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The editors wish to thank all those who helped with this first issue.

Dear Reader,

The Institute's motto, from its first workshops, has been "Do it, don't talk about it." We wanted teachers to learn a new approach to teaching writing by becoming students themselves, by experiencing writing as a composing process, and by understanding what it means to learn through writing. We also hoped that teachers would discover themselves as writers— inventing, exploring, and working through the revision process. In a transient, but ideal "writing group," workshop participants (including Institute associates leading the workshops) would serve as readers for each other.

Associates of the Institute and I have talked for several years about publishing a journal of writing produced in or begun during one of our workshops, by both participants and leaders. We always assumed that since the weeklong July workshop offered the best opportunity for extended writing, it would also be the best source of manuscripts. In July 2005, an editorial board consisting of Institute associate director Mary Chang and Institute associates Carley Moore and Indu Chugani took the first steps toward turning the talk into reality: they invited all July workshop participants and associates to submit their work for publication.

It has been a long journey from last July's Thursday night reading to the selection of poems, stories, and essays for inclusion in the journal, and, finally, to the time-consuming and sometimes difficult process of editing and revising. Many of the writers included in this first volume of *Writing from the Inside Out* have worked closely with the editors on revising their work for publication. We thank all of them for their hard work.

We look forward to receiving your poetry, essays, or fiction in the future.

Best regards,

Teresa Vilardi
Director, Institute for Writing and Thinking

The Sweet Feast of Us

for Brian Callaghan

1

Stunned, you found summer gone.
Tomatoes only just now coming,
the list of jobs still long
like the stringer of fish not caught.
Along the river, tied to a long sigh,
your heart counted the first turning leaves,
the stubborn colored signs that said
the end of earth's workings had come.

Fifty-four summers, gone from golden days
to the deeper thoughts a gray beard makes,
fall now closer to loss than to fresh promises,
and winter already remembered in bones.

What loss hung in the black trees
of the season's last pink sunset.
You remembered ice on skin and graves
as you gathered your many dogs
and headed up to the house.

2

There are the longer, kinder moments
on the riverbank or under an old man tree
slung above the moving water, hearing
some message sung by the sun's voice.
It's then when the hands can grasp
what is passing, the roughness finally
told to the ready ends of fingertips.

What can count a life?
Who can say the good?

It may be that there is only
not dying, the way light changes
and paired wings cut through air,

raindrops rushing leaves, a quiet night.
Only that. Then nothing more.

If so, then we become a great value:
slaps on backs, laughs like breaths,
so simple and clear, the ingenuous love
and the excellent mistakes.

Writer's Note:

This poem was first born out of a phone conversation with my oldest, dearest friend. We see each other once a year, if we're lucky, and talk on the phone a few times. When we meet or talk, we go right to the matters of life, right to where each of us is on our journey. Moments of closeness like this are often the catalysts for my poems. Trying to define what it is that we have between us and what in life we share is what a poem is for.

We were working on serial poems in our workshop at Bard, "Poetry in Today's Classrooms," and thinking about and writing our own serial poems. This poem's final draft came out of that exercise. It had been two separate pieces in my notebook, but the exercise brought me to a thought: maybe we often write the same poem, or parts of the same poem, at different times. I attempt to write a poem each morning, and now I have begun to notice that there is often a clear connection between many of them. Maybe we are all writing just one poem that is our life.

I have been teaching high school and middle school English for about twenty years. I have taught in some fifteen schools in eight countries. I wrote a lot of poetry when I was a young English major, but then never penned a line for more than twenty years. I came back to it about six years ago, attempting to follow Stafford's regimen of writing a poem each day. It is often like wringing blood from a rock, nearly suffocating, but with persistence I often find a poem coming alive to grab me by the scruff of the neck and pulling me in.

Jim Kelley

St. John's School, Tumon Bay, Guam

The Glass Jar

The white house on Salem Avenue was one of the houses I dreaded visiting the most. The house stood two doors down from the mouth of my street, an octopus of cul-de-sacs lined with cookie-cutter, 1970s suburban homes. It was the only house on my paper route that was not part of my neighborhood, and as a child I absorbed the sense that any trip into the less familiar world outside of our development required precautions. While the warnings I received from my mother about venturing out onto Salem Avenue focused mainly on her worries about cars on a busy road, I worried about something else. I spent my time thinking about the older houses, which, unlike my house, so many generations of people had lived in and, possibly, died in. During my first week of seventh grade, my best friend's father died suddenly from a massive heart attack. Afterward, I worried about the death of everyone I knew—my grandparents, parents, siblings, friends. I spent days and nights imagining the circumstances in which I would find one of them lying dead, as if to prepare myself for the horror of such a discovery.

I delivered the community newspaper in my neighborhood once a week from my sixth through eighth grade years, and once a month, retraced the route, door to door, to collect the subscription fee. At each house I rang the bell, and when someone appeared I glumly stated, "Collecting for the *Forest Hills Journal* . . ." I often felt foolish and bothersome like I was trick-or-treating without a costume. At some houses, the person who answered the door gave up a dollar quite cheerfully. At others, the subscriber would seize the opportunity to complain about missing newspapers, newspapers that landed on the front lawn instead of the porch, or papers that were found soggy from rainstorms I had no control over. Sometimes, to my dismay, the doors were answered by the sadistic, older kids, the bullies on the block, and I imagined them laughing at me after they receded into the house and sent a parent to the door to pay me. Sometimes, and this is what I actually preferred, no one answered the door at all. This was a short-term

relief, but it became a long-term failure because the more doors that went unanswered, the less I was paid.

The white house was dingy, covered with worn and soiled siding. Its windows were thin, drafty, and yellowed with age. The white house's yard was more roots than grass, and the roots led up to tall trees that obscured the sun. Light must have rarely shone through the windows. No sidewalk ran between the small front yard and the busy street, so I had to step through the roots to make it to the concrete front walkway and climb up to the small cement front porch. With a sour stomach I pressed the doorbell and waited. I knew it would be a long wait; it always was at this house. I followed my ring with a few anxious knocks on the door. Soon, I caught a glimpse through the front window of the old woman inside, slowed by her enormous girth and age, making her way deliberately and painfully to the front door. After first sighting her I knew I would still have to wait at least another minute for her to cover the ten or so more feet between her and the door. As I waited, I zipped and unzipped the leather pouch I carried to hold the money I collected.

I felt guilty for making this woman go through so much effort simply to pay me a dollar, only a small portion of which I would keep for myself. But when I chose to skip her house altogether, I felt more guilty. She was an old woman living alone. Did she look forward to visitors? Would she be disappointed if I didn't show up? I didn't want to think about it; I knew what loneliness felt like.

