

TEACH. WRITE.

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Going Up the Hill

This is my story. There are no explosions, no car chases, no exotic women. On the other hand, someone I trust told me it was important, so I thought I'd pass it on.

I'd been estranged from my father for almost twenty years. The exact reason? I think we'd both long since forgotten. We stayed angry out of inertia. Neither of us wanted to be the first to admit they'd been mistaken, yet I suspect we'd both been.

Then, disturbing information began to reach me. People who knew both me and my father told me that he was starting to have difficulties. His mind was not what it once was. He was becoming easily confused, and often forgot things.

I was stunned. My father, in my memory, was indestructible. To me, in my childhood, and even in my adult years, my father was a giant of a man. He was the man who knew everything. He was, even in some ways when we were opposed, my model of an honorable and just man.

I reached out, through others, to my mother. Her reply was simple, "Come visit."

That was easier said than done. I'd moved halfway around the world since I'd left home. Getting leave, booking travel, it all took time. It was almost two months later that I finally returned to my home town. In some ways it had changed, in others it was still the same small town, that had once seemed the whole world to me.

I stayed with an old friend and rang my mother. "Come for lunch tomorrow," she said, "I'll try to let him know you're coming."

The next day, just before lunch, I pulled up outside my parent's house in a rental car. It was the house they'd bought not long after get-

ting married, and the only home I'd ever known as I grew up. It looked almost the same, only shabbier. The garden, which my mother had devoted so much time to, looked unkempt. The paint was starting to peel in places. It had, simply, aged.

I grabbed the gifts I'd brought with me and started up the drive. As I passed the front room, I could see the top of my father's head. Despite his eighty years he still had a good head of dark hair. I briefly touched my balding pate and mentally cursed the gods or genes of hair.

In the past I would have simply gone around the back and in the kitchen door, but having been away so long it just didn't seem right. Nervously, like I was about to meet a girl's parents, I rang the front doorbell.

My mother greeted me effusively at the door and took the gifts I offered. She seemed the same, only somehow smaller. She walked more slowly, with a decided hesitation. Her hip, I knew, had been replaced several years ago.

She took me to the front room. My father was sitting in a comfortable chair, reading. He looked almost no different than when I had seen him last. The full head of hair, the strong face, the slightly distracted look in his eyes, a legacy of an old accident that had robbed him of vision in his left eye.

"Look, he's here," said my mother, a little loudly to my ears.

My father looked up from his book. He stood, a little unsteadily and shook my hand.

"Well, you're looking good," he said. "They must be looking after you in Taiwan, or the Philippines, or wherever you are."

"South China," I corrected him.

"And where's your wife?" he asked, looking over my shoulder.

"We divorced six years ago, Dad. I let you know about it."

A slight look of confusion, and even anger, swept across his face. Then, he was back to his normal self. "I hope you still keep in touch, for

the boy's sake.”

“It was amicable, as much as these things can be.”

“Lunch is ready.” My mother interrupted us.

“Well, can't keep mother waiting,” said my father, leading me to the dining room.

We dined. My mother's cooking was still my mother's cooking. Make of that what you will.

As we ate, my mother made most of the conversation. She asked me about my job, any woman in my life, the usual things mothers ask. My father limited himself to minor interjections as he concentrated on his food.

My father excused himself after lunch and I, as family tradition dictated, helped my mother wash the dishes.

As we finished, she said to me, “I've been talking to your father a lot about you coming to visit. Every time I mention it, he gets excited. Well, as excited as he does.”

I grinned. My father was very old school in that respect. Very stoic. Expressing emotion was not his strong point.

“He said several times he wanted to take you up the Hill.”

I was momentarily confused, then the years dropped away. The Hill. It was just behind my parents' house, not very big, more a rise than a hill, but it overlooked the railway tracks. My father was a great train fan and adored the Hill.

When I was a young boy, my father had loved to take me up the Hill. He would lead the way up the steep path, encouraging me to keep up, telling me not to be lazy, and occasionally offering his hand in the particularly difficult bits. When we reached the top, we would sit on the grass and watch the trains go by. My father would take photos of them and tell me all about them, where they had come from, where they were going. He would explain to me all about the cities they'd been through,

the foreign goods they carried, and what it was like where they were made. He'd never been to most of those places, what he knew came from what he'd read or seen on the TV, but he made it all so real to me. I loved listening to all these stories. He shared the world with me. I think that's where I got my travel bug from.

We'd sit on that hill for hours, watching the trains. He loved the trains and I loved his stories. In the warm summer sun, I'd often get a bit drowsy toward evening. I'd lean against him, feeling so safe and so secure. He'd put his arm around me and finish his stories before we'd set off home. Again, he'd set a good pace, but he'd always be there to help me down the hard bits.

Nights after we'd been up the Hill, I slept so well.

My mother saw my smile. "You remember?"

"Yes. I'd love Dad to take me up the Hill."

"I'll go and get him ready. You'd better pack some water for him. It'll be hot up there."

As my mother went to find my father, I grabbed a couple of bottles of water and slipped them into a bag.

He came, slowly, into the kitchen and spotted the bag. "What you got there?"

"Water. Mum says it might be warm on the Hill."

"She'd be right. You want to go up the Hill then?"

"Sounds like a good way to spend the afternoon," I replied, slipping into the old, easy-going way we used to have.

My father picked up a walking stick, I'd never seen him use one before, while my mother flustered around us, making sure he had his phone, and his hat, and anything else she thought he'd need. When she was satisfied, she kissed him on the cheek and sent us on our way.

We went out through the back yard. Like the front it seemed messier and less well kept than I remembered.

As if reading my mind my father gestured to the vegetable garden. “Excuse the mess. I just don’t seem to be able to get out to the garden like I used to.”

We reached the back fence, and my father opened the little gate that led out to the path up the Hill. We started up the path, but I realized we couldn’t keep up the pace we used to. Instead I walked slowly, offering my hand when I felt my father might need it. He’d always been a self-reliant man, but now he took my hand with relief and let me help him up. Soon he was panting, slightly breathless, but I knew by the look in his eyes he wouldn’t stop till he reached the top. I knew that look. I have it myself sometimes.

We reached the top, and my father lowered himself slowly to the ground. I sat beside him, enjoying the feel of the autumn sun and the warm grass, and sharing the water. Before I could talk, a train rattled past. My father, instantly, was alert, telling me where it had come from, where it was going, and many details about the hardware involved.

“Of course, there’s not that many trains going through here now,” he ended, almost apologetically.

I thought about what to talk about, with just the two of us up there. I’d thought we should talk about what had gotten between us in the past but decided not to. Obviously, it was no longer important.

Then I thought we should talk about him. He obviously knew his memory was not what it used to be. Maybe we should talk about it and what the future held for him. I started to, but then held my tongue. This was the Hill. This was a magic place. This was not for talking about such mundane things.

Instead we talked about other places. Occasionally, a train would rumble past below us, and my father would tell me all about where it had been and where it was going. The rest of the time I talked. Not about my job or the money I made. That was not important. Instead, I told my father where I had been, what I had seen. I told him about all those places he’d told me about when I was a child. I described the cities, the mountains, and even the palaces. I told him of the names he’d taught me as a

child, of what it was like to actually be there.

It seemed we talked for hours. I noticed the sun much lower in the sky, almost directly in our eyes. Then, I noticed that my father was leaning against me. How long he had been I don't know. I put my arm around him.

"I've missed you Dad," was all I said then.

"Likewise," was all my father said, but I knew he meant it.

"We'd best get going," he said, levering himself to his feet with his walking stick. "If we're not back soon, your mother will start to worry." We started down the Hill. I led, waiting in the harder places to help him down. Again, he was too breathless to talk, so I held my silence as well.

We entered the kitchen to find my mother cooking dinner. The sight and smells set my mouth watering. Again, my mother kissed him on the cheek and then asked, "Did you two have fun?"

"It was a good afternoon," said my father, "but I'm tired. I'll sleep well tonight. Let me know when dinner's ready."

He shuffled off through the house.

I watched him go and then asked my mother, "Do you think he'll remember this afternoon?"

She looked at me and thought for a while. "Honestly, I don't know. Maybe not, but that doesn't matter. He hasn't been up the Hill for years. I think that every time he did, he'd just think of you. Today you've given him something important. You've given him a wonderful afternoon, a chance to connect with better days. Don't worry about the future, just be happy with that."

