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Moving Away from Home: A Map of Classroom Burnout

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Moving Away from Home:
A Map of Classroom Burnout

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

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“We don’t get to know anything
but what we love.” Johann Wolfgang Goethe

“You must change your life.” Rainer Maria Rilke

Abstract

In this series of essays about professional burnout, a veteran teacher seeks a way to continue her work and enthusiasm in it, for the sake of both her and her students. To that end, she explores her relationships with her father and mother, and how the practices of teaching and learning she brought from home have affected her present classroom experiences. A complicating factor is the presence of chronic illness and its demands both primary and secondary: her father's Alzheimer's, her mother's bi-polar disorder, and the demands of eldercare for her mother. She also explores her own habitual practice of being a student, in a reflective inquiry into the mind and situation of students from inside her own experiences.

Interleaved vignettes of student interaction illustrate the kinds of difficulty that the speaker has with her teaching. They appear chronologically to suggest a developmental movement.

Key words:

education

burnout

elder care

Alzheimer's Disease

Bi-polar disorder

bullfight

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Preface

When I am sitting enfeebled in the rocking chair on the porch of some loved one's home, when I lie finally unable to stir beyond my bed, when I lose the ability to speak or write or remember the names of those close to me, I will have in my cell structure the image of movement, of driving or riding down the highway toward another destination. The road might run to Texas during the summer or return to South Carolina late on a weekend or head to Savannah for an evening, or to Atlanta or Columbia or Waco. The soft growl of tires on the pavement, its grainy gray surface slipping under me, the black asphalt unrolling ahead, slick with heat mirage that disappears as we approach. I will have in my muscle memory the impulse to check the map for a blue line that signifies the water I have just crossed, or to find on it the dotted black one for a county line. Sitting beside my father in the car on annual family trips to Texas I felt the correspondence between the highway and the map, felt a certainty not possible in many other ventures, to know that just- *now*- passing that sign- we moved across this line on the map. I could place myself in space at this time, and verify the physical reality of the written text I held in my hand, time and space made manifest. The highway, the road, travel, process.

I've come to recognize movement itself as a means of problem solving, not just motion but movement through to a new understanding. Some years ago I faced a medical crisis and called a long-time friend for advice, dithering about what to do. I tried to explain my dilemma, but was so caught up in its intricacies I could make no sense of it, to her or to myself. "Why don't you take a walk," she advised. "That seems to work for you pretty well." So I did. I put on my shoes and headed out the door, my heart pumping, my thoughts racing, and my feet making a

steady thrum on the sidewalk. By the time I reached the end of the block, all seemed clear. I knew exactly what to do, and wondered at my foolishness in being so fuzzy.

This notion of constructing knowledge through movement was part of me long before I saw the pattern. Years ago in a dissertation I overlaid the paradigm onto an academic study of literature, arguing that the characters of my study created personal knowledge from a process of movement and loss. Their need to find answers, I said, unaware that I was naming my own process of making meaning, calls them to see what lies beyond. When we need to figure something out, we hit the road.

My road has frequently pinpointed school as a destination, either as teacher or student. Going away to school in the midst of stress, I believed, offered a haven from the storm, a familiar structure I understood; or if not a haven, then a task that would absorb me, that I had a history of success with. One after another, I collected *alma maters* like pearls on a string in hopes that in one of them I would find the “mother of my soul.” I believe now that my desire to “go away to school,” highlights the action as much as the object. On every occasion when I sought the challenges of school to develop some life alternatives, I not only went to *school*, I went *away* to school. I used to joke that I chose my undergraduate college because it was as far away from home as I could get without paying out of state tuition. It was small and had the history of my sisters’ attendance as appeals to my parents, but its primary attraction to me was the independence its geographical distance afforded. When in due course I pursued a master’s degree, a doctoral degree, and then a second master’s, the same pattern held: Despite local opportunities for each of these, I chose schools that would require me to get up and move. Each was in a location hundreds of miles removed from my current situation; going to each of them got me “out

of Dodge.” On two occasions I would leave my job, my home, my life as I knew it, and move across state lines; on the third I didn’t sell the house, but the program took me to Spain and Italy and back to Spain—not a bad jaunt for someone eager to shake the dust from her feet.

A few years ago, nearly thirty years into my teaching life, I faced a problem that seemed to get bigger every day. After years of making lesson plans, reading essays, dealing with students good and bad, finding satisfaction and reward in my work, I was breaking down inside like a house that crumbles brick by brick, shattered window by shattered window. The despair hung on me like a suit of sandbags; it took enormous effort to drag myself forward. Burnout, psychologists call it, a common enough condition of people in service professions. For me, the difficulties crystallized in the aftermath of a particularly difficult semester, one that started with a negative misconception in a class that I couldn’t turn around; students felt stuck with an instructor (me) they had heard was difficult. They didn’t like the material I had chosen and did the assignments half-heartedly if at all; my efforts to stimulate discussion fell flat. Resentments on both sides piled up, and the term became one of those muddy, illogical dream sequences in which you try to move with leaden legs. At its end the student evaluation responses were hostile, actively so, and when I read them, each one was like a physical blow. Reeling under their impact, I found myself stretched on the floor at a friend’s house. The afternoon comes back to me with a visceral tug: Lying on the wooden boards in yellow afternoon light, I question not just how I do my work but who I *am*, whether I’ve been wrong about the story that I tell myself of being a good teacher. What else have I been wrong about? My defenses about the relative value of student evaluations slip and crumble; these are not isolated malcontents but a tsunami of almost unanimous anger. What am I doing wrong? What hope do I have? How can I keep doing the only

work I thought I knew how to do? I try to rise and cannot, my breath comes in shallow bursts and then in long harrowing sighs. Outside in the rural agricultural region where I live, harrows in the fields flail at the earth, breaking up clods of dirt, to get the soil ready for planting. I know that old patterns need breaking up, but which ones? What makes them not work? My body aches. I don't even know what needs to be learned. The only response, which comes unbidden from inside my bloodstream, brings me to my feet and I head for the track around the park. Like the characters who need answers, I get moving.

It took me a while to map the path that led to the floor where I lay temporarily immobile. To figure out where to go from that place, I had to learn something of where I had come from and what had brought me there. To keep teaching, and to believe in myself as a teacher, I had to find a different map. Just where did I make the turns that led me to this conflict? The road I eventually discovered took me into stories of my family history and deeply worn patterns of behavior I carried into the classroom; it offered insights into my relationship with school, both as a teacher and as a student; and it taught lessons of gentleness and the need for space that are necessary for any traveler. The highway, movement, process.

Fall 2003: Majid

Majid Aram. That name on my class roll made me think he was Arabic or Indian—but no one could have looked less so: pale fair skin, blue eyes, and wild curly blond hair. Something about him put me off from the beginning: his continuing to talk when I was conducting class, his interruptions of peers—he had all the maturity of my five-year-old nephew—but I set it aside.

Now into the third week, this term seems to have more than the usual clutter; late papers, excuses about books and materials, inattention in class, grumbling about assignments. One afternoon when I give instructions, he speaks up: “I don’t think we should have to do this.” In the darkened computer lab a few students are talking to each other; I respond to Majid with my standard response to students who want to tell me how to teach my class: “You don’t have to.” You don’t have to do any of the work, I want to add; you don’t have to come to class, you don’t have to be here at all. My irritation threshold is low this week; I am fed up with freshmen thinking they should be in charge and that the world should operate to suit them. I am tired of trying to get their attention through a low hum of conversation, of sorority girls whose chatter is ceaseless, of baseball caps pulled so far down on faces that nothing but a shadow is visible. I’m weary with the struggle.

Majid’s response to my curt comment is electric: “Don’t say that to me. That’s a stupid thing to say!” I am stunned, and so is the room, which goes suddenly quiet. I fight my anger, but years of experience have taught me that the classroom is no place for a confrontation. I point to him and glare.

“Come with me,” I snap, and head for the hall.

Outside, he starts immediately to complain; to my astonishment, he is furious with me, not in the least chagrined or chastised. He argues about the illogic of teachers who say that students have a choice but in reality the teachers have all of the power and they know it. Despite myself I know that he is right about the power differential, and so I try to be fair. I hear myself tell him that perhaps my comment was a stupid thing to say, and that indeed his comment was a stupid thing to say. I tell him that my assignments have been planned with the benefit of scholarship and experience and that I am, after all, responsible for making them. I am angry at myself for explaining and angry at him, but nothing is registering with him. He continues to rant at me. I stare at him, trying to puzzle out some sense in what he is saying. Then he says, "Don't LOOK at me like that! What are you looking at me like that for? It's like you're trying to look into my SOUL!" He is near hysteria.

Two days later, the class is working on peer responses for a paper. Everyone is there except Majid; when he finally arrives and gets settled we are thirty minutes into a fifty minute period. Afterward, I can't keep the annoyance out of my voice or, apparently, my face. He explodes, "I TOLD you not to look at me that way. I TOLD you I didn't like it. You look at me like I'm your DOG." I don't say that I like my dog much better than I like him. He leaves in a huff.

I have no idea how to deal with this child. I make an appointment with him for a conference and, fearing his hostility and my own eroding objectivity, arrange for our departmental ombudsman to join us. The other teacher and I wait for half an hour, but Majid doesn't show. He also misses the next class, and having heard nothing from him, I think with some relief that he has dropped. But when he appears for the following class, he says he has

been out of town. Some business about traffic court, so he HAD to go; it wasn't his fault. He is annoyed at my lack of perception. I suggest that he could have contacted me before he left school or even from home. I explain that he had kept both me and Dr. Saye waiting, that the responsible action would have been to let us know about his conflict. I try to be reasonable, but every exchange between us is toxic now. He argues that he had left his syllabus at school and didn't know my phone number. Besides, his computer at home wasn't working. I remind him of the technology of a phone book. He is not apologetic, just irritated that I have accosted him with such a minor matter. As far as he is concerned, the problem is mine. When my colleague and I eventually do meet with him, he perches on the edge of his chair and fidgets, but for him, he is fairly calm—nevertheless, after Majid leaves, Neal widens his eyes and cautions me not to ever be in a room alone with him.

It's a mess of a term with him, but somehow we get through it together, coming to a tacit truce, both of us avoiding interactions as much as possible. I don't even want to understand him. We are both relieved when it ends.

Three years later I think of Majid when student Seung-Hui Cho goes on a shooting rampage on the campus of Virginia Tech. The next year Stephen Kazmierczak, kills students and himself at Northern Illinois. Austin, Texas. Columbine, Colorado. Blacksburg, Virginia. The list becomes longer than I can bear. We have to ask what kind of places our schools are, whether what we do here fails them in some deep way. Severely disturbed students require more than we can provide, and knowing how to recognize them is something we're not trained for. The next year we have special seminars about dealing with troubled students. So much of higher education is about challenges, about pushing past one's comfort zone into new understandings.

We challenge students to question what they think they know, about their world, their friends, themselves. It's a thin line to balance on.

Last week I recognized Majid riding his bicycle down the sidewalk, surprised to see him still a student. I supposed he might have bailed out, ultimately unable or unwilling to fit himself into the confines of academic structure. But there he was, dodging pedestrians and traffic. I wonder about his other teachers and about his development. I would like to believe that he has gained maturity with time, but of course I can't know.

Chapter One: The Nature of Learning

Going to school was, in the narrative I learned as a child, the fundamental activity of life, the one on which all other facts of life hinged. If, when I woke on a cold and gray morning I wanted only to snuggle down within the covers and keep my eyes closed, I knew that I needed a good reason to make it happen. I would mentally examine my body, looking for potential disease or ailments—maybe that discomfort in my throat was the beginning of strep, of a bad cough, of something contagious. Could it be that my stomach hurt? I could imagine the twinges of a problem there. When my mother came in to rouse me for the second time, I managed a weak, “I don’t feel good.”

Instead of solicitous concern, I got a brisk, “Well, get up and have some breakfast, and see if you don’t feel better. If you’re still sick after breakfast maybe you need to stay home.” Getting up to eat breakfast was just what I wanted to avoid. After leaving the bed for the kitchen table and a bowl of oatmeal, what was the appeal of going back to it? If I had to get up anyway, I might as well go on to school. Which was exactly the point.

When we really were sick and stayed home from school, the price of the absence was any activity that might be fun. There would be no playing or games; if we were sick, we were to be sick. And that meant no evening outing: “If you’re too sick to go to school, you’re too sick to go to the ball game.” Home for the day, home for the night.

My parents attended PTA meetings, examined and signed report cards, supported our basketball games. But our schoolwork was our own domain. Other than a Latin project of a stylus tablet fashioned from a wooden frame my father built to hold sheets of cardboard I coated with

wax, nearly setting the kitchen stove on fire with melted paraffin, I remember little hands-on help with schoolwork. Sitting with my father at the dining room table with my algebra book between us, I tried to puzzle out a word problem and quadratic equations. My German father was good with numbers but short on explanations and patience, and furthermore, his methods of solving problems didn't match what Mr. Truitt had told us in class. He read the question, did some figuring, and tried unsuccessfully to get me to see what he meant. "Oh, Honey, just look at it!" But I couldn't get it.