I always noticed her legs first. Each leg seemed thicker than my waist. Translucent skin showing through to thin, pink blood vessels, the kind of skin I recognized from the tip of my grandfather's nose, covered the surface of each leg. The woman's knees looked like they had been worn dry and red, as if they were chapped from a frigid arctic wind. But I imagined she didn't often make it outside of her house, even onto the porch where I stood. In fact, she didn't even seem to be able to retrieve the newspapers on her own. Sometimes when I approached the house to collect, two or three weeks' worth of newspapers still waited by the door.

When this happened, I sometimes imagined her face down, dead on her worn linoleum kitchen floor.

“Hello there, how are you?” she said. She spoke in a thin, reedy voice, winded from trekking across the living room to answer the door. Her hips, thighs, and buttocks, with the shape and texture of a giant beanbag chair, creaked from side to side. She winced, either because she was unaccustomed to the light outside her door or from the pain in her swollen knees.

“Collecting for the *Forest Hills Journal*,” I recited as I held up a yellow collection slip that would become her receipt as soon as she paid me. She held onto the edge of the open door with both hands for support, still out of breath.

“Oh, honey, I’m going to have to ask you for a favor.”

“Umm . . . okay,” I said hesitantly.

“My money, it’s in the cupboard above the sink. Could you come in and pull a dollar in change out of the jar?” I swallowed and nodded, then put one foot through the door. I turned sideways so I could make it through the door without any part of me touching any part of her. Inside the house the odors of urine and rubbing alcohol transported my thoughts back to the intensive care room my family brought me into to see my grandfather after he had a heart attack years before. I remembered the fear I felt inside that hospital room.

I passed through the wide archway from the living room into the kitchen, stepping softly in an attempt to prevent the floor from creaking, as it always did upon my entry—another reminder of the house’s age. The rusted faucet in the sink smelled like a well. The metallic cabinets above the counter were covered with shiny white enamel. On my tiptoes, I grasped the cabinet handle with both hands and pulled hard to get it to snap open.

A glass jar filled with coins stood next to a small chipped plate, a water-spotted juice glass, and a plain white bowl. I could see the specks of dirt, lint, and hair mixed in with the coins and collecting at the bottom of the jar. Images of hands reaching into pockets and pulling out coins and detritus to deposit into the jar poured through my head. Hoping to avoid the tart, metallic smell

of copper pennies, I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly through my nose as I peered over the edge of the open lid. I reached in carefully, hoping to pluck out four quarters by touching as few of the coins as possible. I found two quarters, a dime, and a nickel. I always tried to avoid running my hands through the pennies because I hated the smell they left on my fingers, but now this was impossible since I needed 35 pennies to round out the dollar. I counted them out quickly, unconcerned with accuracy. I dropped the coins into my leather pouch as quickly as I could. I rubbed my fingers together like my mother did after she touched a package of raw meat in the grocery store, the feeling of the residue on her fingers driving everything else around her out of focus—including her son, following behind her with the shopping cart.

Every month when my paycheck turned up in the mail I didn't want my parents to see it, but they always did because they had to cash it for me. I was humiliated to have them know how poorly I was doing my job, though they rarely said a word about it. But quitting the paper route, the thing I wanted the most, would have brought great disapproval—disapproval expressed not explicitly but through the anxious tone of voice my mother used when she worried that her child had made a choice that she thought was not in his best interest. I was a shy child, and she worried that if I stayed home, I'd close myself off from the world entirely. Though unspoken, her thoughts about such things were always clear. Her anxieties dominated her attention and left all of us—my older brother, my older sister, and me—on our own. I couldn't add to my mother's worries. I knew I couldn't quit the paper route.

As I turned back towards the front door I could see the old woman's gentle smile in the dim light sneaking through the yellow-tinted front window. She looked as if she might ask me to stay for a glass of milk or to help her walk back to the chair or the bed she'd been resting in when I rang the doorbell. These would have been unbearable reminders of her needs, and mine, which were left unmet. So I walked as quickly as possible back toward the door, avoiding eye contact. I squeezed by her again, hoping she would not reach out like a ghost and touch me. She never did.

As I stepped back out onto the porch, looking down, I mumbled, “Thank you,” and with my heart pounding I stepped back through the roots in the front yard and hurried to my dirt bike, which lay in the grass at the end of the drive.

Writer’s Note:

In the first hours of “Writing and Thinking I,” in the summer of 2005, I wrote these words in my notebook: “I’m the writer who never has anything to write about.” It felt like a true statement. I had always wanted to be a creative writer. But every time I tried to write something creative—by that I mean a writing piece that is neither academic nor journalistic—I could not generate an idea sustainable throughout an entire memoir, short story, or poem. Everything I tried to write was contrived and disconnected from my life. This pattern changed during my week at Bard, where I began “The Glass Jar.”

This change was the result both of good timing and new writing techniques I learned that week. In the months before arriving at the weeklong July workshop, I had been revisiting significant anxieties I experienced in my childhood in an effort to rid myself of these feelings in my adult life. I arrived at Bard with a lot on my mind and, initially unbeknownst to me, plenty to write about. “The Glass Jar” first appeared on the page through the process of freewriting. Learning to separate the creative process from the editing process in my writing helped many of my memories flow out onto the page before my internal editor could choke them back. Through the process of sharing the early versions of this piece with my colleagues at the Institute and with our instructor, Carley Moore, I discovered that I had captured authentically fragments of the dread and anxiety I experienced as a child. To me, the heart of the current version of “The Glass Jar” lies not in the story itself but in the tangential memories and anecdotes that the story of retrieving the money from the jar

enables me to tell. The skeleton of the story is simple, even insignificant, but the shadows of other people in my life at the time are cast across the story. If I attempted to write more directly about the dread and anxiety I experienced in childhood, I don't think I could have captured it as clearly as I have in this story.

Daniel Sigward

Belmont Day School, Belmont, Massachusetts

Barbecue and Beale Street

1

Jerry Wexler lives in a mansion
The Blues Man lives in a shack
Jerry Wexler lives in a mansion
The Blues Man lives in a shack
Wexler got millions
while The Blues Man got jacked

2

When I was ten
her storefronts were blind
and though she wanted to talk
her voice was broken
glass
and her eyes covered
wood
where garbage workers once stood
declaring
“I AM A MAN”

3

Sam Phillips lives in a mansion
The Blues Man out back

4

Glass replaces boards
and reflects me at twenty
FATHERLESS
“I AM A MAN”
echoes from the glare
of Bright Lights
and Night Life
of Rum Boogie,
The Orchid

and The Black Diamond
that the Blues Man never wore

5
Elvis Presley lives in a mansion
The Blues Man lives in a shack
Elvis got a King's crown
while Howlin' Wolf
lurks
in the back
ground

6
In her eyes
I see
tourists taste
barbecue and Beale Street
but never digest
the souls of Bo and Muddy
moanin'
"I'm A Man
I'm A Full Grown Man"

7
Jerry Wexler lives in a mansion
The Blues Man lives in a shack
Wexler in a mansion
The Blues Man in a shack
Wexler got paid
while Leadbelly got jack

Writer's Note:

On the way to Bard, I read the introduction to a book on the history of Stax Records, the Motown of the South. I was determined to write a poem that not only traces Memphis's blues heritage and disinheritance but also improvises upon the traditional form of the blues. I appreciate the rhythm that comes through when this poem is read aloud as a result of the stanzas that take their structure from this great (African) American music.

