



TEACH. WRITE.

A WRITING TEACHERS'
LITERARY JOURNAL

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Teach. Write.
A Writing Teacher's Literary Journal

Volume I, Issue 1
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Katie Winkler ~ Editor

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An Unexpected Dedication

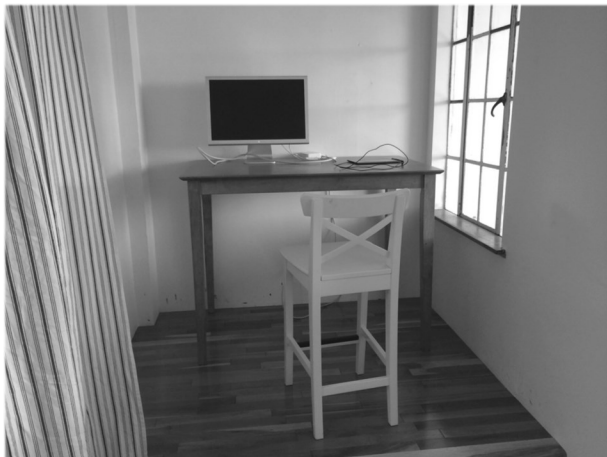
I didn't plan for the first edition of *Teach. Write.* to be a memorial issue, but as happens so often in my life, something bigger than my little plans took over, and I learned long ago to just go with the flow.

So I dedicate this first issue to two great teachers and writers—Kathryn Stripling Byer, once poet laureate of North Carolina and long time English professor at Western Carolina University, where I received my master's; and Melody Lindsey, one of my former students at Blue Ridge Community College in Flat Rock, North Carolina, who later became a fellow teacher and writer as well as a dear and trusted friend.

When I conceived *Teach. Write.*, I never dreamed that poet Brenda Kay Ledford, also a graduate of Western, would submit her poem “Mountain Sisters” in memory of Kay Byer. I had no inkling that Elizabeth Jennings, Melody's friend, and mine, would suggest writing a tribute to Melody and use one of Melody's own writing prompts to produce the poem cycle “Sensing Blue” for the journal's Write Your Own feature.

Structure is important. Planning, drafting revising, editing, too, but going with the flow, that's what I love most about writing, and teaching, too. Don't fight it—something unexpected, and beautiful, is bound to happen.

Katie Winkler



Mountain Sisters

In memory of:

Poet Kathryn Stripling Byer

Brenda Kay Ledford

The syrup mill perfumes
a fog-choked morning,
sunrays break through poplars,
the rain crow's mournful solo.

The Blue Ridge Mountains
hover over the Tuckasegee River
meandering through Cullowhee.
Time creeps in the coves,

The past unfolds
as a mountain poet
spills words as a Crazy Quilt
unraveling on the page.

Sisters united in spirit,
sunrise to sunset toiling
to care for their families;
isolation as a yoke.

The painful beauty,
a chilled breeze;
the mountain woman grasps
her black shawl.

To My 7th Grade Algebra Teacher,
Mr. Cardine
Abigail Warren

Of course I was shocked
when you asked me to babysit
your two-year-old twins,
so you and Mrs. Cardine could
go Christmas shopping. I,
who spent that year
in and out of the vice principal's
office,
smoking cigarettes behind the gym,
thrown out of school for my
foul mouth,
even the science teacher, Miss Beauchamp,
wouldn't leave me alone
with the Bunsen burners,
and you?
You set a place for me at your kitchen table
where the twins sucked up
spaghetti like worms,
I did, too
and we all laughed;
and you left me there,
sitting in the rocking chair
between two cribs
holding your daughter, Annie,
and all I could think about
was that you knew
you really knew
how safe they were with me.

The Teacher Taught

Stephen O'Connor

Some memories are so simple, I wonder why they have stayed with me all these years. I remember, for example, an evening near Christmas. It must have drizzled over the snow before the temperature dropped; its surface appeared glazed, as if covered in white glass. The multi-colored Christmas lights on the bushes in front of our house cast long streams of green, red, blue and orange light across this shimmering surface. I crunched across the snow, bearing aloft a wooden broomstick that was no longer connected to a broom. My head was full of Greek mythology at the time, and so it seemed to me that I held not a broomstick, but a long spear of Pelean ash, tipped in bronze. I was Achilles, and my challenge to Hector was this:

Remember every valor of yours, for now the need comes
Hardest upon you and you had better be a spearman and a bold warrior.

And every time I flung my stick-spear, it skittered clattering far over the glazed snow. I ran after it, crashing across the frozen field, leaving footprints eight inches deep, blowing clouds of white vapor into the chill night, until my mother called me in from the December darkness for dinner in the warm kitchen with the family. There are many scenes like that in my memory, or in my heart, and I could write about them all day, but now, from time to time, these fond childhood memories seem to clash with another scene I recall.

It was while teaching an ESL writing class in Lowell, Massachusetts, perhaps recalling the vivid scenes from my own back pages, that I asked the class to write about a happy memory from their childhood. The students at that time were mainly Cambodian, and one of them sat for a while with a blank, uncomprehending face, while the other students began to write. I assumed that he hadn't understood the assignment, but when I sat down with him to explain it again, he said simply, "I don't know what to write because I have no happy memories."

"Oh sure you do," I persisted, "think of some special place, for example, that you enjoyed. There must be some time that you remember, when you were happy. Playing with friends? Your grandparents' home?"

He interrupted my explanation. “Do you know what I remember from my childhood?” he asked. “The smell of blood. Did you know that blood smells? I remember the soldiers putting cigarettes in the mouths of the dead people, and laughing at them. They killed so many people. I have no happy memories.”

Our roles were reversed, and the teacher was taught. I sat, stunned by his words, like some Pollyanna forced to consider a grim reality, and learning once again that old lesson: never assume. Unthinkingly, I had been projecting my own wistful recollections of a New England boyhood onto a young man who had fled a genocide.

Homer wrote that Zeus has two urns, and doles out from them good and evil days to each mortal according to some Olympian whimsy. Certainly, the joker who deals our cards can have a macabre sense of humor. And so, at some point in your busy day, pause to remember those simple Saturdays when you jumped in piles of fallen leaves, when you fished with your father in a running brook, when you listened to your mother singing as she drew a tray full of oatmeal cookies out of the oven, ran downstairs on Christmas morning to open presents under a glowing tree, or read *David Copperfield* deep into a summer night, falling asleep to the chirp of crickets. Remember those good days, whatever they are for you, and don’t ever forget that it was only the luck of the draw that you have such days to recall.



The Rule of Apostrophes

Elizabeth Jennings

It's simple

The instructor seemed sure of this. As if
she had no doubt. As if the rule
 (for apostrophes)
had been settled long ago

One of two things only

The students slouched, sat attentively, snuck
a look at their cell phones. Quiet

One of two things only.

She said it again.

Wondering how it could be so hard
to comprehend. It was such an easy rule
in the scheme of things.

One of two things only.

An apostrophe is never
used to form a plural, never.

She repeated and waited for a response
Watching the sea of eyes for acknowledgement.

One of two things only

When you see an apostrophe you know
right away. Something's been
left out
Or something
belongs to somebody

Those are the two things:
Omission and possession

One of two things only

Could it be that in front
of her eyes the students were fading
Bit by bit, falling
Apart, dragged off by someone or something.

She raised her voice again
One of two things only

The Waiting Room

Brian Longacre

The plastic plants that looked like they needed watering. The framed pictures on the wall that the office supply catalog called art. The fish tank. The inoffensive, gender specific magazines: sports, design, decorating, Newsweek. The waiting room, where people called “patients” waited. And waited. Waited until they were called and acted surprised and pleased to be personally named out loud among others who were not being called, as if the nurse was a bartender who knew their name, as if they had won something, as if a nurse ushering them back to another room to wait some more was a win. The waiting room. Full of waiting and people becoming patients.

Marco sat stiffly. Upright. On the edge of the chair. His work clothes were still new and clean, and his shirt had two patches: “Ace Heating and Cooling” and “Reggie.” They said they were ordering a new shirt for him, but it was customary to give a newbie an old shirt until he proved himself more than a paycheck. Marco held his wallet and his breath. The last time he had been to the doctor was to pick up a girlfriend who was pregnant, which was only a few days before he found out that neither she nor baby was his. He didn’t like being touched or told. He didn’t like smart people. And the lady at the desk smiled too much. He hated offices, and he could smell himself. Then, the air conditioner kicked on, and he could hear that the ductwork was loose in the ceiling, and he helped him to know that they were wasting so much money on poor seals from shoddy work. “Typical,” he thought to himself and leaned back in the chair.