The God of Education prompted my parents to purchase a glistening set of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, heavy with tissue-thin pages and embossed deep-burgundy cardboard covers, twenty four of them including a yearbook. The young man who sold them in our living room assured my mother that they would be an indispensable aid to the education of her children, an assurance for which she gave him \$300 in small monthly installments, confident that she was doing a good deed for her children, giving us advantages she surely never had and access to all the information we could ever need. A second set of encyclopedias appeared at about the same time, perhaps from the same salesman, smaller and more elementary: the Illustrated Encyclopedia Library. Their black and gold spines held far more manageable information; these became the primary source for reports on South America, uranium, and rodeos. Schoolwork was the only acceptable excuse from chores; it alone held priority.

My mother's family was full of teachers. There were farmers and machinists and housewives, but the teachers had a cachet of respectability not available to the others who didn't wear suits and dresses to work. School was not just the door to success, it was the building itself. To do well in school meant that you had merit, you passed muster, you were admired.

So I went to school with great expectations. What I learned was that education was a dangerous business. To be a student is to put yourself at risk, because learning, real education, always involves loss. My initiation began early, when the kindergarten class went to see Uncle Dan's Magic Train. Uncle Dan was a minor local celebrity and his magic train appeared on a television show that, without a set at home, I had seen only rarely. Still, I had seen it, and I had faith in the smiles and waving hands of the boys and girls who visited the show and who were televised into my cousin's living room. My disillusionment when I entered the studio to find the train only a row of kindergarten chairs behind a cardboard cut out was deep and lasting. No amount of Atlanta Dairies ice cream in tiny cups with cardboard tops and wooden spoons would erase the sense of my own naivete. I began to understand that learning is change, that growth depends on leaving something behind. It's a loss of innocence, really, education is. Once we learn about Santa Claus, there is no going back.

I learned quickly to absorb rules and structure, and was rewarded for it as a good student. In a second grade class of my memory, I sit taking a spelling test that requires me to divide words into syllables. I am stuck on the first word: *car*. Now, I know that syllables are parts of words, and that we hear them individually when we speak, a division of sound that allows the word to fall apart into sections. I sound *car* to myself, working to count the parts. My Southern dialect provides me with two distinct sounds, "*caw-er*." But where to divide this little word of only three letters? I am stymied. I repeat the word in my head, trying for the life of me to figure out where to separate the thing. Then a rule pops into mind: "Every syllable has at least one vowel." Well, then. With only one vowel, there must be only one syllable. I mark my test and move on, trusting in the logic of rules as greater than that of my experience.

In the late sixties we were exhorted from bumper stickers to “Question Authority,” a good impulse then, and now. I came of educational age at the cusp of “open classrooms,” liberated, exploratory curricula, and independent study. In 1970, just as I was beginning the courses of my education major in college, Marxist educator Paulo Freire railed against “the banking” system of knowledge, where students learn what the teacher deposits in their minds, and dictates what constitutes knowledge. Teachers in his ideal were no longer masters of their field, they were collaborators in individual exploration. It was a revolution in education. And for the next quarter of a century I gradually learned pedagogies of Peter Elbow and other compositionists who argued for the value of process.

Now, capitalism seems in charge of the university, which operates increasingly on the corporate model, and the primary product of interest is economic. My students, when asked about their goals, regularly and almost universally tell me they want to get “a good job,” which, when I press, turns out to be one that makes them money.

When a dozen years ago I arrived at my school for new faculty orientation, I was given the university's adaptation of L.L. Bean's credo for salespeople, urging us to respond to students as customers whose satisfaction we seek. With this emphasis on product rather than the process of learning, students can hardly be blamed for seeking a degree rather than an education, for expecting monetary return on their investment of time and money. Last week I received a notice stating that one of our governor's goals is “to have the best customer service in the nation. Working together,” he says, “we can make Georgia a nationally known state for outstanding customer service.” *Customer Service?* The website offered itself as my “online coach” to help me treat my customers well, developing key attributes of being “helpful, accessible, responsive,

knowledgeable, and courteous.” I am not sure how to go about arguing that education is not a product that customers can purchase in the same way they order a new refrigerator or an elaborate meal. Perceiving the calling I am drawn to as merchandise and the people I interact with as customers is demoralizing; more, it short-changes the students by a vision of their passivity. Education as commodity is one of the biggest mistakes we are about.

What I ask of students is much more than an investment of money. I get frustrated at those who seem to want to attend class, put in seat time and get their grade, who seem to go through the motions without real engagement, who want me to tell them what to know and how to give it back to me. I scoff at those who want to claim a degree without being changed in any real way. But what I’m asking of them is difficult. Like unfamiliar exercise for a body you’re trying to improve, being stretched almost beyond where you can go is acutely painful. I think of Mary Rose O’Reilley, teacher and Buddhist who writes about her classroom, that “one must court doubt and despair in the process of learning anything at all.” And if we fail, she adds—as teacher, as student—as we often do, failure brings more pain.

Even when the learning is successful, it requires a letting go of what we have known about— ways of looking at the world, at other people, ideas, even themselves. Coming to college can be terrifying in its loss of familiarity, loss of what we believed to be true. When information can be added without conflict, it’s easy enough. But when new information calls into question old knowledge or contradicts what we held to be true, then what? The ground we’re standing on shakes and opens, dirt turns to liquid, buildings tumble into cracks in the street and we’re in danger of being buried.

Consider the possibilities. One can acquire knowledge, information, without great risk, provided that it doesn't contradict information that one already holds. Additional data about the French Revolution doesn't threaten. Formulas to solve calculus problems. Study of tribes in New Guinea. But maybe additional data about the Civil War does threaten. Maybe discussion about the Confederate battle flag, about the Georgia state flag that carries its image, becomes personal. "I'm not racist, I just want to honor my heritage," a young white male tells me in discussion about his paper arguing for public sanction of the Confederate "Stars and Bars." To interrogate that remark would require him to examine what he means by heritage, to consider attitudes he has inherited, to consider loyalties to family members and postures he has assumed without thinking for 18 years. Suppose he does allow himself to think about the Confederacy from a black classmate's perspective; suppose he has a flash of empathy and insight about how it might feel to have others celebrate a period enslaving people who look like you, who might be related to you. What then? What does he do about Uncle Buck? What about his father? John Dewey says, "Anyone who has begun to think places some portion of the world in jeopardy." To experience real education requires more of us than emerging from the warm covers of the bed. To change one's mind is to lose the former way of thinking, to, in effect, die to the self that you had been before. No wonder we resist.

I was a late bloomer; I mark as the beginning of my real education a moment during the late seventies in a graduate classroom, when I first contradicted a professor on an academic matter. The subject was Robert Browning's poem "Saul," which I had prepared for discussion, and when the professor offered his interpretation of a passage, I spoke up. "I read it differently," I said, surprising myself with a voice I didn't know I had. I explained my reading, and the

professor nodded thoughtfully, agreeing with me. It was a heady experience. I had the power to construct knowledge for myself.

Years later in a graduate class on American Romanticism, a classmate would tell of reading *Moby Dick*. "It's about *knowing*," he was told, but he misheard the comment as "It's about *rowing*." That made sense to him and he didn't question the remark. Rowing, on and on, boats against the current, toward the unknown, amid the vast expanse of the sea—maybe that *is* a description of knowing. That surge of sureness, momentary stays between swells—that's what I want for my students, along with their desire for it, again and again.

Fall 2004: Jeremy

Jeremy comes to my office with his paper that was due in class today. Today's absence was his eighth; my syllabus allows for only six. He hands me his folder with a quick apology and starts to leave. He is slim and moves with a jaunty ease, and his voice is usually full of confidence. "Come in," I say. "Have a seat." It is the academic version of "We need to talk," but he doesn't yet catch the tone. I close the door to tell him he has over-cut the class and will not get credit for it. I try to explain gently, but he looks stunned as the reality becomes clear.

"But I was sick and throwing up," he says. His curly brown hair hangs slightly into his eyes.

"I understand completely, and I certainly don't want you to come to class when you're ill," I respond. "But this absence is not really the problem, is it? It's the seven others that came before."

Jeremy doesn't say anything. He sits in the chair beside my desk leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his head hanging. His bare feet are motionless in his flip-flops. He picks at the fringe on his denim cut-offs, and his usual grin has flattened into a straight line.

"I don't want to be rigid or unreasonable," I say. "I have an attendance policy for a reason—we do so much in-class response that it's unfair to the rest of the class when you're not there to help out." In spite of my frustration with his behavior I want to give him a chance to save his semester. "I'm prepared to be convinced these absences are the result of extenuating circumstances," I offer.

"Well, I was up all night last night, sick, and I didn't get much sleep. I still don't feel good."

"Right, I understand that. "I wait for more. It's easy here to leap to the judgment that his throwing up all night and getting little sleep is the result of alcoholic revelry. Finally I prompt, "So, were all of these problems the result of illness?"

"Well, Monday I didn't get back in time for class. I had gone home. And last Thursday, I was on the road, heading home." He shakes his head. "I can't believe that lab counts for two."

"You must have known you were getting close to the limit," I say.

I think about what must be going through his mind. How much expense will this mean for his parents? I think about how I could ill afford to have repeated a class. He's not a bad writer. Is it fair for me to fail him when he actually writes pretty well? I want to tell him to go and sin no more. But what message will that be? That he really doesn't have to be responsible for himself? That other people will bail him out of his difficulties? How many times has that happened for him? Is this what he's used to? Isn't one of the things freshmen need to learn is that their choices and decisions belong to them, along with the consequences? Maybe I've made a mistake in recording them. Sometimes he comes in late, after I've checked roll. What if I have marked him absent on one of those days? But he's not just ONE over the line, I reason. Even if I made a mistake once, it's not likely that I've made several..... But what if I am just taking out my annoyance that he is repeatedly late to class, that he has a cavalier attitude about his work? Is this over-reacting? We're dealing with lives here. What about the consequences of my action? I wrestle with myself. Jeremy looks at the door, then at me.

"So, do I have to account for every one of those absences?"

"No—Just persuade me that you should continue. The ball's in your court." This can be a lesson in rhetorical strategy, I think. I'm hoping he can come up with something.

He looks at me, trying to summon his jolly attitude. "So, what if I just keep coming and don't miss another day until the end of the semester." He looks thoughtful. "That will be hard," he says, almost to himself, "but I think I could do it."

I wonder why it is hard to get to a 2:00 p.m. class on Monday and Wednesday. "You're certainly welcome to finish out the term," I tell him. "There are just three more weeks. But I can't promise anything."

From the place on the path I stand now, looking back at this scene, I'd cry out. "Wait a minute! What is this about?" If I want to have an attendance policy then have one and keep it. If I am going to wrangle over record-keeping and tardies, and get everyone into a state before ignoring it, what's the point? With a shock I recognize here a pattern of behavior that I learned at home from my parents: Put the subordinate party in the wrong, make him wriggle, and finally withhold clear resolution; keep 'em guessing and fearful of being wrong. Sheesh. In a surge of freedom I realize that I don't have to wrestle with myself and my students to bring them to the mat and make them cry "Uncle." The need to press them down dissipates, and in its place comes a nascent surety that shame and blame won't get either of us the results we are after. I also recognize that in my endless wrestling with myself and my doubts about fairness and accuracy, I am trying to shift responsibility for my policy to this student. Yes, let him be responsible for his absences, but be a grown-up and take charge of the structure, I say to myself. Do your job so that they can do theirs.

Chapter Two: Mother and Child Reunion

In the photo, my siblings and I stand with my mother squinting against the sun, knee-deep in weeds against the backdrop of a two-story limestone block structure under an achingly clear blue sky, once my mother's home. Now, despite its disrepair and use as storage for hay and as shelter for cattle and wandering rodents, it is the focus of our annual pilgrimage from Georgia to Texas, a ruined monument to her youth and family, the place where she was born and married, the place where she left her own mother to move to Georgia. We have shoeboxes full of pictures of my mother posing in front of her home, a documentary of decay.

The Rock House, as we called it, was built in 1878 by Hawley Gerrells and purchased by my mother's father in 1911. It is recognized on the Hamilton County Centennial commemorative plate as the Helen Stoddard House, Stoddard being Gerrells' daughter and a local writer and the tiny community's claim to fame, though my mother's family owned it longer than its original or any other owner. The rock, quarried from nearby limestone, was soft enough for my mother on her fifteenth birthday to carve her name and age into its surface with a ten-penny nail, on one of the stones abutting the door on the south side of the house: "Erma Roberts Age 15 May 29, 1932 Indian Gap Texas." The house doesn't exist anymore, eventually dismantled for the stones to be reused, though that particular rock where my mother literally wrote herself into its structure was retrieved, and now sits in my back yard in Georgia, where she can see it from my kitchen window. A part for the whole, transported through time and space.

A few years ago I visited the site of the house, where a contractor had disassembled it stacking the usable blocks onto pallets for shipping and tossing those not fit for new construction

onto a pile. It was on that pile that I found the stone into which my mother had carved her story, amid scraps of the past. As I look for parts of my own story that led me to the classroom and eventually to the wooden floor of my friend's house, I feel like the contractor looking for solid rock, taking the blocks apart piece by piece, setting aside the imperfect ones. Rebuilding my teaching self calls for those blocks to be set aside for study, but not to be used in constructing the new building.

