

Writing from the Inside Out

2007

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Dear Reader,

The writing included in this journal originated in one of the Institute's workshops, and many began as "freewrites" or "focused freewrites." The July week-long workshops offer the best opportunity for extended writing and I like to imagine that an idea embedded in a freewrite began to take form during the week because of the responses the writer received from fellow participants. Some of the writers may have read their fledgling poems or stories at the Thursday night community reading, perhaps beginning the revision process just as we said our good-byes on the last day of the workshop. It has been a long journey for some of these pieces from the initial writing and reading to the final preparation of the poems, stories, and essays selected for inclusion in this journal.

In fact, the Institute's April 20th conference focused on "revision," a phase of the composing process that is at once exciting and troubling for writers. As Toni Morrison reminds us in her essay "The Site of Memory," revision, re-shaping, and rethinking *is* writing, just as shaping a new dance to the bodies of real dancers is the art of choreography and film making is the art of editing, cutting, and re-ordering scenes filmed earlier in the process. The year-long project that resulted in *Writing from the Inside Out* created a rich opportunity for both authors and editors to re-visit "ways of responding to writing," and strategies for revising.

The contributors to this volume are, of course, also teachers—in middle schools, high schools, and colleges. Their lives are busy and filled with daily responsibilities at home and at school. We applaud their efforts and appreciate the way that they worked closely with the journal's editors to prepare this volume for publication.

We hope in reading this, you will be inspired to submit poetry, fiction, an essay, or a memoir for next year's volume. The deadline for submission is September 24, 2007. Details are available on the Institute's website (www.writingandthinking.org).

Best regards,

Teresa Vilardi
Director, Institute for Writing and Thinking

Crybaby

In my notes the page is titled “An Early Story about Language.” It is a Saturday in December at Bard College—a writers’ workshop. Outside it is cold, with snow on the ground. The sky is pale over the lead-grey Hudson River, the trees bare, the hillsides purple. In nature, purple is a different color, more satisfying than the artificial purple of a magic marker, a dress fabric, a school banner. On the hills it is deep and multi-toned, and it makes me want to write.

We begin with stories about language. An early story, one from childhood. I write, using language to look for language. In my notes are the words, “Dad shouting at me, using my name as a challenge, a threat.” Mom was the one who “knew English,” and if we had an English question, Dad sent us to her. He was a terrible speller; she was a whiz. She knew about language, but he knew how to use it, shouting my name as a challenge or command. Or, sometimes, in love.

We all played with language. Stinky Pinky, spoonerisms, nonsense rhymes. “Nobody knows, tiddly pom / How cold my toes, tiddly pom . . .” There was family language—Dad joking, “Where’s the grifter?” as he pulled our sweaters off at night. And baby language—“hainey,” my sister’s word for music. There was the language of poetry, which we loved for its power to heal and save, with the incantatory quality of verse charming the ear and, for the moment, making us whole. And always there were the “magic” words: “please,” and “thank you,” and “I’m sorry,” although, in a family often strained by silence and hostility, “I’m sorry” might fail in its purpose.

But the story isn’t coming. I want a single day, an hour, when language was the agent, the hero, perhaps, of some important event, but no one incident comes to mind. And then, as I write, I remember. Crybaby.

It’s about my sister as a little girl, this story. She was perhaps four years old. I was thirteen. “I don’t want to tell this story,” I write in my notebook, but it comes anyway, about how, in the big kitchen in our farmhouse in Maine, I drew a cartoon picture of a

crybaby, colored with crayons, and posted it on Grandma Jeanne's bedroom door. I was old enough to know better, and should have been ashamed. But my sister's fits of crying were too much for Grandma, and she, domineering and conspiratorial, drew me into her realm, where crybabies were bad. Spoiled brats.

And "crybaby" was the word we used to name and control this maddening behavior, all through that long summer. Dad's mother had recently come to live with us. She had the little bedroom off the kitchen and she didn't want crying anywhere near. I drew the picture of the baby face, and beneath it she wrote the interdiction, in French: "*Pas des Bebes Criantes! Absolument!*"

And so my sister was pronounced "a crybaby." She did cry a lot, or so it seemed to us. She cried when she couldn't have her way, cried over small discomforts and troubles, and cried in the midst of minor disagreements. She would burst into tears, unreasonably, we thought—and this is an important word. It was *unreasonable*, because we could not reason it, could not reason her out of it and into cheerfulness. What was clear, and this is how the word began to serve us, was that she did cry. Tears poured down her face. Wailing from her lungs filled the rooms. So we named this sensory aspect of our experience, and in so doing, named the psychic aspects as well. Our spirits were much bruised by this crying, and then were healed, somewhat, by our being able to hurl the accusation, "Crybaby!"

At Bard, it is mid-morning and time to stop writing the story itself and go on to the next stage. The pages in our notebooks are divided into two columns, with the stories on the right. Now, in the left-hand column, we reflect on what we've written. The crybaby story. "The power of naming," my notes begin. If you can say what something is, you can control it. My baby sister is upset; she weeps and wails. We say she's a crybaby, and thus accuse her even as we say what the problem is. "Crybaby" means "you're spoiled. You have no good reason to cry. Your crying is a form of misbehaving, it's wrong, so don't do it."

The naming does not make the crying stop, but it does pile up the weight of moral indignation against it. It does justify sanctions against the offender, right? It takes this unreasonable and unreasoned thing that sits in the middle of our lives, and organizes

it in such a way as to make it psychologically manageable. We establish a system composed of the guilty and the innocent, the judges and the accused, the offender and the offended. It is a system of opposition in which the use of force—“No crybabies allowed! Go to your room!”—is sanctioned, even demanded.

But the moral loading of a nameless and unorganized phenomenon can itself be an act of violence. The reason is in part epistemological. We know the phenomenon by means of the name we give it. “Oh, that? We know that. It’s just a crybaby.” The knowing then takes the place of the phenomenon itself. There is more to a crybaby than the crying itself, and whatever more there might be remains un-named and unknown, and left to prowl around outside our little circle of linguistic light, an unobserved and therefore more dangerous threat.

What if my baby sister cries because, with the intuition of the child, she knows the pain in the family, and knows that it is not acknowledged? What if she senses her father’s growing isolation from his mother, and from his wife and children? Certainly she feels the hostility and pain of her grandmother’s constant judging and rejection of ideas, people, behavior. Suppose the little girl knows all this, knows it, not the way the big people know, with words, but in the heart?

No matter. We have taken her tears and howling and reduced them to a word. We have taken charge of this one problem and by the power of naming we have turned away from its pain and its intractability. We have also separated ourselves from that larger problem, one for which our culture has another name and another act of linguistic fogging, “the dysfunctional family.” But we don’t have to confront that set of complexities. The word “crybaby” defends us, for now, against the more frightening possibility that the enemy is not the crybaby. The enemy is us.

Writer’s Note:

This essay began in an IWT workshop titled “Language, Power, and Play.” It was December 1990, long before I put the experience in essay form, but at the time I wanted the workshop writing to last, as more than just a process of thinking and

searching. I thought I might someday turn it into a finished piece that could stand on its own. So I kept my notes.

The workshop had us write, not surprisingly, about language. We began, on a Friday evening, by writing about our names. Saturday morning, the assignment was to write a story about language. There were two prompts, in fill-in-the-blank form: “Times when you _____ (lost, feared, loved, murdered, etc.) language” and “Times when you were _____ (confused, inspired, challenged, threatened, etc.) by language.” I began my story with memories of being challenged and threatened, and eventually came upon the memory of myself using language in a hostile way, as the story of the crybaby sister relates.

When it came to writing the essay, I began by using notes about the workshop as a framing device, partly because those notes included the description of the winter scene that opens the essay. I used to love the weekends on the Bard campus, and the description took me back there, to the years when I was a regular participant in IWT workshops and conferences. Locating the story in the workshop itself felt right, so I decided to keep the frame, moving back and forth between the story itself and the occasion of its writing. The result is close to what I have in my notes. I took both the narrative and the reflections on it, doing little more than cutting something here, fleshing out an idea there, and polishing the sentences.

Ralph Stevens

Coppin State University, Baltimore, Maryland

Come Slowly—Eden!

Mrs. Peal mostly lectured. From time to time, she took off her glasses and gestured with them, a movement that exposed her bright green eyes and seemed a bit showy. I liked it. She was smart in the sense that she would have made a good partner in Trivial Pursuit, and when I was 15 years old, I admired her.

My friend Julie and I always sat in the third row and took furious notes. We could tell that Mrs. Peal liked us from the way she glanced over when she was making an especially important point, as if to say, “Did you get that?” We did. She often made witty remarks, but she did so in the course of the lecture, without changing her tone of voice, and unless you were really listening, the remark could pass you by. So Julie and I really listened. When she joked and we giggled in an otherwise silent classroom, Mrs. Peal would nod approvingly in our direction.