I thought for a minute. I was.



Old Hill Farm

Sometimes I take a drive
up to that old hill farm
where I spent
the first ten years of my life –
ten years of living free.
Most of the trees are gone,
cut down long ago,
leaving bare hills and hollows
and empty fields.
In my mind I can see
the horses and cows
grazing on green grass
and walking out into the pond
to cool off
on a blistering summer day.

I can see my daddy
walking over the fields
and through the hills and hollows
coming home in the evening
after a long, hard day of work,
but happy to be free
and to be his own boss.
That old hill farm was his refuge
and his dream,
a dream he lived for just twenty years.
My daddy died in the Fall of 2004,
seems so long ago now,
but, then again,
just like yesterday.
That's how time always goes.

Many years have passed away
since I lived on that old hill farm.
I was never the same,
and life was never the same
after we left there,
and I don't think my daddy
was ever the same, either.
Dreams died when we moved away.
When I go back now,
I am haunted by the memories
because I know I can never
get that time or place back again.
Even the old farm house
that stood there for so many years
is not there anymore.

It stood empty and run down
languishing for a long time,
but it was still standing there,
though in a sad state of disrepair –
until soon after my daddy died,
and then it was torn down.
Coincidence?
I'll never believe that.
I cannot explain it,
but it's as if my daddy's death
marked the end of an era,
and that old farm house
where the happiest years
of my life were spent,
died when my daddy died.

The death of the farm house
also marked the end of an era.
I can't get my daddy back,
and that old farm house
is gone for good, too.
Yes, the end of something,
something significant –

the end of childhood,
of dreams and idealism.
the end of my father,
the end of the old farmhouse,
the end of a way of life,
and, in some ways,
the end of a part of me,
a part I'll never get back.

When I drive by the old farm place now,
I can still hear my daddy's footsteps
and see him coming home
in the evening, over the fields,
through the hills and hollows.
I can hear my mama's voice from the house,
see my sisters in the old porch swing,
see all the crops in the fields,
and the animals in the pastures –
but it's only a memory,
one that I'll always cherish
but one that will always haunt me
in missing what once was
and is no more
and can never be again.



When We Get There

we pull up to the farm and I can feel my husband
grow sad and tense in the seat next to me. The road turns into
a small gravel path that quickly disappears into thickets
of sticky motherwort and wild indigo, gentian and even
a few errant stalks of purple.

We get out of the car at almost exactly the same moment, me
struggling with the purse strap stuck to my armrest, him
struggling with whatever unspoken grief still remains from the funeral.
I point out tiny blue butterflies and noisy yellow birds to my daughter
ask her if she knows what their names are
even though I know she doesn't, she's only five. My husband
is already walking out to the house where his brother's car is already
parked
where his brother is already standing outside the front door, smoking a
cigarette.

Later, at the hotel, we argue about what we should do with the trash
piled up
inside the house, the beautiful piano covered in soot, the antique china
cabinets
that won't open because of all the rust. My sister-in-law wants the
piano, wants
to fight about it, even though I tell her the soundboard's cracked
it's not worth the haul. We fight about tractors frozen
still and silent in the barn, the milking machines with tubes choked
with mold,
the piles of newspapers and dirty clothes blocking everything but the
front door.
my daughter laughs when we tell her she can take anything she wants
from the house
that no one would stop her from taking a memento
from where her great-grandparents lived

she laughs because there's nothing there anyone would want.

Its Fall

I heard a rustle in the branches above.
I lifted my eyes to missing leaves
and watched as a hawk gave one simple shove.

My eyes followed the path— as if it were a dove—
of a body in flight then fall. I blinked.
I heard a rustle in the branches above.

This was a moment I'd only dreamed of.
How can a squirrel fall out of a tree?
That hawk killed a squirrel with one simple shove.

It had no time to reach. No saviors among
the skeleton branches. There couldn't be
a friend among foe in the branches above.

A wet slap on the sidewalk. I couldn't move
towards his white breathless belly. I breathed
my tears away with one simple shove.

I left before the birds began their mean
circle, before a gardener could scoop him up.
I heard a rustle in the branches above.
A hawk killed a squirrel with one simple shove.

What I'll Miss

I'll miss the sunlight
glistening off the snow-white gulls
soaring and gliding over Enid Lake,
then diving and dipping
in search of their daily bread
in the dead of Winter.
I'll miss the laughter of children
as they run and play,
in their own world,
in their own way,
full of innocence
and free of care.

I'll miss the leaves of red and gold
and the deep blue sky
of a bright October day,
the doe and her spotted fawn
grazing in the meadow
in the woods behind my home.
I'll miss the sight
of softly falling snow
covering the trees and fields,
hills and hollows,
the stillness and silence
of a snow-covered scene.

I'll miss music and poems
that move me to tears
or fill me with joy,
the smells of food
cooking in the kitchen
beckoning me in;
I'll miss the voice
of my love,
my dear heart,
welcoming me home,
greeting me with her sweet smile,
and hazel-azure eyes.

This is what I'll miss
when my ears stop hearing,
my heart stops beating,
my lungs stop breathing,
and my eyes close
for the last time.
This is what I'll miss --
all of this,
all of this,
and much, much more
when my sojourn here
is finally over.

Liz Hill

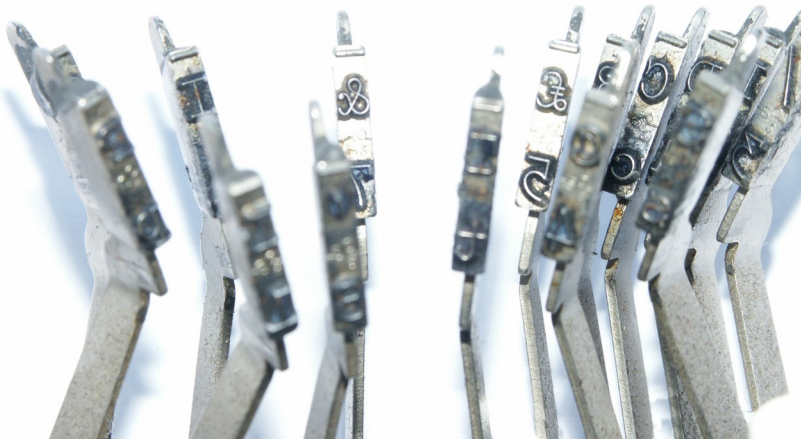
Paris Bird Market

Peacocks, pigeons, parrots, doves. Cacophony of squawks, songs, coos and cries.

A man in red pants shows off his prized parrot. “Amazing vocabulary! Attitude! Bird swagger!”

A young girl clings to her father’s hand. If she could, she would fling every door wide.

She understands cages.



Nico

The children and I left the Neolithic village with our torches and traveled through the ancient valley of our modern first-grade classroom. The morning rain gave the blue-uniformed coats lined up in the twenty identical cubbies a musty smell. This became a stinky swamp that needed to be crossed. We carefully watched out for quicksand. Our small merry band trudged through the skunk weed toward the window where science project lima bean plants grew. These plants became a lush jungle and where the class was encouraged to whisper and imagine the animals we might encounter here.

The city sounds of car engines and horns blared through the open windows, but for us, they were sounds that came from extinct animals we would never see. Up ahead loomed a green chalkboard mountain. The ascent required wide steps and some huffing and puffing to reach the top. The peak revealed a beautiful panoramic view of valleys, swamps, and jungles behind us and a vast desert and our destination up ahead.

"Oh no! There are strange looking storm clouds up ahead. It does not look like rain. What can it be?"

The children replied:

"Sand!"

"Chalk!"

"Jello!"

"Dirt! "

"Keep steady and keep moving. We are almost at the cave," I said.

The Sudden sandstorm arrived on the scene. Covering our faces with our sleeves we made sure to leave our eyes open to see the trail ahead which led to our destination. The mouth of a small dark cave stood in front of us. We decided it must be nighttime by now. The blinds were closed which plunged our world into the jet-black darkness. Squeals, laughter, and gasps erupted at the sudden change. The lights of the flashlights twinkled like stars in the safety of our cozy classroom. We remained quiet so as to not attract any animals who would follow us. The children were assured the torches would keep all the animals away.