Lorraine felt more alone than she had in all sixty-seven years, more alone than when her half-hearted husband unmarried her, more alone than when cancer and chemo together smothered her mother like a plastic bag and a pillow, more alone than the night she stood beside suicide in the snow barefoot and broken at the gravesite of her only child. Those alones and countless disappointments all watched silently from the shadow as spotlights centered on the clipboard on her lap, illuminating the blank space of the one line she couldn’t complete, the one line whose blank would swallow her, the one line that made

her wonder why she should bother fighting at all....the one line, Emergency Contact, for which she had no one to answer.

Mrs. Marguise arrived thirty minutes early for her monthly appointments. She greeted the receptionist with a loud, Southern “Hi, darlin’” no matter who or how old the person was. Then, with a louder, more Southern “Sure Sweetheart” she chose the seat that she assumed was the least used, farthest from the magazine rack, farthest from the restroom. She always placed her large, faux leather purse -- today’s was Crimson to match her shoes, her “ruby red slippers” Mr. Marguise called them -- on her lap, which she hugged as a place to rest her arms and make her belly feel flat but as a way to protect her valuables or so it appeared to anyone else. She was small, 5’1” and always around 100 lbs, always since high school, which was six ten-year reunions ago.

After Mrs. Marguise secured her seat and her purse, settling in like a mother bird, but with enough make-up and color to be assumed a male bird, she simply looked around the room looking for eye contact, and when she found it, she smiled brilliantly, with all of her teeth and make-believe joy. Her goal, her mission as she liked to tell the ladies at Mossy Branch Baptist Church, was to make the world a better place by smiling people straight to Jesus. But the young guy in blue across from her and the woman staring at her clipboard two seats over wouldn’t look her way, and she wondered if she would have to speak, wondered what she would say.

Sissy, somehow, flung open the door while holding a half-dressed baby boy and a phone, scurrying in and up to the window, apologizing loudly over the receptionist’s “good morning,” which was clearly a wasted sentiment. “Am I too late?” she asked in exaggerated anguish after she had finished a flurry of partial sentences about the traffic and her kid and his stupid school and her “sorry ass boyfriend who can’t do a goddamn...”

She took a seat like she took fast-food, flopping into the chair across from the uniformed guy who smelled like a man. The shirtless baby boy, who seemed used to the thrashing, was quiet but alert, stunned perhaps, by the tornado that must have swept him from sleeping minutes ago. Sissy was not her real name, but that’s what everyone called her, and everyone called her. She caught the working guy looking at her shirt, her loose-fitting tank top that said, “Use Your Hands” in big letters over “Big Jim’s Lobster Shop.”

He was wondering if her “sorry ass boyfriend” was the father of that baby, but she smiled back at him because he was quiet, he was there, and he had a job, a good one, with a company that embroidered his name on their shirt. She said, “Traffic sucks.” He nodded something of an approval, then stared at the fish tank.

A nurse opened the door: “Evelyn Marguise?”

“Hey darlin’.” She got up quickly and walked across the waiting room, smiling towards everyone, happy that her name was announced, like she had won something.



Hardwired

Neil Slevin

I never imagined
a summer would shape
how I think and feel
from minute to hour,
week to year,
being me would be
a full-time job
from which I'd often
need unpaid leave,

I'd spend life
living for others
even though the
concept terrifies me,
that thought of
loving someone else
when I don't even
like myself yet
knowing I feel best
trying to fix a soul
that isn't mine,

when I live to inhale
their every breath
to the point I forget
to take my own
until the instant
I remember, they
cannot but know,
I am the one
who's broken,
I broke me.

The Encounter

Oil on canvas by Remedios Varo

Kenneth Pobo

I open a box and one
of my old selves stares out.
I thought she had died,
but here she is,
half mocking me, tenderly
touching my hand. My day
had been ordinary,
cleaning cat boxes,
watching a *Dark Shadows* rerun.

I expected to go to bed
and be the same as I was
last night, all the last nights
for years. Then the face,

not in a dream,
but here, on my table,
I think I'll disappear into it—

perhaps a stranger will
set me free—
If I want to be free. I might
prefer to stay. I could've
kept it closed. No,
I had to open it. I'm glad
and a little scared.

Replica or Not

John Michael Flynn

Janet knew names of painters in the Uffizi: Titian, Raphael, Domenichino. She knew of paintings by Perugino called *Holy Family*, and *Madonna del Cardelino*. She moaned, heartbroken, when she learned that the Uffizi and the Pitti Palace were closed. All museums in Florence ran holiday hours. A week after Christmas, which meant a week after their departure, the museums would open again. This came as both disappointment and surprise, and it occurred to Casey that in the American working life, a period of rest and piety had become a concept that smacked of the medieval. Only the anti-Christ closed retail operations during Christmas.

It was Janet's turn to whine. She'd been raised in Philadelphia. Her father was a lawyer. Fluent in Spanish, she had a bachelor's degree from Georgetown. "I really wanted to see some art. What's wrong with these people? Talk about a missed opportunity."

"There you go again," he said. "*These* people. Their museums aren't privately owned."

"Let me complain, will you? You do it all the time."

Casey apologized. Trying to sound sympathetic, he said he understood her disappointment and thought Florence felt cramped, bringing out a contentious energy in them both. He didn't believe what he'd said, but he knew Janet would agree with him, which she did. She also went along with his suggestion they keep walking and looking, since the city itself was a work of art.

Using her guidebook and a small map, Janet led them to the Palazzo Vecchio, where a replica of Michelangelo's *David* stood in the place where the original had once been. In the center of a cramped square surrounded by dirty brick and concrete walls, it was blackened in places with splotches of soot and streaks of runny pigeon guano.

"Not surrounded by scaffolding," said Casey. "Not like in Rome. And he's always open."

"But it's so dirty." Janet sounded glum. "And a replica. Not the real deal."

"So the perfect man is disappointing?"

"He's not. Am I right?"

"I have no idea."

"He is true, though. That's what he is. There's something larger than life about him."

Casey smirked. "You women are impossible to please."

Janet snickered at his comment, which startled him. For the first time in Florence he hadn't annoyed her.

She asked, "Tell me something, Case, is *David* what every boy wants to be, or what every boy already is before knowing it?"

He didn't like being referred to as a boy. He pondered this, hoping to please Janet, wanting to get it right. "Maybe a man like this is so perfectly made he can only exist in an artist's dream."

"Who taught you so much about art?"

"You did."

They shared a laugh. Casey felt relieved and energized. For a change, he'd said the right thing. They were the only people in the square and it was quiet enough to hear the pigeons cooing.

Janet nosed around the statue, guidebook in hand, reading as she circled the statue, careful not to touch it. She said as if lecturing him, "This is *David* before he went into battle. It says another sculptor, Donatello, sculpted him after he had slain Goliath. Hmm. That's interesting."

"It is," said Casey. He'd never seen Janet so vulnerable, so much a tourist and he thought the role fit her. She wasn't nearly the bucket of hard nails she liked to project herself as in public. In Rome, she'd been impossible. He quipped, "We might as well enjoy ourselves."

Janet offered an airy nod, nose in her guidebook as she kept circling the statue.

Casey thought Florence quiet in a way that American cities, even in his native pastoral Vermont, seldom were. No airplanes overhead. No roar of dis-

tant freeway traffic. The city was shut down for the holiday. All life that stirred did so behind closed doors in family kitchens and in churches. A holiday meant peaceful recuperation, prayer, traditional meals and conversation with visiting relatives and neighbors. Not hare-brained dashes to crowded shopping malls.

He also liked that he'd started to notice such smaller details. "I think I could live here," he remarked.

Janet had heard him and she nodded, but her comment proved she was on a much different wavelength. "It's amazingly accurate," she said. "A shame we can't see the real one, since *David's* shape is a kind of poem, a part of the earth, not a dream. Out here in the elements it changes just like the rest of us. By rain and sun and wind."

"Sounds arty to me but I like it," he said.

