd remember poems we'd read
and tell me something from your physics class.
Your sparks of insight had become like lamps.

Tomorrow, you and I will still both miss
ideas we should have grasped, voices we could
have heard. But on occasion, we'll nourish them.

Dale Scherfling

The Loop

In 2006, Martin Heller was eighty-nine years old and still sharp enough to be annoyed by things.

His granddaughter Ashley was visiting from Columbus with her husband and their son, Tyler, who was eleven and spent most of the afternoon on the couch with a device that fit in his palm, his thumbs moving over it with a speed and purpose Martin had once reserved for things that mattered.

“What’s he doing?” Martin asked.

“Gaming,” Ashley said, as though that explained everything, or at least enough.

Martin watched the boy for a while. Tyler’s face was perfectly still except for his eyes, which moved in small, precise arcs across the screen. He might have been watching fish in a tank. He might have been anywhere, or nowhere in particular.

“Does he go out?” Martin asked.

Ashley glanced up from her own phone. “He goes to school. Soccer on Saturdays.”

“I mean out. On his own. Around.”

She gave him the smile she reserved for questions like that — patient, careful. The smile of someone who had learned the old sometimes needed managing the same way the very young did.

“Oh, Grandpa,” she said.

Martin turned back to the window.

Outside, the street was quiet in the way streets were quiet now — not empty, but sealed. A woman pushed a stroller past. A man walked a dog on a leash so short the animal minced along beside him like an apology. Nobody was simply out. Everyone had a destination, an errand, a reason that could be explained if necessary.

He thought about Lorain.

He thought about being twelve years old and out after dark.

It was 1947 and the Palace Theatre on Broadway had just let out. Martin stood on the wet sidewalk in the Lake Erie mist and felt the noir world of the movie settle over the real street like a transparency. The bricks shone. The streetcar tracks at The Loop caught the light from tavern windows and threw it back in long streaks.

He had seen the film twice in a row, which cost him nothing because Denny Calabrese, who worked the side door, owed him a favor from the week before.

Martin crossed north of East Erie and the world changed.

It was ten and the strip was alive in the way those blocks came alive after dark — not dangerous exactly, but running at a different pressure than the rest of Lorain, as though the rules that governed daylight had been quietly suspended for the evening.

The sailors came up from Toledo and Detroit on the lake freighters, and some of them still carried the look the war had put on them — something behind the eyes that hadn't entirely stood down. They spent their money in the bars along the strip the way men spend money when they have been on the water for weeks and know they will be going back.

Or when they have lately been somewhere worse.

Martin drifted among them because nobody stopped him. He was twelve years old and kids were part of the furniture then. He ran errands. He shot pool for nickels with a deckhand from Cleveland named Kowalski who smelled of coal smoke and let Martin win often enough to keep him interested.

The women who worked those blocks called him kid and ruffled his hair and laughed their loud laughs.

Nobody thought it was something that needed preventing.

He was out past midnight and nobody at home was calling the police.

He never told his mother.

His father, who had crewed the lake freighters himself in his twenties, probably knew, or could have guessed, and said nothing.

That was also a kind of freedom — the freedom adults gave you by choosing not to ask.

“Tyler,” Martin said.

The boy looked up. He had his mother’s eyes, attentive and slightly cautious.

“You want to take a walk? Just out. Around the block. See what’s there.”

Tyler glanced at his mother. The look was fast and automatic — the reflex of someone checking the weather before deciding what to wear.

“It’s fine,” Ashley said, though her voice did the thing voices do when something is fine but requires supervision.

They went out together, the old man and the boy, down the front steps and onto the sidewalk.

The evening was cool and the leaves were starting to turn.

Martin walked slowly — he walked slowly now whether he wanted to or not — and Tyler walked beside him, still holding the device, though he had at least stopped using it.

“What do you see?” Martin asked.

Tyler looked around with the polite attention of a student.

“Houses,” he said. “Cars. A dog.”

“What else?”

The boy considered carefully. He was a good kid, Martin thought. He just wasn’t used to the question.

“I don’t know,” Tyler said. “Nothing, I guess.”

Martin looked at the same street and saw, just briefly, the shimmer of something underneath it — wet brick, a streetcar rail catching the light, a sailor laughing too loudly in a bar he had no business being in, the Lake Erie mist rolling in from the water and softening the whole night.

A world that had once let a twelve-year-old boy move through it after dark without a chaperone, a permission slip, or a hand on his shoulder steering him toward the age-appropriate and the pre-approved.

Not nothing, Martin thought.

Never nothing.

He nodded toward the corner.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go a little further.”

Tyler slipped the device into his pocket.

And they walked.



Mary Ellen Webb

Learning to Read

Ode to the little ones who long to read,
knowing that it will change their lives.

Please teach me to read.
I want to be able to learn your enchanted code,
To be able to rearrange these
Mysterious letters and numbers
So that, I too, can experience the magic
That comes alive on each page of a book.
I want to create a song from paper,
To tumble, and laugh and learn,
To fly, and soar to lands far away,
To dream of a life of beauty, and kindness,
Where I can catch the tune
And hold it close to my heart,
Letting it smolder, inside me,
Keeping me warm on cold winters night,
Kindling my hopes when eyelids fall
And fingers fail with their bloody scars.
Please teach me to read.
Give me the keys to become somebody,
To change my life, to be free to think
And act and move according to my dreams.
Move over. Invite me to sit. Read to me.
Let me jump into the story with you.
Let me linger awhile over landscapes and seas.
Accepting me into your secret circle,
Where I can be anything I want to be.

Josh Pearce

Teaching Chess to a Child

Screaming at the garden
to turn green
with as much success as shouting
"Grow up!" at children.

Urging the Earth, "Your move, *go*,"
against the fading game
clock and advancing rime

but my offspring's mind
only grows like a pawn
one square at a time
same as the king

shrinks under attack burrowing
back until the thaw.

Trey Balch

Chess for Dummies by a Dummy

I am no chess master, but I am pretty good. My father taught me how to play chess when I was about seven years old. My mother was institutionalized, so my dad and I had to do more chores. In 1985, the most boring place in the world had to be the laundromat. I was much too hyper active to be able to stand that particular torture. My dad was also hyper and hated going there as well. He had the idea to play games there, but he didn't like board games, and I didn't know any card games except for war. He decided to teach me chess.

Chess is a complicated games with specific rules, but I picked it up fast. I never beat him, but I learned how to play. When my mom got out of the hospital, we played less and less. In my late teens, Dad bought me an electronic chess set. It wasn't like the AI technology today but fun nonetheless. I played a lot and my skills improved. It was a great Christmas gift that got plenty of use. I learned a lot from that old, electronic board.

After high school, when I was too young to drink but too old for much else, I would hang out with a friend from my neighborhood at the local coffee shop. We would get jacked on caffeine and play board games. We played chess; I lost. My friend was very intelligent, but I was offended. A loser. I went and bought a book, *Chess for Dummies*. I studied that book and broke out my electronic chess board and studied the silly game. I did not tell anyone what I was up to. It was a shameful secret.

That yellow book taught me new openings and strategies. I was ready to kick some ass. I went to my dad's house and acted as if I was truly bored. I manipulated the subject to chess. He took the bait and broke out the chess board. I won the game, and he

called it a fluke and challenged me to a rematch. I won again. My father wanted another rematch, but I told him that he must be tired and that I would take a rain check. He made me come over the next day at noon. High noon. I won that duel and the next. I yelled, "Checkmate! In your face!" and then showed him that yellow how-to book. He laughed at himself and was full of pride.

With my master defeated, I was confident. I called up my friend to see if he wanted some coffee. I didn't suggest chess right away, as I didn't want him to be suspicious. We played Scrabble first, then dominos, and then chess. I won the chess game, and Richard was beside himself. We played again; I won again. After my triple-crown win, he asked, "Did you read a book or something?" I laughed and answered, "Who me?...Read?"

I felt like Gary Fisher, like I could defeat God. That confidence was quickly shattered when this monosyllabic dunce challenged me to a game. I had no respect for this guy. He was a big, hulking idiot. This was chess not arm-wrestling. I accepted that fool's challenge with the confidence of a king. He beat me bad, and then did it again. Richard and I teamed up against him and lost quickly. It turns out that this mouth breather was in prison and played nothing but chess for five years. He told me that he read a lot of books about chess as well. I asked him if he ever read *Chess for Dummies*, he answered, "No, but you should." Overrated game.

William Walsh

How to Mow the Lawn

—For Denise Duhamel

Dear Writer...

... this advice goes out to you: the world
does not want you to be a writer.

The world wants you to mow the lawn.
Go forth, mow the lawn like a good steward

of the mundane; however, if you're snake-bit,
write until carpal tunnel sets in like plaster.

Write what you must, but remember,
there's a psychological cost camouflaged

behind the curtain of truth: not everyone
made it through the year. Don't worry

about the things in life you missed. I, too, never danced
at the prom, never had an invite to a teenage party

or vacationed on Don Pedro Island
with friends I didn't have.

The world is as you see it,
and what I ran from in life, pursued me,

and what I faced, transformed me.
I holed up in my room

with music and poems and waited
for the world to balance out and find me.

I created my own ecosphere:
As within, so without

Keith Manos

Writing Workshop

Everett almost gasps when Marcie declares, “I think I’ve seen this before.” She says this with cold eyes, her tone resembling a police officer asking for license and registration. She stares across the circle of desks in Everett’s Coolidge High School classroom at Kevin.

Kevin’s eyes widen in alarm. He opens his mouth, then closes it. His face goes pale.

Marcie’s comment doesn’t surprise forty-one-year-old Everett. In fact, he almost wants to nod his head so vigorously in agreement that he fears he’ll hurt his neck. *But how to actually respond to Marcie’s assertion? He* wanted to point out the plagiarism. Everett has to take a big breath to sweep away the sudden fog in his brain. Even before she spoke, Everett had been staring too long at Marcie. He couldn’t help it. He’d been anticipating what she was going to say since his after-school Workshop Writing club started discussing Kevin’s story. As usual, Everett was giving Marcie the last word. And as usual, she nailed it.

As their teacher, Everett realizes *he* has to take charge here. He won’t wait for Kevin to defend himself. “Where, Marcie?” He stares at her solemn face. So do the other seven students. Only Kevin lowers his eyes to the papers on his desktop, as if avoiding Marcie’s stare this October afternoon will stifle the accusation. This, too, doesn’t surprise Everett. He has had a student like Kevin in his Writing Workshop club every year for the last twenty years. He’s never had, however, a student writer like Marcie.

Still, he didn’t anticipate Marcie also catching Kevin’s plagiarism.

Marcie pushes her black, shampoo-commercial hair off her shoulders and stares first at Kevin and then at Everett, her dark eyes still cold but now expectant. “On TV.” In the hallway during exchange

time between periods, she's always the girl in front, pulling other girls in her wake. Today Everett notices the small pimple on the left side of her chin, the redness peeking through the concealer she's rubbed there.

The gears turn in Everett's head. He can almost hear them clicking. Kevin's sci-fi short story is about astronauts and their damaged spaceship, how they have to figure out a way to return safely to Earth.

Apollo 13.

Of course. It was on television two weeks ago. Everett is both shocked and pleased that Kevin, who constantly fidgets during class, took the time to watch a two-and-a-half-hour movie, three hours on television. Marcie has a point though. And the other students are waiting.

Everett knows he has to say something, but he's not certain what that is yet. For extra time, he pretends to reread the opening page of Kevin's story, a story he's marked up with his blue pen. Kevin has the typical sci fi tropes – a spacecraft malfunction, the potential of death in the vacuum of space, techno babble – but he'll give Kevin the benefit of the doubt if . . .

Everett lifts his eyes to Marcie. "On television, Marcie? Was it a show, a movie, a documentary?" He wants *her* to name the movie. It's her rope; let *her* tie the noose.

She crosses her arms over her chest, sensing the kill. "It was a movie." She tilts her head, causing that silky hair to slide off her shoulders. "Tom Hanks and two other guys."

"Oh." Everett pauses, musing. This is a familiar problem with fiction. Even T.S. Eliot admitted, *Good writers borrow, great writers steal*. Working on his unpublished novel, Everett himself has stolen phrases, sometimes whole sentences, from other writers. He suspects a lot of writers do this. He steals because he's desperate to publish his novel. It lacks something to make it stand out. *But what?*

His novel is *Students of Argos*, a science fiction tale about an academic class of lizard-like aliens who drink bleach to get drunk and for fun destroy cacti-type plants with ray guns on the planet Argos. It keeps getting rejected.

Everett envies those authors whose bios declare it's their debut novel, their pictures on the inside back cover showing a knowing smile, thick hair, and clear skin, all of them so young, living with their husband or wife and two cats in New York City, while Everett is a nobody in Cleveland.

No, actually, he *hates* them.

Because publishers have chosen *their* book instead of his. This envy is like a disease. He can't go into a library or Barnes & Noble and not feel a flood of resentment. But every morning when he walks into the school he reminds himself that Stephen King had once been an English teacher, too.

Today, he swallows his jealousy and shifts back to Kevin.

"Your dialogue, Kevin," and here, Everett flips to the third page, "from the operations commander, 'Failure isn't allowed.' What inspired that?" He recalls Ed Harris as Gene Kranz saying, "Failure is not an option." Nevertheless, he gazes hopefully at Kevin.

Kevin bristles. "I don't know." His face dips toward his desk again and his shoulders slump like a ragdoll's. He sits directly across from Everett in their workshop circle. Everett senses Kevin is fighting back tears.

The other eight students wait with silent intensity; a few stare casually at the poetry posters on the bulletin board. Not Marcie, however. Her eyes are on Everett. When she tilts her head again, he senses her impatience, her judgment – not of Kevin but of *him*. Therefore, he wants to have closure as soon as possible. The last thing he desires is for Marcie to call him out if he doesn't handle this correctly. She's glaring at him, waiting, it seems, for him to give Kevin an F.

Everett rechecks Kevin's story. He rubs the faint stubble on his chin, drags a hand through his thinning hair. He feels his response start inside his chest, like his heart was beating at it to erupt through his throat. They call this a *teachable moment*.