Aside from her green eyes, Mrs. Peal had a plain face, and she concealed her body beneath shapeless blouses and skirts with the hems let out. Her very plainness appealed to us: she was brainy and unglamorous and started class right on time. Her tests were hard but fair, and Julie and I knew exactly how to prepare for them. Mrs. Peal had written her master’s thesis on the causes of the French Revolution, and we were pleased to see that when she spoke of this, she became quite animated. It was in graduate school that she had met and married her husband, and we knew that they lived together on West 72nd Street, near the park. Mrs. Peal was not our best teacher, or our favorite, but we appreciated her reliable, organized lectures and the fact that she noticed us and took an interest in our schoolwork. Certainly, Julie and I aspired to greater things than Mrs. Peal’s life appeared to contain, but we used her as a kind of unspoken benchmark. We knew that, at the very least, we could grow up to be Mrs. Peal.

Given this, it came as a shock when an eleventh grader, Emily Besker, told us about Mrs. Peal’s affair. Emily perched herself on the edge of a bathroom sink and revealed that she had seen Mrs. Peal and another teacher kissing outside a movie theater in Brooklyn.

What Emily actually said was that she saw them sucking face, but I couldn't imagine Mrs. Peal sucking on anyone's face, so I quickly edited this image to a lengthy, passionate kiss in my mind. Whatever the terminology, though, Julie and I kept coming back to the sharpest edge of the story: Mrs. Peal was married. Surely, Emily must have been mistaken. Or lying.

Although Julie and I had never met Mr. Peal, we knew he existed. We had seen him at the sports barbecue the previous fall and now regretted that we had not observed him more closely when we had the opportunity. Who was this Mr. Peal, this man who had failed to satisfy our Mrs. Peal? What were his flaws? We began to suspect he had many. For what else could drive Mrs. Peal into the arms of another man, another teacher?

Mr. Jacobson was an English teacher, and from what we had heard, a good one. He was quite tall and had bushy eyebrows covered by large glasses. He seemed a bit older than Mrs. Peal, and we quickly concluded that Mrs. Peal must have been looking for a more mature man than the surely juvenile Mr. Peal. When we spoke of the affair, Julie and I took to calling Mrs. Peal and Mr. Jacobson by only their first names, and the story of Mandy and Paul quickly became the focus of our lives.

In the absence of any real knowledge about love, romance, or sex, Julie and I devoured the details of Mandy and Paul's affair. We observed our teachers carefully, noticing how they ate together at lunch, how he refilled her iced tea, how she brushed the lint off his sweater. As time wore on, we began to feel that we knew them, knew how they felt and what they liked about each other. And we wanted to get their attention.

Julie and I began drawing their names over and over in elaborate hearts in our history notebooks, halfway hoping that Mrs. Peal would see us and say something. Later, we dared each other to sketch the hearts in pencil in the margins of our tests and then erase them incompletely, leaving a faint mark. We wanted to get caught doing this, to be included somehow in their drama, but feared what might happen if we were.

Weeks went by, and Mandy started losing weight. She began to reveal her figure more, the shapeless blouses giving way to more tight-fitting ones. She started wearing lipstick. For the first time,

Julie and I noticed her breasts, and we pronounced them quite attractive. For his part, Paul got new, smaller glasses that let us get a good look at his face for the first time. We began to see the appeal of his dark, serious eyes and loping walk. We pinched each other with excitement when he greeted us by name outside Mandy's office. Yes, we saw what Mandy liked about him.

As Julie and I grew more obsessed with their affair, we also grew more daring in our investigations. The first time we snuck into Paul's office, it was really just to see if we could: 10 seconds of squealing and shushing and dancing around on the dark blue carpet—enough time for Julie to steal a pen off Paul's desk and for me to note with satisfaction Paul's well-thumbed collection of Emily Dickinson poems and the tidy way he kept his galoshes tucked against the wall on a piece of newspaper.

The second visit was for Julie to return the pen, but soon our stealthy visits to Paul's office became a habit. Each time, we looked more thoroughly for evidence of his affection for Mandy. Would there be a photograph of her on his desk this time? Paul was too smart for that. A ticket stub from the romantic movie where we imagined his fingertips had first brushed her thigh? If we looked through his pencils and twisted rubberbands, would we discover he had kept a note she'd passed him in a faculty meeting—or, more dangerously, in chapel? We wanted Paul to be a shameless romantic, a keeper of mementos. But we were glad he was discreet.

Once, for no apparent reason, it was Paul who delivered a stack of photocopies to Mrs. Peal's classroom while we were taking a quiz. He knocked twice, his eyebrows inquiring through the window—May I enter? And at Mrs. Peal's nod, he opened the door, placed the copies on a table, and withdrew quietly.

Like hawks, Julie and I were alert to the slightest glance between them, but later, we were in agreement: Paul had kept his eyes on the photocopies the whole time.

"It must be killing him," Julie declared as we walked to sixth-period. "He sees her all the time, but he can't touch her or even look at her."

I nodded, thinking how much I wanted someone to look at me the way I imagined Paul looked at Mandy. "When it gets real bad,"

Julie went on, “I bet he jerks off in the bathroom between classes.”

Julie enjoyed trying to shock me, and although I made a point of not being shocked, I was easily provoked into defending Paul.

“Jesus, Julie—he doesn’t do *that*. He’s an English teacher for God’s sake. If he’s in the bathroom, he’s probably writing poems to her on bits of paper towel. He’s very refined.”

Being refined was another quality we thought Paul had. We weren’t entirely sure what being refined entailed, but we knew it was desirable. Refined, romantic, mature, all ways we were by now convinced that the sweet and bookish Paul outclassed and outcompeted the unknown but lowly Mr. Peal.

One day in class, Mrs. Peal was leading us in a current events discussion about human rights when a boy named Duncan—a nerd often picked on by more confident, athletic boys—made a comment that caused some snickering around the room. Duncan’s very knowledge of current events and the earnestness with which he spoke made him an easy target. Unexpectedly, Mrs. Peal came to Duncan’s defense, giving a short speech about human rights extending into the classroom and telling us that Duncan was even smarter than we realized and that one day he was really going to amount to something.

Duncan got beaten up after school, but once his black eye started to heal, I asked him to the movies. He was confused about why I wanted to take the train into Brooklyn for a movie that was playing all over Manhattan, but he agreed.

After the movie, Duncan kissed me hesitantly, sort of gripping me on the arms and darting in to dot my face with hasty, puckered kisses. I tried to help him, putting my arms around his neck and looking into his eyes, but he seemed too flustered to act. On the train ride home, we talked about school and I told him about Paul and Mandy.

He was surprised at first, but as I related our visits to Paul’s office, our half-erased hearts in the margins of tests, he laughed, and the laughter seemed to relax him. He put his arms around me and we rode home that way, my head against his chest, swaying with the train, thinking about our teachers and ourselves and the future.

For a long time, Duncan did not understand my obsession with

Paul and Mandy, and he was disappointed when I gave him a copy of Emily Dickinson's collected poems for his birthday. He thought Mrs. Peal was jeopardizing her marriage and maybe her career for what he referred to as "a little lousy sex." Knowing that, like me, Duncan had never had sex, I dismissed his opinion as uninformed. Besides, Julie and I had already decided that if Mandy was sleeping with Paul, it was because she loved him very much. We were also sure they both took off their glasses before doing it. They both had such nice eyes.

Spring came early that year, and crocuses pushed their way up through the muddy earth with gleeful green stalks and yellow faces. Duncan and I did not spend much time outdoors, though. Sometimes, we would go to his house after school and lay on the floor of his room. The floor was a dull, splintering wood, but we lay on a braided rug in the center of the room. There, in the dim light that filtered through the curtains, we looked at dirty magazines together. Duncan stole these magazines from his older brother.

At first, the pictures in the magazines scared me—pictures of women stretched out on lacy, pink beds, legs apart, red fingernails calling attention to the places they touched themselves. I had never seen pictures like these before. Initially, Duncan turned the pages. As we looked, we were careful not to touch each other, resting our shoulders and arms awkwardly on the floor so as not to get in each other's way. Duncan's brother was usually home during the afternoon, and we were nervous about getting caught. Any sound from the rest of the apartment caused us both to jump with fear and excitement. Duncan was very grave. He reassured me that as a feminist, he would never buy such magazines, but since they were already in the house, what was the harm in looking at them? And besides, he reasoned, the real excitement came not from looking at the magazines but from knowing we could get caught. Duncan's ears wiggled a bit whenever he spoke seriously, and this was serious talk. I saw the logic of his argument. We lay on the floor and looked at the same pictures over and over, breathing hard and getting up often for drinks of water. As we lay on the floor, I became aware of the way my jeans were pulling against my body, how I was digging my hips into the braided rug. All that spring, we

treated the magazines with a kind of intellectual disdain, analyzing which pictures were more or less degrading to women and going to great lengths to tell each other that it was not the pictures that excited us, but rather the risk of being discovered. When at last we found ourselves groping and moaning on Duncan's bed, I felt certain that if Mandy ever looked at magazines, it was only for the thrill of secrecy. I knew Paul was too refined to look at them.