Beale Street, the main street of blues music in my hometown, Memphis, was made up of dilapidated buildings when the speaker in the poem was a child. Today, it is revitalized, and tourists come and take from it a taste of the city. What tourists taste contrasts starkly with the urban blight that the speaker witnesses, the civil rights struggles that produced picket signs that stated "I AM A MAN," and the sharecropping that produced blues songs and made it necessary for the speaker's father and men before him to declare "I AM A MAN." I hope to improvise additional stanzas that capture the Beale Street that existed when the speaker's parents and grandparents hung out there. That, too, will starkly contrast with what tourists taste when they visit this famous street today.

Levita D. Mondie-Sapp
Maret School, Washington, D.C.

Muguet, or Lily of the Valley

Sitting in a car, cradled next to the poem,
I am small, white and bell-shaped, driven by
the letter of leaving, imprinted, looking back
at this anonymous wish made from a window.

Time, driven away from a childhood, a shape
whose words had been clear, square-shaped, while
another's pattern pressed into a pillow of French,
later washed of sensual doors in another form.

Blanketed by fantasies of leaving it all behind—
the beggar of abandon, a detritus flower, a syllable
falling from a mother, who marked this cheek
with red memories. A bouquet of busy, the lonely,
that throughout tiny translation of selves,
accumulates a word in English, finished.

Writer's note:

Words, sound, images, foreshadow the poem. Uncensored writing takes shape as it slips into the sonnet form. "*Muguet, or Lily of the Valley*" originated in a workshop, "Poetry for Today's Classrooms," which I led in July 2003. First there was freewriting, brief paragraphs describing an early memory, a flower, a secret, then ending with writing down the lyrics of a song. The following day, after a workshop on the sonnet that explored the range and limits of the form by reading and hearing a variety of poetic examples, workshop participants and I worked on writing our own sonnets, utilizing the freewriting we had done the day before as the basis, the material, for these sonnets.

Eléna Rivera

Faculty Associate, Institute for Writing and Thinking, Bard
College

Both Horns

“I always thought that intellect and sentiment formed the horns of an exclusive either-or. They do not.”

—*Prisoner’s Dilemma*

On the last official day of high school for my seniors, I started class the way I have each day for the past several years, with a poem. For this charged Tuesday afternoon, I read, slowly and deliberately, William Stafford’s “You Reading This, Be Ready.” And then, before I launched into my usual routine of attempting to bring some sense of closure to the year, I passed out index cards. “Most of you,” I began, “are probably very ready to be done with high school. So I can imagine that this might strike a number of you as ridiculous, but I have to at least ask. And what I’m asking is if any of you would like to read another novel by Richard Powers this summer. If you say no, that’s fine, I promise. But many of you had a significant reading experience with *Prisoner’s Dilemma* in the fall, and so a few of you, I’m betting, would like to try a Powers novel called *Galatea 2.2*.” I glanced up from my desk at the center of our double horseshoe and I found a sea of unreadable faces. “So, if you’d like to try it, just write your name and your e-mail address on the index card and put it on my desk after class.”

Both my classes of seniors had been outstanding—not just good-hearted and hungry and bright, but patient and mature and deeply thoughtful. Not surprisingly, it was a moving last day. After we did some writing about endings and shared some of those entries, I asked them to look around the room. Many of them had gone to school together for twelve years, and I reminded them of this. I also told them that in my estimation they had had a fantastic year in this class and probably had a few things to say to each other. I asked them if they wanted to highlight anybody in the room whom they admired or who had given them inspiration. In both classes, the students said absolutely wonderful, heartfelt things to each other. And then I concluded by passing out a copy of a letter I had written—one for each class—something I have done

for every class since my first group of sophomores back in the fall of 1992.

When the final bell rang, I said my goodbyes. Most students walked out and said thanks. I shook hands with some of them and hugged a few others, and I stood, drained and pensive, in the empty classroom. At the end of a recent French film, the beautiful *To Be and To Have*, there's an astounding scene that captures the powerful feelings of a teacher, in this case at the end of his career, standing in his classroom after the last student has left on the last day. That moment, even if it is not at the end of a career, is loaded. On one hand, there's relief: you made it. There's also a keen awareness of the enormous sense of possibility, the incredible promise—of individual students, of course, but more so of what certain groups are capable of achieving. Some groups are obviously better than others, though what makes a class click isn't just a measure of the total intelligence in the room. It's mostly about chemistry. If I have a few students who are emotionally honest and one or two who have a sense of advancing the thinking of the class—and not just their own ideas—then that is a recipe for coherence. These two particular classes of seniors were exceptional in my career, and so as I stood there looking at the empty desks, looking out into the small courtyard, I felt a sense of loss. I felt grateful, but as I stood there alone in the classroom, I was sad to let them go. I gathered my things and as I did I noticed the pile of index cards. I had forgotten. I sat back down to look at the names and to count. Out of nearly fifty students, twenty-two had said they would like to try another Richard Powers novel.

Richard Powers is a demanding writer. His eight novels are rife with allusions—poems, paintings, classical music, and movies pepper his plots; he always writes in multiple, interweaving story lines; and he writes, it seems, about almost everything, including game theory, neural nets, virtual reality, and molecular biology. On top of all that, his prose, even when it's not plumbing a specialized discipline, can be dense. So why would recent high school graduates choose to read Powers on their summer vacation? Certainly, this particular group of students had that immeasurable

quality of hunger. But I think there's more to it. I think that if you are a bright, thoughtful young person, who is as interested in human relationships as in ideas, then there is something almost singularly compelling about Powers. Reading someone like Conrad may appeal to the powerhouse intellectuals, but *Heart of Darkness* left many of my students cold. And though many are fond of someone like Dickens, his appeal, even in something as intricate as *A Tale of Two Cities*, has much more to do with character and plot than with ideas. And a writer like Don DeLillo, who lives in ideas, is usually hit or miss. (Before September 11th, he had a better chance: my students thought *White Noise* hysterically funny, but now, truly, not a single one cracks a smile). Though critics often point to a lack of three-dimensional characterization in Powers, for three years now, my students have found *Prisoner's Dilemma* as moving and real as it is intellectually stimulating. Often, Powers writes about exceptionally bright and talented characters and their struggles, not only to use well their intellectual gifts, but even more pressingly, to find true human intimacy. This, I believe, is the real draw for my students. They want the kind of intellectual stimulation his novels offer, but they understand that without relationships, knowledge matters a whole lot less. Reading Powers at seventeen or eighteen wedges open both an intellectual and an emotional world and positions them in a necessary relationship to one another. I can only compare the way my students have responded to Powers to the way they have responded to Shakespeare: he feeds their hunger while stirring in them a desire for hope and action.