The idea of beauty fascinated him. There would come a day when as a film director he'd have to choose actors based not on talent alone but on the shape of face and body. He envied Janet. She projected beauty in her own way. She had money and a well-rounded education and, as she'd put it, choices. She had intellect and a passion for learning, yet she showed a practical, decisive and confident side. She'd also developed the habit of speaking with her hands as if she were a daughter of the Piedmont.

She said to him, "It doesn't matter whether *David* is made of stone or water, because he still continues evolving. Even in stone, there's a sense of motion. I'll tell you why he was made. Not because of any dream of perfection, no, such dreams are dangerous. *David* was made to show us that we're solid and earthbound, and that hundreds of years from now people will still be able to see that growth in all of mankind starts and becomes inevitable once we see how simple we are."

Casey, listening, blew a sigh. The girls he'd known in high school had never talked like this. "Man, that is out there. So let me get this straight. You're saying we just keep learning, whether we want to or not?"

"And in that way we're perfect, yes," said Janet. "That's the myth. That's how we kill the giants. We trust our perfection." She beamed at him. She paused. A flash of doubt reddened her face. "Or something like that. But we're still flesh and bone and we should celebrate that, too. You know, our own form. It's beautiful when you think about it. I'll tell you something else, too, before I forget it. I think that sometimes the dream of mankind is just beginning."

"You're starting to lose me," said Casey. "Exactly which dream would that be?"

"Perfection, of course." She rolled her eyes. "Isn't that what we're talking about?"

"Inner perfection?" He risked sounding facetious. "Or outer?"

"God isn't even close to being revealed in us," she said. "We have so far to go."

"That's pretty heavy for a business major."

She sneered at him and remarked sourly, "What do you know about it?"

Not much, he thought. He felt pleased no one had heard their conversation. It was preposterous, but he loved Janet for it. All her barriers had come down. She moved with the confidence of a woman comfortable in her element. She'd made the best of enjoying a replica, having missed the museums she'd looked forward to. They'd met on a train, made friends, and agreed to travel together until, she'd said, they got sick of each other.

He doubted that would happen. He loved Janet's mind, her passion and seriousness. He loved the way she made him think and really hear himself and how she chattered like an elitist intellectual. He loved that only the two of them, at mid-day, occupied the square.

Later that night, lying in a tiny bed in a tiny *pensione*, Casey asked himself if other men had ever felt the whirl of emotion he'd experienced upon seeing *David*, replica or not. It stood as an idealized representation that sought to define the purity of the male form. Which male of the species had been sculpted more sublimely? He didn't exist. He needed to be created. So did that mean life imitated art, or vice-versa? He couldn't say.

Like many of Janet's pointed comments, the statue had brought him to an uncomfortable affirmation of his ignorance. He couldn't, if asked, define perfection or beauty. He couldn't define art or why he felt so drawn to it. Art seemed to him allied to a dexterous alluring energy that informed and elevated people. At the same time, it spoke of benevolence, love, good and evil, the coarse and refined. Art examined extremes of human and animal nature and the kingdom as a whole. It couldn't just represent the surface. It needed other elements, as well: mystery, hidden energy, honesty. Art couldn't be afraid of being wrong.

The sculptures and paintings and even the best architecture he'd seen possessed a sensual darkness, a kinetic force and a willingness to try to capture something essential, even at the risk of failure. A true work of art spoke from

beneath what it offered on the surface, as if from out of a dream, the same dreams he'd often had. The kind of dreams he chased and jotted down and imagined one day as films he'd direct.

Art in this way, like a dream, could be dangerous. The greatest of it didn't just stand for an idea or concept or topic. Nor was it a rote lesson on morality or a grandiloquent exercise in form; it was simple enough to be inexplicable and magical. It spoke of life in all its forms and yet it was elusive, too, asking more questions than it gave answers. Finally, it was a masterwork of technique, composition, color and choice of materials held together by the tissue of the human heart, out of the white spaces in the artist's quiet and perhaps tortured soul and mind.

If he'd learned anything about art, it was that he'd been wrong about it and he'd known nothing. He could spend the rest of his life trying to unlock its mysteries.

As Janet had said, the sculpture of *David* represented a myth. This myth led to the truth that all creatures born of earth, sky and water possessed an infinite beauty not he, not anyone else, would ever fully comprehend. It was an expression of *not* knowing and it was worth striving for. Art had a way of harnessing beauty and absence of knowledge into a measurable familiar form. It defined life's irony. It helped the raw and untutored, persons just like him, to see that no one knew everything about the infinite human condition and it was okay not to know. Humanity had managed to survive and would live on in spite of the consequences of its own cruelty and ignorance.

Like a memorable film, art didn't just entertain or allow escape; it helped the lost as they sought ways to see. This idea so thrilled Casey that he made a promise that he would never forget it. Once he realized his dream of becoming a film director, every film he made would open eyes and minds and hearts. It would show form and simplicity, and it would communicate. The feeling of being opened, thrilled, scared and enlightened was the lasting entertainment factor, after all. It's what every viewer took home after leaving a cinema, theatre or museum.

Rising and falling with his thoughts as if he floated upon the sea, Casey, all of eighteen- years-old, fell into a dream full of sunlight. He felt gratitude. Air filled his body, and he floated out of his bed on a carpet of vapors, and he watched each wall around him slide away, not to be touched until they disappeared. He felt courage. He'd seen so much of *Italia* in so little time, far beyond expectations. He'd been changed. He would go back to Vermont and his uncertain future, but he would never be the same there.

He lay alone, brimming with light as he thought of all the art and the beauty in the world that he was yet to discover. In this state of mind, he spent his first Christmas Eve away from his family and friends and all that he'd once defined as home.



Where Were You Last Night?

Tom Hooker

“Where were you last night?”

Mom stands at the kitchen counter amid the aroma of fresh coffee, wiping her hands on the pink cotton smock she wears over her navy business dress.

“Nowhere,” I say. “I was asleep. In bed.”

“Don’t give me that.” She puts a glass of OJ and a Pop-Tart on the table in front of me. “I got up to pee and checked your room. I saw your empty bed, and the open window.”

I feel my face burn. “I went for a walk.”

She shakes her head, jiggling the blond hair she’s pulled back away from her face with a Scrunchie. “I don’t know what to do with you. You’re just like your father. Thank God we didn’t have any more children. Here I am, stuck trying to make a living and raise a kid all by myself. Now you go sneaking around, making me spy on you.”

Way to go, Mom. That’s a real self-esteem booster. She’s been this way ever since Dad skipped out last year. No, before that, even.

I guess it began when Dad started acting funny. He’d go off somewhere for a day or two, without telling anyone. When he came back, Mom tore into him, and he sat there in the living room chair, not even listening. His head would be cocked to one side and he’d gaze off into space, like he was hearing someone else. Then, one day last year, he was just gone.

Mom’s still ranting. “No child support, nothing. I don’t even know where the son of – where he is.” She looks at her watch. “I’m going to be late. Hurry up and finish your breakfast.”

In the car, she picks up where she left off, about me this time. “Now you’re out catting around at night. Probably buying drugs, hanging with a gang, getting some girl in trouble...”

Suddenly I wonder, did she “get in trouble” sixteen years ago? Am I that trouble?

Mom’s not the only one who’s had it bad since Dad left. Mr. Burns, the assistant principal, has had Mom in for conferences because of my “acting out” in class and because of my slipping grades. More trouble for Mom there, too, I

guess. Having to make excuses for me. Plus, Mr. Burns gives me these looks and promises to “make things easier for me” if I “play along.” Fat chance.

Mom’s still going. “...eat too much. I swear, I’m going to have Doctor Carmichael check you for a tapeworm. I must say, though, you haven’t gained an ounce. I wish I had that teen-age metabolism of yours. By the way, you haven’t seen that tan blanket, have you? I could have sworn I washed it...”

I was out last night, my saying I went for a walk wasn’t technically a lie. I’ve discovered how to pop the screen on my window and crawl out that way. I walked behind a couple of restaurants, scoping out the Dumpster divers. I checked under the bridge that crosses Mud Creek.

I’d almost given up when I found him crouching in a cardboard appliance box behind the hardware store, wearing a rotten blazer and grimy jeans. I crawled in there with him when a police cruiser drifted by, making rounds.

“Hey, old man, you hungry?” I asked. “Here’s a sandwich.”

He stared at me through crusty eyelashes. “Are you real? I can’t tell anymore.”

Off his meds. But I knew that when I found him. “Yeah, Dad. I’m real. Here, take this blanket. It’ll keep you warm.”