When we weren't lying on the floor of Duncan's bedroom, Duncan and I sometimes took outings to various culturally significant sites around the city. We attended Saturday matinées at the Metropolitan Opera, went to obscure and sparsely attended readings on the second floor of the New York Public Library, and visited the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. At each of these places, Duncan and I would stare purposefully at whatever we had come to see, our chins resting thoughtfully against our palms. Then, after an appropriate amount of time had elapsed, we would sneak into the coatroom and furiously run our hands all over each other's bodies, attempting all the while to carry on conversations about the overture to *La Bohème* or the horrors of overcrowding in turn-of-the-century tenement housing. I was much better at this game than Duncan, finding I could concentrate on both the physical and mental tasks with a sick agility that delighted me.

I often imagined that Duncan and I might encounter Paul and Mandy in one of these coatrooms, pulling aside heavy minks and thick cloth coats to discover our teachers discussing the opera while engaged in the act of sucking face, a concept I now more fully appreciated. Would they be shocked? Afraid? Would they bargain with us, asking us to keep their well-guarded secret? Duncan and I would agree, of course, showing our maturity by acknowledging the gravity of the situation and pledging to keep their secret just between us—and Julie.

On one occasion, Duncan and I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art and found ourselves staring at a painting of a nude woman by Modigliani. In the painting, the woman was leaning back on a red cushion, her skin orangey-pink with spots of white. Her form took up most of the painting, her figure large and well lit in the cool museum hall. I noticed how the woman's black hair fell neatly around her face, one piece trailing down her shoulder and

across her breast. Her head was tilted to one side and her eyes were closed. Her face was long, narrowing at the chin. I thought of how different she looked from the women in the magazines and made a mental note to engage Duncan in a discussion of this later.

I stared at the painting. Although she did not appear to be asleep, the woman seemed relaxed. I noticed that her hips were very broad and her thighs met in the middle of the painting. The hair between her legs was a lighter color, somewhat curly and tufted. The shape of her body from navel to mid-thigh seemed almost triangular. Her breasts were round and stood up from her body, the nipples pink smudges of paint. Her face was expressionless, her closed eyes topped by dark, thin eyebrows—long and well defined, like two black slashes along the top of her face.

I turned to Duncan and whispered, “She seems so exposed, but there’s also a lot we can’t see.”

Duncan nodded like he understood, and although I knew he knew more about art than I did, I persisted.

“Like her hands—they’re totally out of the frame of the picture. And her legs, and feet, and toes.” Duncan nodded again. “Why would a painter crop an image like that? And where are her ears? See the way her hair covers her ears?”

“Yeah,” said Duncan thoughtfully, gesturing toward the painting. “And her eyes—we can’t see what she’s thinking behind those eyelids.”

We were quiet for a minute.

“Do you think she knows she’s being observed?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Duncan said. “She seems so comfortable—if she was a model, maybe she was used to posing for artists.”

“Maybe,” I shrugged.

I gazed up at the painting and thought about how other parts of her were also not visible—things like her knees, her ankles, her back—but these things seemed too obvious to say out loud. After a time, Duncan walked on toward another room, but I stayed. Looking at the painting, I thought about how vulnerable the woman seemed to me. All her defenses were concealed from view by the painter—her hands, eyes, ears, tongue, legs, feet—and I realized that I felt afraid for her.

Later, I did argue the distinction between nude and naked with Duncan, though he moved the conversation quickly away from my mention of the magazines since he did not like to discuss them apart from analyzing the pictures as a prelude to our kisses. Instead, Duncan tried to engage me in a broader and more complicated discussion about taste and art in general, a conversation I found difficult to follow given the assertive presence of Duncan's hand inside my shirt.

After our trip to the museum, Duncan and I slowly started seeing less of each other. When we finally broke up, it was an amicable ending: he returned the collection of Dickinson poems to me, and I promised not to tell anyone about the magazines.

The next spring, after we had graduated, I learned that Mr. Jacobson was going to be subletting the apartment of my friend's father. My friend, Eric, did not know about my obsession, but I arranged to meet him there for coffee at a time we guessed would be about halfway through the day of Mr. Jacobson's move into the apartment.

I arrived on Eric's street and immediately spotted Mrs. Peal from a distance. Wearing shorts and a yellow tank top, she was seated on the stoop smoking a cigarette. Her legs were stretched out in front of her and her face was tilted up toward the sun. I had not known she smoked, and I wondered briefly whether it was a new habit. She did not notice me approaching her and so was startled when I spoke her name.

"Mrs. Peal?" I waved and removed my sunglasses.

"Oh! Hello, Liz! I didn't see you there." She smiled. "Out for a little neighborhood stroll?" She batted away an insect and drew her legs up. I noticed again the bright green of her eyes.

"Ah, not exactly—I—"

"Oh, of course! You're here to meet Eric, aren't you? I saw him go inside a little while ago."

"Yeah, he and I are, uh, going out for coffee." I shifted my weight uneasily to the other foot.

"Coffee," she smiled, "that just sounds so grown up. You're only 18 and already meeting for coffee. My, there's a certain romance to it, almost . . ." She looked up questioningly at me.

"Oh, Mrs. Peal," I stammered, "Eric and I aren't—"

She laughed. “No, of course you’re not. I’m just teasing you.” She took a drag of her cigarette. “You know, Liz, now that you’ve graduated, you can call me Amanda.”

I stared at her.

“You know, Amanda—that’s my first name? Teachers do have first names, dear.” She tossed her hair to one side and smiled. “But then, I suppose you know that.”

Writer’s Note:

I wrote this during and after Alfred Guy’s workshop on “The Essay.” One day, he asked us to write about a teacher we once had. My initial scribble was about a teacher of mine in high school, a teacher I admired and remembered well.

When an idea or dilemma is nagging at me, I find it will emerge in a piece of writing, no matter what the assignment is. Many fragments that I originally wrote in response to Alfie’s prompts that week—fragments that, at the time, seemed unrelated to one another—later became part of this piece, because they were all circling around the same themes. The section of the story that takes place at the museum, for example, came out of an exercise in our workshop in which we each selected a postcard of a work of art and described what we saw as precisely as possible. I selected a painting by Modigliani. Later, as I continued to work on the piece about Mrs. Peal, the image of the woman in the painting occurred to me again.

What was easy about writing this piece is that it has its origins in a story from the distant past of high school, so I am far enough away from those events to see truths and ambiguities that at the time I could not fully engage. What is hard is realizing how much I reveal about myself through my writing, even when many of the events are imagined.

Elizabeth Anne Perry

The Berkeley Carroll School, Brooklyn, New York

Dating Outside the Faith

I go out with adverbs,
defiantly,
because everyone says they're bad,
but I meet them
clandestinely
on the wordy side of town.
Furtively, we climb dark stairs to seedy rooms
where we describe our doings to each other
languidly, minutely, voluptuously.

Later,
I pull myself together
and steal back to the clean, spare streets.
My well-edited friends ask about my day.
I tell them it was leisurely, lovely.

Writer's Note:

This little poem was born during a centering freewrite at the beginning of a day. As I often do to wet my toe in the dark waters of the unconscious, I started off by capturing one of my dreams from the night before, something about my parents. Suddenly, out of nothing consciously connected to the dream, "I love adverbs" popped into my head. The sentence seemed nearly gastronomic, it was so fraught with sensuous, lip-smacking delight in how adverbs sound, the rhythm of them, the lilt of the "-ly" ending, the taste of them in my mouth. Savoring my real gusto for adverbs counterposed with the parental flavor of my dream put me in touch with the slightly guilty defiance of my adverbophilia, with enough energy to carry me through a first draft right then and there. It was a juicy surprise when I discovered that the snoopy, snooty "well-edited" friends could be answered with words of dubious identity and this serendipitous twist delighted me enough to keep working on the poem. I felt like I had something, but I fumbled for months

with the title, until I came up with a phrase that combined just that same teenaged guilty defiance. (For the record, I also luxuriate in comma splices, run-ons, sentences that begin with conjunctions, sweet white wines, and 30-minute sitcoms.)