Leaning back in his chair, he glances briefly at Kevin and then at Marcie, who now fidgets herself in her seat. "Did you copy the plot of your story off the *Apollo 13* movie?" he asks Kevin in a sympathetic voice.

Kevin's fingers twist the edges of the paper in his hand. "I didn't copy anything," he abruptly calls out. "I made my own story. That movie has three astronauts, mine has two." He crosses his arms over his retro AC/DC t-shirt and frowns.

Now all the students stare at Everett, who will be the judge and deliver the final verdict. This is his chance to impart some insights about writing. He loves Writing Workshop club. He loves talking about stories. He especially loves delivering the final word about the writer's story. Writing Workshop has blossomed into Everett's favorite day of the week. Unlike his English classes where students sit in dull, orderly rows like soldiers in military formation during the school day, in the after-school club called Writing Workshop, students circle their desks, always leaving one at the front of the classroom unoccupied for Everett. It's a student desk, but to Everett, it's like a king's throne. He appreciates how the students in Writing Workshop seem to consider him to be important. He begins this club every September showing the new set of students his only published story. It was titled "Vagabonds of Withrow Road" and it appeared in the *Cleveland State Review* fifteen years ago. As each year passes, the accomplishment seems less and less significant, and Everett is almost embarrassed now showing the students the withered magazine.

"Well, E? You gonna rip on Kevin?"

The question comes from Carl, a tall senior who's always ready with a joke or snarky comment. Everett imagines him grinning and

high-fiving other teens later outside of class, the kid who makes every party more fun.

Writing Workshop is the only time where Everett lets students call him E instead of Mr. Thomas. E is certainly better than ET.

Everett glares at Carl. “No, Carl, I’m not.” Then Everett clears his throat. He sweeps the room with his eyes – his way to indicate his advice is to *all* of them, not just Kevin. They wear sneakers, ripped jeans, sweatshirts – the teenage fashion statement for the day. Every day, to be sure. When some of them inch forward in their seats like jockeys at the gate of a horse race, Everett smells sweat and stale perfume.

He nods once. “Always be a first-rate version of yourself instead of a second-rate version of somebody else.” Actually, Judy Garland said that, but Everett lets the students believe he originated it. Several of them nod back. Only Marcie rolls her eyes. “In the future, Kevin, let’s see more original work,” Everett adds in a serious tone.

Max raises his hand. He’s a football player who doesn’t boast about being an all-conference offensive tackle. Every week, he privately shares a new poem with Everett, seeking his approval. In his most recent poem about the Homecoming dance, he used words like *sticky*, *farts*, and *twerking*. “Do you mean, E, like first team and second team?”

Everett exhales. Max waits. So do the others. Joanna giggles. Slender streaks of sunlight cut into the room through the blinds on the windows.

“Not really, Max. Almost though.” Everett pauses, his eyes sweeping the room again. Eight students respond with blank stares; Marcie plays with her silver necklace. The girl next to her, Joanna, writes in her notebook. Everett hopes she’s copying his Judy Garland quote.

Everett sighs. “Never mind. Let’s remember why we’re here. We want to help each other get better at writing fiction. Right?”

They take quick looks at the clock and then at each other. Their taut eyes tell Everett they like criticizing more than they like helping. This opportunity to deliver fanged criticism is probably the only time they can publicly chastise a classmate with impunity, to drag them through the mud and watch them squirm. Everett has cautioned them about being overly critical, but his recent admonitions have failed.

“Maybe one day you’ll publish a bestseller like one of them.” Everett winks and waves a hand at the names on the whiteboard behind him – John Green, Toni Morrison, Judy Blume, Stephen King. Later, the custodians will sweep the floor, empty the garbage pail, and clean the whiteboard. The names will be erased. “It’s a great feeling to get published,” he adds to more blank stares.

Unfortunately, Everett is not familiar with that feeling, despite “Vagabonds of Withrow Road.” He dreams of being John Grisham, getting his book selected by Reese Witherspoon, going on a book tour. When he revises, he studies his novel’s sentences over and over, checking the cadence of the words, the inflection of their sounds and meanings. In a workshop back in September, he lectured that words in stories were gifts to the readers. But he neglected to tell them publishers wanted authenticity. Stories with a “real” voice. The drama of real life.

So far, whatever publishers want, Everett hasn’t delivered it. Published writers seem to live in a world that excludes people like Everett, to speak a language he has yet to learn.

Everett clears his throat again. “Let’s end today with Max’s story.”

Max perks up and grins. His story is about a washed-up pro quarterback who becomes a private investigator who gets hired by an NFL owner who wants a bodyguard for his wife who falls in love with the quarterback turned PI who then gets offered the position of quarterback on the team if he stops going to bed with the wife.

Cameron's beefy hand goes up immediately, his face beaming with confidence. He starts waving his hand, as in "Call on me, call on me," and he's so energetic he reminds Everett of a swimmer signaling a lifeguard for help.

"What is it, Cameron?"

His hand goes down, and he smiles broadly. "This is a story about forbidden love."

"That's a good start." Everett gestures to the others. "What do the rest of you think?"

They don't hold back. They'd been waiting impatiently for this – the opportunity to criticize Max's short story, to call out as many faults as they can.

"Why does your MC admit he was having sex with the wife? Sheesh. He's an idiot."

"You only have four characters. Don't football teams have like a lot of players and coaches?"

"How old are these people? Is Bruno a lot younger than the wife? Is she, like, a cougar?"

Students can say anything in Writing Workshop. This class is a cocoon separated from school rules.

They go on to tell Max that although Bruno is a football player, no scene involves him on the football field, that the wife is only described as being "pretty," that he should know that NFL owners sit in loges, not the bleachers.

As always, Everett allows Marcie to make the final comment. "I'm not into sports," she huffs, looking at Max. "I don't get the whole football thing, and it doesn't make sense that your quarterback becomes a private investigator so quickly."

With that, Everett notices the time and decides to close the discussion. He looks at Max. "My main problem, Max, is that the story seems unfinished. What does Bruno decide to do – take the quarterback job or continue the relationship with the wife?"

Max scratches his armpit. "I ran out of time," he mutters. "I knew I had to turn in something."

"Well," Everett begins, but then he falters, discovering he has no advice for Max. His own novel is incomplete. "You'll figure it out," he finally utters.

Max stretches out his thick legs. He must be uncomfortable, Everett deduces, with his broad body in a generic school desk. Other students start whispering to each other. Everett raises a hand to quiet them.

"Listen up, everyone." He slides out of the student desk and stands to offer the closing comment he makes at the end of every Writing Workshop club. He takes a breath. Then: "Writers write every day, people. You can always edit a bad page. You can't edit a blank page." He smiles weakly.

Everett took that from Jodi Picoult, but, as before, he lets the students think he created it.

A few nod politely. The rest turn away to gather their bookbags or shrug on their coats. Marcie tugs at the collar of her sweater as she swivels to stand, and following her lead, the others are on their feet, their eyes on the open door, even before Everett announces blandly, "Okay, that's it. I'll see you next week."

They shuffle out of the room, jostling each other and joking down the hallway. Everett listens, like an eavesdropper, to them laugh, slam their lockers, tease each other about weekend plans. He especially listens for one of them to say his name. Maybe repeat one of his comments about writing. Compliment the Writing Workshop class. How much they like it.

No one does.

With another long exhale, Everett starts shoving the desks back into straight lines so his classroom is ready for Monday morning. As he does, he recalls his college days when his writing teacher advised the class to do journaling every day, so Everett bought several cheap

spiral notebooks and disciplined himself to write at least an hour every night. He wrote once about a dead tree, another time about the awful breath of this girl he kissed at a party, and then once about the senseless passage of time. None of that appears in his *Students of Argos*.

When the semester ended, Everett stopped journaling.

Everett has listened to a hundred podcasts from writers speaking about their published books. They talk about revision strategies and beta readers, but all Everett can see is competition. That's why he stopped listening to them months ago. It was all up to Fate, wasn't it? The personal whimsy of an editor?

Soon, the hallway, like his classroom, is quiet. Everett stacks Monday's handouts on his desk and discovers how tired he is.

That's because school starts way too early. He stayed up late last night watching a *Planet Earth II* episode on Netflix instead of writing. Last night's show was about African elephants, and when it got to the part about them mating, he couldn't stop watching despite the pricks of guilt he felt. He should have been working on *Students of Argos*. Everett worries that his writing muscles have atrophied.

He hears two knocks on the door and looks over.

Marcie is there, her eyes regarding him critically. She saunters into the room until she's at his desk. His forehead grows hot.

"I emailed you the first three chapters of my novel," she says. She gives him a quick closed mouthed smile, and her eyes first ask the question Everett is somewhat reluctant to answer. Then out loud she says, "You told me last week you'd critique my novel for me. Remember?"

He does. He clicks the mouse of his computer, goes to his school emails, and scrolls down to the email he hasn't opened. "Yes, um, there it is. I'll give you my critique soon." He uses the vague term *soon*, so if Marcie asks for his critique of her novel on Monday, he can tell her he hasn't finished it.

Marcie nods curtly as if she's the teacher. "I don't know why I'm giving it to you, but you're my writing teacher, and so I thought, why not? No one else has read it."

Marcie steps back until her hand grips the doorknob but looks back at him. "Soon?" She's nailed it again, putting Everett on the spot.

Everett gulps. "Um, as soon as possible," he repeats. "I promise."

That makes Marcie do another eye roll as she leaves. Everett steps towards the door to compliment her about taking on the challenge to write a novel as a teenager, but she's already gone, her heels clicking down the hallway.

Everett sighs, returns to his teacher's desk, and sits. The truth is he has no weekend plans, no family, no home improvement projects. He could work on *Students of Argos*, but there's another Netflix series that has caught his attention. He'll probably binge it.

Now, however, since he's in no rush to get home, he clicks on the email attachment and exhales a long breath. Marcie's novel is titled *Their Last Year*.

By the fourth page, Everett discovers it's a story about three girls, seniors at a rural Ohio high school, and their parties, their school lives, their indifferent parents. One is an ambitious, almost ruthless volleyball player; one is an insecure Homecoming queen; and one is desperate to accumulate followers on her social media. Everett can't stop turning pages. The sentences flow so easily he almost forgets he's reading. He finds himself rooting for the protagonists: the athlete Megan, the Homecoming queen Savannah, and Paige who craves popularity. He's desperate to find out if Savannah keeps her pregnancy a secret from her best friends and boyfriend; if Megan decides to quit the volleyball team after the confrontation with the coach; and if Paige gets help for her depression from a therapist. Each chapter ends in a cliffhanger.

He highlights only once. A comma error on page five.

An hour later he stops, looks up from his computer screen, and sighs with relief. He finally knows how to fix *Students of Argos* and make it a story any publisher will love. He knows his theme. He knows the new complications. He knows his story.

He taps the screen and smiles lustfully.

This one.



Richard LeDue

The Damnation of Introversion

Sitting in an overcrowded room,
I realized something about myself:
I prefer a violin or cello solo,
cutting through the silence
like someone praying alone,
instead of a symphony thundering,
as if it was god, but more worried
about his bowling score
instead of anything to do with my soul,
and that people make me miss
the silence much more
than anyone ever should,
causing my brain to find salvation
in poems like this
that at least talk to themselves
in empty rooms.

Julia Ziegler

Arise and Go Now

“We are going to start this year with poetry.” Half the class groaned while the other half waited, silent and curious. “I know, I know. I think you’ll like it though,” Mr. Lynch assured us from his seat at the front of the room. He sat in a wooden desk intended for students – the kind where the chair is welded to the desktop by a thick metal bar. His shiny bald head gleamed in the one o’clock sun streaming in through the wall of glass windows. His classroom was one of my favorites. Our high school was built in the early 1900’s, and the man who designed it was a prison architect. Because of this, many of the rooms were windowless, but not Mr. Lynch’s. Though it was small, the entire left wall was a window looking out toward the center of downtown Portland.

Short, only a couple of inches taller than me, Mr. Lynch sat on our level. Knowing what I know about him now, I am sure this decision was intentional. Though he was the teacher, and us the students, he wanted us to feel like equals. He led our class discussions like a spiritual guide; we were collaborators with the same goal. There was nothing to prove, only ideas to explore together.

“William Butler Yeats. We are going to study some of his work,” he explained as he passed a stack of thick packets around the room. “You will read the poems, and then come to class with notes about them. And then, we will discuss what you’ve found.” I liked the way Mr. Lynch talked about literary analysis. To him, it was a practice of uncovering truths.

“But to start off the unit, we will read a poem together in class.”

In years past, I was the first to shoot up my hand and volunteer to read aloud, especially in English class. I considered myself a thorough reader, but at the time, poetry was relatively unfamiliar to me.

"Would anyone like to volunteer?" The class remained silent. "Alright, I'll start then." Mr. Lynch smoothed his own packet flat atop his desk.

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree, by William Butler Yeats," he paused and looked up at us. There was an eagerness in his face, like he was itching to let us in on a secret. "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, and a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made..." another pause. "Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee, and live alone in the bee-loud glade." He stopped reading at the end of the stanza.

I waited for him to continue, and when he didn't, I looked around the room at the other students. Some furrowed their brows while others stared at the words on the page in what was, clearly, utter confusion. Mr. Lynch read the words like an ancient chant. He emphasized each line as if it held some secret meaning. I was no stranger to emphatic English teachers, but Mr. Lynch read with an unfamiliar wonder and intention. I wondered if anyone else was as entranced as I was.

"Would someone please take the next stanza?"

Surprising myself, I raised my hand.

"Thank you. Go ahead." He didn't know my name yet. It was only the first day. I cleared my throat, eager to make a good first impression.

"And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow, dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings; there midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow, and evening full of the linnet's wings..." I paused because I reached the end of the stanza. Though I heard the words come out of my mouth, it felt like I had spoken a foreign language. None of it made sense to me, and I struggled to even remember what I had read.

"Continue," Mr. Lynch said.