The cave consisted of tables and desks pushed together into the center of the room. Taped black paper tablecloths around the entire table's edge enclosed the cavern. The group took turns crawling into the opening and moving to the far end. The class listened to a story about a family living in the Stone Age where one of the family members was a cave painter. I showed the children picture books of actual cave paintings and we talked about the images. What did we see? Why did we think these images were picked to paint? Who painted them? What did they use to paint the images?

For the rest of the morning, we occupied ourselves by crumpling construction paper, straightening it out and wrinkling it again. The crinkled paper gave the impression of uneven stone. The charcoal and brown pastels not only landed on their paper but also on their faces, clothes, and floor. I loved the creative mess. We remained busy and content.

The assignment focused on what humans needed to survive. Some children enjoyed copying the photos viewed in our cave and explained they needed the big animals for food. Other children drew their families, their dogs or random things like ice cream trucks and toys. One girl drew a supermarket with human figures holding spears while pushing shopping carts. Hours past this way before we walked down for lunch.

My neighbor and kindergarten teacher walked out of her classroom. Amy spun around, slowly taking in the newly decorated surroundings.

"Wow! Kelly, your kids are going to go insane when they see this. You're so creative. "

This kindness came so naturally. Amy was a tall, quietly competent, young woman, of sound mind and body.

"Thanks, Amy. Wait for me. Let's go get our mail and talk to Eve about our field trip idea before we pick up the kids from recess."

I took a picture of Amy in the hallway cave then put my materials back in the room before we walked downstairs together. The afternoon session began in exactly 24 minutes.

"I have a surprise for you," I said.

No one listened and a moment of chaos ensued. Amy's class stood still and ready to go. She whispered to me to do a transition activity. Sigh. I got their attention by using a transition technique I learned while getting my teaching degree. I intermittently clapped and patted my head. Simple magic. One by one the little ones did the same. They quieted down and formed a line. I repeated my previous comment about the surprise and allowed the whispering of guesses and predictions during our climb to class. Amy's class trailed behind us.

My anticipation grew as we drew closer. Turning left at the next end of the hallway would put our door into full view.

"Thank you for being such wonderful listeners today. You all worked so hard this morning and I hope you are proud of your work," I said.

They beamed as we turned the corner. I walked backward to see their expressions but became confused when impressions of horror replaced bright smiles. Amy's eyes widened then stayed shut a little too long. I turned with complete dread to see the sheer and utter destruction of our morning project.

This is what I saw. Drawings ripped from the walls, leaving the papers in shreds. The bats seemed to have vaporized because I could not see them anywhere. A light purple liquid covered everything leaving puddles and wet heaps of paper. I guessed the culprit shook a soda can and had it explode over the entire area. Paper families torn in half. Devil horns and pentagrams were scribbled on some pictures. Obscene images could also be seen on the drawings still relatively intact and facing up from the wet floor.

I felt sick and paralyzed with shock. The noises the children made brought me back to reality.

"Mrs. Perkins what did you do to my cave drawing?"

"Why did you ruin them?"

To my dismay, some children thought the monster who was responsible for this nightmare could be me. I told them about a surprise. The class rushed past me and tried to find their drawings. They were understandably angry and hurt.

I somehow herded them into our bright yellow classroom, with its calming familiar smells of tempera paint and play dough, but our illusion of safety was gone.

We sat on our warm blue diamond rug. I showed them the photo of the intact project I took on my phone where Amy was seen giving me two thumbs up. We took turns talking about our feelings, then I read them a story. To regroup, I started them on an individual silent reading session. I texted my principal, Eve Theos.

Eve informed me Amy had filled her in on what happened and Peter, the school janitor, was coming up to help.

Eve texted me back.

Eve: Mystery solved. Someone spilled the beans on a ninth-grade boy who was caught leaving paper bats on someone's desk.

Me: Not very stealthy. Who did it?

Eve: Nico. He is a bright and quiet, but sometimes troubled ninth grader. Let's meet with him tomorrow. I will send an aid up to cover your class at 10 am. Good?

Me: Yes. Thank you.

At dismissal, I asked Amy to point him out.

"Yes, I think I know him," Amy said "There"

She awkwardly jerked her head in his direction. A boy stood by the door hunched over his phone. He wore a black hoodie under his required blue coat. The hood hung over his forehead shielding his face. He was small and slight with big feet he had not yet grown into.

"Like a puppy," I said aloud, not meaning to talk out loud.

He must have heard me speaking to myself about puppies because he turned and faced in my direction. I could not see his face although he was only 15 feet away. His hood did not cover his entire face. It was not the hood. The only way I can describe it is, he was transparent.

Invisible.

I had to strain to see his features. I wondered if he could see me. Was I invisible too, or did he see a round, freckled woman squinting at him through thick glasses? As he turned and walked out the door, I thought I had seen an outline of a smirk.

I went home to the lovely little life I made for myself. So different than my childhood when I was invisible.

The following day, although I was on time, I was the last one to arrive at the meeting with Eve and Nico.

"Hello, Mrs. Perkins," my boss said.

I was facing Eve, who was sitting at her imposing desk, making the invisible boy appear smaller than yesterday. Introductions were made by Eve and I asked if I could invite Nico up to my classroom.

Silence.

"Why?" asked the principal.

"I would like him to meet everyone," I said.

"Sure," Eve said. "Wonderful idea."

We got up, and he followed me out the door, hands in his pockets and staring at the floor.

"How is your day going?" I asked.

He didn't respond and we walked the rest of the way without saying a word to each other.

I opened the door to my first-grade class who were seated on our magic carpet, as planned. I thanked and excused the aide. I then asked the boy to please sit in the chair facing the children. I sat with the children on the rug. Everyone was quiet and quite serious.

"Children. This is Nico. Does anyone have any questions or anything they would like to say to him?" I asked.

Many small arms raised and the questions and comments were honest and direct.

"Was it you? "

"Why did you rip our cave paintings?"

"I wanted to bring mine home and show my mom."

"We had so much fun under the desks.

"We had flashlights."

"Why do you hate us?"

Nico answered each question with a "yes", "I don't know", and "I am sorry." His surprisingly deep voice was kind and remorseful. I fully saw him and he saw me when he started to cry.

More comments came from the children who were speaking all at once.

"I think you need a hug."

"It's okay. "

"We forgive you."

"Don't cry."

"You said you were sorry."

I was mesmerized by the whole exchange. They did not like seeing him cry and had already forgiven him. I wondered what happens to our empathy and capacity to forgive as we age. They held no grudge. Their pain was gone.

I had sometimes felt invisible as a child. Nico's destruction was an attempt to be seen. To leave evidence of existence. To say, "I am here."

"Thank you, Nico. I think you made 21 new friends today. We would love for you to come to visit us again. Will you?" I asked.

The visible boy with the happier blue eyes, jet black hair, and a surprisingly baritone voice said he would like to come back. He read a picture book to the class every Friday afternoon for the rest of the year. All was forgiven.

We saw him and he saw us.



Jekyll and Hyde

“a bold choice” according to the school
newspaper. national outlets used more
descriptive words for the bi-racial casting
of the play. bifurcating the role between
two different fifteen-year olds, aligning
their actions by race. cold insanity
and sheer brutality. the animal
and spirit equally unrestrained.
all questioned who determined which
would enter the dissecting-room door,
which would hold the phial, which the powder,
which would exit? who envisioned their bodies
entangled— curled and splayed— upstage
and unmoving, before the final curtain fell.

Rosaline speaks

I hardly think of him these days, except
when asked, or blamed he fell. the looks that say
“if only you had not rejected him.”
should I have shed my maidenhead for naught—
open my lap, my heart, to golden showers
for fourteen measures of his ill-phrased lines?
and now I’m clept as chaste, as frigid? bound
for a nunnery? I play hard to get,
expect his chase— with love as strong as death—
to last beyond one song, and he exchanged
my cousin’s rose for mine? fuck that whiny,
inconsistent little bitch, and his three-
day bride! I was too fair, too wise by far,
and ‘scaped the passing fancy I thought love.