The family history before the Rock House is sketchy; my mother's mother, Melissa Virginia Neal Roberts–Virgie, to her family– descended from John Neal born in 1770 in North Carolina, who is speculated to have been the son of a Steaven Neal who emigrated from Ireland in 1730. John Neal roamed through Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi before settling in Texas in 1854. Family records suggest possible links to a Col. James Linton Neill, who, when he had to leave for family illness, transferred command of the Alamo to Col. William Travis just weeks before Santa Anna led his troops against the mission fort. Other stories hold that the White House in Washington, D.C., sits on land formerly belonging to a Neal. None of these stories was recounted during my childhood; they appear in a family record we acquired recently and have less reliability to me than my mother's account of a neighbor's succinct praise to my Grandma Virgie's skill in raising her children: "You have such a fine family, Mizrus Roberts–all those boys and not a one of them in jail."

My mother had five brothers and five sisters who survived to adulthood, four of whom became teachers, including a principal and school superintendent, and a football state championship coach of the year. They lived on a hard-baked farm in central Texas, growing some cotton of their own, and picking that of others when times were hard, as they always were,

though her father also ran a local mercantile store for a while. She bought her school supplies and later tuition on family credit. Though teachers come from my mother's side of the family, Mother tells me she never particularly enjoyed school, maybe because her brother Willie called her "stupid" and declared that she "couldn't learn anything," words that she fiercely forbade us from using. As they set off for school in the mornings with her mother's injunction for Willie to "stay with Erma," he would do so until they were out of sight of the house and then take off like a colt, leaving her in the dust of the road. Despite her own early misgivings, Mother went on to Decatur Baptist College, getting her teaching credentials after two years and paying back her school loan with her first meager earnings. When she tells me now that she was always afraid of school, never liked it, I am astonished—I had assumed that her discomfort had been mild and passing. School for me was wonderful, and most of that impulse to enjoy it came, I believe, from my mother.

"What?!" I ask. "You didn't like being in school even later, when you went to college?" But she waves her hands in front of her face like wiper blades, erasing the images, turning away from me.

"No, no, no," she insists. "I never liked it! It was always hard and I never felt like I could learn anything." I imagine her looking up to her brothers and sisters who were teachers, wanting to follow them but uncomfortable doing it. I imagine her admiring the institutions of education at the same time she feared them, and putting herself into them so that she could be like those she looked up to. I have to re-think my notion of my mother as one who avoids what's difficult. How could she have transmitted this attachment to education when she felt it so foreign to her? To find herself unequal to the goals she saw as important, to find school unappealing and difficult—

and nevertheless to instill appreciation and opportunity for it in her children— I find this a remarkable achievement.

Her father died when she was nine, before she had the opportunity to lose her notion of him as divine, and in her stories of him he appears ethereal and beneficent. Abraham Tillman Roberts was a small man, apparently given to playfulness, for when my mother was not yet a year old, he either jumped or was playfully pushed from the running board of the car on which he had hitched a ride with friends, and fell under the wheel of the car. Though the details of his injury are unclear, he was unwell throughout Mother's memory of him, becoming virtually blind as a result of the accident. He also suffered from tuberculosis and spent some time in a sanatorium trying to recover his health. One late black and white photo shows his hair disheveled and his eyes full of pain, staring at the camera but with eyes not quite focused. My Grandmother Virgie holds the youngest of their children at the time; the next-youngest one leans against her leg. She is scowling into the light, a large woman with slumped shoulders, and looks weary to the bone, though she has dressed for this formal picture with evident care. The older boy is wearing a white shirt with a ruffled collar, the baby a long gown. I wonder at the impetus for the photo, whether they expected it to be his last.

Despite his ill health, my mother's father survived the accident for eight years and managed to father another five babies, the youngest of whom was born after his death. According to family story, he picked cotton on his hands and knees feeling for the bolls, determined to have the farm paid off "for Virgie and the kids" when he died. And he succeeded. But there is more to her inheritance.

My cousin calls it “the Roberts Curse,” a mental instability with numerous genetic factors that manifested in “crazy Uncle Arch” among others, my grandfather’s brother who tended to ride on horseback yelling up and down the dirt roads of Hamilton County with a shotgun and who eventually committed suicide; another of his brothers either killed himself or was involved in foul play. My mother and at least five of her siblings have suffered to varying degrees from what today we would diagnose as manic-depressive episodes, or bi-polar disorder. Though she wasn’t diagnosed until we kids were grown, mild classic symptoms were part of Mother’s behavior throughout my life: a mania characterized by grandiose plans, wakefulness through the night, non-stop talking, racing thoughts, and easy distractability. In the depressive phases she was unable to make decisions, prone to excessive naps, and unable to muster the energy for what seemed basic activities. Never suicidal, she was, however, “emotionally volatile.”

When in 1940 she married my father in the Rock House where she had been born, she left her mother to travel a thousand miles across the country to Georgia. I’ve always faulted my mother for her lack of willingness to change, but I see in this move a courage and adventuresome spirit that belies that rigidity. “If you let me take her,” my father told Virgie, “I’ll bring her back every year.” He made good on his promise almost fifty times. Upon our annual pilgrimage, we would return to the Rock House like a shrine.

But for their wedding day, I imagine a late May afternoon, baking hot already in the cloudless azure Texas sky. She is in a blue crepe dress that comes just to her knees, with short cap sleeves, a lace shawl collar, and two crepe rosebuds coiled at her waist. She has a corsage of white roses pinned to her shoulder. He is wearing a smart brown double-breasted suit with a dark stripe and wide lapels, sporting a small white handkerchief in its pocket. The polish on his oxford

and linen shoes reflects the sun. The ceremony takes place inside the cool limestone walls of the west room of the Rock House, officiated by the preacher from the Primitive Baptist Church at nearby Mt. Olive. There is organ music, played by a neighbor on a pump-pedal instrument with elaborate wooden scroll work and a red velvet cushion. Maybe someone sings "How Great Thou Art," her favorite hymn. The ceremony is somber, full of injunctions about obeying until death and enduring sickness as well as health. But today she is happy and healthy, and so is my father. They smile at each other and kiss shyly when the preacher gives them permission, and perhaps my mother does not this time complain that my father has smeared her glasses or held her waist in the wrong way. She does not yet feel the darting nervousness that prevents her from settling into a task or startles her into distraction. Perhaps the visions she has of a great and expansive future are appropriate for the day and not symptoms of a tingling mania. As they climb into the car with my father's parents to begin the two-day drive back to Georgia that will constitute their honeymoon, it is late afternoon and the Texas sun that sets behind them glows with the fire of promise.

It is thought that besides genetic factors, environmental stressors play a part in bi-polar causes. One expert suggests that the genetic potential may be triggered by a significant personal loss. My mother was primed, then, to succumb to both grief and illness when their first born child had Down's syndrome and died with pneumonia when he was not yet two years old. My mother held him in her arms while he struggled to breathe. At one point she looked up at my father as his breathing slowed.

"I think he's getting a little easy now."

My father replied softly, "He's dying."

My Grandmother Mary says that after his death Mother would follow her through the house as she went about her chores, talking, talking, talking, a behavior she would exhibit as a primary trait in her later manic phases. Mother was pregnant then with my sister Bonnie, who, born healthy and beautiful, became her salvation. Then my sister Virginia arrived, and then I, during a brief move to Kansas. Mother's illness was already in evidence when she had movers pack trash cans full of garbage. By the time we moved back to Atlanta, I was three and a half, and Mother had decided we weren't living with my father's parents anymore. In the winter of 1955, my mother's dream house, a brick two-bedroom ranch style, was a treat for all of us. The next fall, after three girls, my mother finally succeeded in giving birth to a healthy boy and our family was complete.

Perhaps being a child of a hard-scrabble farm and coming of age in the Depression called for a holding on to things. My mother is unable to throw away any "good" piece of packaging material. Strong cardboard boxes (or even cereal boxes), plastic containers of all types, glass jars, cellophane wrappers, all could be used again. The logical part of me understands that years of living with the dictum of "use it up, wear it out; make it do or do without" have made her loathe to dispose of useable items, and keen to find use for those most of us would pitch without a thought; I myself confess to a fondness for a really nice cardboard box. But there is also something in her that refuses to use a thing for its intended function. Hence, we have bookcases filled with dishes, china cabinets stuffed with sewing equipment, sewing machines storing mail, cookie jars holding assorted lids, and hair spray bottles (and soap dispensers) filled with water. Further, her merciless stacking and piling create towers of newspapers and advertisements that

she intends to look at one day and that threaten any rationality. In going through the stacks that lined her bedroom when we sorted out her belongings a few years ago, I found sales flyers from K-Mart, receipts for light bulbs purchased in 1979, *Farm Market Bulletins* several years old, a piece of V-mail dated January 1944 from my uncle stationed in Germany, empty business envelopes yellow with age, an offer from *Prevention* magazine for special rates, the packaging from size AAA batteries, a copy of her will, a church bulletin, and several unfinished letters to her sisters.

If reading the road maps in the car beside my father gave me a sense of objective time and space, navigating the terrain of my mother's bi-polar illness suggested that both time and place were internal and thus shifting realities. Time, particularly, had an idiosyncratic quality. I wonder now if the lack of focus, the jittery thought process that is part of the manic polar cycle was a factor in my mother's chronic tardiness. Perhaps getting dressed or packing for a trip, she would simply get distracted and forget what she was doing. We were late to church, late to doctor's appointments, late to music lessons. I remember our small green Ford careening around corners as we raced to piano lessons at Mrs. Clark's house, often arriving 10-15 minutes late for a half-hour lesson. (No wonder we never learned how to play well!) She was late picking us up from basketball practice; frequently we sat for an hour or more waiting for her to finish whatever was important at home. I learned recently that even as a child she was the last one to arrive anywhere or to finish anything.

"Come *on*, Erma," her friends and siblings would say with exasperation, on their way to the field, to school, to a visit, to a meal. I can hear my father's voice saying the same thing, the rest of us in the car with the motor running, already late for our destination while she finished up

just a few more details. Even today she can spend ten minutes brushing her hair, arranging it carefully before she will come to take a telephone call. Late for an appointment, she can stop a dozen times en route from her room to the car, finding her purse, picking lint from her pants and then finding a wastebasket, getting a drink of water, deciding that she needs some perfume and having to look for it, tucking the ends of the bedspread in carefully, re-arranging the items on her dresser, then looking at a book, a letter, or a photograph that she finds there.

“Come *on*, Mother,” I will say, ready to explode with impatience and frustration as I watch our appointment time come and go.

“I *am*,” she replies, heading in the opposite direction in search of her tissues.

Despite recurring cycles of disorder, Mother maintained a private kindergarten in the basement of our home after my brother started school. This was before public kindergarten was available in Georgia, and no federal or state program existed for children before first grade. One of the stories I heard is that facing a difficult, scary surgery when she felt her health and perhaps her life in jeopardy, she had made a sacred promise to help little children. Given her personal aversion to school, it seems surprising that she would choose this route, but perhaps teaching four- and five-year-olds seemed more manageable than being a student herself. And a promise is a promise. So she taught children their colors and how to spell their names, how to sing songs and operate in social groups, and they and their parents loved her for it. My sister and I made many a worksheet for her students. My own teaching style draws little from this, I think, though perhaps my inclination for older students comes from wanting to do something other than what my mother did. For ten years, then, until its stress finally overtook her and the project moved to our church, she managed classes with the help of able and reliable women as aids and helping

teachers, who on many days opened school and carried on with activities while she struggled against her illness of chaos and delay.

Her illness ran a variable course, often surging into mania in the spring around our annual Texas trips. After I moved away from home, my mother and I would sometimes have pleasant, friendly chats, occasionally even moments of warmth. Sometimes we had screaming fits, each accusing the other of selfishness and thoughtlessness. I would rage at her obstinance and then take to my bed, leaden with guilt. She would hang up on me during telephone conversations and refuse to speak to me in more than monosyllables for a week. She's ill, I would sometimes tell myself; she can't help the way she acts. But I didn't sympathize; I built up resistance to any emotional engagement with her. I get some reassurance in this disengagement from the NIDUS site for Bipolar Disorder, which acknowledges that it is "very difficult for even the most loving of families" to be "objective and consistently sympathetic with an individual who periodically and unexpectedly creates chaos around them." It's hard to see episodes as part of an illness and not simply extreme but normal characteristics. Mother was moody, she was irritable, she was given to fits of anger, but those emotions were pretty much within her private purview. She was the only one in the house permitted to express anger. When I slammed my bedroom door in a temper, I was told to "Come back here and close that door right." The emotional energy of the house was devoted to keeping Mother calm.

After my father's death in 1993, long after we children had moved into homes of our own, Mother's bi-polar illness was diagnosed and treated for the first time. She returned with my sister Bonnie from her initial visit with the psychiatrist, announcing her news to the rest of us, sitting at the kitchen table.

“And *he* said,” she continued, wide-eyed with amazement, “that I have probably had trouble with this for a long time!” The four of us looked at her, then at each other, then back at her, stunned by her apparent innocence.

“Gee,” we wondered aloud. “Really?”