I cleared my throat.

"I will arise and go now, for always night and day, I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore, while I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey, I hear it in the deep heart's core." I took a long breath as soon as I realized I had forgotten to breathe. I glanced up from the page and tried to discern if the class enjoyed my performance, but they all still looked as confused as I felt. Mr. Lynch wore the faintest hint of a smile.

"Excellent, thank you."

I could breathe again.

"Now what do you think it means?" Mr. Lynch stared right at me as he asked the question, even though I was sure he was asking everyone. No one raised their hand, and Mr. Lynch continued to stare.

"Uh, I have no idea," I blurted out. Though I hated to admit my lack of understanding, I hated the silence even more. To my surprise, no one laughed. In fact, someone to my right seemed to nod in agreement. They were just as lost as I was.

"That's okay, give it a try," Mr. Lynch said, as if nothing I offered could be wrong as long as I gave the interpretation a genuine effort.

"Well uh, I guess, there is a lot of natural imagery." I wasn't deciphering yet, only observing.

"Good. Show me where," he prodded further.

"Okay, uh, clay and wattles..." I looked back down at the page in front of me, "and honey-bees and crickets..." I scanned the rest of the poem, "and water and shore."

"Good. So animals and water. Nature."

"Mhmm," I agreed, hoping he would take over from there.

"What does it make you think of or feel?"

"I guess it sets a sort of peaceful tone. Man in nature..." I pulled at the strings of my thoughts and they unraveled in front of the class, "like maybe the poet is pondering his place in it all? Night and day, water and land, man and animal..."

I stared off at the ceiling as I let my thoughts wander. When I looked back toward the front of the room, I caught Mr. Lynch's warm smile, full fledged now. My cheeks grew hot. It was unlike me to speak on something I was unsure about, but for some reason, Mr. Lynch's classroom offered a safe place to do just that.

"I think that's a good start. Would anyone else like to build on that?"

—

"That's a ridiculous thing to say, Mark," Mr. Lynch said through a stifled laugh in between bites of homemade chicken tikka masala.

"I don't care! Why open your mouth if you don't have anything important to say?" Mr. Halpern threw his hands up in the air and widened his eyes beneath his wire frame glasses. He kicked his bare feet up on the desk, rattling it beneath his weight.

"Maybe because that's how they learn, buddy," Mr. Gutlerner chimed in. Mr. Halpern rolled his eyes and returned to poking his salad.

I said nothing, but chuckled a bit behind my hand. Lunch with the trio often went like this: Mr. Halpern exclaiming that he was fed up with his students' lack of understanding followed by Mr. Lynch calling him out for being insensitive and Mr. Gutlerner defending the kids. Lynch was always the quietest of the three, Halpern the loudest. Gutty held a nice balance between the two and remained the voice of reason.

Other students perceived my frequent lunches with the English teachers as peculiar. Most teenagers took any opportunity to hang out with their friends at lunch time. It wasn't as though I didn't enjoy eating with my friends, but I felt special spending lunch with my English teachers. Singled out in an endearing way. It was an invitation into a secret meeting of minds. The first few times they invited me, I listened to their conversations nervously, unsure of when to interject. But over time, I became more comfortable with the three of them.

They weren't quite my old friends, but they weren't just my teachers either.

"What do you think, Ziggy?" Halpern whipped his head around to me, "you weren't like this when I had you in my class! I don't understand why the kids are getting dumber." Halpern had taken to calling me Ziggy.

"Well, I wouldn't say they are dumb," I cautioned. Halpern rolled his eyes.

"You can be intimidating, you know," I added.

Gutty laughed, "that's an understatement."

Lynch smiled that big grin.

"Who, me?" Halpern joked as a goofy mischievous look came to his face. "I just don't sit and listen to bullshit, that's all."

"How are they supposed to learn to say important things if every time they say something you make them feel dumb?" I usually wasn't so blunt with Halpern, but we were friends at this point. In fact, I was Halpern's teaching assistant one period a day, and I knew he valued my opinion. Halpern didn't just ask anyone to be his teaching assistant. Even though my main duty involved walking to Starbucks to pick up his extra hot americano, I figured I was learning something just by spending extra time with him.

"She's got a point, buddy." Gutty often called Halpern *buddy*.

Meanwhile, Lynch stayed quiet, taking in every inch of the room and conversation as if it were a poem for him to deconstruct. I had lunch with the three of them about once a week. I would have gone more, but I didn't want to bother them, even though it seemed they appreciated my company. Gutlerner had been my sophomore English teacher, Halpern my junior, and Lynch my senior. I found nothing more entertaining than listening to the three of them banter or argue or joke around. At that point in my adolescence, they were three of the smartest people I knew. Not only were they bright, but they were unapologetically passionate about literature. That was something I

could relate to; it was something I admired. I respected their perspective on literature, but more largely on the world, more than just about anyone else.

Sometimes, I wish I paid even more attention.

“Bill Lynch died on the treadmill last night,” Halpern’s voice rang through my cell phone speaker. I knew it was him calling because I had his number saved from the summer before when he asked me to babysit his kids. I never did end up babysitting, but we remained in contact when I moved to Nashville for college. It had been what felt like ages since I’d seen Halpern in person, when in fact it had only been four months. Halpern, Gutty, and Lynch all wrote me letters of recommendation for college. I wasn’t a straight A student, and I’m convinced their letters were the reason I was accepted to Vanderbilt.

“What?” I stopped dead in my tracks. I was on the sidewalk of 21st Avenue making my daily commute from my dorm to my afternoon class on main campus. Nashville in September is still summer: swampy and hot. I was sweating through my shirt even though I had been walking for less than five minutes. Nausea crept into my stomach and chest. I couldn’t tell if it was from the heat or from the words echoing out of Mr. Halpern’s mouth.

“Bill Lynch died on the treadmill last night,” Halpern repeated in the same monotone voice.

I sank to the ground, skinning my knees on the hot pavement. Before I could wipe the blood from my legs, I was wiping the tears from my cheeks. My phone lay on the ground next to me, Halpern still on the other end. I forgot about my next class. I forgot where I was. All I could picture was Lynch’s earnest smile underneath that one o’clock sunlight streaming in through the left wall windows.

When I caught my breath, I picked the phone back up and put it to my ear.

“Ziggy? Did you hear me?” Halpern didn’t sound worried, just serious.

“I heard you.” I tried to hide my sniffles from the microphone.

“Okay, well that’s all. I just wanted to tell you before you found out from someone else.”

And then he hung up.

That December, three months after Bill Lynch had a heart attack while on his evening treadmill run, I returned to my high school for the first time. Halpern had organized a memorial service in honor of Mr. Lynch and sent me the invitation unsure of whether or not I would be able to attend.

It was raining hard that day. Typical for Portland in December, the sky was clouded gray. I wore a pair of black jeans and a nice sweater. I wasn’t sure what the etiquette was for a memorial service like this one. I didn’t think Mr. Lynch would have liked the image of us all in black, so I wore a patterned blue and purple cable knit sweater. He was the kind of teacher who helped his students grapple with the darkness, planting seeds of color amongst a garden of difficult truths. It seemed only right to remember him in color.

My mom asked if I wanted her to go with me, but I told her I wanted to go alone. Walking through the front doors of my high school, I instantly regretted my decision. As I stepped into the gymnasium and saw the bleachers filled with teachers, administrators, and Lynch’s former students, my confidence began to unravel. I saw serious and solemn faces, when all I wanted to see was Lynch’s warm smile. He would have hated to see us all so miserable. Though he was a realist, he was a realist with a silver lining of optimism. He seemed to know that a crucial part of accepting death was celebrating life.

In front of the bleachers stood a wooden podium. I picked up a pamphlet which detailed the order of events for the service. On the

front was a recent photograph of Mr. Lynch with his son and daughter, who were middle school and high school age respectively.

I met Mr. Lynch's son once. They lived in the same neighborhood as me, which also housed a little frozen yogurt shop I worked at during my senior year. One evening, when I was working the counter, Mr. Lynch and his son walked through the door to the shop. His all too familiar smile accompanied the little ring of the bell above the door. He was surprised to see me, but his shock transformed into excitement when he introduced me to his son. It's easy to forget that our teachers have lives outside of us, outside of the poems in which we imagine they live.

I found a spot on the bleachers toward the back of the gym. The service had yet to begin, and I passed the slow moving time by scanning the faces around me. I recognized a few students from my year, but most of the crowd looked older than me. Mr. Lynch taught at Lincoln High School for many years, so it was unsurprising to see he had impacted so many students. I glanced toward the door, and Mr. Halpern walked in holding a single sheet of paper. The crowd fell quiet. He walked slowly, but with purpose, toward the podium in the center of the gym. Those of us who knew Lynch knew Halpern by default. Not only did most students take Halpern's class prior to taking Lynch's, but the two were attached at the hip. Like opposite sides of the same coin. Halpern the chaos and Lynch the calm. I watched Mr. Halpern fumble with his paper and shuffle his feet. Without Lynch, he could no longer balance.

"Hello everyone. I'm Mark Halpern. Bill was my best friend." He began to choke up and I realized I had never seen Mr. Halpern cry. While he often expressed sarcasm, annoyance, and surprise, I had not seen him express vulnerability. When he was my English teacher, I was impressed by his ability to express interest in the books we were reading or the ideas we discussed. But it was a kind of controlled passion. He only let us see what he wanted us to see. "Bill, as you all

know, was one of the best. I think that is apparent just by how many of you are here today to remember him.”

The tears had been welling under my lids since I sat down, but now they were flowing steady down my hot pink cheeks. I closed my eyes and pictured how the event would unfold had Mr. Lynch been in attendance.

“He has such a flare for the dramatics,” Lynch would whisper in my ear with a chuckle. I’d stifle my laughter but agree wholeheartedly.

“Oh give him a break, he doesn’t know any other way to be.”

“I know. It’s just the way things go though. We come and go. He knows that,” Lynch would sigh and scrunch his brow.

“It’s one thing to preach acceptance to a room of twenty impressionable students. It’s another to live it when your best friend dies.” My face would become serious and still. Lynch would just smile.

“I knew I’d taught you something valuable,” Lynch would say turning his head back to the front of the room.

“Anyway, I won’t take up too much time talking. I would, however, like to read you all a poem. It was one of Bill’s favorites. He taught it to his class every year.”

My heart lurched. I knew the words even before he read them.

“I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree...”

Sofiul Azam

Under a New Sky

– West Okoboji Lake, Iowa

Past cornfields and windmills, we came.
Traveling light, no laptop or books –
a mistake not to have read Mary Oliver

with my legs in water with the morning sun reflected on it.
In the morning today, I walked the lakeside trail covered in woodchips
and saw dry mid-height stalks of grass

with passerine birds twittering inside.
The wind swishing through leaves of orange and red,
trees either native or planted long ago.

Squirrels gathering nuts for winter.
In the afternoon, I kayaked for hours –
paddle-dripped water gleaming against the sun.

I remember I should have taught my daughter how to swim this summer.
In the evening, about to piss in the wild,
I was warned of foxes and coyotes lurking in the woods.

I didn't brave much further.
Later down Dinning Hall the campfire lights our faces,
the moon backstroking on the lake as we read from our works.

Toasting wine to the moon like Tang Dynasty poets
before burning logs with a thick dried twig,
like Hamlet holding Yorick's skull by the grave,

I return to my cold bed, toss and turn warming it,
missing my daughter's cuddles,
my toddler son's tussling to get between us,

my wife's spooning after their sleep.
I'll nod off to sleep, editing poems on my cellphone.
Tomorrow, I'll pack up and return to my new place

in this other time zone under a new sky.
Memories like burrs adhering to me. I wish to be
a frog with nothing to fret about as it scrawls on water and earth.

Kenneth Pobo

Snow and Stump

We can't see our birch stump under deep snow.
Between bark and flake, the world aches in white.
The spying sky watches roofs far below.
We can't see our birch stump under deep snow.
I wish that winter would pack up and go.
A woodpecker rises, a feathered kite.
We can't see our birch stump under deep snow.
Between bark and flake, the world aches in white.

Dale Scherfling

The Going Rate

In 1963, San Diego State, I sat in a classroom and was taught by a man who was, by any reasonable measure, a success. He taught full-time. He also sold stories to *The Saturday Evening Post*—not once, not as a fluke, but on a rhythm, about every six weeks, like a man with a paper route. Sixteen hundred dollars a story. In 1963 dollars. He was, in the plainest sense, a professional writer, and he stood in front of a room of us and taught us how to become one too, as though the door he'd walked through would still be open when we got there.

It was already closing behind him.

I didn't know that then. I don't think he did either, not fully—though the Post would be dead as a weekly within six years, and something large and structural was already coming apart underneath the whole enterprise of magazine fiction, the way a house can look sound while the foundation gives way.

I think about him now against the long backdrop of what came before both of us. O. Henry, dying poor but famous in 1910, was still writing into a world where a story sold to a newspaper syndicate or a slick magazine could make a man's year. Jack London worked both ends of the market at once—the cheap, fast pulps that paid a cent or two a word and kept him solvent, and the quality magazines that made him a name—and moved between them without much sense of contradiction, because both paid, and paying was still the point.

By the twenties, when Fitzgerald could get four thousand dollars from the Post for a single story, and through the thirties and forties, when Irwin Shaw could build a literary reputation partly inside the pages of commercial magazines rather than in spite of them, short fiction wasn't a hobby adjacent to real work. It was the work. A serious writer could reasonably expect to be paid seriously.

My instructor, in 1963, was living in the tail end of that world without knowing it was the tail end. Sixteen hundred dollars was already less, in real terms, than what Fitzgerald got thirty-five years earlier. Television was pulling advertising money out of the general-interest magazines one dollar at a time. Paperback originals were pulling readers toward novels and away from the story form. The economic floor that had held up three generations of American short-fiction writers was being sawed through, slowly, board by board, underneath a man who was still, that very year, getting his checks like clockwork.