I walked into the school on a hot Wednesday evening in late June. It was nearing six and the sun was still scorching. A few athletes were leaving the building, strolling, sweat-drenched, to their cars; a few others sat in the front circle waiting for their rides home. Inside, the air was thick. My sandals echoed in the empty corridors. A school is a strange place at a time like this, and even the nicest schools have an institutional feeling when they are devoid of the vibrant young people that make them run. Nervous

and excited, I walked into the large conference room and started to arrange the tables into a more intimate space. Just before seven, my charges started to arrive. They looked relaxed and rested, healthy and tan. Summered. A month away from the building had been good for them.

I had scheduled this meeting as an opportunity to get grounded in a few of the novel's ideas before we began reading. We would do this by writing and then reading aloud our responses to a sequence of questions. I looked again at the brief script:

1. Freewriting
2. What is the relationship between the intellectual world and the physical world? Explore and describe how the mind interacts with all that is outside of it.
3. Read Emily Dickinson's "The brain is wider than the sky"
4. What does Dickinson say in this poem about the relationship between mind and world?
5. Tell a story about a time when you devoted yourself to an intellectual pursuit
6. What is the purpose of intellectual pursuits? Why do we hunger after knowledge?
7. What do you carry with you from *Prisoner's Dilemma* that might be interesting or useful or helpful as you approach *Galatea 2.2*?

A sequence like this demands rigorous thinking. And yet, in part because it is not product-based (we're not moving toward an essay—although one easily could) and in part because it is collaborative (you get to hear the writing from everyone else at the table), it has an element of playfulness to it, something less formal, and therefore, for most students, more inviting. This method certainly asks students to grapple with ideas, but in doing so, it

invites personal narrative and metacognition, thinking about thinking. This reflective step is crucial. Self-reflection and self-awareness—knowing your strengths and weaknesses, your comfort zones and blind spots as a thinker, having a grasp on what ideas are important to you and why—help students achieve a kind of sophistication in their thinking that has, potentially at least, great legs. If students know the kinds of intellectual moves that help them make progress and that help them get unstuck, then they have with them a truly valuable tool, something that they can carry beyond a particular course or discipline. I believe that most students have a hunger for ideas and this approach gives them access to the ideas that matter to them, often in a way that makes those ideas personal and resonant.

Part of what made this meeting so wonderful is that we were starting with a strong foundation. The students were familiar and comfortable with this kind of approach to writing and they knew and trusted and respected each other. After we had done a few minutes of free writing, we moved into the next prompts, stopping after every couple to read what we had written before moving back into the writing. Powers uses the Dickinson poem as epigraph in *Galatea 2.2*, and I thought it would be potentially fruitful to get grounded there before we actually began reading the novel. We wrote for just over five minutes on each of these questions, and the students wrote, as they had all year, with honesty, humility, and insight. We heard direct commentary on the Dickinson poem, a smattering of anecdotes, and a number of attempts to tackle the larger concerns of the broader questions. Often, as in the following pair of responses, students move from anecdote to analysis.

Lauren:

In second grade, we had those red plastic pieces that you could hold up to any 2-D pictures and then, while looking through the red slab, you would be able to make a symmetrical image of the initial picture or a copy. Dickinson's poem reminds me of this and also ["Because I could

not stop for Death”]. For so long, I could not tell if [that] poem was actually describing a woman taking a real carriage ride or if it was a mental journey. I could not tell if she actually had a companion or if the passenger was the same quality as an imaginary friend.

Either way, if you work really hard you can draw a rectangle, your death, a carriage, or [an imaginary world] on the other side of the red glass. The mind can bend, shape, mutate, and rearrange the world. And so the brain is wider than the sky because it has that infinite quality that even the clouds cannot reach. The brain is the weight of God because it has the capacity, not the ability, but the capacity, to generate and resurrect on its side of the glass. Until you must get the buckets and bail yourself out, because, indeed, it’s always deeper than you could know on the other side of the glass.

Rachel:

This question feels big so I’ll try to make it small, like a kid I know. I believe the mind is a lot like my eight-year-old cousin Barret. This weekend I watched him. He’s a pocket full of something and it’s not sunshine but it is something good. I’ll explain him this way: my aunt Leeza told him he had to wait for his little sister Susanna to finish her sandwich before he could go outside. To make a lot of squirming and fidgeting short and more bearable than it actually was, all Barret wanted to do was go swing on the swings, but all he could do was watch his sister nibble at her turkey and cry when she detected some mustard on it.

I won't pretend this metaphor extends well, but the moment was revealing in its way. Inside, confined, Barret ran dangerous circles around our coffee table. Outside, he felt relieved by the serenity of trees to climb. Out, he found an outlet. Our internal intellect is overwhelming. When we turn to the physical world, we find ways to harness that unchanneled intellectual energy. We run circles in a larger, less maddening space. We need to extend to the external because our internal minds are too deep. That is why the physical world feels so urgently intellectual.

Many teachers probably resist this kind of writing. To be sure, it is not the kind of direct, formal analysis of the Dickinson poem that prepares students for high achievement on something like the Advanced Placement literature examination. Nor is it anything—at least not yet—that would resemble an essay, or even a narrative. It all depends on the purpose of such writing. With this set of prompts I was hoping to get students thinking about three things: the complex relationship between the physical and intellectual world, their reasons for pursuing knowledge, and what, from their first crack at a Richard Powers novel, was still with them. While the students' writing isn't error-free, pitch-perfect prose, what they came up with—and in just a few minutes—underscores how essential it is to allow students to think both in terms of texts and in terms of their own experiences and beliefs. It is in the intersection of those modes that their writing has the most meaning and becomes more than something produced for a teacher or for a grade and then, often at least, quickly forgotten.

The first meeting went along splendidly, and I thought they were well-primed for *Galatea 2.2*. It was summer, and I was reluctant to ask them to do more than read the book, but as a final request, I asked them to bring to the next meeting two questions, one that focused on this particular novel and one that addressed some larger concern, the kind of thing that they might want to ask

Richard Powers himself. “And it would be a good idea to come prepared,” I told them, “because Richard Powers will be joining us by phone.” They had been thoughtful and focused, even a bit earnest all evening, but now they were giddy and loud. “What?” “Are you serious?” “Do you mean you’ve been sitting on that all night?”

And so I told them of how I had thought it such an extraordinary thing that they were choosing to read another Richard Powers novel that I wrote Powers himself and asked him if he would participate in our little book group. Then I read to them part of what Powers had written to me: “I would be delighted to participate by phone. It is the least I can do to support such enthusiasm on their part. I wish I could do more.” With that, we rearranged the tables and chairs and walked back out into the still hot June night.