Medication moderated her swings, but reactions to the lithium caused her treatment to be erratic. On those occasions when she was jazzed, she slept little, banging pots and pans around in the kitchen through the night, re-arranging the cupboards. In the morning we put things back in their places, finishing the task she had not been able to. She wrote reams of notes, recounting interviews on television talk shows or elaborate conversations she had had or wanted to have with family members who had slighted her. In some spells she would talk non-stop. A question about whether she had eaten supper would elicit her childhood history and long explanations of the care she gave to the child who died. She found it hard to complete a sentence; the idea she started in one would trigger another, in another story and then that one would start still another. One afternoon when she was without medication, I came upon her trying to pack her suitcase for a trip. Talking to herself in short bursts, muttering directions that she couldn't hold in her mind long enough to follow, half-dressed, she looked acutely mentally ill. For the first time I imagined her internal chaos.

A scene appears in my memory: Mother sits at the kitchen table sorting her pills, her movements fierce, the lines on her face hard. She is bent over, her arms supporting herself on both sides. She looks intently at the bottle in her hand and mutters the dosage that is to help control her bipolar condition; others are for osteoarthritis and high blood pressure: “One, four times a day. One, four times a day. OK. One, four times a day.” She looks up briefly at my

entrance, but she's far too busy to acknowledge me. Her eyes flicker over the bottles in front of her. Her hands are rough and bony, ridged with blue veins, and marked with red splotches of bruises. Her fingers grasp another bottle and struggle with the cap. She thrusts it at me. "Help me with this," she demands. The light catches her white hair, brushed into disarray. Her eyes narrow as she concentrates on her task.

She raises her voice suddenly. "Now just leave me alone, everyone. I've got to be able to take care of my own medicine if I'm going to stay by myself. This is MY business." Her hands fumble with another bottle and the cap slips, the contents spilling onto the floor. "I've dropped some," she says, an implicit demand that I pick them up. I do, crawling on my hands and knees. She glances at the floor and directs me, her voice annoyed. "There's another one over there."

"Here you are." I hand her the bottle. She looks at me. Her eyes shine with intensity; she is an eagle, blinking and turning her head.

"Just put it down," she says. Then she gasps and grimaces and clutches her side. "Oh, that pain again." Her eyes are closed and narrow, her lips pursed. "I just moved my weight to the side and that bone touched bone and sent a hot poker through me. My skin is so touchous I feel like it's going to explode. Oh, no, oh, no, oh, no— I've hit my foot. Is that bleeding? Look at my heel and see if it's bleeding, I feel like a knife is going through it. Just when I thought I was a little more free of pain, well, I'm never free of pain, but beginning to get a little easy—I thought I'd have a little oatmeal for breakfast this morning and so I fixed it with real hot water so I could eat it but it takes me so long to take my medicine— I have eight of these pills but if you count this one twice, that would make nine, wouldn't it?"

She is still talking as I leave the room.

Recently, expecting to elicit sympathy for my beleaguered childhood, I mentioned to a friend that my mother had suffered from bi-polar disorder. She said, "That must have been awful for her." I was taken aback. I wanted to say that well, it was no picnic for the rest of us, either, but I was forced to consider the possibility that Mother struggled with her own demons. For most of my life, however, I simply disengaged.

I was her attendant for a trip to Texas for the funeral of her favorite brother, sometime after my father died and her diagnosis. Her fear of flying, combined with her avoidance mechanism, engaged all of her delay tactics (she didn't want her brother to be dead, so as long as she put off going to the funeral, he *wasn't* dead). During the course of the flight she misplaced her glasses, and though I knew they couldn't have gone far, they were nowhere to be found. Even after landing, I searched and re-searched every bag, sack, purse and pocket I could think of ("They're not *there*, Mary Ruth, I've already looked *there*"), including the paper sack from our deli lunch, only slightly soiled, which she had refused to throw away. Every passenger disembarked, and we were still looking, between the seat cushions, under her feet, in the folds of her clothes. The flight attendants joined the search—no glasses. Finally, in desperation to let the cleaning crew do its job, they insisted that they would continue to look and let us know if they found anything. I headed to file a report at the Lost and Found desk before collecting the rental car. Then, "Oh, *here* they are..." Mother trilled. "They were right here in my purse, all the time." She was smug. "I knew they would turn up." I juggled her walker, her cane, her wheelchair, her considerable luggage, and navigated the rental car through unfamiliar airport roads while she complained that she was tired or hot or needed to find a lavatory. By the time we reached

Hamilton I was having difficulty staying in the car with her. She wanted to stop at the cemetery to have a moment at her mother's grave before going to the church.

We stood in the August sun while she looked at the headstone. Then she began to weep loudly, crying out for her dead mother and her brother. The sound rose into the air, a wail that became part of the heat and swirled around the headstones, and I watched her, unable to move. In my memory she reaches upward, imploring the heavens in what struck me as futile histrionics. I knew that I should reach out to her, offer her a shoulder or at least a hand, put my arms around her. But I was physically unable to do so. I couldn't move. We stood separated by six feet of dry caliche soil and fifty years of anger, a gulf I could not cross. I swore that I would never again be her travel companion.

With or without medication, my mother seemed to operate within her own world, and the job of others was to keep it working according to her needs. She rarely made a direct request, simply statements about her situation; those around her were to remedy any problems. "This table is dirty." That meant someone was to fetch a cloth and clean it. "I'm cold." We find sweaters, turn up the heat, bring a blanket. "I've dropped some medicine." "I want to go to Texas." Some of them took some doing, but we tried to make it all happen.

I leap psychically into my classroom from these scenes and realize that though I have escaped the genetic aberration that throws me into uncontrollable emotional spirals, I have unwittingly taken on the role of my mother when I interact with my students. The hidden requests, unspoken but expected, lurk beneath my explicit instructions. I want them to read selections in their books that I mention in class without assigning. I tell a student that her paper

should be long enough to develop her idea fully but expect her to know what that means. I have assigned reviews of campus events without guidelines and been frustrated when they came in hand-written. Weren't they to know that I wanted a double-spaced typed two-page paper? Another facet here is the reaction: I get angry and frustrated and make the student feel wrong. There is an insidious control in this interaction, a power play that I resented when I was on the receiving end of it, and I realize with a start that it must cause the same reaction in my students now. We're caught at both ends—they frustrated by expectations they have to discern for themselves, and I disappointed by their inability or refusal to respond to some vague standard. No wonder we're all occasionally sullen.

A corollary to this position is putting the student in my mother's role of announcing problems and expecting results. Teaching requires a delicate balance between detachment and compassion, between disengagement and taking on the responsibility for a student's problem.

"I couldn't read the assignment because my student loan check hasn't come through and I can't buy books yet."

"All the computers in my residence hall were out of paper and I had a class before this one so I couldn't get to the library."

"I had to miss class last week because my roommate got in a fight and needed me to take him to court."

When students simply deposit their problems on my desk and stand back, I go through a series of responses: I start trying to figure out a solution; I resent being expected to solve the problem; I get annoyed with the student and layer him with blame and shame for the situation. This is a stone from the old house that I should toss on the scrap heap. Learn to detach a bit and

ask the student what she has in mind for a solution. Identify ways to offer assistance that don't involve taking over. This is a tricky business for someone who has been expected to solve her mother's problems handed to her, and who has resented the process.

Probably the biggest frustration of my childhood comes from vague exhortations to "do better." Permission to go on trips or visits with friends or extended family hinged on a standard of behavior that was fuzzy and fluid at best, standards embedded in Mother's internal gradebook. Perhaps she never pushed through her thinking enough to come to clear conclusions; perhaps she assumed that we should intuit the ideals she held. But I was never sure whether I had measured up until the verdict was delivered. Had I done enough of whatever I was supposed to do? It was hard to tell. And this, my most deep-seated frustration, creates for me and my students our biggest source of conflict. When students turn in work, I find myself evaluating it according to a scale that I never fully articulated to them, or even to myself. I find myself deciding what I wanted from them as I go, accepting this, rejecting that, on the grounds that they could have/should have done "better." This striving for a nebulous goal ruins us both. In my defense: I understand on a visceral level how frustrating this vagueness is, and I work consciously to overcome it. But it is hard, hard, hard to redirect inclinations that seem to exist in my cells.

From my mother's illness I gained two habits. One of protective distance, a practice of disconnecting from students and unpleasantness. The other of independence and resourcefulness, of figuring things out for myself. When I needed assistance with a project or a question, my mother's typical response would be, "Ok, in a minute." Those minutes multiplied as she cooked supper or talked on the phone or did laundry or whatever else took her attention; usually they turned into hours, and eventually I would get tired of waiting, start picking at the problem on my

own, trying this or that approach, until I had managed a kind of outcome that would satisfy me. So, I count myself fairly good at problem-solving, a characteristic I enjoy. And a third habit: To second guess myself, repeatedly fret that I have made the wrong decision. Any action, in my experience, could be accomplished in two ways: my mother's way and the wrong way. The notion that more than one right way existed of blanching peaches or ironing a blouse or cooking a meal was foreign; even responding to a set of choices (should I stay another night at this vacation spot or go on? Buy this dress on sale or another one I like better?) was hard. What if I made a mistake? What if I chose the wrong one? Surely disaster. And just as it was hard to know whether I was doing the right thing until judgment was rendered, I agonize over whether I have made the right choices because the results are not always clear. So, when a student over-cuts my class and I tell him he will be dropped from the roll and fail the class, what if I have made a mistake in record-keeping? What if my standards are not fair, after all? I dither and fret and wonder what to do that will be fair and accurate, until everyone involved is a turmoil of frustration. The pressure to find the *one* right answer was enormous. When it finally sunk into my head that several right options usually exist for most courses of action, I was liberated.

In recounting this relationship with my mother I've been avoiding the single greatest practice that she passed along to me, the central force of our lives, developed to Olympic skill: Denial and avoidance. Denial can be pathological, I know; Faulkner's Emily Sartoris kept a couple of dead bodies company because of her issue with departures. Avoidance can be dangerous, too, if one avoids telling a driver he is unsafe, for instance, and it has emotional costs in less critical circumstances. Despite its emotional toll, however, I argue that a modicum of

avoidance can be a good thing. In the South, good manners is the art of acting as if what is happening right in front of you is not happening at all. In families, it allows Thanksgiving dinners to proceed smoothly despite Uncle Milford's flatulence or the impending separation of cousin Michelle and her husband. In our family, it is the power that protected Mother when, having to leave her home at last, she took to her bed while we children gathered and distributed all of her belongings. And avoidance allowed me to accept Mother into my home as a permanent resident nearly ten years ago.

The residency has been evolutionary; for the first few years, after a serious surgery for Mother, my sister Virginia and I divided her care, shifting her back and forth between our homes in Tallahassee and Statesboro. At first Mother's anger at her health conditions made our routines difficult. She was not then physically incapacitated; that is, she could easily walk with a cane and dress herself, read and watch television, though her scoliosis bent her frame into a lopsided "S" and she could look above the floor only with effort. But she was disoriented and confused. I was afraid to leave her alone for more than a few hours at a time, and after the total meltdown of a copper kettle, we had to make a firm rule that she was not to use the stove. ("I *thought* I smelled something, but I didn't know what it was...")

And then somehow, sometime, something shifted. The impetus must have been a combination of aging body chemistry that moderated at last the bi-polar swings and the cold realization that, but for us, she would be in the nursing home she so desperately feared. She began to come to terms with her physical condition. Gradually, almost imperceptibly at first, she began to complain less of the scoliosis and arthritic pain. She began to offer thanks for our help. She began to respond to other people, noticing their needs. She became pleasant and congenial,

reliably so. By the next year, she was causing us to look at one another and ask, “Who *is* this woman, and what has she done with our mother?” By the third year she was a gracious, loving, delightful woman.

Seven years ago a compression fracture in her spine left her wheelchair bound and brought her to my house—the only single-level dwelling among us. And here she has remained except for brief visits to my siblings. The youngest daughter and now unmarried, I fit the stereotypical tradition of primary care-giver. Though there are glimpses of the old mother, generally she overflows with gratitude at the attention I give her, offering smiles and pats on my hand along with her verbal thanks. She speaks every day of how blessed her life is, and how much she appreciates all of her children.

I would like to say that I came to terms with my own demons of disengagement and resentment and was able to offer my mother compassion while she was still mentally ill. But I didn't. I have, however, been able to respond to her expressions of love, and have gradually been able to pick my way back through the minefields of the years to ground that feels safe to me. It is fertile ground, and I am grateful for its richness. Though becoming acclimated to her as a permanent resident was not easy, I am aware of the pleasure that sharing my home brings for both of us. She is enthusiastic in her praise of the flowers I plant and the projects I do in the yard. Together we have watched a pair of wrens build a nest and hatch four eggs in the Christmas cactus on the front porch. We have coaxed two African violets back into bloom, and celebrated a lily's budding. She, who has never tolerated an animal in the house, has taken my dog to her heart and I hear her cooing endearments to him when I'm in the next room.

These years have been redemptive for me. Fifty years is a long time to develop and harbor anger, and it isn't easily released. But I am working on it and I can feel tiny, corroded bits of my spirit flecking off, leaving a smoother, softer surface. After fifty years of resentment about being sidelined, of her being unavailable to us because she was perhaps unavailable to herself, I find compassion for her. And for me.