I am now the writer he might have imagined training; except I am working on the far side of that collapse. I write for online 'zines. Occasionally a print magazine. An anthology now and then. I have one hundred and three accepted pieces, some of them still in a publication pipeline, waiting their turn. Across all of it, I have probably made a hundred dollars total. Not per story—total.

I want to be honest about what that is and isn't. It isn't failure. The market I'm selling into was not designed to pay me the way the Post was designed to pay him. It runs on different fuel entirely—not subscriptions and full-page cigarette ads, but volunteer editors, tiny nonprofit budgets, exposure, and love.

The internet finished what television started. It dismantled the machinery that once converted a good sentence into a paycheck while throwing open every door in the building. I can publish more, and more often, and more widely than my instructor ever could. One hundred and three acceptances is not a small number and would have astonished a pulp writer in 1930 who was lucky to place a dozen stories a year. What I can't do is convert that volume into a living, because the rooms I'm publishing in were never wired for money the way his rooms were.

So where does that leave me? Not, I think, outside the tradition. Inside a different room of the same house.

O. Henry and London worked a market that paid because mass literacy, cheap paper, and advertising dollars had made fiction a genuinely mass commodity. Fitzgerald and Shaw and my old instructor worked what was left of that boom as it started to taper. I am working what's left after the boom entirely passed, in a landscape where publishing is nearly free and money is nearly absent—the inverse, almost exactly, of the world he taught me in. He got paid well to be read by many. I get read, sometimes by many, and paid almost nothing.

But I teach continuing-education courses now, the same way he stood in front of a room in 1963, and I write about the craft, and I have never once stopped loving the sentence-level work of it—the placing of one true word after another. That's the thing the market never touched, in his time or mine. The rates changed. The magazines died. The whole machinery of how a story becomes money fell apart and was replaced by something thinner and stranger.

What didn't change is the thing he was actually teaching me, whether he knew it or not: how to be a serious writer in whatever market you're handed.

He was handed a good one.

I was handed this one.

I'm still standing in the room.

Suryendu Chaudhury

Oh, Margaret

She remembers the board
That drank the chalk,
The sunlit chairs and wooden desks
Spread out across
A sky like room.

“Miss Margaret, which lesson shall we start?”
She looks at George, looking with intent,
A tab in his hand, ready to savour
The important points.

“Students, today: a surprise test.”
“The questions are on the smart board.”
A familiar echo rings past her, with familiar tones.

Wendall: his fingers crossed,
Thinking about the noodles in his lunchbox,
The ketchup too less again.
Jeremy: looking at the robin outside,
His hair still messy from midnight mischief,
While his world still plays for him.
Robin: with a slight smile, posture upright,
Ready to put his will to test,
And a wish to be the best.

As she sends the PDF
Containing questions,
She finds Margaret
Looking at her with large dreamy eyes –
Where blackboard
And smartboard
Still call students...

Sally Vogl

Still Not Home

My student, RJ, would make a perfect restaurant manager. He'd joke with his employees and converse with customers. "How is your *chile en nogada*, sir?" or "what about your *tacos al pastor*, ma'am?" He'd stress the fresh ingredients, especially the orange juice in the tacos. If time allowed, he'd personally stir a pot, his glasses steaming up, his long ponytail secured under a bandana.

Because he's incarcerated, this isn't an option.

In the weekly poetry class I teach at the State Prison, he mentions that he requested a kitchen job "so I always have access to food." I assume job requests depend on good behavior and ability. Not every inmate has the physical strength for HVAC work, nor could all inmates be trusted with kitchen utensils.

While some young men work out to become buff, RJ spends his free time reading or writing poetry and ignores his round midsection. After class, my students file out of our small room near the chapel. It's so compact that twelve chairs in the circle touch each other. I think of the men still sitting there, as if the personalities linger; the punster, the quiet one, the questioner. RJ actually does linger to chat.

One day, standing at the door, he opens up about being gay. "I let everyone know," he says in a matter-of-fact way, "so there's no second guessing." I only nod, because I sense he cares little for social norms and is not seeking my approval, just sharing who he is. "I guess I'm an anomaly," he continues. "From a culture of machismo, and gay in a men's prison." He starts to exit, then changes his mind. "I can't wait to **try** an imitation poem this

week.” I remind him that it’s my lunch break, and he moves along.

How easily RJ carries his sense of self, always friendly, often jovial. I wonder if he has escaped threats, even beatings, that happen when an inmate doesn’t follow tough guy standards. If RJ has been intimidated by brutal actions, he doesn’t show it. One time he tells me he’s imprisoned because he was falsely accused of a crime, but he stops short of saying more.

RJ is well accepted in class, due to his friendliness and his generosity with beginners, explaining poetry terms to them. Besides his hardy appetite for food, I sense in him a parallel appetite for words and ideas, as though he lives inside the poems we discuss. His enthusiasm helps his classmates to engage. He also translates for Latinos who don’t have his command of English. This is the RJ who’d be a great restaurant manager, wanting people to have a good experience and putting others at ease.

Each week, RJ completes the assignment, whether it’s ghazals, haiku, or free verse, and usually brings one or two more pieces. The light-hearted RJ disappears on paper. His poems reveal a difficult past, including his struggles with being gay. “But I’m tired of being locked in/ I want to be free,” he writes in a poem. Also, he has suffered much because of his absent father. Like other young adults, he has tried to find the father he doesn’t know; incarceration has restricted him. He can’t comb the earth, or research online. Phone use is restricted to collect calls to pre-approved family members. In his poem titled, “The Ghost,” he writes, “One day I hope to meet this man/ the other half of me.”

“Someone glimpsed my father on a street,” he says in one of our after-class talks. “My mom tried to follow him, but Dad escaped again.” This makes me think of an endangered bird, spotted with binoculars before it flies away again. Although

impassioned birders might feel excitement seeing a rare bird, for RJ, the “sighting” of his father kindled a brief hope of finding family, only to vanish.

Another day, before leaving RJ says, “I think I’ll turn in my poem, “Still Not Home” for our chapbook.” Each student is asked to submit two to three poems for the in-house chapbook. “What’s your opinion?”

“That would be great.” I say. The poem describes a Christmas at his home, told through his photo album, showing a tree in silver and gold tinsel, with gifts underneath, “surprises to be revealed in due time when paper skin is ripped open,” he writes. Framed photos of family members perch on the branches. In the poem, he transports himself to his home. His eyes linger on each relative: his mom, siblings, grandparents, wondering how he or she is doing.

Like RJ, I’m also displaced. A fire in my condo complex consumed about half of my unit. In the days afterwards, that scarred place drew me like a magnet. Under the casualty team’s surveillance, I masked up to retrieve medications. They prohibit me from going up the stairs, categorized as unsafe, to retrieve my books, now imprisoned on the second floor.

At first, my identity meshes with what I lost. I picture myself on my gray sectional, reading magazines. Over time, my former possessions became abstract, disembodied from the itemized list I had sent to my insurance company. I imagine RJ’s home with dog-eared books, a soup kettle, a griddle to fry tortillas, and racks of chilis. How did he grieve leaving these behind?

Unlike RJ, the half of me with caring family is intact, but the part of me that wants my own place, my artwork, my own kitchen, is left dangling. Like RJ, I love cooking and miss entertaining friends for a home-cooked dinner. I no longer have kitchen ware. I’m uncertain about my books, because the

casualty team eventually packs them and stores them in my garage. I become disheartened when I opened a box of books and find ashes and mildew on them.

Months and years after the fire, I'm "still not home." Many delays have occurred—insurance issues, a rainy winter, which prevented outside framing, and the restoration company being underpaid by the HOA. Disorientation has taken a toll, I've lost my sense of time and place. The most difficult outcome has been my transiency. I move in with my daughter, until the insurance provides a temporary furnished rental, resembling a cheap hotel. Then insurance money runs out, and now I'm back with my daughter. There will be a time when the rebuild will be finished, probably within months. Physical scars of the building will have healed, but what about emotional ones? Will I be able to erase mental pictures of my place in flames, then the aftermath—foul smells and the layers of ash?

My displacement helps me empathize with the disorientation of a prisoner. I wonder how RJ experiences losing time and place—a physical home, a family, a town—to confinement in his cell. RJ has never mentioned a release date; I don't think it's in his near future. When inmates learn of their upcoming parole dates, they become animated, wide smiles on their faces. RJ resorts to reliving 4X6 previous moments with his family. Does he share his longings with other inmates? Do they reach out to him?

Inside prison facilities, the inmates also get moved around. Sometimes to isolate very sick ones. Sometimes because of a major leak in a building or even a move to a least restrictive facility for good behavior. I wonder how disoriented the guys feel when this happens. Their few possessions would take only minutes to pack. But, I imagine starting a conversation after lights- out. A new voice responds, not the cell-ie you've had for a

year, the one you trust with your deepest thoughts. That cell-ie has been paroled or is in the infirmary.

When inmates exit into the hallway after class one day, a timid student named Frank approaches me. His beanie rests just above his eyebrows and dark eyes.

"I've been changed from level three security to level two," he says. "I'll be transferred to a dorm."

"Congratulations," I say, knowing he'll earn more privileges. Then I notice his downcast face. "What's the problem?"

"I like my cell-ie and the quiet. I don't want to live with a dozen other guys."

RJ mentions that he submitted five poems, including "The Ghost" to university magazines. He asks me each week when he might receive a response. Fortunately for him, the response comes within the month. He arrives at the next class, his eyes widened with excitement, and shows off his letter of acceptance.

"Guess what?" he says, "One magazine accepted all five poems!" All heads turn in his direction, and I see surprise on their faces.

As soon as the journal is available, I scan it to find his poems, hand-written, placed in the magazine's middle, like a centerfold. He's the only poet with five poems included. I'm irritated that he didn't follow my advise to send neat, typewritten copies. So like RJ, to do it in his own style. His crossed-out words are still intact. Still, I'm glad his poems will reach an audience, especially "The Ghost." Hopefully, this poem will inspire others who have grown up without a father.

After reviewing RJ's pieces, I read through the magazine again, this time from the beginning. A painting of a bare-breasted woman appears on page one. Oh, no. The penitentiary officials

will censor it. My stomach tightens. Will his first published work also be imprisoned?

I call the editor to explain the situation. She says her staff will figure out something. When RJ's copy finally arrives, the woman's breasts are covered with small, yellow stickers, the kind used to mark yard-sale prices. RJ leafs through the pages, then turns them quickly to find his poems. He doesn't notice the patched-over lady, half-hidden.

Waiting is something RJ and I have in common. It signifies a lack of control over our lives, an impasse to restoring a major part of ourselves. RJ's coping skills are better than mine; incarceration has provided him lots of practice in biding his time. I'm often frustrated and angry over housing delays and tie myself in knots. I hope whenever he's released, that his father will still be alive. But one waiting period is over for RJ; his art has found a home. My wish is that someday RJ will realize what he gave his poetry classmates: gentle listening. focus, and energy.

When I started teaching in the prisons, I never imagined that, years later, I'd still miss my students. A hole exists because I can't check in with them, the way I can do with my former students from the public schools. I don't know if inmates have been released, and don't have any contact information for them.

I often thumb through copies of journals that published RJ's and other students' poems. Fire's soot and also mildew are sprinkled across the pages. The casualty team had reminded me that these books contain toxins. I've sealed these journals in a plastic bag, and each time I reread them, I wash my hands with care.

Carl Scharwath

Not Before Him

The grave is not a full stop, but a hinge in the universe—
a door waiting for the single voice that summons all
sleepers back into the trembling light of their next
beginning.

When the stone doors opened, silence rose like a spirit
unbound. Dust loosened its ancient grip. Names
glimmered on the wind.

Saints stepped out like dreams returning to the body,
walking into a city that remembered their footsteps.

The tombs—faithful keepers of dust— could not hold
their treasure. They yielded to resurrection's wind, and
the risen moved among the living as quiet proof that
death is only a threshold waiting to be spoken open.

Wally Swist

Forgiveness

Forgiveness may be the most difficult spiritual discipline to master. People may say they forgive someone but saying something and truly forgiving someone is truly a different matter entirely. Simon Wiesenthal's book *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (Paris: Opera Mundi, 1969) is an exploration by a Holocaust survivor on the Holocaust and his experience with a Nazi who was mortally wounded in WWII. Such levels of the consideration of forgiveness are stunning. It makes most of us think of what we might do in such a situation also when most of us have trouble forgiving minor incidents, never mind nearly incomprehensible offenses such as the Holocaust.

In my mid-twenties, I was working as an assistant manager in a rather fine bookstore in The Yale Center for British Art, teaching in the Connecticut Poetry-in-the-Schools and writing features for the art department for The New Haven Advocate. I certainly felt a reprieve from my having come of age in a local town – largely where I had been badly bullied. After having lunch one day, I was walking up Chapel Street back to the bookstore when I came upon a tall blonde man striding toward me on the sidewalk. He put out his hand and I recognized him. It was a student I had been in home room with for the six years from junior high through high school. He exclaimed to me that he was in business for himself, happily married, and was living in a shoreline community known for its affluence. He smiled broadly, and I was happy for him.

However, one tear, and then others, began to flow slowly down his cheeks. He haltingly said, "You were the only one . . . the only one." I looked at him not with alarm but with compassion, and asked, "The only one . . . for what, Dale?" He wiped away a tear and said, "You were the only one who ever treated me with kindness. All the others bullied you, too. But you were the only one who ever treated me like a human being." Upon that, we both hugged in the middle of the sidewalk during lunch hour. I've never forgotten that moment and I don't believe I ever will. Bullying leaves an indelible mark on its victims. To know in one's

heart that one may have made a difference is a place of solace that is nourishing and restorative.

But have Dale and I really forgiven “all those others that bullied us?” I don’t know since I hadn’t thought of it. However, recently, I just happened to come across the reference for the high school we attended in that the members of the baseball team that had won the state championship when we were in school had been admitted to “a hall of a fame” there. I shuddered, really, since some members of that team had bullied me. Had I forgiven them? The popular psycho-spiritual teacher and intuitive healer Caroline Myss has stated that we give up so much energy every day still being attached to what happened to us when we were younger and in school. I thought I was long past thinking of those years of being bullied, but was I? I still shuddered at the thought of incidental bullying and snide remarks. But is bullying ever incidental. Is it ever forgiven? Yet Simon Wiesenthal could forgive a dying Nazi?