Galatea 2.2, as its title suggests, is a modern take on the Pygmalion myth, and in this version the creator figure—a fictional character named Richard Powers—falls for the computer consciousness he is helping to harness by reading to it many great works of literature. Given this, I thought I would begin our second meeting by reading to my students. The idea had come to me a few days before as my wife, Juliet, read to me Adam Gopnik’s essay, “Death of a Fish,” from that week’s *New Yorker*. It was a piece that evoked in both of us hearty laughter and quiet tears and I thought my students would love it. In the fall we had studied Gopnik’s wonderful tribute to Kirk Varnedoe, “Last of the Metrozoids,” and I thought that this new essay would echo, in a minor chord, the experience they were having with Powers—of returning to a new piece by a writer whose work they had enjoyed immensely almost a year ago. I don’t think I was aware of that link at the time, but what I did notice was how perfectly the Gopnik essay, with its focus on consciousness and identity, obsession and loss, connected with the thematic center of *Galatea 2.2*.

As I was reading “Death of a Fish,” I quickly became concerned that it was missing its mark: they were not laughing. Even though it is a familiar experience for me to be reading out

loud to my students and to be thinking about how well or how poorly the reading is going, it is still odd. Despite my students' unsettling silence, I felt convinced by the time that I finished reading the Gopnik essay that it is a wonderful, brilliant work and I forged ahead with the evening's first writing prompt, asking them how "Death of a Fish" opens up the ideas in *Galatea 2.2*. My anxiety proved unfounded and the students carried forth with a number of great, rich connections. We moved into some work with our favorite passages from the novel and then I opened it up for some discussion. After a long stretch of thoughtful talk, I focused them with one more writing prompt about their sense of Richard Powers as a novelist. Again and again, they spoke of the way Powers evoked in them a need for reflection, of the way his books were a kind of practice for living. As Emma said:

There is so much that I admire about him as a writer. His novels elicit in me a discomfort that is so necessarily real that I am left fearful of how things would have been had I not entered into the beautiful prose filling the many pages. Powers, while revealing his characters' weaknesses, desires, and dreams, calls out our own. While his characters reside immortalized in fiction despite the dense autobiographical strands incorporated in them, we are undeniably real—he reminds us of this. His novels ask us to make note of those unrepeatable days and change the scale for the one vote we can cast.

The previous night, Powers had called me at home. He wanted to know about these students, who they were, where they were going to college, what they were studying. I told him about some of the writing that we had done at the first meeting and he asked if I would forward some of it his way. We tend to think of novelists as powerfully removed from their readers, but when given the chance to talk with the actual page-turners, Powers leaped at the opportunity. It is hard to imagine other writers of this stature being

so invested in adolescent readers of their work. I couldn't imagine, say, Don DeLillo giving me a call to ask questions about high school students.

After the break, the students resumed their seats around the conference table and I gave them a short pep talk about not being shy. The phone rang and the room went silent. Though they seemed with me when I had told them this was a rare opportunity and that they should ask the questions they wanted to ask, their anxiety was palpable and they seemed, suddenly, much younger. It is a strange truth about adolescents that at seventeen, they can seem twenty-seven one moment and seven the next. In the fall, for instance, on our final day on *Hamlet*, one especially eloquent young man said this: "The humor and beauty in the play more deeply engender the sense of waste that we feel upon the play's conclusion." In the ensuing silence, he looked at a poster of *Antigone* that had been up since the beginning of the year and said with complete seriousness, "What's ante-gone?" His buddy elbowed him in the ribs and said, "Sometimes you are such an idiot." Then the bell rang.

But on this particular night, the students' silence did not indicate an ensuing regression. After each question, Powers would say, "That's a terrific question," or "That's a big question," or "I hear several different questions there." He was a tremendous listener. Then he would launch into his response. Most of us know people who speak in paragraphs, and if, like me, you are not one of them, then you'll probably agree that it is always rather miraculous to hear someone hold forth with such unflagging eloquence. Powers spoke in beautiful, lively, vivid, miniature essays. Occasionally he paused to gather a thought, but mostly it was an extraordinary flow of words. He talked about how strange it was to look back at *Galatea 2.2*, something he had written over a decade ago, and how he saw it as "a very exposed book," and that he saw himself as a different kind of writer now, and a different self, too. "One of the great myths of the self," he said, "is that it is singular and monolithic." As a teacher, I constantly try to see if students appropriately register the moments that I see as significant for

them, and as I looked around the room it struck me that this was one of those instants that I wanted to pause and mark on them in some kind of indelible way. But as much as that desire sometimes overcomes me, I know that restraint is almost always preferable—that my moments are not necessarily theirs.

In the full hour that Powers spoke with us, one sequence especially stands out in my mind. He was answering a question about whether or not he worried that people would misread his work. This is something that my students often wrestle with: they want to make bold claims and piercing insights, but more than anything, they fear being wrong. Powers cited Proust, “We guess as we read,” part of the epigraph from his first novel, *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*. He continued, “The narrative that we bring to a book always affects our understanding. Any reading that proceeds in good faith can’t be a misreading.” And then this: “Good reading and good living are very similar processes. If you make yourself available to the constant surprise of turning pages, if you can remain limber and flexible, if you can maintain an improvisatory humility. . .” My notes trail off there. Sometimes two words can stop the whole train—or send it down a different track—and “improvisatory humility” sent me spinning. They seemed like good words to put on a note card, as Raymond Carver might say, and tape above your writing desk—or your teaching desk. Or your reading chair, I now thought.

After we said our goodbyes, and I gently hung up the phone, we sat there in stunned silence. I let the moment stretch out for an extra half-minute, and then I asked if anyone wanted to say anything. “Let’s not,” one young woman said immediately, and it seemed right. And so, for another minute or two, we just sat in silence.

In the weeks following the meetings, I kept thinking about what my students had written, and I found myself returning to what one young woman, Ally, had written at the first meeting:

My older sister, Rachel, has always held a huge amount of influence over me, whether or not it is

intentional. Whereas some siblings strive to be different than their elders, I found myself wanting to experience everything that she was in the midst of. At the age of five, about to enter elementary school, her seven years seemed to hold so much more. She had lost a tooth, rode a two-wheeler, had a sleepover, learned to read. Naturally, I wanted to do all of the above. I tried to lose my front tooth, a hopeless and painful attempt. My parents would let me nowhere near a bicycle, and my sleepovers were limited to the countless stuffed animals sprawled across my room. It felt as if the only thing I had control over was learning how to read.