Donna Glee Williams

The North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching,
Cullowhee, North Carolina

Lyric Undone

We've just begun and already it's gone,
the pure thing, like the favorite roost of an eye,
a white road and above it clouds of gypsum
as if real horses powered that old black sedan.
Old growth on either side, beneath it brittle
timber woven thick upon a sunless floor.

To transfer the aesthetic of the mismatched set,
or vintage wardrobe, and come to accept what might
be random in the story—while the white road wishes
to be no story at all. Afternoon picks out handprints
on the passenger's side glass. The story, the past—
we think: if there was but an operation to cut it free.

The true operation adds, to remove.
It implants in you the road, the dazzling gravel,
silica signaling that rays of time still pass over.
This place is exhaustion itself, ground up so fine.
I want to go to the Pacific Northwest—
I've never been. Someone take me;
at no point in this was I asking to be alone.

Writer's Note:

The idea for “Lyric Undone” really comes from a feeling, the very real (for me) feeling of looking back over one's poems and being disappointed that none of them can ever measure up to the perfectly harmonious, crisp, transcendent ideal that one holds in one's mind. And in fact, as this poem argues, that ideal poem is gone—undone—at the very moment that one sits down to try again to reach it; the possibility of perfection is sacrificed as soon as the very first word is set down. I began the poem by trying to talk about this idea while, at the same time, fancifully imagining the landscape where my ideal poem might at least occur: for whatever reason, I decided on a white road in the woods.

The writing of the poem, beyond that impetus, was satisfying in that I had the pleasurable experience of discovering things along the way. I didn't know, when I started out, that I would come to see this longing for purity as a longing to escape from history, nor that I'd come to think of the poetic tradition itself as part of the problem, its inventory of themes and voices as overworked as the stones of the Northeast are ground up fine. The poem ends with a surprising—to me!—bit of yearning for the frontier, an escape to wilder country, and, maybe the biggest surprise of all, a request for a little help in getting there.

Matt Longabucco

Faculty Associate, Institute for Writing and Thinking, Bard
College

To be

Years ago I was a wife.
I don't remember what it
felt like—just that when you went
away, some thing inside me
died. And I pretended it
didn't matter anyhow.

I loved you then in an un-
questioning, adoring kind
of way—and as we smoked
around those ancient islands
I thought this was forever.

I didn't mind when you got
sick. I wandered out and bought
orange juice from a man who
did not speak my language—
money crumpled in my fist
like the child

I was.

Some time ago I was a
sister. I don't remember
exactly what it felt like—
but I suspect that when you
went away, some thing inside
me died. And I tried to pretend
you didn't matter to me.

I drew a line inside of
me. So when you got sick, I
wished that you were dead and we
could get this over with.

I loved you then in an un

even kind of way and when
we drove that long flat road and
you cursed the dead and offered
up your secrets, I couldn't help

but wonder who

you were.

Just a week ago I was
a daughter. And while I don't
remember precisely what
it felt like—I know that when
you get sick, you go away
and part of me begins to die.

And I return to this life
I've made of books and rain though
I can't pretend you do not
matter to me anymore.

I loved you absolutely—
when we sat cheek to chest while
you spun tales of kings and girls
I thought we two were one.
So I wonder now and then—
when I'm alone—what happened

to the family

we were.

Writer's Note:

I began this piece while attending a poetry workshop at Bard,
my third such weekend workshop at the College. The weekends I
have spent at Bard have a special place in my heart—in part

because of the wisdom I feel I have gained there, and in part because of the solitude and opportunity for reflection these weekends offer. Something about the business of devoting an entire weekend to writing always puts me in a contemplative mood. This poem reflects something of that, I think. The raw material for this poem was generated while on what my instructor, Kristin Prevallet, termed “a poetry walk.” In truth, there was nothing particularly inspiring about the walk itself. Indeed, the exercise initially felt like little more than that—an exercise. So I wandered around the campus making lists and observations and thinking about what the tempestuous architecture of the campus had to do with me. Much to my surprise, the walk generated the thinking and writing that led to the use of the verb ‘to be’ as the foundation for the poem. While I don’t have a record of that thinking or even more than a rough copy of the notes I took that morning, I know I was thinking about who I am, who I have been, and how others in my life have helped inform my sense of self.

As I look back on this poem almost a year later, I wonder if it is really anything more than a fragment. It strikes me now that this may be only a segment of a much longer (and as of yet unwritten) poem. Certainly, the rather melancholy events alluded to in the three primary sections of the poem do not make up the whole of who I am. That said, the poem is (as it is) a sort of reflection on moments of loss, specifically the loss of love and loved ones. I was also thinking (as perhaps is obvious) about labels (wife, mother, sister, daughter) as markers of identity and contemplating what the emotional coordinates of those markers are. My desire in titling the poem “To be” was not only to offer the premise of the poem in a rather obvious way, but also to offer a kind of hope.

The real struggles I had (and continue to have) with this poem are not, however, those of content. Nor were they struggles that began during my weekend at Bard. I have wrestled with the shape, the stanzas, and even the meter of this poem on and off for quite some time. I knew early on that I wanted to set apart each of the forms of the conjugation, but beyond that, I wasn’t quite sure. I experimented with syllabics and some other quasi-metrical organization schemata, and, at one point, settled on a scheme that amounted to little more than strategic line breaks. In this final

version, I have returned to a syllabic structure in hopes that the syllabics will work against the pattern of repetition. I am aware that the parallelism of the stanzas is far from perfect. But I have settled on a form and a register that I hope reflects the simplicity of the verb while at the same time hinting (as does the verb itself) at something much more elemental, if not more profound.

Note: A poetry walk prompt consists of 18 steps accompanied by a series of writing exercises. Participants are instructed to create (from the raw material generated on the walk) a five-part work consisting of a serial poem, three haiku, a list poem, an ode, and a cento.

Stella Katherine Beale

Greenhills School, Ann Arbor, Michigan

Tokyo Mingled

I can remember the shocking sense of unbalance I felt when I first arrived in Tokyo, ripe for experience and my first real job. I, who had been on my own since 17, and already bilingual in French, was reduced to lopsided infancy by the staggering onslaught of heat and incomprehensible external stimuli. The heat gave birth to wondrous and horrendous things. Flowers were hothouse or jungle massive and riotously colored; sounds carried slowly through the moisture and, like the cicadas' song, the buzz that entered your brain did not leave.

I was straightjacketed by my bulk and stared in wonder at every woman and girl I saw, all so petite and doll-like. How was it possible to be so pulled together in such a climate? To combat the eternal sweat slick, I later learned they carried blotting pads and face mops and sock glue in their Prada bags; bags that, for some, were their paltry remuneration for hours of 'compensated dating' with older men. The summer heat required you to walk in the most measured of gaits; still, you'd manage to dampen all of your clothing. I soon took to carrying a face mop myself.

I was tall for the first time ever. I was a large rust spot on the well-oiled machine. Keeping up seemed vital in this disposable fast-moving culture, and a nearly destitute, pseudo-prudish *gaijin* like me would never manage. Almost everything in Tokyo seemed new; buildings were torn down and rebuilt every 20 years or so, and most items replaced with new versions extremely quickly. Appearances felt like everything.

Despite the heat, hot soup was a staple, served at every meal including breakfast. Balancing lunchtime servings in open bowls on wobbly trays, delivery boys would cycle through congested lanes where the sidewalk was just a painted line on a narrow strip of roadway. My hand cramped into a claw after using nothing but chopsticks for a couple of days. There was nothing else to use. The heat-induced stupor and my new illiteracy resulted in the accidental purchase of canned horseflesh. The appetite-suppressant quality of this discovery was not to be underestimated. I attribute a 22-kilo weight loss in large part to that one repellent tin.

I took three showers a day. The air conditioning, like other comforts, was limited in my *gaijin* guesthouse, where I lived with other foreigners. It didn't reach the bathroom, and a cold shower wouldn't stick once you'd stepped out. We had to put our shoes in special plastic boxes so they wouldn't get moldy. I, for once, stopped throwing my every stitch of clothing into heaps on the floor, convinced that it would rot, or worse, be devoured by bugs that grew to terrifying proportions and seemed to develop supernatural powers to match their enormity. Once, upon waking, my futon just centimeters above the *tatami* floor mat, I reopened a magazine, casually flopped upside-down beside me from the night before. But my plan of a leisurely morning read was aborted at the sight of a dead cockroach, half the size of my hand that must have spent the night at such a proximity to my head.

I changed my sleep patterns to foil them. Wakeful until dawn, I then slept fitfully for a few hours. I made my room as inhospitable as possible: I coated the baseboards in *hosan dango*, a boric acid powder, leaving not a millimeter to chance; checked and rechecked my sheets and bed; and removed my glasses so I didn't have to see anything too closely—and think about it all night. Or dream about it all day while I taught at the School of Conversation Language Lessons, which turned out to be the fast food of English schools.