Mom pulls to a stop in front of the school and faces me. “Look,” she says. “I’m going to ask you again. Where were you last night?”

I give her the eye. “I told you. I went for a walk. I can’t help it if you don’t believe me.” Then I open the door and leave.



Something to Count On

Kenneth Pobo

Skip spent almost \$4000
on a custom-made gun.
Raylene barely spoke to him
for a week—he shrugged.
With Skip, you pound the red
brick wall of a shrug,
no way to tear it down.

He has no friends,
but many buddies
who like Cal's Tap
and sports and laughing
at wives, girlfriends,
or if they have no one,
blame women. A good friend,

Skip holds the gun
with tenderness, only
uses it on special hunts.
It stays in the basement
under lock and the key
to Skip's heart.

Nascar Dad

Tom Hooker

The press called this one of the most competitive seasons in Monster Energy Cup history, and Dave Warren was right in the middle of it. He was on the bubble, and needed a win badly to lock in a spot in the Chase. The number 36 car had run well at Pocono on Sunday, but had lacked that last little bit of *umph* necessary to take the checkered flag. Dave had to settle for watching Joey Logano cross the finish line ten car lengths ahead of him.

With a break in the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup series over the weekend, Dave and his crew grabbed the chance to bring the GulfTex Ford back to the shop in Catawba. Not one to stand around outside the winner's circle and wait for some pretty girl with a ribbon draped across her chest to walk up, put the champion's cup in his hands and give him a kiss, Dave intended to grab it with both hands.

The hauler brought the car in late Monday night. Piston Bramlett, the team's chief mechanic came in Tuesday morning, before his sausage biscuit hit the bottom of his belly, to pull the engine. Dave watched as Piston connected the power plant to the dynamometer so he could search for that elusive extra half-horsepower of energy, the key that might bring Dave the checkered flag at Dover in a week and a half.

Piston started the engine. At idle it made a low, throaty rumble that sounded like the purr of a satisfied lion. Dave saw movement from the corner of his eye and turned to see his wife approach, wearing a pair of form-fitting designer jeans and a green and gold T-shirt with the Gulf Textiles logo – GulfTex, his sponsor. She settled an orange sound-suppression headset over her ears.

"Have you seen Ricky?" Carla's frown made little reversed parentheses between her eyebrows.

"He ain't here." Dave turned to watch his engine crew.

Piston opened the throttle and the engine's purr escalated to an excited shriek as its RPMs approached nine thousand.

Carla touched Dave's shoulder to draw his eyes. When the noise got this loud, lip-reading trumped listening. "Nita said he was out all night, and he hasn't come in this morning, either."

Dave blinked. "Is his sister babysitting him, now? Look, he's sixteen. Old enough to take care of himself."

Piston throttled the engine back before turning it off, and the quiet was like whiskey. He would spend the next half-hour studying the test results before making a few adjustments and testing again. Over in the next bay, someone dropped a tire iron. The steel on concrete *clang* echoed in the now almost silent garage.

Carla looked around the shop, as if hoping to find Ricky asleep in one of the corners. "I may only be his step-mother, but, I'm afraid Ricky's gonna get himself in trouble."

Dave offered his aw-shucks grin. "Yeah, he was born raising hell. He takes after his daddy." He grew solemn. "Look, I know he's kinda wild. But he's just a growing boy trying to have some fun. He'll straighten out when the time comes."

"Well, he got picked up for shoplifting while you were off at Darlington, don't forget that. And that wasn't oregano in the shoebox I found in his room last week. Ricky's asking for help the only way he knows how, and you're not listening."

A chirping cell phone two AM is rarely a sign of good news. Usually it's a drunk who dialed a wrong number or someone who says, "Pack a dark suit. The funeral is Thursday."

The phone chirruped three times while Dave fumbled for it. Beside him, Carla buried her head under the pillow.

Dave grabbed the phone.

"What?" Screw phone etiquette. "Whoozis?"

"Bobby."

Dave pictured a dark-haired man in a Piedmont County Deputy Sheriff's uniform, his former high school football teammate and best friend.

"I picked up Ricky tonight. He was joyriding in a stolen car."

Dave swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. "I'll be there directly."

A half-hour later Dave pulled his F-150 into the parking lot of the Law Enforcement Complex, a fancy name for the county jail. During the twelve mile drive from his home in Ivory, he'd had the highway to himself. It gave him a little time to think. Maybe Carla was right to be worried.

Bobby met Dave while he posted bail.

"They'll need a few minutes to get him processed for release," he said. "You want some coffee?"

They walked to the break room, a small area with a wobble-legged wooden table and four ladder-back chairs. A cork bulletin board plastered with thumb-tacked safety notices and hand-printed "For Sale" ads hung on the wall. A yellowed map of Piedmont County, North Carolina was Scotch-taped beside it.

Dave aimed his butt at one of the chairs and plopped into it.

Bobby filled a Styrofoam cup with dark coffee and handed it to Dave, who held it under his nose and inhaled. The aroma invigorated him. He took a sip. Bobby poured his own cup. He shook imitation creamer into the black decoction, then tore open a blue pack of imitation sugar and dumped it in, too. Dave noticed the subtle bulge in Bobby's waistline. He was paying the price for spending too many hours guarding the steering wheel of a police cruiser.

Bobby sat at the table, stirring with his ball-point pen. He lifted his cup and blew across the liquid's surface, his eyes focused on the little ripples in the brown liquid, avoiding eye contact. He sipped his coffee and cleared his throat, sounding like a car with starter trouble. Finally, he met Dave's gaze. "I need to talk to you about Ricky."

"Okay."

"I've been deputy for almost twenty years. I've seen enough kids go bad to recognize the signs. If something doesn't change, Ricky's going to wind up at Morganton."

Dave tried to smile, but the thought of his son in the state penitentiary skewed his face into a grimace. "Aren't we having this discussion a little late?"

"I think there may be a chance to plead his charge down to a misdemeanor." Bobby picked up a paper napkin and began shredding it with his fin-

gers. “The car belonged to a preacher over at Buttermilk Springs. He might be persuaded to go easy on the boy, and the DA will probably go along. Plus, Ricky’s so young he might catch a break from the judge.”

“Well, that’s good news.”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t make the problem go away. Ricky’s been trouble looking for a place to happen for a while now.”

Dave scratched his chin. “Ricky has been trouble since the day he was born. When his mama left me, she got custody. But he soon wore her out and she sent him to stay with Carla and me. Carla tries, bless her heart, but Ricky’s too much for her, too. I just wish I knew what made him that way.”

“I think I might have an idea about that.”

“Really, what?”

Bobby leaned back in his chair. Light gleamed off the silver star pinned on his khaki uniform shirt. “I’m going to say something that may be hard for you to hear.” Bobby’s expression reminded Dave of Mr. Houston Brown, the undertaker, when he wore his funeral-face. “A few minutes ago, you said Ricky’s been trouble since the day he was born. Is that true?”

“Of course, it’s true. That’s why I said it.”

“Is it possible that Ricky’s been difficult because of the way you and his mom treated him to start with?”

Heat suffused Dave’s face. “If I didn’t know you as well as I do, I’d shove that star down your throat. Are you saying Linda and I abused Ricky? That’s a lie!”

Bobby lifted his hands to shoulder level, palms out. “Hold on. I know you and Linda would never beat Ricky, but other things happen. Neglect can cause someone to act like Ricky has, too. A moment ago, you talked about how first Linda and then Carla couldn’t handle Ricky. Where were you during that time?”

“Driving a damn race car. Where do you think?”

The deputy spoke in the calm voice he’d been trained to use with irate people. “So while you were driving a race car, and while Linda was busy trying to save a failing marriage, Ricky was left out. He probably felt scared, watching your relationship fall apart. Maybe he thought your divorce was his fault, a lot of kids feel like that even though it’s never true. So, he made some trouble, just

to get attention. Only that didn't work, so he made some more trouble. Now that's all he knows how to do."

"So now you're a psychologist. Deputy Dawg, the shrink."

"You know how it is around here, even best friends don't stick their noses in each other's business. It wasn't my place to say anything. But tonight, when I had to put those cuffs on your son, that made it my business."

Ricky said nothing when Dave drove eastward out of town, away from home. Dave was quiet, too. The only sound in the vehicle was the mournful song of a country and western singer on the radio who told all who listened about how, "my wife ran away with my best friend, and I sure do miss him."