When I go back to the house I grew up in, my mother's ideal two-bedroom brick ranch with a basement, looking out the windows gives me a perceptual double-take. When we moved into it the Christmas I turned five, my sisters and I skated on our socks across its polished hardwood floors. It had a full basement where we rode bikes and roller-skated, and in the den and in the kitchen, there was honey gold pine paneling top to bottom—walls, cupboards, and ceiling. It felt as if you had been captured by an elf and taken to his home inside a tree. My mother loved it, and announced that when she left this one, it would be “feet-first.” She didn't move easily, my mother; having left her birthplace a thousand miles behind took her to her limit. So when this house became hers that Christmas, she was adamant that there would be no more moves for her.

But twenty-one years later when the Atlanta perimeter Interstate 285 came within half a mile of us, and the two-lane blacktop rural highway that had run in front of our house had become a four lane expressway, something had to give. My mother said, “I'm not leaving this house.” My father said, “Whatever Mama wants.” So, the seven room brick house she knew and loved was stripped of its brick, loaded onto a truck and moved in the dead of night to its new location on their farm sixty-three miles away. The contractor said, “Never again.” By moving the house entire, Mother was able to avoid cleaning out closets and making decisions about trash.

There was no need even to move the heavy player piano, which rode out the trip strapped to the walls inside. Builders dug a new basement on the farm property, set the old house on top of it, added another bedroom and bath, and rebricked it all.

But of course it wasn't quite the same. Besides a strange sense of dislocation---I looked out the back door and saw cows in a back pasture instead of the swing set in a yard that had been the view from that door for twenty years---the house was oriented differently to the sun. So I watched the sun set through the kitchen window instead of across the front porch. Morning light came to me through the front bedroom, not the bathroom. Going for a visit, I always had that nanosecond of imbalance when I glanced out the window and felt an uncertainty of time and space.

As I think about my teaching life, maybe what I need is not to dismantle the stone blocks of an old homestead and toss away those I think unusable for new construction; maybe what I need is more subtle--a shift in orientation to my past and myself, a new perspective and vision that will allow me to adjust attitudes and responses rather than jettison them. Maybe I can open a space in which grace can operate, and in the opening find myself as a teacher moving on, moving through to new understanding.

Spring 2005: Courtney

*Writing, I tell my students, is a way of thinking; I want them to consider ideas, really think about them. But the work required to link their lives to the rewards of written language, to recognize the joy in exploring an idea, sometimes feels beyond me. Reared with sound bites and encouraged to draw easy, absolute conclusions, surrounded by instant twitters and tweets, some balk at intellectual struggle. Courtney comes to my office to discuss the paper she has drafted in response to the novel our class has read, *Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achebe, examining among other themes the cultural conflict between native Africans and British missionaries. It's late in the term and I've spent weeks insisting that the work of writers is to tell us something we don't already know. Her insight for the paper is that the Ibo religion of Africa is different from the Christian religion that missionaries bring to the village. I stare at her blankly, waiting for her to continue her thinking, maybe to explain something about that difference, but that's all, she's through. My patience and sense of compassion for student insecurities desert me and I want to say, in mock surprise, "Really? They're different? Who would have dreamed such a thing? What a revelation!" But sarcasm is not easy with first year writing students, almost never a good idea. So, I make my voice calm, and ask with as much sincere concern as I can muster, "Ok. Now, what else? Since your task as writer is to tell us something new, what part of this idea is new information? Would a reader expect these two religions to be different? Yes, probably so. Can you think of something we don't already know?" I'm hoping she can identify some kinds of differences that would be interesting.*

She is distressed; her eyes have the guarded look of a desert creature exposed to the sun,

sinking against a stone for protection. After some gentle questioning, and I try desperately to be gentle, she reveals her dilemma: She has read only the first dozen pages of the novel. Where is the line between being encouraging and calling out laziness? I suggest that it's hard for me to help her think about a novel that she hasn't read, but now her defenses are up. She can't get over my rejection of her initial idea.

"So, you want me to re-write the whole thing," she announces with disgust. I remind her that she hasn't yet fulfilled the assignment, and she shakes her head in dismissal. "Well, I've already written the paper. I mean, I have it here." She waves the pages at me. "I don't have time to redo the whole thing. I could fix a couple of sentences, but" She trails off and purses her lips, looking at a point beyond the door and then back at me. "I'm just going to turn it in. I mean, I've already written it."

I'm bone weary with the tedium of daily life with them and I must find a way to rekindle romance in the relationship or else pack my bags.

Chapter Three: Dialect of Divorce

On the highway after an evening class for the university where I teach, toward home, where my uncertain marriage lives, I give myself a pep talk as I speed along under the sulfur lights. I am in transition mode. Between class and home, between commitment and flight. For what feels like a long time I have been wrestling with how to live that married life. “You can do this,” I say grimly. “There’s a lot that is good here. Just focus on what works well and don’t keep looking for problems. You can do this.” I don’t know how to make myself want to be there. The interstate is lighted with an orange glow, illuminating concrete and signs and traffic while behind them halogen and fluorescent lights announce shops, stores and offices, now closed.

This image of the almost deserted highway, my commute between home and school and my insistent self-scolding comes to me now as I think about teaching, facing stacks of papers, preparation for committee meetings, tenure decisions, annual evaluations, lesson plans, difficult students, demands for technological integration. I try to find the energy to feel positive about it. Educator Mary Rose O’Reilley observes that when we talk about teacher burnout, we use the “dialect of divorce”: “I don’t know if we have a future together.” Almost thirty years into this relationship with teaching I don’t know if I can continue it.

It wasn’t always like this, of course; in the beginning I was head over heels in love with teaching, ready to take on the classroom world, me and my books. Perhaps I fell in love with it under false expectations, as we sometimes do, believing that the beloved would make me important, allow me an idealized version of myself. As a teacher I would be the one students would admire, would follow directions from, would want to emulate. In front of them I could

reproduce the effect that Mrs. Carmack had on me at Lakeshore High School when she introduced us to *Macbeth*. Louise Carmack was a sensible woman who wore her hair piled into a soft bun on the crown of her head and her reading glasses on a gold chain around her neck. A glance over those glasses when they sat on her nose could still the most surreptitious whispering. One day she arrived in class transformed. Her hair hung straight down in front of her shoulders as she stood in front of the podium. Without a word of introduction she grasped the edge of the lectern and began to read the three witches. "Double, double toil and trouble. Fire burn and cauldron bubble. Hail, Thane of Cawder." Her voice cracked and wavered. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. The classroom and people in it melted away and only that voice and that hair hanging in strings remained. I felt the chill of the dark forest. I saw Macbeth tremble and wonder at his future. The syllables rolled across Mrs. Carmack's tongue and piled upon each other in a wash of impending calamity. I understood in that moment that I wanted just such power. I wanted to be standing there wearing drama and emotion. I wanted to teach this stuff, to read it and pass it along for a living.

And for a long time we got along fine, teaching and I. My first PTA meeting as faculty for St. Vincent's Academy, Catholic school for girls in Savannah, was held in the gym, metal folding chairs drawn up close to the stage and a small podium where Sr. Jude, the principal, spoke about curriculum and religious study. She also introduced us, the faculty, and made what I considered even then a remarkable comment to the parents gathered there. "I understand that you consider education to be important, and some of you are making financial sacrifice to send your daughters to this school. But these teachers are making a financial contribution to your daughters' education as well," she announced. Wait a minute—I looked around me. What was this about financial

contributions? I didn't remember any arrangement about that. "They could all be teaching somewhere else for more money," Sr. Jude went on, "but being here requires them to take a lesser pay. So I know you appreciate not only the emotional and intellectual support from these faculty, but also the financial support they offer you." I sat a little straighter. I'd never thought of the logic she presented, and it made sense to me. Yeah, I thought. Yeah. We're regular philanthropists. In one sentence she transformed me from a new teacher grateful to have a job at all into the educational equivalent of William Henry Vanderbilt. In fact, she was right about the low salary, but I was still glad to get it. From that moment I had a confidence in myself and a sense of worth; I would eventually teach for eight other schools, all college level, and never again hear that voiced appreciation. I loved teaching at St. Vincent's.

My non-formal introduction to the nuns of Sisters of Mercy there came at the first school dance. I arrived at the gym and chatted with several women in the foyer. Close cropped hair, bright clear eyes and faces breaking into a frequent, quick smile. Sister Jude, Sister Michael Mary, Sister Gilmary, Sister Brigid. Exotic names to a Methodist girl accustomed to the stolidity of Germanic tradition. They referred to each other by first names, with no formality. But I'd never heard of a woman called Michael before, at least not since my own high school, where Michael Tisdale taught Latin. Mrs. Tisdale had been tall and rail thin, and tapped down the hall in slender high heels. She insisted on politeness in her class. If a student walked in front of her desk while she was sitting there, he was immediately halted. "Excuse me! Where are you going?" she would interrupt his progress to the pencil sharpener with a smoker's rasp. "Always go behind someone; that's only basic decency." We used to quip that she "smoked like a chimney," and I envisioned her as a chimney herself, tall and narrow in a charcoal pencil skirt and silver sweater, her gray

hair coiled into an elaborate chignon on the base of her thin neck. In those days when the teacher's lounge, that foreign territory, held fascination as terra incognita I peeked in only once. I knocked softly and someone opened the door. It might as well have been made of heavy timber, creaking on its rusty hinges with a moat outside. Inside was cloudy with smoke and soft chat; teachers sat casually in chairs by the window or pulled up to a table. They leaned back and their silhouettes were dark against the light from the windows lining the room. Mr. Truitt was reading the newspaper. Miss Adams was drinking coffee. They were laughing; they weren't fearsome. Their casualness gave them an eerie dimension as if I had wandered into a parallel world where teachers were human.

Most of the Sisters of Mercy at St. Vincent's dressed in simple skirts and blouses, dresses not particularly fashionable but not dowdy, either. No uniform. There was an air of vitality about them. The step was quick and sure, and they laughed a lot. The older nuns did wear the habit of the order—long black robe, ebony cross hanging from the waist, deep white linen gimp, white linen coif, going about their particular charge of the order formed in the Irish tradition by Catherine McAuley, devoted to duties of mercy: instruct the ignorant, visit the sick and imprisoned, manage hospitals and orphanages, and homes for distressed women. Stories of harsh nuns with rulers and blood-letting instincts didn't fit the younger ones and the older ones seemed too frail to wield a cane or ruler with any force. I imagined Michael Tisdale in religious garb, leading us in the catechism of decorum.

One afternoon I was swarmed by a group of girls from my classes. "Sr. Jude says that we can have a drama club if we can find someone to moderate it," they chorused. "Will you, please, will you?" Love of drama had led me to teaching, and teaching is akin to acting, at least as I

conceived of it. In the front of the room, even sorting out subordinate clauses, I was performing, drawing on intonation and reaching for the attention of the audience, sitting in rows in front of me. I was on a stage of my own creation. So when those five girls implored me to become the leader of a drama club, I was immediately on board. Never has a troupe been led by someone with less knowledge, training, or experience. Still, I was young and full of energy and visions of Louise Carmack, and we began.

Our first production, offered a few weeks later to the student body during afternoon assembly and to parents and friends in the evening, was a collection of one-act plays that included a dramatic rendering of Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery," a tale of archetypal ritual, human sacrifice, and blind adherence to tradition –just the ticket for impressionable ninth grade girls. But it was the stuff of drama, to be sure. Jeanne Hoffman, demure and doll-faced, one of the lights of good humor and intelligence in my upper-level class, became cast as the woman whom the villagers put to death, their sacrificial offering in the interest of a good crop. Her young brother delighted in announcing to their parents that Jeanne "gets stoned" onstage, his understanding of drugs clearly beyond mine. Later we tackled big musicals: *The Wizard of Oz*, with the girls' chorus "Les Chanteurs" singing backup; *Bye Bye Birdie* with collaboration from the boys Catholic school in town and more than a little help from Tom Coleman, the exceedingly good natured and talented director of the Children's Little Theater. I felt my way through the productions. We stayed after school into the night, painting scenery, hammering canvas and cardboard sets together, running through lines and blocking scenes. I loved the sense of purpose and project.

My youth and inexperience were the source of both energy and chaos. Two scenes occur: It is time to give the final exam and I have misjudged the time needed to prepare my tests. I am copying pages on the ditto machine in the workroom, purple ink perfuming the pages still wet with fluid. My class is waiting downstairs for me, the time of the exam ticking away. This is the stuff of nightmares. With incredible ignorance I believed I could prepare the copies and collate them in just a few minutes, just before the exam. Twenty minutes into the period, I am still frantically running copies through the thermofax machine and whipping out the purple inked pages when Sr. Michael Mary appears at the door, in search of me. It had all seemed so easy when I thought about it the night before. Maybe I hadn't thought about it at all; maybe I just believed in the power of magical thinking to create the space for the preparation that I needed. She took in the scope of the problem with a few words, and did her best to help; eventually the test went on, or as much of it as I could squeeze in.

And where did this notion of time management come from? I lay it at my mother's feet. All my life I had lived with a woman who operated in her own time zone. She was consistently, persistently, late. When she taught private kindergarten in our basement at home, her music teacher and assistant were often the ones to greet students and get the day rolling. Mother would make her way through the house and down the stairs usually before the preliminary activities were completed, but in her more manic phases she could be an hour or so late in appearing. I despised this habit; it spoke of absence from reality and self-absorption. And I practiced it.