I scribbled endless observations in soggy journals, sleeping less and writing more. I felt my observational focus begin to shift as my waxy outer layer began to disappear. I, too, could blossom here, become a part of it, could melt into this place. The chopstick-induced hand cramping stopped and the taste of wood became more natural to me than metal. I switched to things like sesame spinach salad and sushi and Sapporo beer. I started to frequent the gym and even felt OK about being the wacky *gaijin* girl who couldn't be trusted to step on a machine without at least one spotter. I gave in to the request for my blood type at the gym, at the bank, at the video store. According to popular culture, my carefree, independent, flexible, clumsy, and flighty nature was evidenced by my O Positive declaration. I no longer felt like I had to fold myself into an origami crane to fit the tiny space allotted to me. Meeting Japanese expectations of decorum seemed less scary, as I

embraced my new life. I could bump into and rub up against things without fear or judgment. And I needed to, as it turned out that the hostessing my Aussie roommate did was code for prostitution. That didn't make her any less my favorite. I didn't have to know or understand or be right, and into this open space crept a little of the joy of experimentation.

I even took the dreaded subway, and began to fear it less and less. I now saw the white-gloved pushers as the official transit employees they clearly were, helping to fully stuff the torpid passengers onto trains—though I still didn't like it when they pushed hard on my chest and seemed to linger. We *had* to enter backwards. It was rude to do otherwise. With the pushers, it meant that far more of us could back onto the sweltering train. They were a service that kept us from being late. And when I held onto the hand loop too tightly and ended up crowd surfing, not understanding the dynamics of a massively tight group shifting, I learned how one sometimes needed to surrender in order to find balance.

Writer's Note:

This piece grew out of two separate, but equally delightful IWT Workshops: "Fictions from the Inside Out," led by Nancy Piore in July 2006, and "Fictions: Memory and Imagination," led by Sharon Marshall in July 2005.

In "Fiction from the Inside Out," we each created a pastiche (an artistic imitation) of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. The exercise was rich in rewards for the whole group; we found ourselves wholly immersed in that incantatory repetition so characteristic of O'Brien. My repetition was all about the things I had observed and experienced while living in Tokyo. Using the prompt of "They carried. . ." I was able to excavate a lot of nearly forgotten detail. Later, when we were asked to pick a piece of writing from the week to further develop, I was drawn back to this pastiche, and I also remembered a writing prompt that we had done the previous summer in "Fictions: Memory and Imagination." In that class we had been asked to explore a setting for which we had mixed feelings. Tokyo fit the bill, since it was a place I had both

loved and hated, quite passionately. As I indulged in some IWT nightlife, I allowed the two pieces to mingle overnight and stew a bit. Ultimately, I used less of the pastiche. The piece underwent some final revisions for this publication, as I was challenged to reorder and manage some of my imagery to improve the flow of the writing and tighten up the structure. This final version feels more purposeful, less arbitrary.

Tena Laing

The Sterling Hall School, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Listening

Following the advice he received in the early days of his psychiatric residency from one of his supervisors, a psychoanalyst considered old school by his more “modern” associates, Dr. Robert Coles steps back from theoretical constructs and listens first to his patients’ stories. This is to everyone’s benefit. It allows Coles to develop his flexibility, resiliency, and emotional heart muscles, even as he keeps in mind the professional jargon that will later allow him to be credible with his colleagues and pigeonhole his patients’ psychopathologies for “the records.” It allows patients to be seen as human first and not as diagnoses thrown into rigid boxes that diminish the particulars and nuances of their psychiatric symptoms. A code, a disorder, and a category from The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, first published in 1952, will appear beside their names soon enough and follow them more closely than a shadow. Coles learns that stories matter.

Consider this hypothetical exchange between Coles and a tenaciously uncommunicative patient, which I’ve imagined based on Coles’s descriptions of his interactions with her:

“Do you mind if I walk with you today?” Coles asked, falling in step with the middle-aged woman midway between end points 20 or so yards apart.

She said nothing and kept walking, lit another cigarette from the one already burning in her hand, and coughed. Coles kept pace, mirroring each step, stop, and turn.

On the fifth pass her voice croaked, “What do you want?”

“I was curious,” Coles said, “about why you walk so much. Do you do it as exercise, or as meditation? Or maybe to keep your mind off things?”

“What kinds of things?”

“Oh, anything really. Your husband. Your family. Your life as a little girl. Maybe your work. Your dreams. You know. Anything.”

“I don’t think about anything when I walk. My mind is blank.”

“How do you know then when to light another cigarette?”

“It’s a feeling . . . I worry sometimes.”

“So do I. About my family, my patients, atomic bombs. What do you worry about?”

Dr. Coles met this woman—a phobic, sullen patient who paced all day long—on the psychiatric ward at Massachusetts General Hospital in July 1956. So he tells us in the opening paragraphs of *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (1989). In a series of dialogues with this patient, Coles struggled to follow his mentor’s urgings by listening well to his patient’s story—and sharing one or more of his own.

I wish I’d had Coles’s skill in the summer and autumn of 1969, when I worked as a psychiatric orderly on a ward for schizophrenic men at New Jersey Psychiatric Institute. All the patients there had the same diagnosis—chronic schizophrenia, undifferentiated—and nobody cared a damn about their stories. One patient on the ward was also a pacer. I watched him for hours, fascinated by a behavior that was bizarre to me but presumably natural to him. He would toe an imaginary line, center himself as if he were readying to long jump or pole vault, take a final deep breath, and begin long strides in a straight line down the length of the day room. Across a finish line that only he could discern, my pacer would regroup, toe another imaginary line, and repeat the process in the opposite direction. All day he went back and forth, detouring only to visit the water fountain. I knew a story lay at the source of his ritual, but my youth and lack of training (I was a college junior, and my enthusiastic study of abnormal psychology had given me a false sense of knowledge) and the patient’s years-long regimen of experimental psychotropic medications and electro-convulsive treatments made getting to that story impossible. Even so, at that youthful pass—replete with ignorance—I intuited that stories contained a richness of truth and revelation.

Listening is essential in all fields, but it must be of the active, committed variety, not pre-ordained to hear an expected outcome that conforms to an already chosen model. It must be open-minded,

so that the story being told is heard afresh and not interpreted to reinforce ingrained tendencies. In this kind of listening, when the high priest descends from his or her pulpit and joins the seeker as a co-equal in an unfolding frame, magic may emerge, as it began to do when Coles strolled down the hallway with his patient. Psychiatry and education have something in common here. It does not matter, for example, that a student is “diagnosed” with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Executive Function Learning Disorder. One hundred ADHD kids are, in fact, one hundred unique individuals; the same is true for one hundred phobics or one hundred borderline personalities. A diagnosis rendered in the wrong light may sacrifice individuality to expediency at great cost: the depersonalization of all parties, the distortion of voices yearning to be heard, the contamination of everyone’s story.

From another setting, then, comes this recounting from Leonard D., a close-to-brilliant eleventh grader diagnosed with ADHD and Asperger’s Syndrome. As Leonard unleashes his frenzied, breathless torrent, his reddened eyes need one more molecule of water to overflow:

I was actually feeling pretty happy, and then like out of nowhere I experienced this surge of rage just weeks before school was out. The crazy thing was that up till then things were going great. I loved my NYU course [Note: Leonard’s high academic standing qualified him to take a college-level course as a high school junior.] and was doing really well in it; I’d taken the SATs again and surpassed my earlier scores; I was acing my classes and really excited about my history paper on the Renaissance, already 20 pages long and counting; and the summer was close at hand. Suddenly, boom! My world caved in.

A friend of the family, some girl about 21 or 22, was coming to New York from California for a two-month visit. My parents suggested not only that she stay with us, but also that I give up my room for her and sleep on the living room couch. Can you believe it? I couldn’t. I couldn’t believe they were asking me to do this.

Everything that was important to me was in that room—my books, my television, my computer, my games, my music, my clothes, my shells, my awards, my photographs. Everything. What could I bring to the living room with me? A pillow? One shell? Gee. And what about my privacy? Didn't anyone realize how vital my privacy was to me? My room was the only place I could go to get away from all the mean, stupid, inferior, annoying people in the world that I had to deal with every day, which sometimes includes my parents. I could find peace and solace there if the pressure in my head got to be too much or the stress from outside was overwhelming. Well, no way was I going to give up my room for a bimbo friend of my parents. Let HER sleep on the damn couch! Let HER go to a hotel! Let her go to HELL for all I cared! My parents were asking too much of me this time. I was furious about it, but what made me more furious was that they weren't exactly asking; they weren't posing a multiple-choice question with "Sorry" as one of the answers. No, they were telling me! This was the most unfair and cruelest thing they'd ever done to me. And while they made it clear that they wouldn't accept anything less than my complete surrender on this issue—my humiliation, really—I vowed to fight to the death. They would pay big time for this one!