“Throw physic to the dogs; I'll none of it.”

surrounded at a cafeteria table, you sit alone,
mumbling staccato anecdotes to yourself
because you see conversation with your peers
as beneath you. these snowflakes, blind to the truth
about Muslim Barry and Crooked Hillary. slaves
to fake news. unwilling to watch *InfoWars* and *Fox*.
unable to piece together the Q lines from Trump's man
on the inside (the Planet Ping Pong shooter
was in a closed restaurant. no children were harmed
at Sandy Hook. Parkland is filled with socialist
crisis actors, all nicely paid for their roles).
while they discuss *Fortnite* and *Call of Duty*,
i wonder how long your manifesto is. how soon
until your raging Twitter fingers relocate
to the Second Amendment tokens your parents purchased
for your thirteenth birthday. your lips curl in a sudden smile.
between sips of Capri Sun, small bites of sliced cucumber,
and the bologna sandwich your younger sister
removed the crusts from, you watch them.
something builds beneath the surface. something about
how libtard social justice warriors love to touch
effeminate hands to their faces, gasping about
the First Amendment and free speech. how their fragile
feelings get hurt without safe spaces— trigger warnings
and affinity signs clearly posted. in three months,
once all this explodes in class, you will be led
out of this building in handcuffs. you will threaten
to shoot everyone present— “cleanse the room”—
because one young lady calmly, quietly, disagreed
with your interpretation of a line in *Macbeth*.

From Rhymes with Fool

Before Milwaukee private eye Barry Pool agrees to look for U.S. Senate candidate Paul Danner's missing son Eric, he needs to know more about what he's getting into, given that Eric might have fallen in with a group of neo-Nazis in northern Wisconsin. Pool learns that Eric had taken a freshman English class at Marquette University from Dr. Bill Jacobs and looks him up to hear what he has to say about him.

Marquette's web site indicated that Dr. Jacobs was teaching a short story class during the summer session, which had just started. On Tuesday morning I called his office phone and left a message on his answering machine. A couple of hours later he called back. I gave him a sketchy outline of the case, naming Eric Danner. He agreed to meet me that afternoon in his office.

Jacobs was on the third floor of Coughlin Hall. His door was open, and when I appeared in it, he stood. We shook hands over his desk and introduced ourselves. He was a middle-aged white guy with glasses and thinning hair, a mustache and a goatee. He had on khaki pants with cuffs, a blue denim shirt with a knit tie loose at the collar—the uniform of the liberal arts academic. He told me to call him Bill and invited me to sit.

"I used to read your stuff in the *Journal*," he said. "I wondered what happened to you."

"The merger happened."

"You got cut?"

"No. Without competition the edge was gone. When they asked me to do feel-good features for the Leisure Section I knew it was time to move on."

"And here you are," he said.

"Here I am. By the way, I got your name from Nancy Kane. She lives

in an apartment next to Eric Danner's and knew he had taken you for a class."

Jacobs's smile revealed a hint of the satyr. "Charming girl, Nancy."

"Yes."

I laid out the case for him in more detail than I had given him over the phone.

"I realize there may be teacher-student confidentiality issues involved here," I said, "but I'm wondering if you saw something in Eric or remember anything that might help me get a handle on him."

"Eric was a below-average student," Jacobs said. "Not a skilled writer or a clear thinker, and with no apparent motivation to become either one, at least from what I could see. At the rate he was going, I suppose he might have eked out a C in my course, but then he more or less quit coming. This was sometime in March. He missed an entire week, then returned for one more class, but from then on he was finished with the semester for all intents and purposes."

"And you failed him."

He gave me a look and said, "He failed himself. It's a distinction I insist on. But concerning clues to his character, I can think of two things you might find of interest. The first is his interaction with other students. For various purposes, I divide the class into small groups; they discuss issues, review each other's papers, make presentations on joint projects. Eric didn't take well to that kind of work. He was standoffish and uncomfortable and didn't contribute much. He was with some very sharp kids and may have realized that he was in over his head. But I got the sense, too, that he didn't like working with minorities. One person in his group was an African American female; another was a Jewish kid from New York. They were bright, ambitious, motivated. Eric didn't show hostility or anything. He simply receded into the background, into himself."

"You mentioned two things."

"The other has to do with his journal. It's a place where they can express themselves freely without concern for grammar and the other things that they must be mindful of in graded writing. The only requirement is at least three entries a week, on any topic, of at least a page in length. Some do more. Some do only the minimum. I suggest topics on occasion for those who insist they can't think of anything to write on. The theory is that it helps them find their

voices as writers.

“When Eric came back after being gone for a week, he turned in his journal. He had made up the entries he missed and wanted to know if he’d still get credit. To be frank, reading it made me question my giving them so much leeway in terms of subject matter. Eric’s was full of very angry stuff, the most recent entries, anyway. Some of it bordered on overt racism. After he disappeared, I heard—or maybe I read it in the newspaper—that he had been mugged by some gang members while walking home from campus, which I suppose might have accounted for the angry stuff he had written; then again, it was a logical extension of some of his thinking all along.”

“You mean other stuff he had written in his journal?”

“There and the few times he spoke up in class. Our discussions are pretty wide ranging, and often touch on politics and social issues. Eric seemed invariably negative and complaining. Some of it had to do with political correctness, affirmative action, crime and the criminal justice system. The thing is, on some issues—hyper political correctness, for instance—I tended to be on his side. But there are right ways and wrong ways to argue, and Eric’s were invariably wrong, especially in an academic setting. He had a way of putting a racial twist to everything.”

“After he disappeared for good, did you try to get in touch with him?”

“No. Rightly or wrongly, I don’t chase after students who go AWOL. That doesn’t happen much here, but when it does, I prefer to treat them like adults and let them learn that acts have consequences. I admit that may be a rationalization for the fact that as I’ve gotten older, I’ve grown more particular about how I spend my time and energy.”

“Did he ever write about his biological mother? Her name is Frieda.”

“Not that I can remember.”

I thought for a moment and couldn’t come up with anything else to ask. I stood to leave.

“I still have Eric’s journal,” Jacobs said.

I sat again. “And?”

“And if you think it might help, you can have it. It’s revealing in certain ways that I’ve mentioned, but I can’t remember anything that would serve as a clue to his whereabouts. You might pick up on something I missed or can’t remember.”

He got up and took a spiral notebook from a shelf and handed it to me.

“Are you sure this is ethical?” I said.

“I’m sure it isn’t. Maybe it’s my way of trying to help. Or maybe I’m trying to assuage my conscience for not taking action when someone like Eric goes off the rails.”

As I got up to leave, I noticed that his window looked out over a grassy expanse, crisscrossed with walkways, at the other end of which was the St. Joan of Arc Chapel. Jacobs joined his line of sight to mine.

He said, “The post-modernists look at that and see irony.”

“You have post-modernists here?”

“They’re everywhere.”

“What do you see?” I said.

He smiled. “An antidote for post-modernism.”

I left with Eric Danner’s journal.

I took the journal to my office. Instead of making coffee, I got a bottle of Bass Pale Ale out of my mini-fridge, poured it into a glass, sat at my desk and opened the notebook.

Before starting to read I flipped through the pages for a quick visual impression. The entries were written in black ballpoint. I’ve never put much stock in the claims of graphologists to be able to infer character from handwriting, but I could see a marked difference in the penmanship between the early entries and the later ones, and I couldn’t help but think that that signified something.

The most legible entries, the early ones, were in a plain, plodding script; they dealt mostly with mundane matters—the price of textbooks, the price of gas, complaints about having to keep a journal. Bill Jacobs had said that the students were to use their journals to find their voices as writers. At least in those first entries, Eric Danner hadn’t found his, or if he had, it wasn’t a very interesting or distinctive one; the language and tone were stiff, with lots of passive voice, overreaching on vocabulary, diffidence, and self-consciousness.

He seemed to gain more fluency, and express more frustration, in en-

tries on relationships—with women, with his parents, with friends (what few he seemed to have)—and on belief and action and the relative efficacy and importance and futility of each.

Everything he had written after being mugged appeared to have been scratched in haste or in anger or both, sometimes almost to the point of being indecipherable. He castigated himself for his weakness and wrote of a desire to strengthen and arm himself, even to build alliances, so that that kind of thing could never happen again. He also wrote of a desire for revenge.