I spent all summer with my Dr. Seuss books open, devoting myself completely to the task at hand. I would forego Thursday night Good Humor Man runs for time spent with my *Hop on Pop* picture book. My mother has since expressed the worries she had regarding my ability to socialize with others come September, for I spent all my free time forcing the acquisition of a reading skill. Sure enough, by the time I entered kindergarten I could read a multitude of picture books. I remained lost in the world of books, words, and language until I became too preoccupied with others' perception of me to risk being labeled a "bookworm." Yet like any creature displaced from her natural world, I made my way back. I rediscovered this love for all things printed, and it is this world which I want to lose myself in again.

I'm not sure how you help students feel as though books are their natural world; it's likely a feeling that gets cemented in childhood. Sadly, that love is something that so many students seem to have lost by the time they get to high school. I don't have the answers, but I believe it is the job of those of us in the trenches

to try to rekindle that passion for all things printed, to offer to our students many worlds with the hope that at least one will be a place in which they can become lost.

That wonderful feeling of losing yourself in another world is what makes so many voracious readers crack the spine on book after book. It is a feeling of being blissfully lost, but it is also the sensation of finding yourself in a new world, one populated by characters who sometimes seem powerfully real. These sensations are what urge us—sometimes desperately—to recommend a book to a friend.

We want others to see what we have seen, to feel what we have felt. As a teacher, I try to ask questions that will bring books and their ideas to life. And sometimes, if I am lucky, there are those moments when the greater part of the classroom experiences together the rush of seeing a vivid and beautiful and compelling world. Sometimes, it is even the same one that a while ago, alone, I saw. But it is more vivid now for having been shared. Whenever students bring that world again to life—or when they bring forward something unexpected that lights the page from a new angle—that is cause for celebration.

I see in my students every year glimpses of the same hunger and humility that blossomed so fully during our discussions of *Galatea 2.2* this summer. As Theodore Roethke argues in *On Poetry and Craft*, “There is an academic precept, which says: never listen to the young. The reverse should be true: Listen, I say, and listen close, for from them—if they are real and alive—may we hear, however faintly and distortedly—the true whispers of the infinite, the beckoning away from the dreadful, the gray life beating itself against the pitted concrete world.”

What I heard this summer was more than a whisper, and there was nothing faint or distorted about the voices of my students. It was the time of their singing, and it was beautiful.

Writer's Note:

Seven years ago, I had the blessing of a sabbatical. No author was as influential during my sabbatical as Richard Powers. I read (or re-read) his first six novels in a four-month stretch and agonized waiting three months for his latest to be published. By the time I returned to school, I was committed to teaching his work. I've taught *Prisoner's Dilemma* for the last four years, and the results have always been wonderful. The third time, my students responded with a rare combination of dazzling intellect and mature emotion. I wanted to continue to work with those students by reading another Powers novel, and I was thrilled by their eagerness to read for the sheer pleasure of it just weeks after their high school graduation.

Writing about that experience was challenging. I wrote this over the course of several weeks, drafting a paragraph or two at sittings ranging from one to two hours (often depending on the length of my daughter's naps). I knew that I had to continue to generate new material each time. I wanted to capture my students and their writing as well as *Galatea 2.2* and Powers himself. While I was a part of the essay, I didn't want to be the focus, and it was difficult to determine how much commentary to include. When I needed inspiration, I'd read Adam Gopnik. His essays have a seamless movement between elements with a kind of gradual feeling of coherence—not unlike a Powers novel, and with the benefit of wonderful humor. My essay isn't quite as tight and lively as I'd like it to be, but I think I capture my students and Powers well, and that's important to me because it's really a tribute to them and to him.

Jeff Berger-White

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On First Looking Into. . .

Hour of sightings and vanishings hour of held at abeyance hour of silences
then shadows of *once you go in* (the dark trees wallowing)
and writing on the back (sequel to the rain) hour of how much
will the looking involve (someone bent over your shoulder)
hour of read the instructions *the terms of agreement* of when
does the looking (the seasoned body) pass into seeing hour of
hearing what you see (the geese in bright formation) the associations
already flying (a stifling anvil) hour of what can you get here
that there is no threshold hour of wind/snow and footsteps
after (the wide skies) and looking back (echo) of who
coming after

Writer's Note:

Since I have been participating in Institute workshops, I have begun to review the writing I do in them—not workshop by workshop, but rather by writing strategies. I want to see what I might learn about my own writing and thinking process; I also want to mine the writing for other projects. “On First Looking Into. . .” comes out of that review process and tries to evoke and describe the moment I engage a new idea or text. As I went through my notebook, I pulled lines and phrases from several “First Thoughts” free writes—there are first thoughts in the poem about authority, history, other poems, and my own awareness of writing itself. I chose lines and phrases that struck a chord with me, then I started to arrange them in a “felt order”: lines or phrases that *felt like* they needed or wanted to be next to each other.

When I was arranging the lines and listening for their rhythms, I realized the poem was about the process of engaging something new and what that process looked and felt like. I realized then that when I engage a new idea or text, I have momentary insights, I make associations that can be productive or limiting, I am held at

by difficult passages or thoughts, I have intuitions (shadows), I make agreements with the text or idea, I submit to or fight its assumptions, and I am always revising what I see and what I think its expectations might be. What I wanted to achieve in the poem is the interplay between the moment of perceiving that process and the mind in action thinking about it—a moment that is rich with both order and chaos, unknowingness. The title, an echo of a Keats' poem, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," came to me while I was musing over what it meant to have first thoughts—to not be able to enter into something deeply, and then, to have it open up to us with wide skies, because we keep putting down (literally and figuratively) our first thoughts.

Peg Peoples

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The Purple Hair of Jesus

“Robert Dale! How many times do I have to tell you to GET UP! Your biscuit and bacon are getting cold! and I’m not about to heat them up!” roared Mamma, who already had a roast in the oven and assorted vegetables in hissing pots. Green beans were always cooking, but never cabbage. That would stink up Mamma’s immaculate kitchen, a kitchen that Betty Crocker would cherish. In fact, Mamma was enhancing the luster of the pink formica kitchen countertop when she snapped, “If I have to come back there one more time, IT’S GONNA BE WITH YOUR DADDY’S BELT!” Mamma then attacked the countertop with another swipe of Mr. Clean and proceeded to ambush the pine-knot cabinets with lemon oil and yet another warning: “Robert Dale! DON’T MAKE ME COME BACK THERE!” I lingered for a moment, considering my choices and contemplating the inevitability of Sunday school and the coloring book session at the end of the lesson. Just what colors is a ten-year-old boy supposed to choose for the Apostle Paul and Judas Iscariot, not to mention Jesus?

Daddy’s disciplinary duties were on vacation. He had put in over forty hours on the assembly line swing shift at Kerr McGee Chemical and at least another forty hours working on the hundred-acre family farm. He was now performing his deserved regal duty in the orange vinyl recliner, mesmerized by *The Gospel Singing Jubilee* on the Motorola television set. If a particular number inspired him, he would remove the Sunday school lesson from his lap and spring from the recliner to turn up the volume full blast. Usually, it was Naomi and the Sego Brothers’ rendition of “Sorry, I Never Knew You” that led to the ear-damaging volume.