Dave turned off onto a small side road about halfway between Catawba and Gum Tree. The F-150 followed the track into a large copse of pine trees. They reached a barrier, a steel gate stretched across the road. The Ford's headlights illuminated a large sign in the center of the gate. "PIEDMONT COUNTY PARK; OPEN AT 6:00 AM; CLOSE AT 9:00 PM."

Dave engaged the four-wheel drive and cranked the wheel to the right. He picked his way through narrow openings between trees, the sound of his tires muffled by a bed of pine needles. Once he'd gotten around the gate, he returned to the road and drove to the lakeshore, parking on a knoll overlooking the lake.

As soon as the Ford stopped rolling, Ricky opened his door and vaulted out. He strode over and sat on a picnic table, his butt on the table and his feet on the built-in bench seat along the side.

Dave watched for a minute through the open window of the pick-up, listening to the tick of the cooling engine.

He clambered out, opened the storage compartment behind the seat, pulled two cans of Budweiser and a Coke from a cooler stored there and walked over to sit beside his son. He handed Ricky the Coke.

The teenager stared at the Coke can for a moment, then tossed it into a nearby garbage can. He went to the F-150 and brought back his own can of beer. Dave knew he should challenge the boy, but he had come out here to talk, not fight. He decided to let the matter pass.

Stars glittered in the satiny blackness of the clear night sky. It had been a long time since Dave had been out in a night that hadn't been turned to day by sodium vapor lamps. Across the lake, the descending moon cast a silver carpet toward the two. The moonlight painted a chrome border around Ricky's silhouette. His belly was flat. His biceps firm. He was at that stage of physical perfection which occurs to only a select few and only in their late teens and early twenties. Dave found it impossible to look at him and believe anything bad – physical, mental or emotional – existed in him.

“What happened tonight, Ricky?” Dave asked.

Silence.

“I mean, playing a Halloween prank or a practical joke is one thing, but you stole a car. That's serious business.”

Silence.

“Bobby Crawford says that, if you're not careful, you're going to wind up at Morganton.”

“What business is it of yours -- or Crawford's?”

“It's our business because you stole a car.”

It seemed Ricky's sixteen year old logic couldn't find a chink in that argument. He resumed staring across the lake.

Dave took a swallow of beer. “Talk to me. I need to know what's going on with you.”

Ricky looked back at his father. “That's funny. You've never needed to know before.”

“That's not fair. I've always cared. It's just that I'm busy. Running a racing team is a full-time job.”

“You mean a full-time life. All you do is work on that car or cuddle up to some sponsor. That's why you're on your third wife now...and counting.”

Dave tossed his empty Budweiser can into the garbage and opened his second. It made a *spush* sound when he pulled the tab. “I don't deny that. If you cut me, I bleed motor oil. I piss gasoline. When your mom and I married, I told her that racing was my life, it came first. She said she was okay with that. Only she wasn't. I think she believed she could change me after the wedding. By the time you came along, she decided to quit trying and split.

“Now here you are laying that same old guilt-trip on me. Saying it’s all my fault that you stole a car because I didn’t chuck my life and slobber all over you like a good daddy.” Dave jumped off the table and heaved his beer can toward the lake. The two of them watched it spin slowly as it flew, leaking an amber trail of liquid behind. It splashed into the lake, flushing a covey of concentric circles in the water.

Ricky whistled. “You really are pissed. There was still beer in that can.”

It was Dave’s turn to be silent. He stood, hands on hips.

Ricky drew a deep breath. “You’re wrong about Mom. She didn’t leave because she tried to change you and couldn’t. She left because she didn’t understand just how much racing owned you. She told me. When y’all married, she bought your story that racing came first. But she believed there would be something left over for her. She believed that maybe eighty percent of your life would go to the racing, and she’d have twenty. By the time she discovered that racing had all of you, it was too late. She was just a spectator, nothing more than a groupie with a wedding band on her finger.”

An owl hooted in the distance. Ricky cleared his throat. “You’re wrong about me, too. I’ve never expected you to drop everything to dote on me. Don’t forget, I didn’t have any say about being your son. I just wanted you to pay a little attention – to do something so I would know that ‘Daddy’ is more than just a name somebody goes by.” He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe you could have told me a bedtime story once in a while, when I was little.”

Dave snorted. “Now I know you’re jerkin’ my chain. You don’t know me very well if you can see me sitting on the side of your bed and telling you about ‘Robin Hood and his Merry Men’ or some such.”

Moonlight glistened on the moisture in Ricky’s eyes. His voice was low, barely audible. “No, I wouldn’t have expected you to tell me about ‘Robin Hood.’ But I would have liked to hear about Dave Warren and his Daytona 500 win – or some such.”

Ricky waved his arms in disgust. “Oh, what’s the use? Don’t worry about me. I can find my own way home.”

He turned and walked away.

Dave watched his son disappear into the darkness.

Southern Gal

Tamra Wilson

The summer I turned eight, we traveled from Southern Pines, North Carolina to visit relatives in Illinois. One evening, Connie—Mama’s older sister, the one she actually liked—agreed to take me to her house. But when I piled into the passenger seat of her Nash Rambler, she said that she needed to stop by her folks’ place to drop off a mess of string beans.

“There’s more beans coming on than we can possibly use,” she said.

I made a face. I had no interest in visiting my grandparents. They weren’t a part of our life. Mama had avoided them since she’d left home at seventeen, and I had no reason to doubt her judgment. According to Mama, her Daddy, Pug Vannoy, was allergic to work, mean and no account, and her mother, my grandmother, put up with his sorry ways. I wondered how Mama and Aunt Connie had escaped being like them. Mama said your destiny was all in who you married. Daddy was an Army captain which explained why we were living in Southern Pines next to Fort Bragg.

Aunt Connie pulled into their gravel driveway and hoisted the heavy sack from the back seat. “Sit tight. I’ll be back in a jiff.”

Rain filled the ruts in muddy splotches. Several sets of sheets and towels sagged from the clothesline with large drops sliding off corners of the wet laundry. Five people still lived in the house and all of them were too lazy to rescue their wash.

This sort of thing irked Mama. Her kitchen was as neat as Betty Crocker’s, and from what she had said about these relatives, I didn’t care to meet any of them. She had never taken my brother Billy and me over there whenever we’d come to Wakefield, Illinois which was Daddy’s hometown too. During previous visits Mama would take a slow pass to remind us how lucky we were not to live there. She’d drive like a peeping tom in slow motion, testing to make sure her spine had enough starch to keep moving.

The Vannoy house was worn clapboard with a back section covered in asphalt shingles made to look like bricks. Weeds had taken over the margins of the yard like scribbles in a messy coloring book.

Curtains shifted at the front window. I slunk down in my seat to study the dials and buttons on the dash. Aunt Connie's clump of keys dangled from the ignition switch. Chrome letters spelled "AMBASSADOR" on the glove box.

Suddenly a screen door snapped. Two gangly girls bounded off the back porch across warped two-by-fours that served as the sidewalk. They looked as if they shopped at the Salvation Army in plaids and flower prints and stripes mixed together. The girls had to be Mama and Aunt Connie's youngest sisters--Ruth Ann and Lassie. I'd seen their school pictures at Aunt Connie's on previous visits. The taller one was a carbon copy of what Mama must have looked like at fourteen—dark brown hair and a string-bean body—and the younger one couldn't have been twelve. I figured she must be Lassie because her blonde hair was thick like a collie's mane.

They approached the car. The older one snapped gum. "You're Charlotte's kid, ain't you?"

"She doesn't look like relation to me," the other one said.

I stared straight ahead.

"She must be deaf and dumb," Lassie said.

"More dumb than deaf," the older one reached to poke my arm. I spun around.

The other one giggled. "She can too hear. She heard you plain as day."

"Ya'll stop."

The dirty-blondie laughed. "Hear that? Y'all! She's a Southern gal."

The older girl leaned on the car door trying to appear friendly. "I heard they have lots of niggers down where you come from. You know any nigger boys?"

My lips puckered. "Quit."

"Quee-ut," Lassie mocked. "Ha! She sounds Southern all right--probably from Dog Patch down in them hills and hollers. *Y'all* know Lil Abner?"

“She lives further south than that,” Lassie said. “Mama says they live down there in North Carolina with Andy Griffith and the Darlings.”