Leonard delivered this monologue to his Focus instructor, with whom he met daily in school to strengthen reading, writing, and critical thinking skills and who also engaged Leonard's emotional crises as mentor, coach, lay therapist and spiritual adviser. The teacher listened—without judgment and without a planned response or interpretation based on a diagnostic label in Leonard's psycho-educational evaluation. He allowed Leonard to tell his story, asking questions now and then to clarify or to glean additional information. The teacher nodded, offered an occasional "Uh, huh," was committed and sympathetic. When the powder keg inside Leonard was defused, the teacher turned the conversation to how Leonard might communicate effectively with his parents and

how he might find a way to accept the reality of the situation he was facing and place it in the larger picture of his summer and the rest of his life. What were the potential positives and how might Leonard take maximum advantage of them? At the same time, the teacher shared from his own life a tale or two of similarly “awful,” unfair, and cruel situations and how he’d gotten through them. This conversation continued through the end of the school year. Leonard was able, though not easily, to come to terms with the infringement on his privacy. When he expanded his universe enough to see this event’s essentially tiny place in it, Leonard could get on enthusiastically with his summer. Eventually he and “the bimbo” became friends.

Robert Coles doesn’t tell the reader in *The Call of Stories* precisely what he and his phobic patient said to each other, so I took the liberty, as I indicated, of imagining their speaking and listening. Leonard’s monodrama, however, contained his actual words, which I know because I am the Focus instructor who received and responded to them. I began my work as a Focus instructor in September 2005, at a New York City school for kids with “learning differences.” This followed my career as a different kind of physician, wherein I listened to patients’ stories for 20 years as a chiropractor, writing up their narratives for insurers or attorneys.

I know a thing or two about stories—from doctoring and teaching, from conjuring my own. Stories are lived and told by everyone, not just patients and students, but only the luckiest among us get an active and committed listener to welcome and affirm them. Thus listening, in its highest expression, is at the heart of healing, harmony, wisdom, and success. Listening is a gift. It is also a mystery, for anyone with a functioning central nervous system can decode the words, but not everyone can hear the story that the words comprise. We must listen within in order to listen well with-out. Perhaps we can hear others’ stories only when we are committed listeners of our own.

The effective story-telling and story-listening dynamics illustrated here allowed psychiatrist and patient, teacher and student, to take important and necessary steps into higher levels of

self-awareness, so that each might come back another day feeling seen, connected, and closer to new possibilities. Clearly, the cold, clinical approach cries out for infusions of humanity, and the feel-good way benefits from analytical inclusion. Whatever way is traversed, listening must be at the heart of it. Both Coles and I seem to have found some measure of balance in our listenings, and balance, above all else, makes the organism hum.

Writer's Note:

In the middle of the third day of Nancy Leonard's "Thinking through Narrative" workshop, we were advised that our "hybrid" assignment was due on the last day. The instruction was to construct a piece that integrated analytical and narrative writing and that combined the best of our efforts over the entire five-day period. Looking through our notebooks and identifying a recurring center of concern, finding what was present in the three or four mini-pieces we liked best, our task was to weave those elements into coherent prose.

Of the many prompts that peppered our sessions, the following comprise the ones from which "Listening" was woven: Tell the story of a young friend (in the first person, from that friend's point of view). What do you think of teaching as a profession? What were your first responses to Chapter 1 of Robert Coles' *The Call of Stories*? Describe the relationship between categories and narrative on pages 14-15 of the Coles book. Write a brief dialogue between Coles and his patient in the hospital corridor. Responding to each of these prompts was relatively easy. The real challenge was creating a structure in which to house them coherently and rounding the jagged edges so that it appeared I'd written a unified narrative rather than glued disjointed parts together. My first draft of "Listening" felt powerful but incomplete. This current draft feels closer to a seamless hybrid.

Robert Black

New York University, New York

Image explosion of a famous line

A man, hungry at the end of his life
 (he had been hungry for a long time)
is given an egg
 a small token
 something in place of nothing.
He is appreciative
 but a little bitter—
 after all,
 it isn't golden.

Writer's Note:

There is pleasure in moving thought by taking a line from one poem and transposing it with my own meaning. My own thoughts at the moment I am reading. The association that happens when a line in a poem moves me into my own language. This is the process, but I have forgotten the source of the line . . . an allusion to Stevens, perhaps Brodsky. I'm not even sure which line was the famous one. The resonance of the line is all that remains. Here, in the poem.

Kristin Prevallet

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College

The Abstractionist

We came in droves to hear
the aged abstractionist,
the great poet of the
lassitudes and vicissitudes,
the majestic juggler
of phonemes and intangible
dissociations, that great
antediluvian impressionist,
painter of kaleidoscopic
signs and signifiers
splashing the slaphappy spirit
in fits of stunned astonishment!
He entered the holy
auditorium and coughed
at the dais, dazzled us
with a joke about a jackass
and a platypus and we all
tittered with delight. Oh, the
abstractionist was in fine form,
an impresario, and we
cooed as he began reading
in front of the movie screen
blanched of any image or
meaning, he was muttering,
reciting in indeterminate
pauses with whistling wheezings,
slightly desperate, as if
each breath might be his last
and we marveled at his post-
modern wit, this tired ghost,
oh, he was the ancient bard,
a beached carp puckering,
feigning disgust with each
breathless syllable. We gasped
with every gape, surely
these were the sighs of his own

postmodern joy, he was
a shade shimmering
in panache, pastiche, oh,
he was splendid! And as
he recited each impetuous
phrase we closed our eyes
and blinded ourselves,
floating in some churning
metaphysical wonder,
migrained in ecstasy
we swooned as he rasped
and gasped in rapture.
And then just as suddenly
the great abstractionist
was *finito!* Done! Lights out!
Knock-down finished and
gorgeous and we all *om*-ed
our approval and he
graciously smiled, we
spilled into the aisles, now
more wary of the EXIT
sign and the

OCCUPATION BY MORE
THAN 97 PERSONS IS
DANGEROUS AND UNLAWFUL

warning for we had
ventured together in the
dangerous and unlawful!
We drank Asti and slid
treacherous oysters of Brie
on Ritz crackers in the evening
garden hushed in the
shadows of tiger lilies
as the great abstractionist

donned his stunning robe of
stars and fireflies bragged their
sex and bioluminescence
everywhere like madly
blinking Christmas lights
and a lone bullfrog glumped
in the garden pond and
overhead, raining like a
fireworks of the stars,
a secret riddle of the
fabulous night, the cascade
of constellations falling
on our faces all around us
as we waited for the whispers
and the words and the
rhythms to return and the great
transcendence to begin!

Writer's Note:

“The Abstractionist” is a love poem inspired by Nancy Leonard’s “Thinking through Narrative” summer workshop. Nancy encouraged us to reimagine narrative by writing from multiple perspectives and purposes. I found the opportunity to write across genres and expectations exhilarating—I spent most of my time outside of the sessions writing and reconceptualizing my assumptions about writing.

John Ashbery gave a reading while I was at Bard. I entered the auditorium giddy with language but also distrustful. I loved Ashbery’s early work, but I was an impatient reader and fell out of love with his more abstract work. When Ashbery started reading I fell in love again. What had been elusive was now immediate, playful, apprehensible. Suddenly I was rethinking language, poetry, poetry readings, and my Philistine preferences. I had to write a love poem, an homage, a poem that poked fun at all of this, especially myself. I scribbled down notes while sitting in the auditorium and standing at the party. Later, I prowled the campus

jotting down words as they spilled down from the night. It was one of those midsummer evenings when everything makes hilarious sense. That night I wrote out a draft, and the next morning I sped through breakfast so that I could revise it before Nancy's next workshop. The poem emerged from that urgent love.

David Martin

Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

The Cheat

Kate's cool dark eyes swept over the little knot of students that had gathered at the top of the stairs. She'd heard all of their stories and plans and jokes a million times over. They had nothing to say that was remotely interesting.

There was still no sign of Tommy. It was just like him to be late on the day of the final exam. She'd been up since dawn to go over her notes and find a quote to define the day, writing it carefully into her journal, etching it into her memory so she could draw it forth and present it to him. She had dressed herself carefully—she wouldn't be seeing him again until September and she wanted to look her best. Black halter top, black chinos, her Mexican silver ring, and a thin leather choker with three dark blue beads, which with her short dark hair, made her look fierce and somewhat dangerous. From her shoulder hung an Apache medicine bag, very old, made of soft buckskin and beaded in sky blue, black and orange, a row of fringe along its southern border.

She hugged the bag to her chest and walked to the far end of the hall, pulled out a small, battered notebook of a darker leather and began to read from it.