Naomi possessed a mountainous jet-black hairdo, which revealed, during a close-up, a hairnet and a bunch of bobby pins holding all that hair in place. Hairspray did its job, too. Even though she did not wear makeup, Naomi was mighty proud of that stiff hairdo. The Sego Brothers wore matching powder blue suits, with skinny, coordinating clip-on ties. The austerity of their facial expressions made them look like Titanic passengers who had the

missed the last lifeboat—appropriate, since the song was about a man who had died without working much on his personal salvation and was still hoping to get into heaven to be with his beloved daughter. However, some ethereal authority mandated in song:

*Sorry, I never knew you/I find no record of your birth
Sorry, I never knew you/Go and serve the one that you
have served before.*

At some point the Sego Brothers, who stood behind Naomi, would gesticulate in unison, something like a white man’s version of Gladys Knight and the Pips. On the “I never knew you” part, they would do a staccato point toward the camera, kind of like Uncle Sam, but with a Jerry Falwell kind of smile. I guess the poor man in the song missed out on being with his daughter in heaven. He must have done something far worse than not working on his personal salvation.

Of course, this blast of musical and semantic sorriness frightened me out of bed. Mamma didn’t have to get the belt. I ate the cold biscuit and bacon, under Mamma’s all-seeing eye. “You are not leaving my house without some breakfast, young man!” By this time, Daddy was immersed in waiting for the next song.

“Straight from Florida! It’s the Florida Boys with sand still in their shoes!” the announcer wailed.

*Oh, I’m gonna take a trip/In the good old gospel ship/I’m
going far beyond the sky
Oh, I’m gonna shout and sing/Until the heavens ring/
And go sailing on through the air.*

Granted, this was more pleasant than the idea of heaven having no record of my birth, but I never could figure out what a gospel ship was. Could it be named “USA” or “World Gospel?” Did this gospel ship have wings like an airplane? Is that how it could go beyond the sky? I knew that the gospel was the good news of Jesus—Hear, Believe, Confess, Repent, and Be Baptized! But what

did the five steps of salvation have to do with a ship? Oh, by the way, that last step, baptism, that's total immersion, mind you. Sprinkling does NOT count.

The ritual of these boisterous songs of spirituality and belt threats semi-prepared me for Sunday school. As Brother Hathcock said, a part-time Christian might make it for worship service, but a part-time Christian didn't love God enough to show up an hour early for Sunday school. On the other hand, a full-time Christian attended Sunday school, worship services, AND Wednesday nights with his lesson prepared and memory verse FULLY MEMORIZED! And I'm not talking about those "Jesus Wept" kind of verses either. Mamma saw to that!

Splunge Valley Christian Church was the destination for this full-time Christian home. My Sunday school teacher, Miss Sybill, wasn't really a "Miss." She had a husband, but we never saw him at church. Whatever the case, Miss Sybill could flat out teach Sunday school. Once, she had a lesson on the Garden of Eden. As always, she was painstakingly prepared. She had a bunch of biblical maps that she had ordered in the mail. Some were even in color. The most striking visual aids were her handprinted materials on the flannel board. In conjunction with her lesson on the Garden of Eden she had these subjects covering the board: FALL OF MAN, TREE OF LIFE, VERDANT GLORY, GOD'S LOVE, GOD'S WRATH, OMNISCIENCE. Miss Sybill had also put up some pictures of plush greenery that she had cut out from *National Geographic* or *The Progressive Farmer* and some hand-drawn pictures of a man and woman shamefully covering up their nakedness with leaves from what looked like an elephant's ear plant.

I was ready to ask questions. "Okay, Miss Sybill, I know the Garden of Eden was full of verdant glory . . ."

"Do you all know what verdant means?" Miss Sybill asked. She loved it when we used vocabulary words.

"Green," I announced, but I was headed to bigger issues. "The Garden of Eden was full of verdant glory that surpasseth our understanding," I continued, but Miss Sybill corrected me.

“It’s PEACE that passeth understanding.” Miss Sybill and I both were proudly using the King James version. Saying all the “eths” added a special touch. Throw in “Goeth, doeth, passeth” and “And it came to pass” and everybody at Splunge Valley Christian Church just glowed. Using any other version besides King James could start another Civil War. One time a seminary student filled in for Brother Hathcock and used a modern version in the adult Sunday school, and the oldest church member, Granny Barrentine, exclaimed, “If the King James was good enough for Apostle Paul, it’s good enough for me!” No one dared argue that.

“Yes, Adam and Eve were enjoying the peace that passeth understanding,” I acknowledged. “They didn’t have to work, they could just lounge around and enjoy the verdant glory, they could do anything they wanted, but they could NOT eat from the forbidden fruit.” I was opening the class discussion, which was usually just between me and Miss Sybill. Patsy Westbrook always started coloring before it was time and all the others followed Patsy’s lead.

“Don’t you think it’s just human nature to try something you’re told repeatedly not to do?” I asked.

“We’re not to question God,” Miss Sybill said with an ambivalent smile. Patsy wasn’t actually coloring. She had skipped past the Garden of Eden page and gotten stuck on the Samson and Delilah page. She was wondering what color to use for Samson’s muscles, but she didn’t do any coloring. She just looked.

I kept on. “I know we’re not supposed to question God, but don’t you think He knew Eve or Adam would screw up given those circumstances?”

“Robert Dale, you know better than to use that kind of language.” At that moment, Miss Sybill reminded me of Naomi from the Segó Brothers. She had that annoyed but genteel look that Naomi used during her “Sorry I Never Knew You” song.

“We need more yellow colors, Miss Sybill,” Patsy said, as she finally started to color Samson’s long locks of hair.

“Miss Sybill, don’t you think God knew Adam and Eve would scr . . . make a mistake?” I was doing the best I could. Miss Sybill

was opening and slamming all the desk drawers looking for the lemon crayons.

“God knows all and he loves us very MUCH!” She slammed the final drawer. Then she pointed to GOD’S LOVE and OMNISCIENCE on the flannel board. “Patsy, you all need to stop that giggling.” She turned to the others. The “W” and the “H” had fallen from GOD’S WRATH, so Patsy and her gang were chuckling at the sight of GOD’S RAT.

“What color you want us to use for God’s rat, Miss Sybill?” Patsy squeaked.

“Patsy, I am so disappointed in you,” Miss Sybill opined. Oblivious to Miss Sybill’s mood, Patsy started rummaging through the shoebox of crayons. The laughter soon transformed into assorted wild cacophony from all the Sunday school students. “Patsy, if you all don’t hush, we won’t get to play hangman,” threatened Miss Sybill.