“Darling hillbillies you mean.”

“Moonshiners,” Lassie added.

They both laughed.

I wished Billy were here, so it would at least be two against two. He was eleven and knew how to put such girls in their place. Daddy would have told them to shape up or ship out. All I could do was I squint back. “Y’all are stupid.”

“Are you calling me stupid? Take that back, you little snot.” Ruth Ann lunged at me.

I grabbed the door handle, but she was too quick. The door flung open and I tumbled to the muddy gravel. One of my knees had struck metal. The bruise smarted terribly.

“Look at the little piglet wallowing in the mud,” Ruth Ann sneered. “Yep, she’s Harlot’s kid alright.”

“Charlotte the Harlot,” Lassie teased.

I’d heard that nasty word from church though I didn’t understand what it meant. I wondered if these girls had ever gone to church. No Sunday School teacher would put up with such behavior, especially from girls who were so much older than me. They’d tell such girls to behave, maybe shame them into thinking Jesus and God were disappointed in them. That’s what Mama had told me for as long as I could remember. “Jesus and God aren’t happy with the way you’re acting, Kelly.”

Even so, I wanted to kick them in the shins, slap their smart mouths.

I pushed myself up from the oozing rut, the black slime stuck to my knees and sandals. The heels of my palms were bruised. I wiped them on a clump of grass.

“I’ll bet you don’t know what a harlot is, do you?” Lassie said.

“She don’t know what that means. She’s too dumb,” her sister cawed. “You got any more rhymes for us, Southern Gal?”

I pulled some courage up around me. "My name's not 'Gal.'"

"It ain't? Then what is it?"

I sat stone-faced, looking straight past them, toward the side of the car that read AMBASSADOR, just like the glove box. I wished the door would somehow open itself and let me crawl inside.

"I'll bet it's Bertha... or maybe Gertrude," Ruth Ann laughed.

The screen door snapped again. Aunt Connie charged toward the car. "What's going on out here?"

"Missy had a little accident," Ruth Ann said.

"I fell down," I said. Aunt Connie looked at me, then over at her sisters. She pulled a handkerchief from her purse and wiped my hands. "Is this how you treat company? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves." She helped me to my feet. "This is Kelly. She's our niece."

Ruth Ann gave her gum a hard snap. "We figured."

"She's from down South," Lassie said.

"That's right, a thousand miles away. That's a lot further than either of you have been." Aunt Connie finished wiping my hands, then wadded the hanky into a ball.

"So? Being from down South ain't nothing to be proud of," Ruth Ann said.

"How come we never seen her before?" Lassie said.

"Because you never got lucky until now," Aunt Connie stepped over to the clothesline, careful not to get her shoes muddy, and yanked a wet towel off the line.

"Hey them's clean. You can't use those," Ruth Ann said.

Aunt Connie squared her jaw. "Watch me."

She gave me the towel to wipe the rest of the dirt off my knees and elbows. I handed the dirty towel back to Ruth Ann, who threw it to the ground as we backed out the driveway.

“Those girls are an embarrassment pushing you into the mud. I’ve never seen the like.”

I knew she was exaggerating. She’d seen the likes of them all her life. “They didn’t push me. I fell,” I said weakly.

Aunt Connie looked over at me. “You like that story, don’t you?”

I bit my lip so I wouldn’t cry. I wanted to prove that I was more grown up than her sisters.

She backed onto the street and shifted to first gear. “Why did you get out of the car? What did they say to you?”

“They called Mama names. They said she was Charlotte the Harlot and the next thing I knew, one of them grabbed the door and I fell out.”

She clicked her tongue. “Oh Lord! What a day this has turned out to be!”

I examined my hands. Purplish spots were forming at the heel of both palms. “Why are those girls so mean?”

She shook her head. “You never met their father.”

I’d heard it all my life. Pug Vannoy was the meanest man on earth. I could imagine his bulldog face with a pot belly, a comic-book monster. No wonder Mama was ashamed of her family. And then I remembered how I was related to those sorry girls—bad luck of the draw.

Mama had been right driving on past their house, but I couldn’t help but wonder why she had tempted herself to be seen or maybe have car trouble in the street and have to face them. It was a test that she had passed so far, but this day Jesus and God had sat up there in Heaven and watched me get tormented and let the door open and watch me fall out. They hadn’t lifted a finger to help until Aunt Connie came out and caught them.

“What’s wrong with being Southern?” I asked.

Aunt Connie patted my knee. “Don’t mind them. They aren’t worth worrying about.”

But of course, she was wrong. They were family. We couldn't pick them, but they were our own flesh and blood. They were no doubt as bothered by me as I was about them, with our uneven ages and question marks about how we fit into the same family. We didn't want to own up to one another.

If it hadn't been for Aunt Connie and her string beans, I might never have come face to face with the people inside that rundown house. I might have wondered forever why Mama had chosen to leave. I'd thought she was being trifling and spiteful—uppity even—to slink by and never stop and visit.

But now I understood why she couldn't bridge the gap, couldn't kiss and make up. She had to keep driving.



Eponymosity

Tom Hooker

Clark Bar, Boyd Park

Webster's Dictionary

Hendersonville, Raleigh

Walgreen's Apothecary

Buildings, bridges, mountain passes
serve to honor some by
placing names before the masses.

History will neglect me,
this is my fear,
that I will forgotten be
unless my name is recorded here.

In the interest of eponymosity
before this narcissistic world I flee
won't you please name something after me?

Teaching Poems

David Radavich

Kudos

Sometimes words
just sing

and fly away
like great colored birds

and all you can do
is stare

at their wings
and their command of air,

the way
such departures glide

by the sudden
sacrifice of the scribe

whose only sword
is wind

and a becoming
mind

traversing
tides.

The Art of Mathematics

For my mother

For her there's never
an excuse.

You can always find
a solution,
though sometimes
the number's negative
and sometimes
merely imaginary.

It's a matter of finding
the right equation,
making the two
halves meet,
adding to, subtracting
from, dividing
till you
win your bet.

Reality squared
by dream.

Mathematics is
the art of the possible

in this world
and the next.

My Advice

There's such a thing
as too much story.

Too many details.
Too much justification.

Why you did
what you did
or didn't,

what you should've done
or wished you weren't,

who made you do it,
and in just
that lame fashion.

Then there's the color
of that old pick-up—

I'm wagerin' green,
maybe red—

plus some boots
and a tattered dress—

prob'ly both—

and a whole lot
of livin' not done right.

That's not much
poetry, so I can't help
wonderin'

if maybe you picked
the wrong genre

for your life,

maybe you should
start usin' some images
and metaphors

and see if that
won't perk up
your love picture—

at least some—

and keep you company
those long nights

you're drinkin' hard,
rockin' those knocks

and howlin'
like a dyin' dog

in need
of some *rhyme*.

Fast-Food Teachers

The French fries you get
are meant to be
the math lesson,

hamburger with cheese
American history,

the chocolate shake
a mix of English
and biology.

We get what we pay for,
a diet of illness
lasting into future
generations,

these young minds
infarcted
with the trans fat
of our culture.

The savings we can
pass on to corporations
who enjoy their arugula
and lattes overseas

with Swiss bank accounts
resolutely healthy
in gold vaults.

Bridges

Bill Vernon

In my office I grabbed the textbook, two manila folders of material, and hurried to class, eager, anxious, driven by an idea that had nagged me for months, ever since last spring, and this was the perfect day to try it!

In the classroom, I let the carillon bells clang eight times, then counted heads. Most of them drooped as if the students were still very sleepy. Everyone was present, plus one extra. The unexpected man was sitting in back, shuffling papers across the desk top before him.

Damn!

I released my enthusiasm, flooding the unwanted surprise with what sounded to me like a rapturous greeting. "Good morning!"

Two students managed hellos. A couple of others looked up and smiled. Several groans rumbled up to the front of the room.

"Please excuse me for one moment." I went to the rear and, when Green looked up, said, "Edward, may I talk with you in the hallway?"

The man followed me out into the hallway to a window where I could see his car facing mine in the staff parking lot, which was still 90 percent empty. There wasn't a cloud out there, but inside, thunderheads billowed around our reflections in the glass.

"Why are you in my classroom?" I asked.

"To observe you, Glenn."

"Administrators at this college ask for permission to attend a colleague's class. It's a courtesy."

"Prior notice is the chairperson's prerogative. As you know."