Although sometimes we know when we have forgiven. It becomes undeniable. Once I had the occasion of needing to check the brake lights in the car I was driving to a local garage in the town I grew up in. The mechanic who came out to greet me, wiping his oily hands in rags, was someone who had beaten me up in the playground in fifth grade. Tommy had stayed back, as I remember, and was an older boy in my class. I was fresh out of parochial school and attending a public school, which was new for me. Tommy made it difficult. I was “the smartest boy” in class. I didn’t make a lot of friends when the student teacher, who adored me, constantly mentioned how accomplished my poems were in front of the class. Tommy had reasons to beat me up. But here he was standing in front of me, wiping his oily hands in rags, looking sheepish.

He asked if I was going to college, and I said I was. He said, “I thought so.” Then he looked up from cleaning his hands and said, “This is what I’ll be doing for the rest of my life, if I can stand it,” and paused. Then he stuck out his right hand for me to shake. Tommy said, “I’m sorry for beating you up all those years ago. It was a stupid thing to do. And, look at me now, I’m paying for it, and you’re on your way to college.” I shook Tommy’s hand and tried to convince him that all was forgiven. At times, forgiveness, although never easy, can be accompanied by an energy of

wanting the person you are forgiving to do well, to put past what is past, to have both parties move forward with more than just a modicum of goodness.

The act of bullying can emotionally gouge the recipient. As a junior in high school, I actively protested the Vietnam War. I would hitchhike to New Haven from the town I grew up in and visit a coffee house, Bread and Roses, and pick up dozens of copies of an alternative newspaper, The View from the Bottom, whose anti-war sentiments were ostensible. I'd distribute the newspaper at the high school. I had grown my hair long and it was obvious that I was against the war. The senior whose locker was next to mine was what was known as a greaser. He wore pointed shoes and had his hair slicked back. He wore his sleeves rolled-up on his black shirt. This senior always would surprise me by banging my head into my locker – and it hurt. This act was so consistently played out that I scheduled going to my locker either before classes or after they ended, or by eventually not using the locker at all.

After having graduated high school, one time I had parked my car at a local eatery and wanted to pick something to go for lunch. Coming out of the restaurant was my nemesis. His hair had been cut and he was wearing fatigues. I had heard he had gone to fight in Vietnam. In fact, I had learned he had signed up. He looked different, even changed. He stopped in front of me and put out his hand for me to shake, and as I did so, his grip tightened before releasing it and then let go. He said, "I didn't know what war was before I went, and I'm sorry that I did, but I'm really grateful to be back. Some of my buddies didn't make it." He continued, "I'm really sorry for what I did to you back in high school. I know it was wrong. After seeing what I've seen, I'm really sorry I harassed you. I hope you can forgive me."

My partner, Tevis, often forgives me, instantaneously, when I sometimes lose my temper when I am exhausted from caregiving and needing to repeat something I have just explained to her several dozen times. I see it on her face. Here I am standing in front of her and feeling absolutely scandalous in my behavior, and I see she is there having already forgiven me. However, sometimes, too, it is the other way around: I am standing in front of her and immediately forgiving her when she sometimes is affected by her amygdala's flight or fight reactions and her brain is misfiring and is understanding what I might have said, or

have even been doing something for her benefit which she mistakes for being threatening to her. Sometimes I am standing in front of her and instantly forgiving her, too.

Bullying, though, has no mollifying aspects as mutual forgiveness does, as Tevis and I often forgive each other, but it leaves a mark that eventually scars. Some of Tevis's family members have bullied me for over twenty years. They have raged at me while I have saved them from burning dinner in their own home on a lake in the Maine woods, they have shot up from their easy chair in front of the books they brag about not reading and shout that they can't take me knowing everything about everything when that is exactly how I observe them. What is most salient is that I've not been able to forgive them for hurting Tevis—constantly.

Although they no longer have such power over Tevis, and it has been rescinded since they made these rants, I want to forgive them but I'm too wary of them. They have time and again exhibited that they have not been responsible in caring for Tevis nor understanding who she is as a human being. Perhaps, I don't really want to forgive them. as much as I may currently be unable to since I believe, because of the history, that they can be dangerous and untrustworthy. But isn't this not unlike Donald Trump, can we ever trust him, or anyone who supports him? Is it really ever possible to forgive someone who is only going to commit the same offense or even a worse offense right away?

I've come across black bear on the trail in the woods. I've not wanted to harm it, although it might harm me. However, I respect it and there are ways to move up the trail without conflict. Can we do that with Trump? Can I do it with Tevis's family members who think so little of me that they want to teach me how to hike when I've been in Maine but seem to not understand that I've hiked far more than they have: the Rockies in Estes Park, Slaughterhouse Gulch in Telluride, Big Sur, the White Mountains. Can we really trust an active bully? Simon Wiesenthal forgave a dying Nazi. What might be more difficult and challenging is forgiving a live one.

What is memorable is a talk that Caroline Myss gave regarding forgiveness is one in which she stated that there was nothing really like "breathing in forgiveness juice." She recounted an anecdote in which she set the stage to end a relationship which she had seen deteriorating

and was only being hurt by continuing it. In her ending the relationship, she had the sudden and deep realization that she was actively forgiving the individual who had hurt her and that he could never hurt her again.

We might want to remember this. I certainly do in times of stress and when my amygdala is blinking rapid red fight or flight signs. Perhaps we all need to feel distance in our being able to forgive – to have space in which we can do so, that often enough forgiveness seems to happen alchemically, and quickly; other times it is a slog, an effort, and a weight we can't necessarily lift. Although we know it is only a handshake away, to feel its power, when it is apparent, and not unlike Caroline Myss consuming her "forgiveness juice," is comforting and consoling. What is inspirational is Simon Wiesenthal's brand of forgiveness, with its true strength lifting that nearly unendurable weight of not being able to forgive off from our shoulders – in which we can truly muster our wits and our hearts to assume the responsibility of compassion for our fellow human beings no matter what the circumstances are and then to move into the sunlight after all of that and stand basking in the eternal moment that might expand into what we really hope can be a sentence that might last the far side of forever.

Often there are days when occurrences appear to flow as they had before the diagnosis, but then the caregiver experiences the mercurial nature of Alzheimer's: the surprise of it returning, the cruelty not so much of the repetition in the sufferer but in disassociation and in the ghastliness of cognitive loss.

Forgiveness is a bridge to acquiescence from immersion: there is such a necessity to forgive ourselves for impatience and even rage, such as: finally losing one's temper at the one hundredth repetition; the exhaustion of having to answer the same question; also the grief of the loss: the disappearance of the Alzheimer's sufferer who is vanishing right in front of you.

Forgiveness also obviates the need to be extended to the Alzheimer's sufferer herself. The caregiver knows it is not her fault. She knows not what she does and must be forgiven for all that she does.

Members of the family who do not contribute proactively may be more challenging to forgive. Tevis's family members who have bullied me for more than twenty years are nearly impossible to forgive because

I consider them a danger to both Tevis and myself. First, we must feel safe, then we can forgive.

Forgiveness can't be forced; it needs to be encouraged through active prayer. Forgiveness needs space in which it can open unto itself and others.

It is the blessing that nourishes us and then leads to not only our acquiescing to the disease of Alzheimer's but to the acquiescing of others around us, especially the Alzheimer's sufferer.

The meaning of this sentence is that blessing itself is spiritual nourishment that can lead to our acquiescing and in doing so can also lead to the acquiescing of others around us including the Alzheimer's sufferer. In "acquiescing," and not only letting go but also going beyond what we thought we could only accomplish (often through grace), we gain the capacity of leading others on the way.



Christopher L. Dornin

Same window after the bottle of wine

Name the riddles in the bedroom window. These are the rules.
Find something that isn't there. But it really is. It always was.

*You're challenging me to a lyric scavenger hunt? You are.
Okay. The dusk trees are Roman galleons. Their limbs and
branches jut like spears and spars. The trunks form the oars
of the crews. Your turn. What do you see in the drifting field?*

A smear of ink folded in a letter so huge some goddess dropped it in
the arena
for lovers, like us, in the city of the moon to decipher with gigantic
telescopes.

*I'll forgive the way you blur the last and first centuries as if Einstein
and Aristotle could debate fries and frappes at the neighborhood
McDonald's. Let's return to our birches of ground and cloud.
What is the dark between their pale trunks?*

The absolute. The reference place. The void.

Or the innermost chamber of the last Pharaoh.

Or the sacred cave of a Neanderthal.

Or the flattened forests of Bastogne after the Nazi panzers burned.

Or the black ink of Shakespeare's love for his dark lady.

*Good. Very good. Let's be more specific. The night between these
alabaster trunks wails like the child the birches of sky and field
hold with intermeshing limbs, foiling winter with their warmth.*

Have you played this January game before?

Just as a child with my parents by the family fire.

Be very serious and very honest. Are we night trees in a field of snow?

If we were trees we would move to the center of light.

Our roots would keep the earth from blowing away.

But how would we love?

*As simple trees, of course. We would love in the wild, mindless,
ethereal way bee-filled trees, rising from graves, love.*

We would love in the billowing field and the shifting wind
until we moved as gale-formed drifts in snow.

We would love in the tomb.

We would love in the six wounds that wash the dead,

the born and the unborn

as if their precious blood

were the only soap of forever.

Jennifer Beck

Grouch and Trixie

Cigarette smoke and Love's Baby Soft overwhelmed the teacher's lounge as the last bell of the school year chortled through the halls. Robbie, a skinny fifth-grader, knew the warm, windowless room would be vacant for mere moments before the teachers returned to gather their belongings and disappear beyond the building. He raced to the ditto machine in the far corner, unfolding the paper he'd concealed in his hand.

Normally well behaved, Robbie was propelled by a critical mission. On the paper, he had carefully printed: Lost Turtle, Grouch. Beneath that he'd taped an attractive photo of Grouch in his tank and added the phone number to his house. Quickly he fed the paper into the narrow slot and waited for the damp, purple-blue sheets to emerge. Soon, twelve matching pages flipped out from the back of the contraption, each reflecting his eleven-year-old cursive. He admired his work for a single second before dashing back out the door—leaving behind only the sweet chemical scent of the machine to mingle with the smoke and cologne. By the time he walked-ran to his locker, the papers had dried enough for him to stuff them into his navy-blue backpack before barely making the bus home.

At least that's the story that pulsed through my neighborhood that June of '81. Robbie, three years younger than me, had taped up his posters at every corner. Kids and parents were chattering—how had Grouch escaped? Where might he turn up? Even more compelling was that Robbie had gotten away with his ditto machine escapade. And now, school was closed for the summer, making the offense impossible to report. I overheard snippets of these conversations on the sidewalks when I exercised Trixie, a Beagle who lived two doors down from my family.

Everyday at noon, I'd arrive at Trixie's front door, pull the single key from the back pocket of my turquoise terry cloth shorts, and step into the foyer where Trixie turned circles, panting with delight. By July we had a routine—clip on her leash and head east across the golf course, over the stream's wooden bridge, and down to the lake. We passed at least five of Robbie's signs each way on this route. By then most of the print had been washed away by the rainstorms that Trixie and I usually managed to avoid. The sun had baked the remaining purple ink streams into intriguing patterns that resembled the T-shirts we tie dyed at daycamp the summer before. I watched for Grouch when I wasn't thinking about how I was too old now for summer camp and nearly an adult starting high school in the fall.

I watched July become August as Trixie and I traced our steps out and back to the lake each day. A few times, I tried walking her west, but she dug her heels into the soft grass until I gave up and resumed our regular route. Her front door opened onto the eighth hole, and we shot straight across the mowed fairway toward the stream that bounded the far end of the course. The area had clearly been a forest much longer than a golf course, and the oak savanna that remained divided the grass from stream. Hawks sometimes appeared in the tops of the branches, and I knew to keep Trixie close when we saw them. Occasionally a golfer would emerge down the fairway; no motorized carts were allowed, but only once did a ball whiz just past us. Most of the time, Trixie ran gleefully ahead, her leash a long piece of clothesline, while I trotted behind in my dusty Keds.

The ribbon of forest cascaded downhill to the stream that fed into the lake. It was shallow enough to wade across, or even follow to the beach. But Trixie and I always took the wooden bridge, nodding to the other dog walkers and beach goers who shared our route. At the beach, Trixie ran circles in the sand, barked at the water, and danced in the tall grass that had grown thick enough to hide her. I watched her with one

eye and with the other, observed the older kids chatting confidently, glistening in baby oil beneath the sun.

Walking home, we meandered—Trixie sniffing and me daydreaming about joining the high schoolers. On our way back, Trixie would poke her head through the bridge's wooden slats and peer down into the stream. By mid-August, the forest floor was thick with saplings, daisies, and flox. Trixie lingered, and I had no reason to hurry her.

One afternoon, she planted her paws, refusing to move from her perch above the stream. I leaned with my back on the bridge, watching beachgoers tote their sandy towels home. I tugged Trixie's clothesline leash, but she wouldn't budge. The lake breeze had cooled, and I wished I had my sweatshirt. I tugged her again more firmly. She was sweet as she was stubborn, so I gave in and walked back to join her. Having gotten her way, she pawed at the wooden plank and bobbed her head toward the stream. Following her gaze, I saw a turtle the size of dinner plate just as it slid from a log into the water. Unbelievable! It could easily be Grouch.

After hustling Trixie back home, I dashed into my house, looked up Robbie's family in the phone book, and dialed the seven digits into the phone on our kitchen wall. After 15 rings I hung up the receiver. I tried again that night and several times the next day until I no longer needed the phone book to dial. I kept calling, kept catching glimpses of Grouch who was often sunning on the same log. I admired his dexterity, his stealth in slipping on and off of his log, shell blending into the log and the muddy water. My calls slowed to once a day, then every few days. Robbie's delight at a soggy reunification, and my own pride in reunifying the duo, shifted.