“You really think God knows everything, Miss Sybill?” I was simultaneously trying to learn and help Miss Sybill out.

“Oh, yes, Robert Dale. God is Alpha and Omega.” She pointed to the OMNISCIENCE sign on the flannel board. It must have been humid that Sunday morning, because by the VERDANT GLORY sign now read ANT GLORY. Patsy and her crowd had not noticed this new distraction, but when Miss Sybill noticed the ANT GLORY sign, she sighed such a pitiful sigh that she reminded me of the actress Olivia Hussey, not as Juliet, but as Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the TV movie, *Jesus of Nazareth*

“If God knows everything, then why would He let Eve give in to a snake?”

“God does not ‘let us,’ Robert Dale. We let ourselves. God has given us free will and Satan took on the form of a snake so that Eve wouldn’t know he was the devil. That’s just how slick Satan is. She pointed to a photo of a coiled-up rattlesnake on the flannel board, but she quickly spied Patsy throwing crayons. Patsy was aiming at one of the Tipton boys’ behinds. She was a good shot. Terry Tipton then chased her around the room while Jerry Tipton

stuck out his foot. “All right! Stop that! STOP!” Miss Sybill clapped her hands.

“WHO TRIPPED ME?” Patsy was ready to take on the twins.

“I said, “Stop it”! That’s it, now,” Miss Sybill proclaimed, “NO HANGMAN TODAY!”

“She started it,” announced Terry.

“You’re a liar, Terry Tipton. Ought to be ashamed telling a lie in church,” Patsy hissed.

“Hush now! This foolishness is over!” Miss Sybill kept looking at the clock. We still had ten minutes left before the Sunday school buzzer went off, a warning for everybody to get in the mood for the worship service, and Miss Sybill was painfully aware of what Patsy and her crew might do, and what I might ask in those ten minutes before they let us out.

One time in a previous class, I colored Jesus’s hair purple, and Miss Sybill just flat out cried. Nobody knew what to do. Even Patsy looked at me with a “holier than thou” smirk. Everybody stared at the floor. The vision of Miss Sybill weeping over the purple hair on Jesus silenced us all. That time she looked like Mary in those paintings and sculptures where she is holding the body of her crucified son. I didn’t choose purple to upset Miss Sybill; it’s just that no other color seemed right for this particular picture. My childhood had been inundated with reproductions of this picture of a fish-belly-white Jesus praying prostrate in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus looked cleaner than Mr. Clean but he didn’t have Mr. Clean’s muscles. And yet Jesus was a carpenter. All the carpenters and construction workers I knew looked tough, and all their hands were like sandpaper. Why, you could strike a match on the palms of their hands. But in this picture, Jesus looked like he had soaked his hands in a bubble bath and then gotten a manicure. The carpenters I knew in rural Mississippi would want to whip this Jesus because he looked so pansyish. His robe was too clean, too, like he had both the time and money to send it to the dry cleaner.

That picture puzzled me even more when I read the story from the Bible. You see, Jesus had gotten so tired out from those apostles that he had to find a spot where he could pray alone. He

was at the peak of loneliness. He knew he was supposed to die soon, but at this point of sheer humanness, Jesus asked God if there might be a chance that he would not have to die. “If it be thy will, let this cup pass from me,” Jesus requested. Even I knew God’s answer, and this was before I had reached the age of accountability. That pitiful picture insulted the biblical story, and yet there it was, all over the church’s walls. It was in the public school auditorium, at the dollar stores in imitation gold frames, and it was even hanging in the boys’ bathroom at the school gym. In fact, Pickles Funeral Home had the picture printed on thousands of those paper fans that elderly women like Granny Barrentine and Miss Lovie Guinn loved to sway during long summer sermons. “See Pickles when you need perpetual care,” read the Pickles Funeral Home advertisement on the back of the fan. In the picture, Jesus’s hair was not only not purple, but it looked like somebody from Edna’s Beauty Box had set and combed it. Jesus just looked too “swishy,” as Granny Barrentine might say.

I didn’t color Jesus’s hair purple to cause anybody, much less Miss Sybill, to cry. I wanted to make him look more credible, I guess. I wanted to make him look more human. Besides, he needed a little color on that too-clean face. Even unsmiling Naomi—the one with the Segó Brothers—dyed her hair.

Now Miss Sybill was glaring at the fallen flannel board items and the crayons scattered on the floor. I still had to ask. “But didn’t God know that man would get bored? Did God truly expect Adam and Even to stay out of trouble, especially when they didn’t have anything else to do?”

“Uh, Robert Dale, I think it’s time for a song and you’ve got such a nice voice. Lead us in a closing song.” Miss Sybill could be as slick as Satan.

“Yeah, do the one about the fountain free,” Patsy requested. Was she serious? Maybe she was hoping Miss Sybill wouldn’t tell her parents about how badly she had acted today.

“What the hell,” I thought to myself. Of course, I didn’t dare say that out loud. When I started to sing the chorus of Patsy’s request, “Thirsty soul, hear the welcome call, ’Tis a fountain open

for all,” Patsy and her chums began to pick up the crayons and the fallen letters from the flannel board. Some even brought their colored pages to Miss Sybill, who smiled like the Olivia Hussey mother of Jesus. The Sunday school buzzer sounded, and Miss Sybill insisted we all join hands for a closing prayer, but my mind wasn’t on the prayer. Actually, I would have preferred to color, but that would have caused another round with Miss Sybill.

Writer’s Notes:

Just before my first session at Bard’s Institute for Writing and Thinking in 2004, I had journeyed to Mississippi to see my parents’ graves. That visit, along with several writing prompts in Carley Moore’s Writing and Thinking workshop, lured my mind back to childhood days in another world. I think the specific prompt that led to this story had something to do with articulating my thoughts about an authority figure, and then eventually relating a personal encounter with an authority figure. As the pen moved, my mind began to move faster, especially when I had a vision of a well-meaning Vacation Bible School teacher. As the pen, hand, and mind moved faster, I began to think of the multiple Sunday school teachers I had encountered. Somehow, I blended all of these images and memories into one character who I called Miss Sybill.

What challenged me most about this prompt was articulating my feelings on authority figures. I have always been a compliant student, thus authority was usually not a problem. But as my mind drifted more and more to the past, I began to recall my interminable sessions in Sunday school. Once I began to focus on specific characters, the process was cathartic. I still have ambivalent feelings about those days in Sunday school, and I hope I have captured the emotional and downright comical predicament of Miss Sybill.

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Writing from the Inside Out was founded in 2006 by a small group of Institute associates. Published once a year, the journal is a showcase for and celebration of selected new works that have emerged from workshops at Bard College's Institute for Writing and Thinking. Inside each issue, you'll find a varied collection of stories, poems, and essays, as well as process notes from the writers. The IWT is a place where the collaborative spirit thrives and where we believe that there is a deep connection between writing, teaching, and learning.

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