When she heard the elevator ding, she put the notebook back into her bag and turned to see Professor Halliday getting off, struck by a sudden, childish thought. "If she's cheerful, the test will be easy. If she's serious, it will be hard."

But Professor Halliday didn't look cheerful or serious, she just looked tired and a little sad.

"Hello, Kate. You look like you swallowed a frog this morning," the professor said as she walked past and opened the classroom door.

"How'd you guess," Kate shot back, with her wry little grin that twisted at the corner, her characteristic grimace.

"What *could* you be worried about? You did very well this semester."

"I don't know," Kate shrugged.

Halliday turned to the board and began to write. She had always liked Kate. The girl had, despite all her difficulties, both

strength of character and intelligence. She had many friends among the boys, who seemed to respect her for her blunt honesty, searing but never cruel. Predictably, the girls in the class didn't like her; she was too blunt for them and didn't care about her appearance the way they did. She had none of the self-pity that most girls her age had. She didn't consider anybody very ethical or fine, least of all herself. And yet, one felt that, beneath her rough surface, she wanted to find something worthy of her trust.

She was one to remember, Halliday thought. She had had a full year with the girl, who had stopped attending class during the fall semester when her mother remarried. Most students preferred another teacher when they had to repeat a class, but Kate had insisted that she didn't want to get used to another teacher and preferred to stay in Halliday's class.

From the first, Kate had challenged her authority at every opportunity. One day, she had whipped out an emery board and proceeded to file her nails with an exaggeratedly bored expression on her face. Halliday, who liked to maintain a reasonably friendly demeanor, had told her this was a bad time for a manicure, and to put it away immediately. She then shot her a question to see if the girl had been listening. Without missing a beat, Kate had quickly summarized what she had just told the class. She could have sworn the girl batted her eyes mockingly at the end of it.

But after a time, she had proved herself to be one of the best students in the class. She had an original mind, quick and bright, and an uncommon articulateness. But she had a poor work ethic, and sometimes slipped back into her old ways, showing up to class exhausted and unprepared.

Clearly she had problems with authority. The coup de grace was the day she walked into class with her head shaved, save one defiant black forelock, which hung over her left eye. Only a girl as beautiful as Kate could have survived that haircut, and not one in a thousand could have walked into that class with such brio.

When Halliday finished writing on the board she was surprised to see Kate sitting at one of the desks in back.

"So, how is your mother doing?"

"Fine."

"Will you be staying with her this summer?"

“Not if I can help it,” she laughed. “She and Doug are still in the honeymoon phase. It’s really annoying to be around them.”

“Here’s an idea for you. I hear Dr. Weintraub’s research assistant fell through and he’s looking for someone.”

“Really?”

“It would be the last two months of summer break—July and August, which would still leave you a month of vacation.”

“Are you sure I’m the right person for that kind of job?”

“Well,” the professor said evenly, “you’d have to get in on time every day and be ready to work. But you’re certainly capable of doing the research, which would probably be fact checking, getting copyright permission, things like that. Of course you’d have to type and be proficient on the computer.”

“Oh I can do that.”

“If you’re interested in pursuing it, you could tell him I suggested that you apply, and I’d be happy to give you a recommendation as well, if you need one. But you’d have to promise me you’d stick with it for the full two months. No changes of plan, right?”

“Oh, not a problem.”

“And,” said Halliday, “I hear it pays twelve fifty an hour.”

“Wow,” Kate said, but something was clearly troubling her. “But if I get the job, I don’t know where I’d live. Everybody’s leaving for the summer.”

“Well, I’ll need a house sitter for the month of August, when Drew and I will be in Italy. Someone will need to live in the house, feed the animals, water the plants. I suppose you could use our guest room for the month of July—I’d have to check with my husband—but it’ll probably be OK. It’s a back bedroom with a separate entrance.”

“Well,” Kate said, an inscrutable look on her face.

Halliday turned and began to take the papers out of her valise. “Of course you’ll need to think about it. But if you’re interested in the job, you’d better check in with Dr. Weintraub before you leave. Here, I’ll write down his e-mail, and my number is on the card. Call any time before ten p.m.”

“I will. Thanks, Professor Halliday.”

“Don’t mention it.”

The hallway was filling up with students. Kate walked along slowly toward the far end looking at Professor Halliday's card. It was incredible how swiftly things could change. It sounded like a reasonably interesting job—Weintraub was a sociologist who was probably working on his latest book, and she could make some decent money. Of course, this place would be a ghost town in July and August, but that didn't really matter. She'd have plenty of time to read and swim and paint. The fly in the ointment was Halliday. She didn't know if she would like living in Halliday's house. It might get sticky. She had enough problems with her own mother, who was always prying into her business, trying to get her to share her feelings. The bitch of it was that if she did tell her anything, her mother would tease her about it later. It was as if Kate's deepest thoughts and feelings were so laughable that they could be dragged out into the light of day and used as a family joke.

One night last summer, she'd come home early and caught her mother reading her journal. That was the last straw. Kate had packed up her things that night and taken a bus to New York. She stayed with a friend in Brooklyn until school started. When Christmas break rolled around she had gone home—she really had no place else to go—but she kept her mother firmly at a distance. On Christmas day she had told her mother she was never coming back to live in New Mexico. She remembered her mother's face when she'd said that and it made her sorry. But she knew if she ever came back her mother would swallow up her life.

Now her mother was distracted with her new relationship and had stopped calling Kate every day. But there was no telling how long that would last.

She gave a little sigh of exasperation as she opened her bag and thrust Halliday's card into her little book. Women were tricky. One minute they were your friend, and the next minute they were implying you were stupid and needed them to make sense of your life. Guys were a hundred percent easier.

Albert Schneller—who Tommy called *The Shadow* because he had the habit of trailing after Kate wherever she went—drifted down the hall toward her.

“Hey Albert,” she said in a bored voice. “You haven’t seen Tommy have you?”

“No,” he said with a tinge of resentment.

“He’d better not be late this morning, that’s all I can say.”

Then she glimpsed Tommy’s tousled blond head as he pushed his way up the stairs past a small group of students.

“Hi, Tom!” one girl called out as he passed.

“Hi, Tom!” one of the boys mimicked her in falsetto. “Hi!”

Tom laughed. “Hi guys.”

“Buena suerte!”

He smiled, “Buena suerte back at ya.”

He made his way over to Kate, flashing her a grin.

“Well, it’s about time,” she said, grinning back. Albert looked uncomfortable as Tommy reached over and ruffled her hair. “Hey there, Sunshine! Anybody got a pen they can lend me?”

“Did you study at all?” she asked, raising her eyebrows in mock disbelief.

“Oh, I’m good, I’m good. I looked at the notes last night.”

“Well, I hope so. Or you’ll be spending another semester in comp & lit and you may not be lucky enough to get Professor Halliday, who is, as we all know, a softie. You know I heard she told someone she could teach an alley cat to write as long as it had the will to learn.”

“You’re kidding!”

Albert looked shocked.

“Remember that Korean guy who couldn’t speak a word of English when he got here? Well, I heard he worked with her on every paper and now he’s got a B average.”

“I should have done that,” Tommy said. “If I got B’s, maybe I’d get some respect around here.”

Albert gave him a concerned smile. “I hope you studied the Greeks. There’s sure to be a couple of questions on that.”

“Yeah, no worries, Albert,” Tom said.

“I need to talk to you,” Kate said, pulling Tommy by the arm toward the end of the hall. “See you, Albert.”

Albert stared at them with a mixture of annoyance and disgust.

“Sure you don’t want to come down to the beach for a few days?”

“No money. Besides, I may have a job.”

“That restaurant gig? That’s hard work, girl. You’ll probably get mad at some customer, give him hell and wind up getting fired.”

“Well, there may be something a little better than that in the cards for me, as it happens. Something Halliday turned me on to.”

“Really?”

“I’ll tell you about it later. First, I have a quote for you.”

“Oh, no. Not today.”

“The beauty of the world has two edges, one of laughter, one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder.”

“Wow, that’s heavy. Cutting the heart...”

“Asunder.”

“Asunder. I have absolutely no idea who wrote that.”

“Sure?”

“Absolutely no idea.”

“Virginia Woolf.”

“I don’t suppose that has anything to do with that movie that Liz Taylor and Richard Burton were in.”

“Not a thing. So, is Albert watching?”

“No, he’s looking in his notebook.”

Kate gave a look of disgust. “You’re kidding. That wonk.”

“Don’t be cruel. You know he still has a thing for you.”

“Shut up!”

“The Shadow knows...”

“Knows very little, about women or anything having to do with human nature.”

“Cruelty, thy name is woman.”

“That’s *frailty*, el moronico,” Kate said, slapping at Tommy’s ear.