My organizational skills often meant that we didn't get through all of the plans that I projected for my students. I made elaborate lessons with intentions of introducing them to the joy of reading good literature. I had painted my classroom with bold arrows pointing to a bookshelf

where I collected paperback books that students could check out, a miniature library within the room. Not yet were the desks arranged in a circle; that pedagogical approach would come much later. What I knew of teaching and class interaction came from my own days as a student when we sat in rows facing the front of the room and listened to the teacher. I remembered being required to memorize passages of *Macbeth*; I could still recite much of the “Out, out brief candle” soliloquy. I wanted to replicate that experience. So, we listened to recordings of *The Merchant of Venice* and I assigned them the speech of Portia instructing poor misbegotten Shylock on the quality of mercy. The days allocated for the recitations came, but we were running just a little behind in the schedule; more days came and went, and finally it was the end of the term, and we all knew that the calendar would show no mercy for my bumbled planning. I drew a deep breath and gave it up. But on the last day of school, here came a half dozen girls streaming into my room. They circled around me, in plaid skirts and white blouses, they climbed on desks and tables in oxfords and knee socks, and they began: “The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven on the place beneath...” They had memorized the speech, and by damn, they were going to speak it to me. I flushed with pleasure.

Teaching is a kind of drug when the adrenalin flows and the energy from exchanges in class charges us with electricity. The irregular feedback keeps us going. What I loved about teaching, though I couldn’t have articulated it in those early years, is the dance of loss and resurrection. The letting down of the bucket into the well for drawing up the water, guiding the descent, turning the handle, protecting the filled container—That act, that dance, is the relationship that I want now to save.

Eventually, as is always the case in long-term relationships, the initial affection cools, sometimes aided by outside stressors. Seven years into my teaching career, an itch for something more set in. Not that I didn't still love teaching and find it attractive, I just wanted a little something different to spice it up a bit. That I was also beginning what would become a long-term struggle with infertility fueled my discontent. When month after month passed without success, I responded with a move that would, over the next twenty-five years, become my pattern in times of stress and confusion: I decided to go back to school. My husband and I headed for graduate study.

I taught while I studied and while I tried to get pregnant. Being in a program gave me focus and direction, something I could be fairly sure of— I'd been in school enough to believe I could figure out what I needed to know—and at the same time enough new challenge to keep me interested. As a teacher I began a dual existence, trying to maintain confidence and poise in the classroom but without the generous administrative support I had previously enjoyed; graduate teaching assistants occupied the bottom rung of importance. My stipend was even less than that offered by the Catholic Sisters of Mercy, and my expertise at the university level was still lower. I'd never taught anything more advanced than tenth grade, and here I was standing in front of college students, imitating a real professor. On the first day of class I walked into my room, found the light switch and flipped it on with clear authority, faced the class and said, "Hello. How are you?" A voice came from the rear: "Not as nervous as you are." Busted. So I started over as a teacher, learning as I went, stumbling over my inexperience with students who, I feared, knew as much as I did.

The baby chase didn't go any better. Like graduate school, infertility calls on both physical and emotional nerve, often in ways not immediately evident. Aside from monitoring your body for minute changes in temperature or fluids, in the hope that every month after mid-cycle you are hosting what will become an embryo, you must care for its environment accordingly. Month after month for three more years I held my breath for two weeks, hopeful that this time I was pregnant, avoiding alcohol and drugs. Sick with the flu and hacking cough that I suffered every year, I avoided antihistamines, cold relief, or other medication, coughing so badly all night that I could sleep only sitting upright in the living room recliner. I lived with the raw throat and uncontrollable scratch for two weeks until my period inevitably came, and I was both flooded with relief at being able to have pharmaceutical therapy and helplessly angry that again there was no beginning baby in me. Three years later I left the university with a new degree but success in neither distraction nor pregnancy.

I did, however, have a new teaching direction. Kissing the high school world goodbye and with the blessing of the good Sisters of Mercy, I began what would become more than a decade of life as a temporary instructor, teaching in nine different colleges and universities; I often called myself a migrant worker of academe. My longest post-secondary stint was for six years, each of them appointed with the understanding that my employ could be ended at any time. Temporary instructors are only slightly ahead of graduate students on the academic ladder.

Most of the time I still loved the teaching; I loved the energy of each fall, a sense of expectation almost palpable: Students walking around looking for their classes, their eagerness and anxiety disguised as bravado coming out of their very pores. Their voices would be high and excited, their hands fidgeting and their feet shifting restlessly when they stop to talk in clusters.

They would enter the building brimming with potential, each new class like a garden just planted, before the rabbits and blossom-end rot set in, before the drought burns the spindly stalks, when every seed is the promise of that shiny red tomato in the Burpee catalog. But the pedagogy of my primary institution hadn't claimed Freire and his attention to student engagement in the learning process, nor much about nurturing student development. Requirements were rigid and outdated. Though I gained confidence in the university classroom, every term teaching became more mechanical and dull, and I interacted minimally with the students who came through my classes as through a revolving door, learning to dislike English even more on their way. And I often felt disconnected from them. In one class discussion I mentioned that a character operated as a Madonna figure for the hero, a pure object of devotion. A young woman from the middle of the room raised her hand. "You mean she's a *singer*?" she asked, confused.

Her friend nearby nudged her and whispered, "She means the *other* one...."

Even more confused, the first girl responded, "*What* other one?"

In the dialect of divorce: "We've grown in different directions." Facing the prospect of yet more temporary, adjunct, marginal appointments, I opted for another separation from my teaching relationship, pushing into new challenges. I went back to school.

The literal and metaphorical divorces overlap here in the narrative. In the course of this second return to school, the weight of continued disappointment with infertility finally took its measure and my legal marriage ended, though the relationship with teaching enjoyed a brief renewal. My doctoral institution again placed me in the classroom as a graduate teaching assistant, but this time I had post-secondary experience under my belt, and I knew more about how to deal with first-year university students. I got valuable guidance as well from Steve Lynn,

the director of first-year composition, who treated us as colleagues more than apprentices. Here I learned current composition theory and practice, though my own area of study was American literature. Here I could experiment with assignments and approaches to student learning; professors of composition were developing special studios for students who needed help. I felt a surge of enthusiasm for the classroom. And I loved the literature I was studying; the promise of teaching it lured me forward. I envisioned myself at last the American literature equivalent of Louise Carmack in the university—my affection for teaching soared; we renewed our vows.

After leaving doctoral study and a couple more temporary stints, I found myself hired at last into a tenure-track position with the promise of teaching literature that I loved, back on the campus of my undergraduate school. It was an eerie feeling, as if the universe had deemed something missing in my earlier experience there, and acted on the need for me to revisit the site of my arrogant undergraduate innocence. In one of those crystallizing moments we sometimes enjoy, I remember an evening on that same campus twenty-five years before. The scene has the detail of a film for me, with everything in soft focus: It is an early spring evening in 1971, just before dark when the sky is violet and the air lightly warm. I am returning from a lecture in the biology building, a guest speaker on environmental ecology. I feel keenly the privilege of being in a place that draws such experts into this place for my benefit; as I walk along the drive peopled with occasional passing students, I look toward the psychology building, where in the rooms behind lighted windows I know that students are running experiments with their rats. Behind it is the English building, where that afternoon I had listened eagerly to a discussion of Malcolm Cowley and his relationship with Hemingway and Faulkner. The air seems to swell with

opportunity for intellectual stimulation as the sky sinks to a deeper purple, and I say to myself with romantic certainty, “This is where I want to spend my life.”

I remember the words distinctly, and though I *think* I was speaking generally, of a place with life and energy, apparently the universe took me literally, and here I was, back on the same campus after having made an enormous geographical loop encompassing nine other schools and four states. By this time I had taught college students for seventeen years and had lost my newbie nervousness. I thought. But I had been a beginner in higher education here. I hadn’t reckoned on the muscle memory of my body that tuned in to the buildings and campus, changed though they were, from the perspective of a student, the identity I had held there twenty five years before.

More, I had recently changed my name, returning to that of my childhood. The last time I was Mary Marwitz, I had been a student on this campus. Having married and started teaching within weeks of each other, my teacher-self had existed only in that married name. Without it, I was re-making my professional identity in a place that knew me and, where I knew myself, as non-teacher.

My first teaching assignment included two sections of Developmental English, the then-current label for Remedial English, which would later become Learning Support. I had no training in that field, but I selected a text and made assignments. One day we began to discuss the reading in the assigned chapter. One boy repeatedly had not done the reading. Finally I took him aside. “Why have you not done the assignment?” I asked.

“I couldn’t. I don’t have a book.”

“Why don’t you have a book?”

“I didn’t know we needed one.” This kind of circular reasoning stymied me, but to him it was an ancient response that had granted him absolution in the past: “I didn’t know.” How could he be held accountable, he must reason, when he was ignorant of the details, never mind that his job as a student is to be aware of those central details.

“What were you *thinking?*” I want to shout at students sometimes, but brain researchers suggest that these first year students think differently because their brains are not yet finished; the part that accomplishes the tasks of logic that we take for granted isn’t all there. One consequence, says Jay Giedd, at the National Institute of Health, since this part of the brain accomplishes coordination, is a kind of mental clumsiness. There’s a good bit of lurching about as they try to navigate their complicated social and intellectual lives. This delayed development is, I suspect, particularly evident in students who land in remedial classes; how to handle interpersonal interactions and academic demands are all tangled up together, and none of it comes out quite right.

That developmental class didn’t go well, no surprise to anyone who could see my own insecurity. I would enter the building and walk briskly down the hall to the classroom to find the students lolling about in the adjacent student lobby. When I appeared, they would slowly stir themselves, gather bookbags, purses, and other belongings, and slowly, slowly, shuffle into the room to find a seat. The part of their brains that links their behavior to outcome, that makes a sequential path from their actions to consequences was still under construction. I asked them to be ready for class when I arrived; I threatened them with being counted tardy and absent; I raged, I cajoled. I was totally ineffective. By the end of the term I was exhausted, and we were all frustrated and angry.

What had happened? A simple glance at the exchanges above would be clear to any beginning psychologist. Vague threats, inconsistently carried out because I doubted their validity (How could I count someone absent when he was sitting in front of me?); expectation of respect and authority without building a relationship (How dare they not recognize my superior training—which I myself wasn't quite sure of, at least in this field); a narrow range of acceptable response (No independent thinking allowed); a rigidity of purpose that only I had clearly in mind (And I'm not sure that even I knew exactly what I wanted of them). I flash on my earliest lessons about work and feedback. At home my mother tended not to articulate her standards for what she would approve, in everything from daily chores like laundry or abstractions like contributing to the family welfare. Whether she herself didn't have a clear sense of what she wanted, or the standards were so obvious to her that explaining them seemed unnecessary, we were not apt to get directions beforehand—only disapproval and correction afterward, when the result wasn't what she had in mind. In this class, being unsure made for resentment and anger all around.

What I never did with this class was address the issue directly with them, listen to their explanation of what they were doing, and in the process elicit from them some awareness and maybe even some self-analysis. I simply launched my own directive about what I wanted and how they were failing to deliver it. I'm sure it was a familiar story to them; their presence in this class indicated a history of unsuccessful academics, no doubt the disappointment and displeasure of teachers, and they responded with the defensive power they had. I also, I now recognize, responded defensively with the power I had. I felt insufficient to the task, and made my own failings their fault, just as they blamed me for their failures. I did not listen to their fears and insecurities, unable to discern them over my own.

Now, even though I hear more of what students are telling me, they seem to become more alien with each term, and I have trouble understanding them even when I do try to listen. Their ipods, cellphones, music, text messages, wikis, and blogs, twitters and tweets operate on a different planetary orbit from mine. “You’ve changed,” partners complain about their spouses. “I just don’t understand you anymore.”

Occasionally a marriage will falter under the weight of tedium, repeated efforts without variation or validation. Early in my tenure at the regional university that was once my undergraduate institution, I completed my doctoral study in American literature, eight years after beginning it. At last, I could teach what I fell in love with there—but I hit a snag: even as I completed my degree, the English department underwent a division that put literature classes in one department and writing classes in a separate one; each new department was distinct, and though early indications were that there would be a fair amount of cross-over teaching, in reality the lines hardened quickly. With first-year composition as my primary teaching responsibility, I was placed in the writing department, not yet having taught upper level literature courses with my brand new degree. I didn’t, however, have the background to teach upper level writing courses—so there I was, neither fish nor fowl, trained in literature and unable to teach it, placed in a writing department with no advanced training in composition. Still, I was glad to have the job with its security, and I figured that somehow, things would work out, so for the next dozen years, I taught first-year composition, just as I had as a temporary and adjunct instructor.

In those dozen years, good students and troubled ones, filled my heart. Early in the term last fall a student from two years ago stopped by my office and gave me a bear hug, a tall blond linebacker at his old high school; “You shot it to me straight,” he insisted. I had told him that his

association with those high school friends whose main ambition was to get drunk on Fridays and “see if we could get in trouble” was less important than his obligation to himself; that he wouldn’t likely see law school and his grandfather’s pride if he didn’t take charge of himself. “I cut those boys loose,” he said with a grin; he’ll graduate this spring. My email brought a post from a former student who asked me to look out for his girlfriend. “I remember you telling me that I had to decide how hard I was willing to work, when I almost dropped my algebra class,” he wrote, “and I stuck it out and got a ‘C.’ I told my girlfriend to get in your class if she could.” Another young woman came to my office about her paper, and she began talking about her boyfriend, who has been deployed to Iraq. “I can’t talk with my friends about it; they don’t understand. And my mother is a long way away.” I listen and listen and listen.