On my second bottle of ale, I realized that a verbal picture had emerged from the pages of Eric's journal that matched the photo of him that Paul Danner had given me—of someone lost and looking for answers, for an identity, for something larger than himself to latch onto and call meaningful, or at least his; of someone fearful that he would never find those things.

Nothing solid emerged in the way of a clue or a lead I could use to pinpoint his whereabouts or his specific intentions.

When I finished, I put the notebook in my safe. Before closing the door, I pulled out Paul Danner's \$10,000 check and looked at it. I counted the zeros. I put it back, returned to my desk and looked over at my window.

I felt roughly equidistant between Bill Jacobs's hands-off stance and Nancy Kane's "spiritual imperative" to help, neither hooked on the case nor ready to turn my back on it.

I swirled, then drained, the last drops of ale in the glass. I studied the brick wall outside my window. It was neither bright nor dim. I was certain of only two things: one was that, in my meager economy, ten-thousand dollars was a lot of money. The other was that going it alone against a gang of neo-Nazi skinhead thugs, on their ground, was a lot of risk. What I didn't know, and didn't know how I'd come to know, was which would trump the other.



WANDAWOOWOO FIRED

Shane tells his Big Kmart employees
that lateness is the same
as having a heart
attack. It can kill you.
He takes her card
and punches her out.
“Maybe now you’ll learn
to be responsible,” he says,

signing her last check. She gets
a job selling gallery paintings,
discounts her favorites,
angering her boss Meg,
who also fires her,
despite many improved walls.

GO, STAY

Skip sometimes flirts
with Alicia Conway who flirts
back if she’s angry at her boyfriend
Lucien. When Raylene caught him,
she pushed hard against
his Adam’s Apple—Skip collapsed,
got up and washed the car.
Their anniversary, cake and cuts.

I can’t go.

I can’t stay.

Years wag by the kitchen door,
want to get out. No one opens it.
Even the house would scurry off
its foundations, but it needs paint.
And to be lived in.

A Night at the Movies

As I stepped out of my New York City apartment building I saw two kids passing a joint between them. The kid on the left, about my age, took a hit, then passed it back to the one on the right. My parents and I had lived in that old brick apartment for ten years, and tonight I had only one thing on my mind: seeing the movie *Blood of the Werewolf* at the theater a few blocks away.

It was Saturday night. I was meeting my two friends, Jimmy and Bobby, at the Sunnyside Theater for all night horror movies. We would never let anything get in our way of movie night at that old theater in the early 1970s. It was our quest. But now I had to make my way past these two smoking a doobie.

As a normal 15-year-old, I felt only a little uneasy making my way down the weatherworn cement steps toward the purple haze. My foot hit the next step, dark with grime, cracked from age. Old, dented, metal garbage cans overflowing with black garbage bags, one torn open by a local stray dog lay to the right of the steps. The red brick apartment building itself was also darkened by weather and age. The front door, which I previously exited, was thick, heavy oak and quickly snapped shut due to a spring mechanism.

The two kids at the bottom of the steps were experts at hiding the joint with the position of their hands. Only someone with a trained eye, such as a police officer, perhaps even only a narcotics officer, or a fellow adolescent could tell what they were doing. But I knew.

As I reached the bottom of the steps, the sweet perfume permeated my sinuses. I recognized one of the kids from high school. He had long blonde hair parted to the side, and it would often cover half his face. The other kid had slightly shorter black hair, curly and uncombed. They both wore black t-shirts and denim vests decorated with pins of their favorite music groups. The blonde kid's vest used to be a jacket, but the sleeves were cut off. His pants were old and brown, while the other kid wore jeans.

The blonde kid held out the joint, offering me a hit, and for barely an instant I cared about nothing. Quickly, I broke the powerful stimulant's mesmerizing effects and simply said, "No thanks," then walked down to the sidewalk toward the local movie house.

I was never against drugs, nor did I think much less of these acquaintances for inviting me into their high. I just wasn't into it. For me drugs were never like what your teachers or parents made them out to be; there was never any peer pressure to join in. It was offered, I declined, and that was the end of it. The next time I would see these kids the incident would not even be mentioned or thought about.

Making my way down the street toward the setting sun, I put my hand in my pocket to make sure I had my allowance money to cover the ticket price and possibly a popcorn and soft drink. The tall buildings blocked portions of the sun, and dusk was the perfect setting for this type of entertainment. I wore my brown leather jacket and worn blue jeans. Whenever I walked down this street, I kept my hands in my pockets and looked toward my feet to avoid making eye contact with anyone. It was safer that way as I never knew who would pass while walking these neighborhoods, and I was a pretty small kid compared to others my age.

I thought about the friends I was about to meet at the movies, Jimmy and Bobby, and hoped they wouldn't go in without me since I was running late. We would never miss the opening credits for horror movies. It was tradition to catch every second of the feature.

My friends were nothing like the two kids I had just seen at the bottom of the steps. Those kids were popular at school, had a lot of friends, and the only reason I knew them was because everyone at school knew them, or at least knew of them, knew their names. My friends were less popular. Jimmy was in all self-contained special education classes, suffered from severe learning disabilities, but he was a hoot to hang around. He would often make funny noises at inopportune moments, which often made the rest of us laugh. Most other kids liked him too, unlike most kids in self-contained special education classes. But Jimmy knew a lot about sports and could recite any football or baseball statistic from memory.

The other kid, Bobby, was about two years older, and like me was in all regular classes, but he was too overweight to be accepted as part of the "popular" crowd. He wore glasses, and also liked sports, although he wasn't very good at playing them, so he never tried out for any teams.

Several other acquaintances at school have told me if I hung around with different friends I would be more readily accepted, more "popular." But this suggestion, like the joint the two kids were passing around in front of my apartment building, didn't interest me. Bobby, Jimmy, and I shared a common

interest in horror movies, films that anyone else would consider campy or corny. These movies spoke to us in ways no other person ever really could. They, the movies and my two friends, understood our connection was far more valuable than having large numbers of people knowing my name. We were all awkward in our own special way, but together this awkwardness no longer mattered.

Besides, all three of us had one other thing in common. We all had parents who didn't care if we attended all night horror movie marathons. My parents trusted Bobby because he was older, and Jimmy's parents likely didn't even notice he was gone. Bobby enjoyed getting away from his parents every chance he got because of the way they always brought up his weight. These movies provided the perfect escapist entertainment.

As I neared the movie theater, I stopped at a corner waiting for the light to change to cross the intersection. There a young man, no doubt from the country, waited at a bus stop near the intersection. He wore a red, checkered, flannel button-up shirt, cowboy boots if I wasn't mistaken, and tight denim jeans. He was tall and lanky with a few freckles.

"Hey kid, does this bus take you to the bus depot?" he asked with a thick Southern accent, tapping me on my arm with two fingers just as the "Walk" sign appeared and the light changed.

I looked up trying to figure out why a character such as this would be near downtown New York at dusk but felt sorry for him because I could not answer his question.

"I don't know," I said. He looked disappointed, or perhaps a little annoyed, that I could not answer his question.

"Come on kid, can't you help me."

I grew anxious. I did not want to miss the beginning of the Saturday night horror feature. I looked around. I saw an older man dressed in a brown suit, also waiting for the bus. He was heavy set with thinning salt-and-pepper hair. He rocked back and forth on his heels reading a newspaper as he waited for the bus. I pointed to him and looked up at the tall, thin Southern young man.

"I asked him, but he wouldn't answer me," he whispered.

I tugged at his business suit. "Excuse me, mister?"

"Don't bother me, kid!" he barked.

A pamphlet was sticking out of his back pocket, and I recognized it as a bus schedule. I carefully slipped the bus schedule from his pocket and handed it to the Southern young man as his eyes widened in disbelief at my audacity. He smiled and looked at the businessman then examined the bus schedule to answer his question and handed it back to me.

“Mister, I think you dropped this.”

The man replied with a grunt and finally looked down with a scowl.

“I found it on the ground by your feet,” I said, holding out the bus schedule pamphlet.

“Oh, yes, thank you,” he mumbled.

I hurried across the intersection as the light changed again, while the cars began moving again, one honking its horn. But I would not be deterred on my way to the movie theater.