“It was kind of cruel of you to make him think you were into him.”

“Oh, he asked for it,” she said in disgust. “Always moping around.”

“You just led him on and then...”

“Shut up!”

“...dropped him like a hot rock.”

“Shut *up!*” she said, slapping at his ear.

“OK, OK. Cool down. He *is* watching now.”

“I really don’t care,” she said coldly. “Did you bring it?”

“Maybe we’d better wait.”

“Come on. Give it over.”

He glanced down the hall and pulled a fat little envelope out of his shirt just above the belt and handed it to her. “Smoke it in good health.”

She put it quickly into her bag, pulling out the notebook to make room for it. “Thanks. You’re a pal.”

“Hey,” Tommy said. “You brought your Indian beaded thing.”

“You mean my Apache medicine bag?”

“Yeah. But I’d really like to see that little notebook inside it,” he said, reaching for it.

“No!” she said, jerking it out of his reach. She pulled the bag close and snapped her eyes up at him. “Try to focus on the task at hand. You know—the final? I know it’s hard for you,” she said, gazing up at him, her brown eyes sparkling. “But try.”

They walked down the hall and into the classroom, passing Albert without a word. After a moment he followed them in.

The exam was ninety minutes long. Halliday always brought a book but she could never concentrate long enough to get into it. She stood and made her way down the aisle to the back of the room, glancing across at each aisle as she passed. Kate was sitting in the back next to Tom. She was gazing down at her paper lost in thought, as if she had all the time in the world.

That’s what they used to say about me when I was her age, Professor Halliday thought ruefully. Always daydreaming when I should have been focusing on the task at hand. Well her brother had died and her mother had gone off the deep end just like Kate’s. That was probably why she liked the girl, she thought. She marched to a different drummer. No *Seven Secrets of Success* for her. She could cut through insincerity like a laser cutting through butter. I was very like her when I was her age, Halliday thought, except that I was soft and sad, and she is tough and confident. What was that line about Zelda that F. Scott Fitzgerald had written? “She was hard when she should have been soft, and soft

when she should have been hard.” Well that was her all over, but it wasn’t Kate.

An hour and a quarter had elapsed and most of the students had finished up and gone. Kate and Tommy were sitting in back, with the requisite empty seat between them. Albert Schneller was still there too, surprisingly, not in his characteristic seat in front but behind Kate. When he felt Professor Halliday’s gaze, he stood up suddenly, rattled his papers, and strode up to her desk. Something about the way he approached made her shift in her seat.

He leaned over the desk and whispered, “May I speak to you for a moment—outside I mean.”

“I can’t leave the classroom until the exam is finished. Is it something you can tell me here?”

“I’ll write it down.” He quickly scribbled something on a piece of paper, tore the page from its spiral prison, and handed it to her with nervous fingers. “I thought you should know,” he said meaningfully, and then he left.

Kate has a small notebook in her purse. She took it out and had it on her lap several times during the exam. Nobody should be allowed to cheat.

Halliday leaned back in her chair. Well, it might not be true, but she would have to find out.

She waited until the other students—all but Kate and Tommy—had turned in their exams. Kate took a last sleepy glance at her paper and started to get up. Tommy signaled for her to wait for him outside.

As Kate made her way up to the professor’s desk, Halliday stood to meet her.

“Sorry I took so long. I got stuck on *Antigone*.”

“That’s all right,” Halliday said quietly. “I need to speak to you. Shall we go out into the hall?” It was not a question.

Kate followed Professor Halliday into the hall. “There’s been a report of cheating, Kate. I’ll need to see what you have in your purse.”

“I don’t carry a purse,” Kate said flatly.

“Well your beaded bag, then.”

Kate stared at her. Then she said bitterly, “It was Albert, right? I can’t believe you would take his word....”

“I’m not taking anybody’s word for anything. That’s why I need to see your bag.”

School policy required Professor Halliday to investigate any allegation of cheating and, if confirmed, report it to the associate dean within three days by letter, a copy of which would be sent to the student and another copy to the dean of students. Since Kate had already been in trouble for smoking pot on campus and had been on academic probation in the fall semester when she stopped attending classes after her mother remarried, she would have to appear before Academic Standards, and would very likely be suspended.

Halliday knew Kate wouldn’t want to go home to live with her mother and the new husband. Her father was long gone, living in Montana with a new family. With no one to check her strong will and tendency to reckless, defiant acts, heaven knew what would happen to the girl. But she couldn’t think about that.

“Kate, it’s been reported that you brought a small notebook into the exam, and that you had it open on your lap. Is that right?”

Kate muttered something under her breath, something that sounded like “just my fucking luck.”

“Hey, Professor! Taking a break?” It was Tommy.

“Tom, please,” Halliday said, taking his exam and turning back to the girl. “Kate, there are all kinds of reasons students...take risks. Sometimes they want to see how far they can push things. That’s a dangerous game to play.”

The girl said nothing but only stared back at Halliday coldly.

“I can’t imagine why, after all the work you’ve done this semester, you would need to bring notes into the final exam. And maybe you didn’t. But I need to find out.”

Kate thought for a moment and then spoke slowly and distinctly, her voice harsh and low. “Professor Halliday, I’ve never cheated on an exam in my life. I was on academic probation because I stopped going to class last semester. And yes, I got caught smoking pot on campus with a couple of my friends, one of whom didn’t even get written up because his father’s a big deal around here. Whatever. The point is, I’m not a cheat. You should know that.”

Halliday said nothing.

“I have my own reasons for not wanting anyone to look at my journal. I don’t let *anyone* look at it *ever*.”

“Kate,” Halliday said, her voice resigned and low. “When a student...”

Tommy cut in. “She always carries that notebook, Professor Halliday. She’s always writing things in it. Quotes from different writers, poems, and just—you know—thoughts. She never lets anyone look at it. Her dad gave it to her when she was a kid.”

Kate’s face flashed with anger and incredulity. Then she looked down.

Halliday pressed on. “Is that right, Kate? Is it a journal?”

For a moment no one said anything. Then Kate pulled the medicine bag off her shoulder and held it out to Halliday. “Go ahead,” she said coldly. “I really don’t care anymore.”

Halliday looked at her steadily. “Do you swear that there is absolutely nothing in this bag that has any relationship to the exam? Notes, anything pertaining to the exam?”

“I *swear* that there is nothing in my bag that has anything to do with the exam,” the girl said, still proffering the bag in her outstretched hand. Her angry eyes flicked over to Tommy, whose face was white under the fluorescent light.

Halliday looked at her soberly. “Well Kate, I’m going to trust you. I understand it’s a private journal, and frankly, it doesn’t seem to me, given your work this semester, that you have any reason to cheat.”

A flicker of surprise crossed the girl’s face before she pulled the bag back and put it back over her left shoulder. “Thanks,” she said without expression.

Tommy exhaled. “Well, I’m glad *that’s* over. I mean, I really *hate it* when people argue,” he said, smiling.

“Yes,” Halliday said soberly.

Kate’s gaze was fixed on the cold marble floor. It was obvious she was still angry.

“Don’t be too hard on people, Kate,” Halliday said. “You judge everything by your own measure, but other people have their own measures and their own reasons for the things they do.”

Tommy broke into a laugh. “That’s right, Sunshine. Lighten up, will you? Finals are over—time for some serious fun.”

“Well,” said the professor. “Have a good summer, the two of you.”

“You too, professor,” Tommy said.

“Goodbye, Kate.”

“Goodbye,” the girl said, without meeting her eye.

Halliday stood watching them as they walked down the hall to the stairs. Tommy put his arm around Kate’s stiff little shoulders and she thought she heard him say, “Girl, you are so damn lucky she didn’t look in that bag.”

And then he slipped the beaded bag from her shoulder and ran down the stairs with it. Kate bolted after him. Halliday stood listening to their laughter and the rough clatter of their footsteps as they echoed down the stairwell. Then she turned and walked back to the classroom.

Writer's Note:

The prompt that inspired this piece, written in Nancy Piore’s wonderful workshop “Fiction from the Inside Out,” was to write a pastiche using Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* as a model. This assignment came relatively easy to me and—I believe—to the other members of our group. For me it generated a short piece of writing that had a kernel of story embedded in it, which I fleshed out and revised, and submitted to the IWT journal. Ironically, one of the first things the editors asked me to do was cut this long introductory pastiche that I had labored over. After I cut it, I realized they were right; it slowed down the piece too much and made the POV uncertain. But the pastiche was what had generated the piece, and although it had to be sacrificed, it had done its work well. It got the writing started, which is all any writing exercise should ever be expected to do.

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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.

Interested in submitting your work? Please send a cover letter along with your piece and contact information before September 24 to:

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If your piece is accepted, you'll be asked to write a process note to accompany your work.