This afternoon Brian came to my office to explain his absence from lab last week. He had missed an earlier class because of his grandfather’s death. I’ve heard lots of “dead grandparents” excuses, but Brian is attentive and good natured in class, responsible. I trust him. Today he told me that his grandmother, formerly married to his grandfather, had gone to the deceased man’s house to collect some of her things, things that they had once owned together. There, Brian told me, she had apparently been overcome with grief and had taken all of the medicine left in the medicine cabinet. She never woke up. So, he had been called back to Mississippi for a second funeral. I just let him talk. His eyes were clear and he tried to smile.

“Oh, Brian. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Yeah,” he said. “It really sucks.” Then, “I’m not in danger of failing your class because of absences, am I?”

“No,” I said immediately.

“I won’t miss any more,” he promised. We talked more about work, went over some material, and he got his things. I asked him if he had thought about going to talk with a counselor. He said no, that he was fine.

We’re not told how to be psychologists. Students bring all kinds of grief with them to class, and their loads can be staggering. One young woman told me she was pregnant and didn’t know what to do. I called the counseling center for her from my office and had her make an appointment with them, but she never showed up. A couple of weeks later she reappeared in my office. I asked how she was.

“OK.” Her voice was flat.

“Were you able to talk with someone to help you?”

She looked at me with eyes aged and dull. “It’s not a problem anymore,” she said.

During last spring’s research project students were to investigate a social problem that interested them, like homelessness or illiteracy. One wanted to write about alcoholism; his father had a problem, he said, with alcohol and drugs, but had been sober for three years now. He was very proud of his father. A few weeks later in my office I asked about his progress on the paper. “My father is drinking again,” he said. He spoke quickly, dismissively. What is the proper teacher response to that? I changed the subject.

Another student, a bright young woman, missed class earlier today. Her father has a brain tumor, had been forced to quit work, and is in the hospital intermittently. She wanted to leave school and help with finances and be with her mother, but her mother is adamant that she continue her education, despite the financial hardship. Recently her father has become erratically distraught—yelling and refusing to be calmed. Sarah is the only one he would respond to, so when

her mother had called last night, Sarah had driven the nearly 200 miles to Atlanta. She had gotten back this afternoon, but not in time for class. Her father was dying, her mother was on the edge of a breakdown, and this child was holding all of them together. How do you make an analysis of structure in "Once More to the Lake" important in the face of this? Both of us know it's nonsense to try, and yet it's what we set about, holding on to the tattered edges of normalcy.

Beyond the lives of the students who come to us and the work that they do is the weight of administrative duties. In her visit to the department major area groups today, the dean spoke about the need for our college to "ratchet up" its scholarly activity. Faculty need to have more publications in order to assist the president's "Campaign for National Distinction." The dean also asked that we "ratchet up" our efforts to secure outside funding and grants for the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. Workshops for grant writing are available, and she urged us to attend. She announced that our college was responsible for securing \$1.2 million in new funding for the university during the academic year. She asked that we also provide her with names of potential donors for the university, adding that when she was a teacher, she herself was largely responsible for the benefaction of a former professor, just by visiting him and asking for his help. Someone from the back suggested wryly that retired teachers of composition are not typically among those most able to make large philanthropic donations.

Teaching happens only fractionally in class. In a typical scenario, I am home, it is 3 a.m., and I wake with a start. I am sitting in my chair with a stack of freshman papers that I have promised to return tomorrow. My pencil has rolled somewhere under me. I fill the margins of the papers: I write comments about their ideas, their sentences, their organization; I suggest changes in wording; I mark a rubric for each paper, outlining their strengths and weaknesses. I write long

notes about what direction their revisions might take. My hand cramps, and the callous on the second finger of my writing hand is swollen and red. I can get through about three or four papers in an hour, but after about two hours, my neck and shoulders ache. I have 66 essays to read this week. I massage my neck to lessen the stiffness and tension accumulating there. I think of classes and their preps, student conferences, departmental meetings, committees, service work, and the need for more scholarship/ research.

Perhaps the greatest drain on energy is the sabotage of your self-esteem. Teacher salaries are not even close to those of other professionals who spend up to eight or ten years in higher education. In the humanities, whole programs fight for survival. Last fall a relative commented to me that teachers don't have a sense of the real world, don't do work that is performance-based. In truth, the testing never stops. Despair lurks on rooftops, inside doorways. Attacks on self-confidence occur regularly for teachers, in relentless evaluations, justifications for curriculum, competition for merit salary raises of 1.5 -2% in good times (this year we have taken a 3% pay cut). These days competition for positions with oppressive teaching loads of 5/5 is stiff; nearly one third of our full-time temporary faculty lost their jobs this year. At the same time we hear cries of "accountability" with its implication that something has gone wrong and blame must be assigned. It is difficult not to feel defensive. Perhaps we pass that impulse on to students, even in what seems to be innocuous ways. When we ourselves feel under attack, besieged by rising expectations, when we are cold and frustrated by indifferent administrators, we are at risk of using our students for firewood to warm ourselves, to comfort our wounded and worn egos.

When I left my marriage years ago many people didn't understand why. My husband was a fine man, handsome and intelligent, responsible and funny; everyone liked him. I liked him,

too, but I found myself driving away down the road, for reasons that made sense mostly to me. Now I feel like my intimate relationship with teaching is threatened by years of disappointments and misunderstanding. I am aware that I work in a position of privilege, tenured in a profession that is rewarding in many ways—but I find myself unable to continue. If I am to remain in this relationship to which I've devoted thirty years, I must find ways to teach that are more affirming for both of us, ways that do not come out of my childhood. I must do it smarter, more responsively, more creatively, more freely. I must find ways to fall in love with it again.

Spring 2006: Ashley

This afternoon I host peer responses in my office. Ashley is tall and willowy, with long cornsilk hair, blue eyes and porcelain skin. She wears a blue baseball cap with her sorority insignia on the bill stitched in pink. Sitting and leaning forward with her elbows on long legs with perfect toes tipped in luminous red, tucked into velvet-strapped flip flops, she is stunning in her youthful beauty.

"What can you tell Jerrid about his paper, Ashley?" She turns her eyes on Jerrid and he has a hard time looking back.

"Well, I just really thought, like, you did, like, a good job, like with the paper—and like, the way you, like, put the ideas together." Her voice is soft.

I am fascinated by her vocabulary and I am tempted to count her repetitions of like.

"What idea, particularly, did you find interesting?" I press.

She looks quickly at me, a little anxious. She must know that she's not saying what I want her to say, but she doesn't know exactly why. "I just kind of, like, you know, like the way it all fits."

What she needs, I realize now, is both the vocabulary and the context for a new language, and it is too easy for me to assume that it should be automatic, basic. It isn't automatic, even for those who find it interesting, or those who know it is important for their GPA. I'm asking her not only to use language she isn't comfortable with but to practice a way of reading and thinking she apparently doesn't have a speaking acquaintance with. I try to lead them through the response process with language they know ("Point to the details that create an image for you, something

you can see or touch or taste or smell; what words make you connect with the idea of the paper, or with the writer of it"). I look at that instruction, which seems so basic and obvious and clear to me, and recognize that it's as if I am speaking gibberish. They're afraid of making a mistake. I need to say out loud, "There is no wrong answer here. Any thoughtful response is right." This lovely young woman is in this class because it's required of her and she knows that she isn't tuned in the way I want her to be. But what she's good at, I'm guessing here, is putting together cute outfits; I'm assuming, without cause, that the problems she deals with outside of her English assignments are about clothes or manicures or conflicts with sorority sisters. Who am I to say that she hasn't been touched by grief and loss on a profound level? Regularly students tell me of a parent's diagnosis with cancer, of a divorce that has probably been delayed "until the kids are away at school," of drug or alcohol addiction of their own or someone close to them, of unwanted pregnancies. They carry loss with them, and roll onto the shore of this institution, their undercurrents and riptides threatening to bear them away, while I ask them to learn a vocabulary for peer review. And even those who don't have grieftsome burdens from outside are uncertain, insecure, sometimes defensive. This is hard for them.

She gives me another quick glance and makes one last try. "It like, relates to the whole thing." Finding a frame on which to help Ashley fit her thinking requires more energy than I can muster on this afternoon. We muddle along for a while, and then the conference is over. What have I helped them do? I don't know if we have a future together. I don't know whether I can keep doing the work that I have chosen for my life.

Chapter Four: Inheritances

The keys that my father has for his truck have been re-filed by my brother so that they will not work in the ignition, a maneuver taken to prevent his driving away from the house that he shares with my mother, driving down the highway and getting lost, not being able to remember where he is or how he came to be there or the way home again or even where home is. Because the first line of attack for Alzheimer's is the hippocampus, where memory and spatial orientation are located, this kind of wandering and dislocation is not unusual; sometimes victims get lost in their own homes and even their minds, not recognizing the physical and emotional spaces they have spent years navigating. Paranoia is a symptom, too, but when my father confides that "someone has fooled with" his keys so that they don't work, he is not being paranoid; he's right. We pretend we don't understand what he's talking about.

It isn't easy to dissemble with him. He's always been the one I aligned myself with. His side of the family was the one I folded myself into, found compatible, knew the most about. Between my mother and her legacy of emotional instability I had mortared a wall designed to protect me from its vagaries and disappointments, but my father was the steady one, the one whose side of the bed I sought when in the night I woke with a bad dream.

When I was born, my mother says I was "the spitting image" of my paternal grandmother, a veritable miniature of the woman who smelled of raw milk she had strained in the kitchen sink from the cows my grandfather milked, and whom I would as a child sit beside on the sofa and watch pull embroidery thread into intricate floral designs, wrapping it three times around the needle and then pushing the needle right back into the fabric, the twirled thread somehow sliding

down into place against the fabric to make a nubby French knot. I was named for her. My Grandmother Mary did lovely handwork– embroidery on kitchen towels, pillowcases, tablecloths, dresser scarves– all of those functional pieces of linen that women of her generation decorated by hand. Snuggled up as close as I could and still allow her arms to move, I would watch the colors bloom on the white fabric. I would watch her pull the thread through and miraculously unknot the tangles that always accompany needlework. Years later when the fibrous tangles inside her neurons degenerate into neuritic plaque and create debris in her cerebral cortex, she will be unable to smooth them into workable threads, and eventually take to her bed, not sure of the name of the daughter who cares for her daily needs or the husband she had wed more than 60 years before.

I think of my physical and psychological connections to my father, whom I favored in eye and coloring and body chemistry and, I'm told, in manner. The summer I was eighteen I drove my mother's sister across the south of Texas to her home, just the two of us in the car for several hours, after which she complained that I was difficult to have a conversation with, taciturn and reserved. "I felt like I was talking to Carl Marwitz!" she exclaimed at our arrival. I blushed with pleasure. And didn't his sisters tell me that Daddy was the steady one? And haven't I been pleased when my friends praise me for my steadiness? I think of his connections to his mother, whom he favored in temperament and as it turns out, in chemistry as well, following her path after she became ill and unable to embroider or to strain milk from the cows or to distinguish the dogs in the front yard from the cows she believed to be there. Both victims of the disease. I imagine it hopscotching through the generations, skipping from gender to gender and

landing on me. I try to unravel the tangled threads of my own hunt for stability and identity in this father, this heritage. I wonder if somewhere in me I believe that school can save me.

None were teachers on my father's side, like those of my mother, but I leaned toward them, preferred their German energy. My grandfather, Wilhelm Adolph Gustav Marwitz, was the son of William August Marwitz, an adventuresome youth who arrived at age seventeen in Galveston, Texas, from Wittenberg, Germany, in 1873, shortly after the yellow fever epidemic had run its course there. The woman he would marry nine years later had beaten him to this country by two years, passing through Ellis Island with her family from Hannover, Germany, as a child of six. Though a narrative of family records claims he and Minna Neimann had "59 years of married bliss" after setting up housekeeping in the hill country of Texas, more intimate word from their grandchildren is that their house was not peaceful. A photograph of the home place from that family record shows a white frame house with a two-story ell, a thin porch running along its front bordered by horizontal boards that served as railings. Four narrow windows open onto the front and two more on the ell, with another above them. This whole structure sits in what seems to be a field devoid of vegetation or ornamentation other than a pile of brush and logs to one side. Nor was William August, a short bespectacled man with handlebar mustache, remarkable in appearance. Looking at family photographs I had always considered him a slight figure in both stature and demeanor; his wife, instead, seemed powerful, with a square face solid as a chopping block, black hair pulled cleanly away from her face and forehead in a small bun knotted at the back of her neck, dark wide-set eyes, and a firm mouth. Her physical imprint is on every one of their ten children except for the youngest, Minnie and Otto, who looked like their

father. My grandfather carried his mother's Niemann genes, a square head and black hair that kept its color until he died at 86. I used to feel sorry for my great-grandfather, imagining him dominated, but stories I hear now suggest his persistent lechery and inclination to the bottle. Sent with his son to the doctor in town for a procedure to correct the child's crossed eye, my great-grandfather instead took a detour to a favorite bar, where he drank the money intended for the doctor; my grandfather lived his entire life with one eye lazily wandering toward his nose.