By Labor Day weekend when Robbie's family still hadn't returned, I asked a few neighbors. Turned out his dad had taken a new job, and they'd moved out of state with no new address. Robbie would have been so relieved to hear of Grouch's escapade and discovery, so I was surprised to feel my own twinge of relief for Grouch.

With both free of consequence, their story, like Grouch himself, settled into the landscape. Trixie and I saw him on his log a few more times until school started and we no longer paused on the bridge coming home.



Larry Ollivier

The Fall of the Republic

In a game of cultural trivia
I asked my last class of the day
what I took for a simple question:
What literary character tilted
at windmills? Silence
rolling dark as thunder
through the room spoke volumes,
though not, regrettably, upon the exploits
of our good Don Quixote
De La Mancha. Troubled

at heart, I asked my wife
whose answer crackled in the static
afternoon: "You don't need literature
to be literate!" A colleague ventured,
"Abraham Lincoln?" on his way out
the door to mountain biking

at Lake Tahoe. In all
the long annals of our species
what have any people had to keep them
through the wilderness of centuries
but stories? Though which story
serves in this most desolate hour

I'm sure I could scarcely say. Leonidas
facing down the Persians
in the narrows at Thermopylae?
Or the antics of an aging fool,
maddened with antique tales,
assaulting windmills in the sun?

Nativity

(Billy Walker – University of Houston)

They were making merry in the marketplace
of free ideas – I was reading
“On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity.” Facetious?
I don’t mean to be. In truth, it was a party –
the English Department Christmas
at Professor Joshua Barrett’s condo
in Montrose – you’re familiar with the type,
everyone bearing in hand the obligatory
cocktail, knotted together by threes
or fours reciting the vision and mission
statement of the University: the world
a banquet, the Academy a banquet hall

and everyone to be allowed
a setting at the table. I’d talked that vision, tried
to walk it too, more perhaps than anyone
there could know, but I’d been
sober seven years, was new,
in the first year of a doctorate, and I stood
by bookshelves – floor to ceiling, dominating
three walls of the sitting room –
where I’d found an antique
Milton, seemingly ill-sorted
among the Foucaults and Derridas
and horde of award-winning poets
of the Iowa school, with etchings by
Gustave Dore, and the book fell open

when I took it up to the “Nativity.” Outside,
dark overtook the Gulf
Coastal Plain, light irretrievably lost
among live oaks and sycamores,
and in banked windows
I saw myself imperfectly
reflected, as if in Saint Paul’s
glass, the room resolving by degrees,
a vignette not yet come together. Chip
Manley found me there, shouldered in
to see what I was reading. We’d argued

heatedly the week before
whether Christmas were a holiday
or blunt anachronism bludgeoning the ideals
of the University. Now he tapped
the book I held with fleshy index
finger, assumed prosecutorial
rigor: “You believe it, don’t you?”
The broad, traveled road
to equivocation opened at my feet.
“Believe what?” Chip had a way
of snorting, horse breathed, to magnify
contempt. He snorted. “All of it –

that he was born, was God, the word
made flesh – a carpenter’s! – that he died
to save us.” I could have introduced a qualm
or two, but wouldn’t, not for him. “Yes.
Yes I do.” He snorted, twice. “Look,
believe any damn fool thing
you choose – chant, meditate, pray
for world peace, sleep beneath a crystal
pyramid, beat a drum, run naked
through the woods seeking sympathetic
spirits, lie curled in fetal solidarity
with your grieving inner child – but believe

that!" – he tapped the page again, judge
pronouncing sentence, so hard
I nearly dropped the book – "In this department?
You might as well go off somewhere
and slit your throat!" He left,
and in the window I could see the room behind me
focus, my colleagues gathered in a world
of light and warmth, myself apart,
across a threshold already
dark, and darkening.

Shawna Ervin

Winter's Erosion

Brown grass peeks
through heavy snow.

Follow the sparrow tracks
to the ghost of the ash tree,

its bark white where mushrooms
flourish near rotting roots.

A branch that once held birthday piñatas
is a hollow husk, jagged,

snapped off by the wind.
Snow melts into mud, a collie's footprints

rush across concrete patio.
In a corner, a child's handprint

marked 1973, erodes from the tips
of his toddler fingers.

Francine Rubin

Eleven and a Half Months

Now it's April.
Under tumbling
cherry blossoms,
you doze. What newness
will you be
when you wake?
Three swans glide
in the glistening pool.
I need to pick up
the older kids soon.
I want to write.
I want to take pictures.
I want to be still.
I want to ingest
your delectable face,
squishy, blooming.
Miriam: stay with me
in your almost-birthday.

Mary Ellen Webb

Purple Prose

Every July, about ten pairs of dead eyes stare at me on the first day of summer school for English 12. I can't read minds, but I can read theirs: How did this HAPPEN? What did I do to tick off that teacher so much that I FAILED? Is this some kind of cosmic joke? Why? Why? Why??

I've taught this summer class maybe a dozen times, and they tend to begin very similarly. After initial intros, I say, "So, you guys got this. Stick with me for three weeks, do the assignments in class, no homework, and you will graduate next month. No problem" And, yeah, I can read their minds as their eyes pour out hatred, disbelief, shock and no awe. I do introduce them to the cheerful "COUNTDOWN TO GRADUATION!" Google slide I project each morning, with pictures of happy graduates and the number of days left between today and sweet freedom. (I am not a fan of AI, but this slide has gotten snazzier since I used it to create my most recent one.)

"OK," I continue every first day: "How many of you have done one of those 'two truths and a lie' icebreakers on the first day of school?" One by one, most of them will raise their hands. Some look tentative. Some look disinterested (well, most of them, but some more than others). They all look sleepy. There is always a smirker who stares at me, trying to shame me for my lameness, but I am impervious to smirks and shame. Remember: I teach high school English.

"So," I will continue. "I don't know about you, but I am too tired to come up with two truths, so we are going to start with ONE of each and try to guess." I model on the whiteboard: 1.

Romeo and Juliet is my favorite play. 2. I interviewed Barney the Purple Dinosaur.

"Which one is my truth?" I will ask. Of the five kids who usually play along, four will say *R&J*. (I am, after all, an English teacher.) The smirker invariably says something along the lines of: "Well, I'd usually say *Romeo and Juliet*, but it's too obvious, so I'm going with the Barney thing." Which is the correct answer. Plus I hate *Romeo and Juliet*.

As we go around the classroom, the variety of truths and lies is truly astounding. Sometimes hilarious, sometimes unsettling: "I stole a car from my neighbor's house and drove to Maryland before getting pulled over by the cops" OR "I want to make a career out of small-animal taxidermy, mostly squirrels and my brother's guinea pigs." Which to choose? I pretend that as the teacher I feel it is inappropriate for me to guess, so I don't have to play along.

A couple summers ago, one girl stood up, twined her dark brown hair around her fingers, and said, "I'm a blonde. OR My best friend and I decided to take a spontaneous road trip to Florida during finals week this year." This one I did guess: "Um, is it the second one?" "Yeah." "Is that why we are meeting like this?" "Uh, yeah."

Now, I've taught for more than two decades, and the ice breakers at the average in-service tend toward mind-numbing awfulness. I bonded forever with one of my closest friends during an in-service where we had to say something people didn't know about us. Which, because I knew NO ONE at this meeting except my friend, was everything. This one woman said she had hand-crocheted the lace for her daughter's wedding dress. My friend and I avoided eye contact to keep from bursting into hysterical laughter, instead whispering, *sotto voce*, to each other: "I am not

worthy,” and “I knitted thread to make my daughter’s wedding veil using my own hair.”

The summer school ice breakers tend to do better than the ones at in-services, and after we’ve gone around the room, the kids pick either their truth or lie, and write a brief essay about it. They can share aloud or not, as they prefer. Usually, it’s a room full of nots (this is summer school, after all, and while they may find this assignment vaguely amusing, they are not completely buying into it and lack enthusiasm in general for this course).

About every other year, one kid will want to know how the hell I wound up interviewing Barney the Purple Dinosaur. I tell them it is a sad and tragic tale, one that ultimately led to my decision to end an 18-year journalism career and become a teacher.

It goes like this: For 10 years, I worked as an entertainment editor for a chain of newspapers in the Washington, D.C., suburbs. Let me say right away this was NOT as much fun as it sounds. The pay was abysmal, the 50-plus hours a week ridiculous.

I did enjoy writing a biweekly humor column: “Spinning Webbs.” I explored true-life events, like when I was the Campbell’s soup label collection volunteer at my son’s school (you could trade in soup labels for educational items). I wrote about a nightmare I had that I’d gone to a grocery store and cut the labels off all the soup cans. And didn’t feel bad about it. A week after that column ran, a woman who’d been collecting Campbell’s labels for decades sent me an impressively large box stuffed with more than 3,000 of them.

The Barney debacle happened when my daughter, Megan, was 3. She was a huge fan of the Purple One. I’d taught her how to load the VCR with Barney tapes when I needed to get stuff done around the house. I did sing along to all the songs with her;

the clean-up song was my favorite. So I wrote a column about how, while I recognized that this PBS show did an amazing job of getting youngsters excited about school, etc., I could not match her enthusiasm for it and, in fact, hated it. I ended the column with a reference to the “Barney shake,” which happened whenever Barney decided to go on adventures with his little friends. They would all stand in a circle, shake their butts, and be magically transported to wherever they had planned to go, appropriately dressed (think parkas at the North Pole and flowered shirts and sandals in Hawaii).

I ended my column by saying that MY idea of the perfect Barney shake was as follows: Take 1 Barney and put him in a blender. Add 1 scoop of vanilla ice cream, and... I ended with ellipses. I’m not a monster.

Yet I got hate mail for a month from people who just could not understand how a mother would not love Barney and let me know how awful I was. “I feel terrible for your children, having such a horrible mother,” said one happy reader. “What is wrong with you?” wrote another. Now, I am not someone who needs to be loved by everyone--consider my eventual career change to high school English teacher. But it was a bummer getting two, three, sometimes as many as four pieces of hate mail every day for weeks. And adding to the drama: I worked with journalists. This got around the newsroom pretty quickly. Once or twice a week, I would come to work and find a Barney coloring book, a tiny Barney doll, Barney stickers, etc., waiting for me on my desk. “Hate you guys!” I would cheerfully yell across the newsroom. “Megan will love this, thanks!” It was a magical time for my daughter.

Eventually the hate, or at least the letters, died down. Then one day, as I worked to finish laying out my weekly entertainment sections, my editor came up to me, evil grin on

her face. "So," she said. "You've got a phone interview this afternoon." "Oh, OK, with who?" "Barney." Her grin now nearly spanned the newsroom. Barney was starring in an ice show at a nearby arena, and the interview was to be published a few days before.

I stood, grabbed my car keys and walked toward the exit. "Hey!" she called out. "You can't quit! It's deadline day." "I'm not quitting," I explained. "You can make me interview Barney, but you can't make me come up with questions to ask him." I drove to Megan's preschool, where I asked a roomful of 3-year-olds what was the one question they would want to ask Barney. I wrote these down. I was ready.

A couple hours later, Barney called. My editor grabbed a chair and sat on the other side of my desk to watch. Still grinning.

As a journalist, one tries to be polite and friendly when interviewing someone, to make that person comfortable and more likely to talk. I didn't do this. "OK, so, what's your favorite food?" I deadpanned. "Um...peanut butter and jelly!" Barney said, in his most Barney voice. This guy stayed in character. The. Entire. Time. "Do you go to the bathroom?" I asked. "Um....no?" Barney asked. I followed up with the one question I came up with on my own: "Is that why dinosaurs are extinct?" No response.

Last question: "Do you like having your own TV show," I asked, no verbal question mark indicating any interest whatsoever. "Well," Barney said, "I just love going to school every day and playing with my friends. And then one day, when everyone left, I noticed there were TV cameras. I didn't know we were making a TV show."

I said, "Yeah." Then I hung up. On Barney. And that day decided I needed to do something else with my life. Anything. Took me two years of prep, and soon I was boring disinterested teenagers who probably like *Beowulf* as much as I like Barney.

My summer school students usually enjoy the Barney story, and it sometimes wakes them up long enough to accomplish the few hours of curriculum they have to do for the day. It's clearly my rendition of the Barney voice that captivates them.

And they produce some fascinating stories when they explain their truths or their lies. Some of them even like to read them outloud. Some of them do voices as well.

In all my years of teaching senior English in summer school, every kid who came to class made it through. I'd like to think it's my teaching talents. But I think it's Barney.



WRITE YOUR OWN

When Teachers Compose Using
Their Own Prompts

Mary Dalton

Free writing from prompts is a staple exercise of writing workshops and creative writing classes, and flash fiction provides a lot of utility for free writing because pieces can be started in a generative session then completed afterward before a subsequent meeting. Imposing a word limit on students also introduces constraints that they will need to grapple with in class assignments as well as submission guidelines, which means that craft and format come together concretely in these stories.

I've spent most of my career as a media studies professor, but more recently I've returned to the classroom as a writing student. At one residency, I was given the assignment of writing flash fiction inspired by selecting one from a set of newspaper headlines featuring mistakes that caused misunderstandings or were unintentionally funny. Students were instructed to treat the actual headlines as a springboard for fiction and to be as imaginative as possible while challenging ourselves and completing a story in less than 1000 words.

I chose a famous headline that contained a typographical error, one that probably still elicits giggles. "Amphibious Pitcher Makes Debut" appeared in the *East Oregonian* newspaper in a 2015 story about Pat Venditte, an ambidextrous relief pitcher playing for the Oakland Athletics. Although I know a bit about baseball from research for a screenplay I wrote years ago, I don't pay a great deal of attention to sports in my daily life, I was born a generation after my story takes place, and I've not never written anything else in the science fiction or fantasy genres.