A little while later, I approached a group of people standing outside the appliance store. It was one of those multiple story department stores with a large, glass window on the bottom floor. As I neared the crowd, I could see the television sets displayed in the window showed the president. Most of the crowd consisted of men in various dark colored suits, some wearing brown, tan or black trench coats over their suits. They faced the televisions with intense facial expressions, some with their hands in their pockets while others folded their arms. Most of the men also wore brimmed hats. The crowd also consisted of a few women, likely accompanying their husbands or boyfriends. Most of the older women stood in dresses and fancy hats, others in brightly colored pants as they too watched the televisions, a few appearing anxious to leave while others held the same intense concentration as the men.

I couldn’t see over the crowd very well or hear what the president. But aside from an idle curiosity, I remained focused on my destination of the theater as I muscled my way through the crowd to continue my trek. I pushed and shoved through the crowd. No one even seemed to mind that I was being what mom would classify as “rude.” I squeezed through tailored suits and patterned dresses forcing my way past one person after another.

Then one of the men in the crowd, wearing a fedora, grabbed me. “You should watch this, kid. This is history right here. Our president is making a great speech. Now tell me what you think of that?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, trying to get away, but now feeling too em-

barrassed to just leave.

“There you have it, my friends,” the man said to several others in the crowd, still holding my arm. “This is what is wrong with America today. Too much apathy from the youth. They don’t follow politics, they don’t stay informed like we used to at his age. Take that George McGovern, for instance . . .”

The other men around him just nodded and listened to him speak while he still held my arm. I could have forcibly broken away, but it would have been too rude, too distressing. He was trying to be friendly, but I needed to meet my friends and he was making me late. Finally, I had an idea.

“Um, I like McGovern. I learned about him in history class at school.”

Finally, he released my arm, throwing it down like a piece of trash as he leaned away. “Get away from me, boy, I’m talking to this man.”

It was a risky move on my part and could have backfired in a big way, but I had to do something to get away. I pushed my way through the rest of the clamoring crowd.

Once through, I continued at a brisk pace. Finally, I saw the big, bright lights of the Sunnyside Theater in the distance just as the sun’s last rays set over the tall buildings. It was one of those old-style theaters first erected in the 1930s with light bulbs illuminating its name instead of more modern neon.

After walking a little closer, I could see the dark shapes of my friends becoming clearer. They both ran up to me with happy greetings and Jimmy jumped around in an awkward way that made Bobby and me laugh.

Jimmy was in all self-contained special education classes, suffered from severe learning disabilities, but he was a hoot to hang around. He would often make funny noises at inopportune moments, which often made the rest of us laugh.

Bobby was about two years older, and like me was in all regular classes, but he was too overweight to be accepted as part of the “popular” crowd. He wore glasses, and liked sports, although he wasn’t very good at playing them, so he never tried out for any teams.

Bobby, Jimmy, and I shared a common interest in horror movies, films that anyone else would consider campy or corny. These movies spoke to us in ways no other person ever really could. They, the movies and my two friends, understood our connection was far more valuable than having large numbers of

people knowing my name. We were all awkward in our own special way, but together this awkwardness no longer mattered.

Quickly we made our way into line because I made it there just in time. Soon the previews for upcoming attractions would begin. Excitedly, I held my money in my hand, eager to see my favorite horror movie actors ham it up in old fashioned melodrama, when suddenly I felt the burning stare of someone I knew.

I turned around, not sure if it was something real, or my imagination. There I saw, in a flash, the beautiful eyes of a dark curly-haired girl from my English class, Julie, her name was. Her hazel eyes snapped away as soon as they saw my head turn, but undoubtedly they were there. She was accompanied by several girlfriends and they whispered and giggled to one another as they stood in line a few people behind me. She again briefly peered at me through her curly light-brown hair then quickly turned away when she saw me looking back at her. She wore a white dress patterned with red flowers, and her skin looked smoother than anything I had ever seen.

I let out a “Huh,” which I was almost certain someone else must have heard, but apparently nobody did.

In a few moments, my two friends and I bought our tickets, walked into the movie house, and took our seats. A preview played for an upcoming all-night horror movie fest. Ready to enjoy the subsequent feature I anticipated all week, I still could not remove the image of those two hazel eyes from my mind.

Feeling that burning sensation once more, I turned around to see the curly-headed girl sitting just two rows behind me. Our eyes met again for only an instant when she turned away and suddenly the movie was not very important any more.



G-d is Spying on Mankind

No matter how well-dressed you are, you will not know the contents of a book
by balancing it on your head. Nor will trepanning your skull
allow the wind to carry the knowledge of scattered pages and burning
Bibles
into any part of your brain that will recognize the ash as words.

In the shadows of derelict trains, four old men sit around a table in
pews
rescued from abandoned churches. They, too, have tried
balancing books on their heads for the delight of passersby, tried
learning open-heart surgery and dentistry from medical
encyclopedias
bought at library close-out sales, but perfection eludes

even them and their attempts. The suits you wear have to be new.
G-d can tell if you bought them at a thrift store, or pulled them
from the fresh bodies of a recently-dead suicide victim or career alco-
holic.
If there's anything I've learned about Heaven,
you have to bathe an awful lot to get in.

The Rookie

I.

It was Sylvia who called in the end.

My first year teaching / my cart
of books and lesson plans askew
I push into Room 104 late for fourth
tenth-grade American Lit. /Comp.
Students fill all thirty-five desks with
extras leaning against the heat register
and another languishing in a far corner.

An overload. Hoping for strays I ask
everyone please check your schedule
make sure you're in the right room.
No one leaves / extra thirty-six /
salutes, thirty-seven waves—Sylvia.

II

Sylvia's glasses blur, so thick she seems
to peer through a maelstrom, a whirled
curtain of mist. Her black hair cascades
in one long, straight, uncut, ebony sheet
unique and resistant to interpretation.

I'm a rookie and I'm standing in the room
where I wrote my Senior English paper
my footnotes *ed. *Numbered*? Who knew?
My classmates! So how will *I* teach these
wealthy girls in short pleats, boys in letter
man jackets / leaders of the pack posturing
“we're cool,” nobody here leaves school.

III.

It was late evening when Sylvia first called—

a November Saturday. We were watching the news.

I say, Hello?

Mrs. ___ I slit my wrists.

Where are you?

A phone booth. Across from my house. Vista Village.

I'll call an ambulance. Stay there.

*No. I wrapped the cuts in towels. They're... not
My Dad will totally freak when he finds out.*

Why did you... what happened?

*It's him, yelling again like I told you how he does.
I couldn't...*

Did he hit you? Will he chase after you?

No. No.

Stay where you are. I'll come and get you.

My husband says,

*No. You could lose your job. There are laws.
She's underage. Call the police!*

I drive to the phone booth / bring her home / bandage her
wrists

soon she'll be like a stray niece, a young cousin
she sleeps in a spare room / I finish folding the wash.

IV. Coda

About that call in the end...

Sylvia's Colonel father finally stationed elsewhere
she lives with friends / manages to graduate.

We lose touch. She writes from Belize. Where?
I look it up. She's a midwife. She's found God. The joy!
I can't follow / seldom write back.

Twenty years later she calls.

I say, Hello?

Do you remember me? Sylvia?

Of course.

*I'm an English teacher now and I would never...
Why did you risk coming to get me?*

I'm stuck for an answer. Finally, I say / sometimes...

I don't know. It was my first year.

You called *me*.



Teacher's Day

Miss Falco reached the threshold of her classroom and took three deep breaths. She entered the room and glanced at the crowd of students huddled around Li Wei.

The boy was full of mischief!

The last time everyone gathered around him was when he brought a water balloon to class. Miss Falco had tried to grab it from him, but it had burst in her hands and all the children had laughed. She closed her eyes and let out a sigh. She thought about all those people who worked in quiet little cubicles, their days filled with coffee breaks and office gossip.

"Miss Falco is here," said Shanti, who always sat in the first row. No one heard her.

It was Miss Falco's first year at work. She had never once wanted to be a teacher but jobs were scarce and she needed the money. A small enrichment centre that ran creative writing classes for primary level students hired her after a few interviews. Her supervisor told her about the "angels" she would teach and Miss Falco had believed her. She wondered if things would get better or if she would turn into one of those ill-tempered people everyone disliked. She banged a ruler on her table and waited for everyone to take their seats.