"That's not the way it's done. This visit is discriminatory for that reason as well as the fact that you don't visit class meetings of anyone else."

"As a matter of fact, I visited three others recently. Of course, they invited me for mentoring purposes."

"Oh yes, I know you visited our three new instructors, but that's as required by departmental procedures, which, you may recall, I helped to write. You most certainly were not invited to my class."

"Let's just say that you, in contrast, require my attention for other reasons."

Beyond my grimace, which appeared on the pane, traffic curled back from the turn-off to Fifth Street where the four-story parking garage slowly engorged commuters. Green's aftershave lotion gassed me so I fought a desire to sneeze by squeezing out, "I ought to assign an in-class writing exercise and let you sit there watching pens in motion?"

"Oh, that would certainly benefit your students."

"As if you care about students. This is damned exasperating."

Thoughts of alternatives to what I had planned came to me unbidden. I'd taught the course for well over twenty years so a change to a more usual lesson was easy. But that possibility was also easily rejected. What a cowardly temptation!

I turned, putting us chest to chest and eye to eye. "This is not a good day to come, Edward."

"And why is that?"

"I have something new planned. We'll be leaving the room and going elsewhere."

His eyebrows raised and lips curled up. "Ah, we're being creative today. Then it's actually a good day to visit. Despite your antipathy, I could make a useful suggestion or two. Something that might help you improve your instruction."

"Don't bullshit me. You're looking for things to justify that indefensible evaluation you gave me."

His lips, already tinted blue, tightened. "I merely notified you of a possible unsatisfactory rating. The actual evaluation occurs next month. As the memo stated, any evidence you present could raise my judgment to the satisfactory level. Perhaps today your innovations will impress me."

I shook my head. "Your presence will not provoke me into a serious faux pas if that's what you're hoping for. Besides, my attorney says I have grounds for a lawsuit if you go through with your threat, and maybe grounds enough for punitive damages. Your visit here today should help any lawsuit we file."

He frowned.

"Do what you want, Edward."

"Thank you, but I don't need your permission."

I brushed past him, walked back into the classroom, and sat on the instructor's desk. Edward returned to his original position.

"This morning we have a guest. Dr. Green is observing our class. So let's be sharp. Okay?"

Heads turned toward the great one, who smiled, dropping onto his seat. There were return smiles, a couple of titters.

"Today, the weather gods are with us. I feel sharp. Hopefully, you do as well. I'll collect Theme Two soon. Before that, let's see if I can get you thinking. Please turn to page 426 in our text."

"That's not on the course outline, is it?" Wendy Chambers asked. "Should we have read it already?"

"No, but it ties into our readings and will prepare you for Theme Three. Okay? Are we all there?"

I waited until books quit thumping and pages stopped turning. Of course, James Whitacre continued fumbling in his backpack, struggling simply to extract his text. That could go on for another half hour. He probably didn't have his assignment ready, either. Once again. Oh well.

I went on. "Now, to yourselves, read the famous poem you see there while I read it aloud."

I recited it slowly in toto, then repeated, "'Earth has not anything to show more fair:/Dull would he be of soul who could pass by/A sight so touching in its majesty.' Got the picture? Can you imagine that man on that bridge?"

I paused until everyone looked up at me.

"Even though Wordsworth wrote this in 1802, isn't what he said true today? Here in Dayton right now? Basically, he means that a sunny morning can make an ugly city like his beautiful. And you must believe that London could be very ugly in 1802."

From a back corner seat came "Dayton can be very ugly in 2015."

Several people laughed.

"Thank you, Dudley," I said, then described London's thick smog, caused by the burning of coal, and the general effects of poverty on the inhabitants. I pointed out the sonnet's descriptions, a few implications—the whole thing taking ten minutes, tops—then assigned Theme Three.

"Your next writing should define beauty and react to the experience we are about to have. Your essay is due on November 10. Now, please take all your possessions and stick together. We're going outside onto the Fifth Street Bridge. While we're walking there, give me your Theme Two, which is due today."

We trooped outside, and the students' chattering seemed to have an excited edge their voices seldom had in class.

"The air smells good," Abraham Washington said, exaggeratedly expanding his chest, inhaling.

"We ought to do this every class," Miss Chambers said.

I grinned back at her. "Yeah, it's a nice change, isn't it?"

Our tribe swirled along the sidewalk, quickly covering the block and a half to the bridge while I collected the essays due and stowed them away in a folder.

We passed plastic orange barrels that flashed yellow lights on top, excluding vehicles from going over the bridge, and at bridge center, the apex of the concrete arch, we stopped.

"What do you see?" I asked. "What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you feel?"

Everybody talked at once. The conversation bubbled for several minutes. Then we retreated inside ourselves, leaned against the thick steel rails, and the morning settled inside me. Maybe inside them also.

"What are we supposed to do?" someone finally asked. I paused dramatically, looking over our small crowd, making sure everyone was listening, then asked them to look around and observe.

It was such a splendid day, I felt triumphant just having brought them there. The white sun hung like a huge host above a tall building east, slicing shadows, blazing off every object it touched, including the slate-colored Great Miami River, flowing beneath us.

Four students—two were members of our school's basketball team—waved their arms, then took imaginary jump shots, and their shadows performed gymnastics on the moving surface.

Although it was rush hour, we stood in a pocket of solitude. Traffic noise from I-75 and the city streets around us resembled distant wind, which we heard but didn't feel. A jackhammer yammered

I glanced at my watch and noticed we were within ten minutes of our allotted time. The students circled me, and I reminded them of what Wordsworth had written, how he'd felt and thought. I recited the poem again.

"Think about beauty," I said. "Have you experienced it here today? If so, why? If not, why not? Were you 'dull...of soul,' as the poet called it? Do you have to be in a good mood to see it? What is beauty? Your essay should use a good definition, plus your experience here, and elsewhere, to explain what you think about beauty. Use examples, comparisons and contrasts, whatever it takes. For next class, bring a definition of beauty from a dictionary, plus your written notes, observations, and ideas. Do a rough draft as soon as you can. But the final revised essay is not due for ten days. Okay?"

Then the class dispersed.

"Unorthodox," Edward said, reminding me of his presence.

I gazed at the dark, flowing liquid as we left the bridge. "Was it effective?"

It was a stupid question, but hell! It was the question perpetually on my mind. In terms of teaching, it was also a question never clearly answered.

"There wasn't much instruction," he said.

"More is coming in our next class sessions." I glanced at him. He glowed in the sun like an apparition: tan vest, amber suit, yellow handkerchief

in breast pocket, brown loafers, short, blond, neatly combed, thinning hair, hawk-like nose, sallow cheeks.

I swallowed, fighting an impulse to throw an arm over his shoulders and kiss his forehead. Instead, I said, "Well, I have another class now. Coming to it?"

"Afraid not. I have a class of my own to teach. May I see what your students write for this assignment?"

"I suppose so."

As requested, he received copies of the essays, and a week after that I received his written answer to my question about effectiveness. The subject I'd assigned was too "esoteric" for English Composition 103. My presentation was too unstructured, too "oral." I needed to "take into account student's diversity, their individual interests, aptitudes and learning styles." In addition, the assignment "strayed too dramatically" from the master syllabus. All of this came without referring to one student essay, to one fact.

In red ink I circled the errors, marked the pronoun SP for misspelling, AGR for the disagreement between pronoun and antecedent, PV with the caption "illogical use of the singular" to begin with, noted that generalities need to be explained in terms of concrete examples, added, "By the way, have you ever heard of academic freedom?" then made a copy to keep in my files.

The next day dawned pre-Halloween crisp.

When I drove into the faculty parking lot, Edward was emerging from his new white Volvo. I waved to hold him, parked, got out and handed him the annotated memo.

My rusty, smudged, dented, fifteen-year-old, yellow Ford Escort looked insulting next to his spotless car.

He scanned my smart aleck comments, and his cheeks reddened, catching fire in the morning sun beautifully.





Write Your Own

Editor's note: Each issue of *Teach. Write.* will feature a work inspired by a teacher's own writing prompt, along with an explanation.

The Color Prompt: A Tribute

Elizabeth Jennings

The prompt for my *Sensing Blue* poem is to describe a color without using the sense of sight. I imagine it's been around for a while, but I first heard of it from Melody Lindsey, a member of my writing group who died unexpectedly more than five years ago.