The constraints imposed and the possibilities suggested took me far outside my comfort zone, and that's probably why I've periodically pulled "Amphibious Pitcher Makes Debut" up on my laptop and tweaked it. I don't have an affinity for writing in the short form, which is another reason this story, currently 981 words, still feels like a work in progress. Can it ever be otherwise with stories we tell? Do we ever really finish projects or simply choose a place to rest because, as countless people have noted, the destination is the journey? Probably, but I'm growing more

comfortable with the paradox, just as I've have come to see teaching and learning as reciprocal and inextricable.

Here is my story:

Amphibious Pitcher Makes Debut

The knocking on Clete's door at the motor lodge was punctuated by a slow drawl. "Mr. Scruggs? I got a pitcher you need to see. You ain't never seen nothin' like it before." He'd heard some version of this song and dance too many times to count.

Clete had a pad full of scouting notes, bald tires on the beater he'd picked up on his way to Podunk, Florida, and twenty pounds packed on top of last season's girth. That was about it. Probably nothing would come out of this prospect, but he lurched off the lumpy bed anyway.

Six years earlier, he climbed out of a U-boat in France. After that, he navigated the industrial leagues in the South for several seasons before taking the mound for the St. Louis Browns. He didn't care that his team seemed lodged in the lower rungs of the American League standings. This was his ticket to the "Bigs." He really thought 1949 would be his year.

He'd been on top of the world most of the first inning until the clean-up hitter for the Yankees strode to the plate. Clete took a deep breath and nodded at his catcher, who called for a fastball. The wind-up was flawless, but with the release of the ball, a wrenching *pop* in his left elbow ended his career before it really started.

Clete slipped on his shoes. It required too much effort to bend over to tie the laces.

The last couple of years, he'd scouted pitchers for the Browns in every backwater town where the next Bob Feller might be discovered. Nobody was going to remember the name Clete Scruggs unless he could make it to the coaching staff. Even then, it would take a better team than the Browns to make his mark.

He knew this excursion would come to naught but soon was riding in a rattletrap pickup headed for a farm built on the black soil of a dredged swamp. Just past a sharecropper cabin that had never seen a coat of paint, Clete's jaw dropped as the truck rattled to a stop. Tethered to a tree was about seven feet of something alive covered in scales a shade or two darker than the shack.

The farmer's grin didn't reach his pale eyes, "Ain't it something? I caught it out of the swamp." Clete didn't know what to make of the scene before him, but curiosity drew him out of the truck. "And you ain't seen nothing yet," the farmer said before spitting out a big chaw of tobacco. Clete saw a bushel basket mounted on a tree and baseballs littering the ground opposite of where the creature was restrained from its waist.

The figure stood upright and looked at him with an expression that registered not just innate response but, it seemed to Clete, hopelessness or something very close to it. The farmer grabbed a bullwhip from the truck bed, and the creature didn't flinch when the whip *cracked*. The wiry farmer tossed a couple of baseballs in quick succession, and the amphibian caught one in either fin, which functioned more like hands than mitts. Clete was flabbergasted.

"Show him what you can do," growled the farmer, and the scout realized that the bushel basket was mounted to match the strike zone. His hazel eyes locked with the taller figure's emerald ones, and Clete noticed slitted pupils that widened as it looked at him.

When the farmer *cracked* the whip again, the creature hurled two perfect pitches, the fastest Clete had ever seen. They cut through the air in quick succession from either fin then hit the red circle painted in the middle of the basket with precision. The farmer was right. Clete never had seen anything remotely like this.

He could visualize the headline now, "Amphibious Pitcher Makes Debut," and he heard an imaginary radio announcer inside his head, *He's the tallest and fastest pitcher to start in the*

major leagues and the first amphibian! This boy can throw. . . and with either hand. . . or. . .fin. He's the ambidextrous amphibian!

The spark ignited by this prospect began to flicker. The game had rules, lots of rules, and history. People were slow to change. He had seen that firsthand with two leagues when there should be one. At that moment, Clete knew it would never work.

The scout looked at the ambidextrous amphibian and tracked his gesture to the lagoon through a fringe of trees. The water appeared black and still. Clete knew what had to be done. He hadn't left his mortally injured buddy on the French battlefield, despite the danger to himself, and he wouldn't leave this captive with the man tormenting him.

He walked to the tree where the tether was anchored, pulled a Swiss army knife from his pocket, and severed the cord holding the being in place. Clete had seen an appeal in its eyes that seemed human. The figure ran through the trees, and Clete thought fleetingly that this amphibian would surely have gotten on base when bat met wood because that sucker could run!

The farmer was stupefied by Clete's act. He began to wail as the amphibian dove into the water and disappeared. "He's mine! What did you do?"

Clete knew then that he'd never be a major league coach. He would never see a player with the raw talent and potential of the one he'd just released, but if his rise through the ranks meant doing the wrong thing and exploiting someone else, then he was not a team player.

He grabbed the bullwhip from the farmer and looped it around his hands, securing the leather with a double weaver's knot and fashioning a hitch to keep the red-faced man in place.

"I'll take your truck back to town and give you some time to think about what it feels like to be tied up."

Eve Morton

I teach technical writing at a Canadian university, and despite it seeming to be the 'boring' writing class, I regularly get my students to use the limitations of technical writing for creativity. They often write poems about objects on their desk or write flash fiction using their narrow technical field. One prompt I'm using this semester has been to use a technical genre to tell a creative story. In this case, I use the examples of emails (specifically emails requesting extensions) to tell a quick story about the occult arts and the importance of being nice to your writing and spellcraft teacher. Since the writing craft and the magical craft are often considered quite similar (our words have meaning and matter!), I figured this would be a good fit.

End of Term Emails From Ancient Mysticism and Occult Arts [AMO 101]

Subject: Dead Grandmother No Longer Dead

Dear Professor Milton,

I'm writing to you today to ask for an extension on our last magical assignment of the year. My recently deceased grandmother is no longer as such. Now I need to fly back home in order to help catch her reanimated corpse, and after that is hopefully complete, participate in her funeral rites. Can I hand in the last project on the ancient mystical laws a few days late? I greatly appreciate it.

Sincerely,
Tabby Sullivan
Student Number: 97301

Auto-reply from JeanetteMilton@umagic.ca: Thank you for your email! Unfortunately, I am out of the office. I will be returning in three days and will attend to your email then. Cheers, JM XOXO

*

Subject: No Subject

Hey prof,

Where can I find the final assignment? I lost my textbook and the syllabus was burned in my last spell. I was also sick last Monday and couldn't go anywhere.

Thanks,
T

Auto-reply from JeanetteMilton@umagic.ca: Thank you for your email! Unfortunately--[rest of message indecipherable].

*

Subject: Familiar Loss

Dear Dr. Milton,

My beloved familiar (if you recall I wrote my midterm paper on discovering our kinship, and related it to Pythagoras's early writings on animals) has gone missing. I fear she may be dead. I'm in no state to write my last magical project of the term. I ask for an extension until the 4th of April. If you can't grant me this, I understand, but please note that my writing abilities will be hampered in the final draft due to her loss.

If I don't hear back from you--some of the other students have said their emails are bouncing back with strange character symbols--I will write my paper without my

familiar's help and do the best I can. Just remember that even Pythagoras needed the animals' assistance.

Sincerely,
Raquelle Lee

Auto-reply from JeanetteMilton@umagic.ca: [odd symbols]
[indecipherable]

*

Subject: Students in Ancient Mysticism and Occult Arts

Dear Jeanette,

Many of your students have emailed me for their final assignment and/or the syllabus for your Ancient Mysticism and Occult Arts class. They say you are not answering. Are you all right? The last we heard from you was at the esbat, and you mentioned a particularly troubling student. Do you think foul magic to be to blame?

Please respond when you can. We are worried about you.

Love and Light,
Cherry Diamont
Chair of Magical Studies

Auto-reply from JeanetteMilton@umagic.ca: [auto-reply disabled]

*

Subject: **POSSIBLE SPAM** Academic Jobs in the Magical Marketplace

Hello Professor!

There are numerous openings in your field of Ancient Mysticism and the Occult Arts, as well as an exciting new department opening at multiple international universities for

The Rejuvenated Arts of Alchemy. What an exciting time to be an adjunct professor, seeking tenure in this ever-shifting world!

If you are interested, please apply with a CV, a charm from a verified spell (and spellwork journal), and a teaching dossier. Good luck!

Best Magical Wishes,
The Magical Marketplace Recruitment Team

Auto-reply from JeanetteMilton@umagic.ca: If you're writing for an extension, please take it.

*

Subject: Department Meeting

Hello all!

We hope the end of term is shaping up nicely. Below is the formal meeting agenda for our upcoming session on Friday at noon in the general conference area.

Greetings and Job Openings
Courses on Modern Mysticism
Applicants for the Astral Travel Grant
Rebellious Students: How to Report, What Not To Do
A Word from The Chair Cherry Diamont
Closings and Magical Blessings

See you all then!
Shantelle Jones (she/her)
Pisces Rising, Virgo Sun, Leo Moon

PS: Yes, familiars are allowed at the meeting. It's the end of term and we all need them!

Auto-reply from JeanetteMilton@umagic.ca: If you're writing for an extension, please take it.

*

Subject: Following up on Dead Grandmother

Hi again,

I was able to both find my grandmother again and participate in her funerary rites. Your class ended up being quite helpful! Who knew I'd use the stuff we learned about alchemy applied in some cases of reanimation and necromancy, too?

I'm writing because I did finish my paper, but when I went to your office hours, there was nothing there. It smelled a bit, too. Sort of like sulfur, as if you were doing experiments from our first session.

Anyway, I slid the paper under the door. If that's not okay, I've also attached it here.

Thanks. It was a good term!

Tabby

+Attached: PaperDone1_Sullivan.docx

Auto-reply from JeanetteMilton@umagic.ca: If you're writing for an extension, please take it.

*

Subject: Extension

Dear respected mam,

Hi my name is Johnny I'm in your class.

I hope you are doing all right.

Actually no one in the class has been able to contact you.

We have been talking and can't understand the final assignment. Please help guide us or we can't complete it in time! It's due today!!! No one understands!

Bye until then,
Johnny Lions

Auto-reply from JeanetteMilton@umagic.ca: If you're writing for an extension, please take it.

*

Subject: no subject

hey teach, I handed in my assignment late. Hope that's okay. No one really knew what to do, but we had a great year! Hope 144ason didn't get you down. You know he was mostly kidding, right?

-bd

Auto-reply from JeanetteMilton@umagic.ca: If you're writing for an extension, please take it.

*

Subject: Wellness Check

Jeanette,

You missed the final staff meeting of the term. I know that Dr. Shane's aftershave smells like someone shat out sage and lavender, and Dr. DiMarco's black cat gives you the heebie jeebies, but you always come. You even sometimes bring mooncakes, too. The registrar also told me you missed the final submission date for your grades. The chair's really worried, too. So am I.

Did you have [student name redacted] in your sections? I got a really bad vibe from him. I should have done the warding

spell, fuck whatever the school's handbook says. If we can't protect ourselves, what else can we do?

Call me,
Heather

Auto-reply from JeanetteMilton@umagic.ca: Anyone at all: I'm trapped in the computer in my office. Whoever's writing, I need something to get me out. Please help soon. XOXO JM

*

Subject: Lessons Learned Last Term

Hey Prof Milton,

I suppose I should start this by saying that I'm sorry about last term. For the trouble making over spellwork, the nitpicking on grades, you know. Small stuff. But you really left me no choice for the final project. Maybe if you graded more on my performance, rather than the grammar or syntax of my writing, we wouldn't be here now.

Anyway, this is an apology. And a submission as well. I guess what you said in class was right: it's always far easier to do the real assignment than to beg for extensions or cheat and hand in someone's else work. Or trap the prof into their device so no one can do anything and everyone gets an extension. Yes, a lot of work for a little reward. Even when I did get it right, I don't think I mastered the technique. But I am just in first year with a long magical career ahead of me.

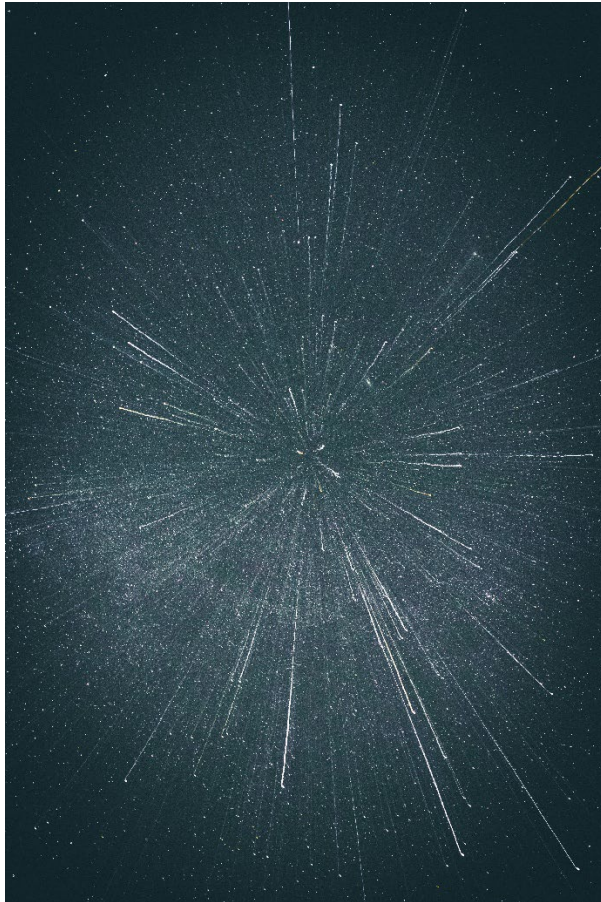
In any case, I did do the final actual assignment too. See attached. Maybe you'll grade it, or at least, look the other way and give me a good recommendation letter for whatever school I'll end up in next. I don't need to take Psychic Foundations to know what's coming from the Dean. But remember: you can always make me someone else's problem.

Consider it.

Sincerely,
Jason Knightly

+Attached: LessonsLearnedLastTerm.doc

Auto-reply from JeanetteMilton@umagic.ca: This user has been blocked.