Shanti thrust a balloon at her as she opened the attendance register. The balloon was a shade of purple with the words *Happy Teacher's Day* outlined in silver powder. Before she could thank Shanti, Miss Falco saw Li Wei kicking someone's water bottle. "Li Wei!" she said, her eyes widening.

"He broke...he..." began Li Wei, waving a jagged stick in the air.

"Where did you get that twig from?"

"It's not a twig," he mumbled and hid it behind him.

Miss Falco hurled the balloon aside and felt her muscles grow tense. She closed her eyes and imagined herself on the edge of a cliff with nothing but cold air blowing into her ears. It relaxed her a little but Shanti's drooping lips filled her with guilt. She picked up the balloon and pushed its stem into her handbag.

"Back to your seats," Miss Falco said. "Get your English files out."

Li Wei stood up. His eyes swept the floor. He was always losing stuff — an eraser, a pencil, a sharpener. Miss Falco walked towards him and pointed at his seat. "NOW," she said. "SIT."

Li Wei slumped in his chair and his eyebrows met in a frown. Miss Falco ignored him and read an extract from Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. "Now go through your questions and answer them," she said. Li Wei didn't move.

Miss Falco walked back and forth with her arms crossed on her chest. She corrected mistakes and offered clues. Some of the students wrote with their tongues curled up on their lips while others stared at her face and shrugged. Miss Falco heard a scraping sound and turned around to see Li Wei peeling some paint off the wall.

"Time up!" she said, a little louder than she should have, and marched to Li Wei's desk. Her mouth was as tight as a plait. Someone's bag blocked her way and she stumbled. Her thigh hit a chair. "Ouch!"

Li Wei chuckled and kept scraping the wall with the broken stick. Miss Falco snatched it from him and threw it into the trashcan. He sobbed with his face to the wall but Miss Falco caught him by the arm. "I shall talk to your parents today," she said, shaking the boy. A few minutes passed but Li Wei's sobs only grew louder. Miss Falco stacked the worksheets and ticked the attendance register.

"The small needle is kissing one!" said Shanti, pointing at the clock. The rest of the class guffawed.

"Ah! You can go. See you next week!" Miss Falco said, not looking at anyone.

All the children trooped out but she knew Li Wei still sat on his chair.

“You will not get it back, okay?”

Miss Falco opened her mouth to say something more but stopped when she saw his eyes light up.

“Got it!” he said and ran towards a corner of the classroom.

A chair fell and a desk creaked as the boy crouched to pick up a crumpled flower head that was covered in dust. Before Miss Falco could protest, Li Wei picked up the stick from the trashcan and stuck the plastic flower head on it. His face broke into a smile as he looked up at Miss Falco.

“Happy Teacher’s Day, Miss Falco!” he said and ran out of the classroom.

Miss Falco tried to breathe — one, two, three — but her breath wobbled, just like the dusty pink flower on its ragged stick.



One Day

runs into another,
and my life
seems to melt away...
routines, routines,
and nothing ever changes.
Yet all the while
I'm dying...
I don't want to wake up
one day
and find my life behind me,
and the only thing
I have to show for it
is that I've done
everything I was supposed to do.
I don't want every day the same –
I want it different, new,
bursting with life,
growing,
overflowing,
inside out,
and upside down.
I want to turn the world
on its head
and shake it up
and fling it off my shoulders

and let laughter ring out
while it is yet spring,
before leaves have to fall
and cold winds come –
one day.



Agony in Eight Letters

I was twelve years old, and the familiar panic gripped me. Heat rose up my body. My face was inflamed. I was trapped. We were supposed to be playing TV tag. I could handle that one. Write the letters in the dirt. Everyone would yell out their guesses. *McHale's Navy*, *Lost in Space*, *The Flintstones*. I had memorized all the initials, and I was a good runner. The hottest day of the summer and stupid Billy decided he didn't want to run.

"Let's play Hangman," he shouted. Grabbing the stick, he drew eight blanks and a huge upside-down L. "Barbara, you can go first since you're new."

I knew he liked me, but I was never ever going to forgive him for this. I calmed my breathing and mumbled out the letter A. Billy smiled at me and etched it in the dirt just above the first and fifth space. The girls all cheered. I relaxed and thought, maybe it will be all right. Another guess and thank God, my turn was up. My ears rang; my hands were clenched tight. My eyes darted around searching for a way out. Six years of school and I had never learned to read or spell. My father was a Naval Air Patrolman, so we moved often. Twelve schools in six years. Our family had crisscrossed the country from one station to the next. We moved from one temporary housing unit to another, always changing schools. I had managed to keep my secret from everyone. Being new was a great excuse not to have to take those big tests. By the time the teachers started to catch on to me, we were loading up the moving van and my secret was safe. I hated school, and this year had really been hard.

"It's your turn," said Sammy, Billy's annoying little brother.

I stared at the dirt, feeling the heat rising again. A L _ H A B E T - Nothing, I had nothing. I turned in a flash and ran as fast as I could. "I have to go to the bathroom. See you later." It was the best I could come up with as the tears rolled down my cheeks. I couldn't read. I couldn't spell, and I bet everyone knew how stupid I am now. I jumped the fence to our yard and made a mad dash to the tree-house. I slumped down against the wall and prayed my father would come home to say we were moving tomorrow. Maybe even tonight if I were lucky. Who was I kidding?

An hour passed.

“Let down the ladder. I want to come up.” My new friend Carol called up to me.

I bet she is coming to make fun of me, was all I could think. She is the smartest kid in my class. She has always been kind of nice to me, but who wants a dummy as a best friend? I bit my lower lip and tossed the ladder down. *I don’t need a best friend anyway. I’ll just tell her that. This is my tree house and I might just decide to live up here forever. I am such a dummy no one will miss me anyway.*

“Hi. Why didn’t you come back to play?” Carol waited for an answer and didn’t give a clue that she knew my secret.

A long minute passed, and she said, “Hangman is a dumb game. Not everybody is a good speller. Just like not everybody is a good runner. You could teach me to run fast, and I could teach you to spell.”

I froze. There was that ringing again and my whole body tensed. “I can spell. I just didn’t want to play. I’m not stupid” I really was trapped this time and there was nowhere to run. I wasn’t going to cry no matter what. I clenched my fist ready to defend my honor, but who was I kidding. Maybe I am stupid.

“Of course, you can spell,” Carol said. “You can do times tables way better than me. I wanted to show you a trick I learned. All big words are made up of little words and sounds. If you chop them up it gets easier. AL like Fat Albert. PHA sounds like fa. That’s a tricky one and BET is like I bet you run faster than all the boys.”

It was true. I could run faster than all the boys and I was pretty good with numbers. AL PHA and BET suddenly didn’t look so scary. My hand began to relax as she tossed me a piece of Juicy Fruit gum and said, “We’re going to stomp the boys in kickball with you on our team.”

Years later, I am a sixth-grade teacher. I look around my classroom and smile. The names have changed to Emma or Arianna. There hasn’t been anyone named Carol or Barbara for years and the Billys are called William now, but they are here. They are the beautiful little souls who give with generosity and kindness. They just want to be your friend. I will scatter my little Carol souls around the room and plant the amazing seeds, the seeds that will allow the shy girl in the corner to make eye contact one day. Maybe I will put William next to Jason, who spent most of last year in the principal’s office. He’s a tough guy who really needs a friend.

The bell rings to begin the new year. I turn and write my name on the corner of my new white board in big bold letters, the word alphabet below it. It will stay there until summer. Just like the letters in the alphabet, each of these children has his or her own identity and sound but put them together and a whole new world comes alive. Knowledge and friendship feed the soul. The blessing of that summer friendship stayed with me, even after our family moved on yet again. I learned to read that summer because of one such soul.

Thank you, Carol!



Beanfield*

As she loaded the last of the horses into the trailer, Mildred wondered how long she would live without them. They were just the last in a long line of beautiful horses—their muscles rippling when they ran across the field in the early morning, their sleek coats gleaming in the sun. How many had she seen nipping playfully at each other under the shade of the big oak in the heat of the afternoon or whinnying sharply in the fog of the early morning, as she watched them from her porch swing?

“Ma’am, you’ll need to sign these papers,” said the young woman who had helped her load the horses. Like so many young people today, she was rude and immodest, her tight t-shirt low cut across her bosom, her chest heaving with the effort she’d exerted, for all the world to see. She shoved a clip board in Mildred’s face.