As a writer, Melody had the ability to mingle the darkness and joy of life in words that were incredibly spare. What I admired most about her was her merciless approach to her own writing—she would not allow false hope or optimism to slip in where it did not belong. At the same time, she had a strong sense of irony that somehow gave even her bleakest pieces a bit of spark and she could capture the beauty of a fleeting moment and make it shine.

But Melody was more than a writer, she was a teacher. In this role, she served as a mentor to me. In some ways, this may seem surprising because I grew up in an academic environment and automatically went on to college and graduate school. Melody, on the other hand, did not come from a culture or family where college was a given. In fact, she started community college relatively late in life and, with encouragement from her instructors there, went on to get her bachelor's and master's and then came back to the college as an instructor. Whereas I enjoy teaching part-time on occasion and in different capacities, Melody found her perfect niche as full-time faculty, student advisor, creative writing coach, and advocate. She bonded strongly with students and could relate to them in a way I will never be able to.

Melody was both an advocate for Appalachia, where we lived and taught, and an admirer of other cultures and progressive ideals. Her perspective enabled her to serve as a bridge for students who came from a variety of backgrounds. She helped me find the balance between nurturing and challenging and was a wonderful sounding board.

I have always believed that a writer's words are able to form a connection with readers across time and space, but when Melody died, I experienced this connection in a way I had not before. There is a small but distinct part of me that exists because of Melody, because of the stories she wrote that I read and the stories I wrote that she read. This poem is a tribute to that very real connection. I hope some of its mystery comes through.



Sensing Blue

Elizabeth Jennings

I.

Most colors are easy.

the first flake of snow falls out of the
sky

Green is mint or fresh-mown grass

Yellow—sliced lemon

It's the smell hidden in February's twilight,

Brown--chocolate simmering on the
stove

with the Earth frozen and asleep

But Blue—

Blue is never easy

But deep underground

the seeds are changing

and that smell of change

To smell Blue, you must wait

rises up to meet the falling snow

At times, it will seem that

you must wait forever

It is the essence of hope.

It is blue.

But then, finally--

in the too quiet darkness before dawn--

the scent of blue comes drifting by

It's a cold smell--

like the smell right before

II.

This I do know.

Blue sounds like a bell

Like the pure, single chime

Of a bell

Some say it is the bell of a church

The Church of God's Wildflowers on a Summer Morning

Sending its peal through the air.

Or it could be the bell of a tower in a medieval city,
the one that strikes midnight
in a half-forgotten fairytale

It might even be a sleigh bell
heard in the distance of a dream,
a clear sound, yet soft,
a sound that wouldn't wake a sleeping baby

It could be any of these
But it sounds like a bell
Of that I am sure.

III.

What else is there to say?

How Blue tastes?

How it feels?

What it is *like*?

The only thing I know is this: First you must close your eyes

Breathe. Don't think.

Be still and know.

Blue spreads out forever

as deep as it is wide

as far as it is close

as hot as it is cold

Blue is the sky—

it is the point where the sheltering atmosphere

meets outer space

Blue is the center of the flame

and the vastest part of the ocean

Blue rises from the depths,

lights its fingertips beyond the stars

and silently breathes on the fire in the earth

A bell sounds.

The seed breaks open.



Contributors

John Michael Flynn taught his first class in 1986 as a TA at the University of Michigan, where he studied under the late George Garrett. He is currently an adjunct in the English Department at Piedmont Virginia Community College but has taught at high school, adult, college, ESL and university levels from Los Angeles to present-day Russia and Eastern Europe. In March he was Writer in Residence for three weeks at Connemara, the Carl Sandburg home, in Western North Carolina. To learn more about his published work and to sample it, visit his web site, www.basilrosa.com

Tom Hooker has taught creative writing for the Blue Ridge Community College continuing education program (2009-2011) in Flat Rock, North Carolina, and for the past ten years has facilitated the Blue Ridge Writers Group that meets at the Henderson County, North Carolina Parks & Recreation Department.

Elizabeth Jennings has worked with the written word for most of her life or at least since launching a day camp newspaper when she was in elementary school. Since then, she has written for newspapers and magazines as well as corporate communications. Her short fiction has appeared in *Prime Number Magazine*, *Apalachee Review*, *Ladybug Magazine for Children*, and other publications. In 2013, her first novel, *The Button Collector*, was published by Cup of Tea Books. As a teacher, she enjoys coaching students in the process of gaining confidence and maturity as writers and empowering them to claim the written word as their own. She has served as advisor for a girls' middle school literary journal, director of an adult literacy organization, and instructor for both curriculum and continuing education classes at the community college level.

Brenda Kay Ledford received an MA in Education from Western Carolina University and degree of highest honors in Creative Writing from Stratford Career Institute. She taught creative writing at Murphy Elem. School. Ledford is also a published writer. Her work has appeared in many journals. Her poetry book, *CREPE ROSES*, was published by Aldrich Press and won the 2015 Paul Green Award from NC Society of Historians. Ledford blogs at: <http://blueridgepoet.blogspot.com>.

Brian Longacre, says “As a writing teacher, I enjoyed awakening the student who had spent years studying the minds of others through their writings but had not realized the joy of discovering their own minds and hearts through their own chosen words, words that carried textures and scents from the basements of their beings. Many of my students did not even know they had basements and that basements were places where houses kept secrets like memory chests, heirlooms, and Boo Radleys. And, all of us, have Boo Radleys in our basements.”

Stephen O'Connor has taught writing for over thirty years, at two high schools and five colleges, often in and around Lowell, Massachusetts, where he has had a chance to work with students from all over the world, including refugees from the Cambodian genocide, which is the subject of the piece included in *Teach. Write*. He has also published two novels, a book of short stories, and had other short stories published in numerous literary publications, most notably *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Houston Literary Review*, and *Aethlon*.

Kenneth Pobo has been teaching writing since 1977. He has taught mostly at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee; University of Tennessee, Knoxville; and, for the past 29 years, Widener University in Pennsylvania. He teaches many kinds of writing, both creative writing and composition, in addition to writing in English classes. “It doesn't get easier, he says, “If you want to teach writing, I hope you thrive on challenge. The rewards can be great: the student who feels less intimidated by writing, the student who surprises him or herself with new learning through an assignment. It helps if one has good writing colleagues too. It's fun and refreshing to share what other writing teachers are doing. Biggest challenge: grading--those piles have a way of growing.”

David Radavich has taught writing in various guises for over thirty-five years, and still, while in retirement, conducts workshops and leads discussions on a regular basis. He writes, “I have always loved the intersection of teaching and language, which is never a straight road but always leads to astonishing discoveries and not a little pain....The truth is, we are all learning—or should be learning—all the time. We tell stories, we listen to each other, we grow, we commune, we separate. Language is where much of that encounter happens, though much remains memorable in the heart and mind unsaid.

Neil Slevin is a 27-year-old writer from the West of Ireland. Previously a high school English teacher in the UK for four years, in 2016 he completed an MA in Writing at NUI Galway and is now pursuing a full-time writing career. His poetry has been published by *The Galway Review* and *Boyne Berries*, as well as numerous international journals, including *Scarlet Leaf Review* and *Artificium: The Journal*. His flash fiction has appeared in *The Incubator*. In addition, he co-edits *Dodging The Rain*, “a self-categorised blogazine committed to representing a variety of new work by emerging writers and artists across the artistic spectrum.”

Bill Vernon served in the United States Marine Corps, studied English literature, then taught it. Writing is his therapy, along with exercising outdoors and doing international folkdances. Five Star Mysteries published his novel *OLD TOWN*, and his poems, stories and nonfiction have appeared in a variety of magazines and anthologies.

Abigail Warren teaches, at a small, private college in Massachusetts, undergraduates who have been marginalized in the world of academia. She loves her fierce, determined students. Many are working full-time, taking care of kids or parents, veterans back from Iraq, or just plain poor. Her poem is about a math teacher who believed in her at a time in her life when others did not. Yes, she says, teachers do change lives. Her book of poetry *Air-Breathing Life* was recently published by Finishing Line Press..

Tamra Wilson's experience teaching writing is varied. In 2013, she was invited to present two workshop sessions at the Carolina Writers Conference. And, she was selected to serve as a teaching assistant for author Aaron Hamburger during her final residency at USM's Stonecoast Creative Writing Program in 2011. She also served as a writing instructor at Catawba Valley Community College's adult education program 1992-1994.