Contributors

Sofiul Azam has four poetry collections *Impasse* (2003), *In Love with a Gorgon* (2010), *Safe under Water* (2014), *Persecution* (2021). His work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Orbis*, *The Cannon's Mouth*, *Deep South*, *Usawa Literary Review*, *Postcolonial Text*, etc. Before coming to Iowa State University for an MFA in Creative Writing and Environment, he taught literature at several universities in Bangladesh for the last fifteen years.

Trey Balch is an untraditional student at Western Carolina University. By untraditional, we mean middle-aged. Trey returned to college and was quickly encouraged by his professors to peruse the craft. Professor Lapeze at Wake Tech encouraged his strong voice. At WCU, Professor Pamela Duncan encouraged his flippant style. And NYT Best Seller, Ron Rash, calls Trey, "talented and sick." Trey Balch will be attending grad school at WCU and hopes to teach writing; make it fun.

Sherrie M. Bartell, Ph.D., teaches writing and critical thinking in the MBA program at the University of the People, where she guides students through the process of developing and writing their capstone papers. Her work explores the emotional and intellectual labor of teaching in contemporary higher education.

Jennifer Beck is a writer and writing teacher. She finds the connection between these two professions to be inextricably linked. Her teaching has allowed her to work with writers ranging from elementary and secondary students to adults. She has written for nonprofits, publications, and published some creative nonfiction. This story was inspired by a writing class she took to continue to grow as a writer herself.

James Blindell lives in Murcia, Spain with his wife and unruly toddler. He teaches English as a foreign language to teenagers. He loves helping his students develop their ideas and express themselves.

Rachel Carrington has been a writing instructor for WOW-Women On Writing for over ten years. She helps aspiring authors strengthen their fiction and find their inspiration. A freelance writer herself, Rachel has written over 4,000 articles and 52 novels. rachelcarrington.com

Cheryl Caesar is an ex- expatriate, having lived in Europe for 25 years before returning to her native Michigan. She teaches writing at Michigan State University, and serves as president of the Michigan College English Association. Her chapbook of protest poetry *Flatman* was published by Thurston Howl Press in 2020, and a second, *Saving Stars*, by Bottlecap Press in 2026.

Suryendu Chaudhury, a teacher of English, loves to teach his students the nuances of poetry that reflect the enigma of literature. He rediscovers through his poems a light of hope to unite the teacher and the poet someday.

Chris Clemens writes and teaches in Toronto, where he has defeated 8.5 raccoons (with help from his wonderful family). Nominated for Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net, his stories and poems appear in Best Microfiction 2026, Matter Press, The Literary Review of Canada, Strange Horizons, Year's Best Canadian Fantasy and Science Fiction, and elsewhere. More at linktr.ee/clemenstation.

Mary M. Dalton is Professor of Communication at Wake Forest University and has written extensively about the depiction of educators in popular culture. Her fiction and documentary films examine connections and disconnections in communities. She is enchanted by the colors and textures of moss, uses knitting as a centering practice with utilitarian benefits, and lives with her husband in Jamestown, NC.

Deanna Davidson, in university, was encouraged by Dr. Pousson to not stop submitting work. He reiterated the importance of pushing through all the rejections that come in the writing field. Dr. Pousson emphasized that a story is never finished, there's always a reason for writing "to be continued". Deanna has internalized his concept by never giving up on a piece, even when rejections come.

Christopher L. Dornin has taught English at two private schools in New York and at three high schools in New Hampshire. He has placed runner-up in the Swan Scythe chapbook contest and semi-finalist in the Finishing Line book contest, the Wolfson Press chapbook contest and the Washington Prize book contest. He has earned 22 New England journalism awards and a New Hampshire Arts Council fellowship in poetry.

Shawna Ervin has an MFA from Pacific Lutheran University. She was a finalist for Kenyon Review's 2024 Developmental Editing Fellowship. Recent publications include poetry in *American Literary Review*, *Bangalore Review*, *Cagibi*, and *Rappahannock Review*; and prose in *Mom Egg Review*, *Seneca Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Sonora Review*, *Sweet: A Literary Confection*, and elsewhere. Shawna lives in Denver with her family.

Arvilla Fee lives in Dayton, Ohio with her husband, three of her six children, and two dogs. She teaches for Clark State College, is the lead poetry editor for *October Hill Magazine*, and has been published in over 130 magazines. Her three poetry books, *The Human Side*, *This is Life*, and *Mosaic: A Million Little Pieces* are available on Amazon. Her newest book, *The Stars Above Us* will be released by *Kelsay Books* in May. Arvilla's life advice: Never travel without snacks. Visit her website and her online magazine: <https://soulpoetry7.com/>

Clara Finley teaches high school English in the Chicago suburbs. She loves to teach her students to write through journaling, poetry, prose, and analytical essays. She finds that, to teach writing, one must engage in writing, so she squeezes it in when she's not grading papers!

Julie Hamilton is a poet and ESL Teacher. Writing is an important part of her life and she is privileged to be able to help new English language learners, reconnect to their own voice, through the written form. Julie has worked as an ESL Teacher for 20 years and is a published poet.

Berrien C. Henderson is a newly retired high school English teacher who has taught World Literature, American Literature, British Literature, and World Mythology and has publishing credits ranging from poetry to short fiction to nonfiction.

Matthew E. Henry (MEH) is an essayist, fiction writer, and author of seven poetry collections. Most importantly, he has over two decades as an educator who believes no topic is "not school appropriate" if students can honestly engage the realities of society and themselves. He encourages them to believe that writing is one of the most powerful flames to both illuminate souls and burn oppressive systems to the ground.

Marie Johnson enjoys using composition, especially poetry, to cope with chronic health issues from a rare genetic connective tissue disease and the difficulties in living with significant autism spectrum disorder. Her 10th grade high school English instruction and curriculum instilled an appreciation for the imagery and structural freedoms allowed in poetic forms compared to traditional prose. Besides poetry, she enjoys drawing and spending time with her wonderful and very pampered cats.

Rick Kempa, poet and essayist, taught writing and humanities at Western Wyoming College for 32 years and directed the Honors Program there for ten years. He now resides in Maryland.

Corey Kramer is a writer, visual artist, and educator on Massachusetts' North Shore. His poetry explores memory, myth, perception, and the strange emotional charge of ordinary places. His work as a teacher continually shapes his attention to language, observation, and the ways people make meaning.

Tamara Kreutz is a high school ELA teacher at an international school in Antigua, Guatemala. She has always taught poetry but began writing during the pandemic, when she took two years off to be home with her infant son. Since returning to the classroom, she obtained an MFA. Being a writer has helped make her writing instruction more effective and meaningful, bringing the practice of poetry to her students more actively by having them create their own portfolios and submit their own poetry.

Heidi Larsen M.Ed. is a 4th-grade teacher at a small Christian school in Central Massachusetts. A poet and storyteller, she delights in the power of words to awaken curiosity, cultivate wonder, and connect people through shared experience. She encourages her students to find stories that shape them while discovering their own creative voices that they will share with the world. When she is not teaching, she is writing, because, for her, poetry is less a choice than a necessity.

Richard LeDue (he/him) lives and teaches high school English in Norway House, Manitoba, Canada, where he has taught writing for 16 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 full-length collection "Existential Drunk," was released from Alien Buddha Press in May 2026.

David Anson Lee is a physician, educator, and poet whose writing explores perception, memory, medicine, and human experience. Throughout his career as a professor, he has mentored students in careful observation, storytelling, and reflective writing. He credits his own writing teachers and literary mentors with encouraging him to transform personal experience into poetry that connects science, compassion, and imagination.

Lizzie Michael is an international English teacher and fiction writer from Cape Cod, Massachusetts. After spending the past three years teaching in India, she is relocating to Bangkok, Thailand. Her experiences teaching across cultures have inspired much of her writing. She holds a BA in Creative Writing from Hampshire College and an MA in Writing from Northern Michigan University.

Helen Mondloch, as a freelance author, has written some 85 feature articles and investigative reports on a wide variety of historical, literary, and human-interest topics for more than a dozen publications. She also published a readers theater play titled, *An American Breeze: A Whirlwind Theatrical Tour of American Literature*. Mondloch is currently about to retire after teaching high school English in Fairfax County, Virginia for more than 30 years.

Curtis C. Morgan taught at approximately sixty schools across Australia and New Zealand as a relief teacher. The teachers he writes about in "The Wrong Sally" — remembered across six decades — shaped his understanding of what it means to leave a mark on a student. His work has appeared in *Mother Earth News*, *Responsible Statecraft*, *Drift and Dribble Miscellany*, *American Bee Journal*, *Reckon Review*, *Futurist Letters*, and *Hooghly Review*. He lives in Falls Church, Virginia.

Eve Morton is a professor living and working in Waterloo, Ontario. When not teaching classes on media studies and LGBTQ representation, you can find them reading tarot at a local market or stocking their occult library in Woodstock, Ontario. Find more at @Mysticmorton.

Richard Newman taught creative writing, world literature, composition, and public speaking for many years in Indiana, Missouri, The Marshall Islands, Vietnam, and Morocco. He recently retired from Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane, Morocco, mostly because of students using AI to generate essays, stories, plays, and even memoirs about the family watching grandmothers exhaling their dying breaths in hospice although there is no hospice in Morocco.

Larry Ollivier spent thirty-five years teaching composition, creative writing, literature, and theater at both the college and high school levels. He studied in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston with Edward Hirsch and the late great Cynthia MacDonald. Retired, he now lives in Southwest New Mexico.

Brian O'Sullivan teaches composition and rhetoric, as well as literature, and is chair of the first-year and transfer seminar program, as well as former writing center director, at St. Mary's College of Maryland. He has been teaching academic writing for almost 30 years.

Josh Pearce taught summer writing classes to middle school kids for a company that was so unprepared it didn't even provide writing supplies. He also volunteered as a writing instructor for incarcerated youth at the county juvenile detention center, where each pencil had to be inventoried because they could be used as weapons. Find more of his writing at fictionaljosh.com.

Kenneth Pobo is a poet from Media, Pennsylvania. He is retired from teaching English and creative writing at Widener University. Nowadays, he writes and gardens. He has a new book of poems out called *Raylene And Skip* (Wolfson Press). His work is forthcoming at *Meetinghouse Review*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *January Review*, *As It Ought to Be Magazine*, and elsewhere.

Francine Rubin is a stay-at-home mom to three young children. She previously worked as a college writing instructor and academic support director. Her debut full-length poetry collection will be published next year by Vine Leaves Press. She is also the author of three chapbooks, and her poems have appeared in over 100 publications.

Pervaiz Salik has taught English to Cambridge International O level standard for 14 years to students as a second language. While teaching poetry, his haiku was selected and given an honorable mention in the Robert Speiss contest.

Carl Scharwath is a poet, photographer, and writer whose work has appeared in more than 180 literary journals worldwide. Carl has published several books blending poetry and photography, exploring the connection between language and imagery. Based in New Smyrna Beach, Florida, he is active in community arts and education, teaching accessible poetry workshops and supporting emerging writers.

Dale Scherfling is a fulltime writer/poet and a creative writer and photographer instructor. He is a former newspaper sportswriter, editor, and photographer and retired U.S. Navy photojournalist. His work has been accepted by The Monterey Poetry Review, San Diego Poetry Annual, Chiron Review, Mangrove Review, Letters Journal, The Blotter Magazine, 25:05 Magazine, Discretionary Love, Writing Teacher, Third Act Magazine, Yellow Mama, Close to the Bone, Flash Phantom, Dispatches Magazine, Five on the Fifth and Oddball Magazine. He is the recipient of three U.S. Army Front Page Journalism Awards and is also a college lecturer and instructor of photojournalism, photography, and music.

Timothy P. Shea is a writer and educator who has taught writing for 37 years with students from grade 4 through graduate school. He currently teaches graduate and undergraduate writing courses at five institutions, including in China! In Spring of 2026, he spent ten weeks as a substitute teacher at an urban middle school. Immersed in the daily chaos, courage, and quiet struggles of sixth-, seventh-, and eighth graders, he began writing poetry to honor the students, teachers, and staff who showed him the profound humanity thriving inside the school's walls. These are three of the poems he created for this collection.

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.

Dan Tricarico is a retired high school English teacher who lives in San Diego, California, and he is returning to submitting poetry to journals after a long hiatus. His previous publications include *Exquisite Corpse*, *Main Street Rag*, *Mudfish*, *Pearl*, and *The San Diego Writer's Monthly*. He is also the author of four teaching methods books including *The Zen Teacher: Creating Focus, Simplicity, and Tranquility in the Classroom*.

Sally Vogl, after retiring from teaching visually impaired students, earned a creative writing degree, then taught poetry in California prisons for five years. In each class meeting, students analyzed and discussed published poems. These served as models for students to create their own poems for the next class. Sally also partnered with a local university to create a chapbook that featured her students' poems.

William Walsh is the author of twelve books: poetry, novels, literary scholarship, and interviews. He is a professor at Reinhardt University where directs the undergraduate and MFA creative writing programs. He is the editor of the *James Dickey Review*. His novel, *Haircuts for the Dead*, was recently published to rave reviews. His scholarly book on Flannery O'Connor will be published by McFarland in the fall 2026.

Mary Ellen Webb has been a high school English teacher for more than 20 years, following a career as a newspaper reporter and editor. She credits her beloved high school creative writing teacher, Mrs. Huffine, for inspiring her to keep writing after she'd told Mrs. Webb that a poem she'd written about a hideous umbrella stand shaped like a dancing boot was hilarious.

Y. B. Young is an independent writer whose concise speculative work is shaped by teachers who treated revision as an act of attention rather than correction. That approach continues to influence Young's interest in short fiction built around care, constraint, and practical hope.

Julia Rose Ziegler is a current MFA student at The New School in New York City. This piece is dedicated to her late English teacher, Bill Lynch, who taught her that reading and writing prepares you to tackle life's greatest obstacles, even death. Her pursuit of a master's degree in writing is with the ultimate goal to teach high school English just like Mr. Lynch.

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