Mildred stared down at the papers that flapped in the breeze, trying to read the words. A horse whinnied. Mildred gasped and jerked up her head to see which one. Listening, she heard the wind rustling through the trees of the homestead, fluttering the faded flags she had hung from the sagging porch roof, turning the garden of cheap whirligigs stuck in the dirt near her front door.

“Ma’am, you’ve got to sign.”

But Mildred waited.

The horse finally whinnied again. It was high and piercing, rising above the hollow, drifting towards the hills.

Only Beanfield whinnied like that, so clear and pure.

Mildred stared at the trailer, heard the horses shuffling and stamping their feet, then looked down again at the papers. “I won’t sign them.”

“Look, Ms. Johnson, on the phone you said you were ready to get rid of the last of these poor animals.”

Mildred stepped away from the trailer. She raised her tiny fist. “You can’t take my horses. They’re mine!” She threw all the weight of her body toward the horrid girl. “Beanfield is mine!”

Somehow the young woman was able to stop her, reached up and grabbed Mildred’s arm, pulling Mildred towards her.

Mildred screamed. But the young woman held her close. Mildred could feel the mounds of the girl’s breasts through the thin shirt. Mildred could hear

her whispering, “Ma’am, you’re going to have to stop this now. I’m not going to hurt your horses. You can’t take care of these horses no more. I want to help.” The hated girl said it over and over. “I want to help.” Mildred didn’t want her to say it. She didn’t want her help.

Mildred wanted to release the horses, let them run across the field, their manes flying in the wind.

She wanted to climb aboard Beanfield and run away, hold her arms out and shout for joy—an Arabian maiden, the daughter of a sheik--Beanfield’s black mane stinging her face—galloping, galloping—across the desert sand.

*First published in *Burst*



Open Plains Cut By Highways

Caterpillars and bridges
rise and fall like waves, there is
always another

road that starts at the point that
the bottom step ends, where
your tiny bare feet stumble on

the gravel path, determined
to run away from me even
now. The wind lifts the hem

of my cotton dress, hold
it down at the edge here
and here, with one tiny

hand that will someday too near turn
into an adult hand,
in these moments when tomorrow

and yesterday and nothing
all matter equally,
so long as there are bridges

and roads that run forever.

Contributors

Bill Camp currently teaches college composition courses at Paul D Camp Community College and Norfolk State University. His writing credits include a literary short story and a poem in previous issues of *Teach. Write.*, a dark comedy in *Page and Spine*, a science fiction paranormal romance short story in *parAbnormal Digest*, and a poem in *New Author's Journal*. He lives in peaceful Suffolk, Virginia with his family, which includes four cats and a dog.

Jim Courter taught freshman writing for nearly thirty years at Western Illinois University before retiring in 2012. All that time, he was writing and publishing fiction and non-fiction, and found that the two experiences functioned as an enriching symbiotic relationship. His fiction and essays have appeared in a variety of publications in the U.S., Canada, and England, including in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. His first novel, *Rhymes with Fool* was published in the spring by Peasantry Press.

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Plainsongs*, *The Long Islander*, and *The Nashwaak Review*. Her newest poetry collections include *A Perfect Day for Semaphore* (Finishing Line Press) and *In This Place, She Is Her Own* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press). She has been a writing instructor at the Loft Literary Center in downtown Minneapolis for the past 19 years, teaching poetry, fiction, and nonfiction classes for youths and adults alike.

David Hann, at university, started writing for the university magazine and enjoyed the experience immensely, including the close camaraderie of a small staff. Since he started teaching ESL about twenty years ago, he has taught writing in various guises. Currently, as the senior foreign teacher at a university in South China he teaches, among other things, Advanced Writing for the senior students. This is also known as 'writing for the real world.' While David enjoys teaching, writing, and seeing his students develop, he does not enjoy having to mark all the homework.

Liz Hill is a writer and spiritual director in Hendersonville, North Carolina. She has led workshops for writers at all levels of experience. Her flash fiction piece, "Paris Bird Market" was written in response to an exercise in a workshop led by Katie Winkler. (lizhill.net)

Jo Lynn Kerr lives a wonderful life on the coastal Carolina beaches, which lends to the setting of many of her novels. She is surrounded by the love of her husband, children, grandchildren and extended family and friends who also inspire her endlessly. Having been a native of Charleston, SC for most of her life, she is deeply fascinated with how history, culture, and family impact us one generation to the next. No matter where you are in the perils of history, what your age or gender, we all strive for one destiny, to love and be loved. The essay submitted is very much Jolynn's story. She taught for several years and has always played an active role in the spreading of the love of words to young and old alike.

Margaret Koger wrote the poem “The Rookie” about an early / late experience as a writing teacher. She taught English Composition and Creative Writing during her twenty-five years as a teacher in a Boise, Idaho high school and ten as an adjunct at Boise State University. Workshops such as *Writers Teach Writing for Teachers* and the encouragement of visiting poets helped her become a writer. She has published poems recently in *Mediterranean Poetry*, *Poetry Breakfast*, *BLYNKT*, *Juke Joint*, *The Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Red Rock Review*, *Collective Unrest*, *Heartland Review*, *Inez*, *Headway*, and *Voice of Eve*.

Rachel Marsom teaches English composition and creative writing at Blue Ridge Community College in the mountains of Western North Carolina. She received her B.A. from University of North Carolina – Asheville, her M.A. from Northern Arizona University, and her M.F.A. from Georgia College & State University. Teaching composition informs her work in terms of both content and structure. More importantly, continually reinforcing revision within classes forces Marsom to turn the mirror on herself and prioritize the drafting and writing process.

MEH is Matthew E. Henry, an educator who has taught writing and literature classes to students ranging from middle school to graduate programs. He finds aiding student in the writing and workshopping of their work to be among the most rewarding and inspirational part of his job, especially when they get published. MEH is a Pushcart nominated poet with recent works appearing in *The Ekphrastic Review*, *3 Elements Review*, *Longleaf Review*, *The Radical Teacher* and *Typishly*. He received his MFA from Seattle Pacific University, yet continued to spend money he didn’t have pursuing a MA in theology and a PhD in education.

Susheela Menon is a writer and teacher. One of her latest short stories appeared in *Litro Online*. She teaches seven-year old students who have in turn taught her what it means to be a good listener. Born and raised in India, Menon works in Singapore. Teaching has connected her to local communities and allowed her to know more about the trials and triumphs of this young nation.

Jacqueline Moran Meyer has always loved reading and writing stories. When she was very young, she would create comic books and sequels to books that she enjoyed. When she read ‘The Illustrated Man’ by Ray Bradbury in middle school she fell in love with fantasy, horror and short stories. Writers workshop was an integral part of her curriculum when she was an elementary school teacher. It included the language arts practices: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Giving students time to write freely and often, about something that interests them, allows them to see themselves as writers and pay closer attention to the world around them. Ms. Moran Meyer is a 1993 graduate of Teacher’s College, Columbia University. She taught first grade and art.

Kenneth Pobo has taught different varieties of composition going back to 1977. He teaches at Widener University in southeastern Pennsylvania. This semester he has an honors class of freshman comp and a 102 class focused on poetic forms.

Katie Winkler is the editor and publisher of *Teach. Write.: A Writing Teachers' Literary Journal* and publishes the blog *Hey, Mrs. Winkler: Musings and Mutterings about Higher Education in the South*. Her work has appeared in numerous online and print publications, including *Saturday Evening Post* and in the anthology *Unbroken Circle: Stories of Cultural Diversity in the South*. She is also a playwright; her fourth produced play *Battered: A Play About Domestic Violence Inspired by Robert Browning's 'The Ring and the Book'* will debut this month at Blue Ridge Community College in Flat Rock, North Carolina.

Wil Michael Wrenn is a poet/songwriter living in rural north Mississippi. He has an MFA from Lindenwood University and is a songwriter/publisher member of ASCAP. His work has appeared in numerous publications, and he has published a book of poems. Wil Michael's experience with the writing instruction he received in courses at Lindenwood University was, in his words, transformational and inspiring -- it helped him to be a better writer and to write in other genres in addition to poetry and songs. His website can be found at: <http://www.michaelwrenn.com/>



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