Farmers and ranchers and later Lone Star beer distributors, those Marwitz boys, of the eight sons my grandfather was part of, were reportedly wild, quick to argue and to fight. I myself saw the scar on my grandfather's stomach between his ribs, flat and thickly smooth, the result of a knife blade at a Saturday night dance, where my grandmother whom he was then courting stanching his bleeding with her petticoat, torn into strips and tied around his waist until they could get the horses hitched to the wagon and him to a doctor. These later stories I heard as a teenager with a kind of romantic haze as my grandfather two-stepped me around the living room to the televised music of Lawrence Welk, imagining high-heeled boots beating a tattoo on dusty wooden planks of a Saturday night dance floor set up in the open yard under a clear Texas sky, with a background of fiddle music and clapping hands, believing them to suggest a full-intensity engagement with life that was my heritage.

My father was more akin to his mother's side of the family; he looked like them, blond and smooth featured. Her stories were quieter; her mother, my father's grandmother Ellenora Minna Guenzel Witzsche, had arrived as a child of four from Bautzen, Germany, not long after the immigration of my grandfather's parents, her infant brother dying on the rough passage over the Atlantic. Of my great-grandmother I know little except that she lived a long time, sequentially

with her daughters in her old age. I know of her and her soft German brogue, her softer hands and arms, and her upturned face, from visits on our annual pilgrimage to Texas from Georgia, where my parents had settled. From her I had confirmed the priority of male position in the culture my father must have absorbed. I recall one visit to see my great-grandmother Witzsche, then 93 and blind from cataracts. We children hung back shyly in the strange room where she sat, soft and plump in her rocking chair, in her daughter's home. Daddy presented each of us in turn: "Grosmuta, this is Bonnie Jean." He put my sister's hand into my great-grandmother's and she patted it gently.

"Yah, Bonnie Cheen," she said, with her German tongue.

Then my other sister: "This is Virginia Anne," Daddy continued, handing over Virginia.

"Yah, Firchinya Ahn."

Next my turn: "This is Mary Ruth."

"Yah, Maddy Rut." Her hand around mine was cool. Her eyes crinkled a bit as she smiled thoughtfully.

Then he brought my brother to her. "And this is Carl Neal."

My great-grandmother clasped his child's hand in both of hers. Her face broke into a broad, full smile, and she beamed. She exclaimed, nodding her head vigorously, "Yah, yah! Dis ist da BOY!"

Tall and sandy haired with athletic build and a quick wit, my father was the first-born of five; his mother would depend on him for help with the youngsters, two brothers and then two sisters, to build a fire in the cookstove every morning, to cook meals, even to bake the family

bread. It was he who would get the call late at night to meet his sister at the train station after her weekend trip to see her fiancé; he was the one who could “hold you up,” his sisters say. On Saturday mornings of my childhood the phone would ring just as he was starting his weekend and he would return to the breakfast table with the news that his father needed him to fix a fence or go see about some cows or help with a shed. He never failed to respond, and never voiced any resistance. Later the steadiness we all depended on fell through our fingers like a fistful of sand.

I thought his homemade bread was even better than my grandmother's. It became, in the small Methodist church we belonged to, his signature and the impetus for impromptu social gatherings on Sunday evenings after he had spent the afternoon stirring up a batch of dough in a dishpan, feeding yeast with sugar and warm milk, mixing it into flour and oil until a glutenous mass evolved, his hands turning the mass and folding it into itself, his fingers lifting and thumping against the side of the dishpan in a rhythmic music, the heel of his hand kneading the soft, elastic dough into an ivory, flour-dusted mound. The smell of rising bread was the smell of Sunday afternoons. After the mound rose to the top and beyond of the dishpan, sometimes he would let me punch it down for its second rising. I would arch my hand like a claw and strike from above, my fingers going into the heart of the dough as the air escaped like a sigh, the surface of the dough wrinkling and sinking around my hand like something elderly that has lost its teeth. On Sunday evenings at church the word would go around that Carl had made bread, and friends looked forward to an invitation. Loaves of bread were his Christmas gift to them and the neighbors, and we would deliver them in brown paper sacks, still warm from the oven and ready to melt butter on thick crusty slices.

He was unable to express emotion easily—when we told him we loved him at the end of a visit or phone call, he would mumble, “uh-huh, yeah, mmmnnh,” and something that a creative listener could interpret as, “I love you, too.” Called on to speak in church or even to offer a blessing for family gatherings, he would invariably choke up with tears, unable to speak at all. We would agonize with him through the throat-clearing, the coughing, the ultimate breaking down of language. He didn’t do small talk well, either. He apparently recognized that making conversation was a skill that it would be good to have, but he had no concept of how to achieve it. Occasionally on a road trip when I was driving, he would feel the need to keep me awake and alert; his mode of conversation was to read road signs we passed in an amiable, conversational tone. “Holiday Inn, next left,” he would offer. “Pennzoil Motor Oil, runs clean.” “See Rock City and seven states!”

He was, however, a wonderful letter writer, though even in that he avoided emotion. My mother tells me that during their long-distance courtship he wrote regularly—but his letters were filled with news of the family cat and the garden and the weather, rather than the love-talk she craved. Finally in frustration, she sent his class ring back to him, prompting him to make a personal visit with an engagement ring in hand. In his letters, his flowing penmanship drew pictures of a self he had trouble speaking aloud, even one who recounted news of kittens. I recently discovered letters he wrote to my mother during a long vacation separation, playful and chatty, a side of him we rarely saw in person. He could be playful—he wrestled with us on the floor, let us ride his back like a horse, and shot basketball with us in the front yard, through a hoop nailed to a big pine tree. On Sunday mornings he would dress for church singing off-key, “Oh, when I was single/ my pockets would jingle/ but now they don’t jingle no more— ” Then he

would break off and ask, “Mama? Why don’t my pockets jingle no more?” But words failed him when they needed to be serious.

I had long assumed that because I liked language, and read and wrote pretty well, I was verbally facile. In graduate comprehensive exams I wrote with no problem; to my surprise, however, the oral exams were much less smooth. Friends have described my speech when I was trying to explain something as “careful” and “measured,” qualities that could be positive, I thought. But I recently listened to a recorded conversation as I discussed important issues of family relationships, and discovered that my friends’ assessment of my speaking style was charitable in the extreme. In conversation I halted and stammered, began sentences and stopped them mid-stream, struggled to find words that, when they finally emerged, made little sense. It was painful to hear. Shades of Carl Marwitz. Better to put pen to paper, for both of us.

From my father I learned to be cautious, that most things don’t work out as you expect them to. My father didn’t venture big risks, was not surprised to learn he’d been taken advantage of. “Well, I guess I got rooked on that one,” he would say about some deal he had tried to make for a load of tin or some gadget for the garden tractor. And perhaps this tendency toward victim status has been the most insidious lesson I need to un-learn. A kind of long-suffering posture, begotten partly by my mother’s illness and the storms it raised, became standard for not just my father but me, too. We were caught in an unwinnable struggle against her manias, and the only solution seemed to be a low-slung acceptance of our fate. Over the long term I developed a passivity and abdication of agency, exactly the qualities that frustrate me the most in my students. Just as discovering that more than one right choice is possible most of the time liberated me from

my mother's pressures, claiming the existence of choice in the first place gave me freedom to act with joy and power, a freedom I'm not sure my father ever enjoyed.

He was not like his father, a horse-trader, as we would say; my grandfather loved the art of the deal and the feel of a bargain, the crackle of the negotiation, the electric charge of making a good trade. He loved getting the juicy end of a transaction. The family piano was acquired in Texas, traded for work so the girls could take lessons. It was a player piano, with rolls of music they would listen to like a phonograph. After the move to Georgia, when the coal for the furnace ran out, my aunt tells me, they stoked it with the old piano rolls. Made of carbon, they must have burned hot and fast.

Grandpa was a rural route mail carrier, and took the mail my father had sorted on the kitchen table the night before to families in the outlying areas of Hamilton County, morning and afternoon; when someone moved away and left an unexpired magazine subscription, he would bring the magazines home to read, a boon to the family. His own favorite reading included western magazines and the Congressional Record, where he must have gotten the notion that to be well-educated, the entry into prosperity, one needed bigger schools, in a larger town than where they lived; this decision prompted one of the great trades of his life, a three-way swap of mail routes that took him and his family in 1936 from the outposts of the Texas hill country to Atlanta and then suburban College Park, Georgia. My father had already graduated from the tiny schoolhouse in Hamilton County and would have only one year at Tarleton College in Stephenville, but the move to Georgia and what my grandfather saw as a better education opportunity cemented the family into a suburban life that blended rural experience with upwardly mobile inclinations.

My father was not ambitious; I never knew of his trying to put a deal together or to make something happen for a career. He worked more than thirty years for Gould National Batteries as office and factory manager, but the company's move of him from Georgia to Kansas and then back drew from my mother the vehement assertion that she was not moving again. Ever. She had built the house that she wanted and she intended to stay there. So ended any chances for promotion for my father. He never mentioned it. He never mentioned anything about work or what he wanted from his life. Though he was curious about the world, and liked to drive into North Georgia to see leaves turn color and to find out what the marble quarries in Tate really looked like, and enjoyed the movies, too, he was a quiet man not given to reflection that we knew of. Whatever he thought about long-term dreams or goals or disappointments in his still, steady way, he never shared. He would come home from the office, read the paper on the living room sofa, often with one of his children in his lap, reading the comics aloud to her in self-defense. After supper he would go to the garden in summer and in winter to his chair and magazines, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Family Handyman*.

Like him with a curiosity about how the world looks beyond our porch, I recognize in me an interior curiosity that he never expressed. Perhaps self-analysis and reflection are luxuries of a generation that hasn't had to chop cotton in the fields or worry about feeding and clothing a family. Perhaps interest in what makes us tick becomes possible only after the satisfying of more basic needs. I wonder what he would think about my investigation of our lives in such a public way, my attempts to name my disappointments and challenges in order to make sense of them. This was not his way.

From my father I learned not to talk about other people, a practice that turns out to be invaluable in faculty break rooms. Sundays after church at the dinner table of my friend Sue were full of conversation about the neighbors, what Dot Sloan must have spent on her new furniture, where that Perdue boy was going to school and why he chose that one, and speaking of him, who was that young woman he was with in church? I was fascinated with the world of others that swirled around the table along with the bowl of mashed potatoes and the platter of lamb with mint jelly. When I tried the conversation at my own home, ventured a guess about the personal lives of the Lowes across the street, my father cut me off: "We don't need to talk about that." And we didn't.

We didn't talk about most things. School was my business that I was expected to take care of. My parents would attend conferences with my teachers, PTA meetings, inductions into honor societies and basketball games where we played, but the world of classes and studies belonged to us alone. Most of the time I could handle it without help, though the mysteries of math never revealed themselves to me. Sitting at the dining room table with my algebra book open to the chapter of the day, I struggled to make sense of the symbols and equations until my father would finally sit down beside me and taking a sheet of paper and his own pencil, sketch his solution to the problem. Finally I would pretend to understand and allow him to leave the table in relief for both of us, and go back to my own muddle with the assignment.

We didn't talk about religion or politics or literature or ideas. We talked about chores and expectations, and sometimes, vaguely, standards of behavior that were evidenced by conduct grades in school and meeting curfew at home. Saturday morning, to my friends a day of play—going to the lake, to the tennis courts, to each other's homes for an impromptu game of touch

football, was to my father a day to tackle chores around the house. His approach to the day was to expect results at its close. "What are you going to do today?" he asked every Saturday morning at breakfast. Languid, desultory approaches to the day were incomprehensible to him. Either he had projects he wanted help with, even if we were girls, or we needed to have useful plans of our own. I never knew him to do anything purely for himself. His work in the garden was to put vegetables into the freezer and on the table; his tinkering with the washing machine, so constant as to keep its white enamel skirt permanently stored on the back porch, exposing its black inner workings, gears and motor and belts and pulleys, the cover pulled back into place only when visitors outside the family were expected, kept the family washing possible. For our part, we vacuumed floors and baseboards, helped with meals, washed dishes, hung out clothes, sprinkled clothes and put them into the freezer to season, ironed them, swept the porch, took out the trash, looked after the younger ones. Sometimes we helped in the garden, canned fruit or scrubbed and waxed the linoleum floor of the kitchen. There was no end; among the virtues of the academic calendar I enjoy is that it concludes.

From my father I learned to be judgmental, of myself and others. He inspected our activities and behavior with a critical eye; when we didn't measure up, he explained what needed to be corrected. When we got good grades or did well in an event, he would say little; high achievement was expected. I don't remember ever hearing my father say he was proud of me or of something I had done. He didn't intend to discount our efforts; it was simply that when we did well, no correction was needed, so he kept silent. I struggle against that posture with my students, who would benefit, as I think I might have, from some positive feedback now and again. I mean no harm when I concentrate on their shortcomings; it is simply the pattern I absorbed early. Here

is a necessary shift for me: celebrate what works well. In the days at South Carolina when I did doctoral work and re-learned what it means to teach composition, I realized the thrill of unqualified praise. It was good not to offer a “yes, but” response to every paper—once in a while, I vowed, I would find something to praise wholly and without reservation.

From my father I absorbed a love for creating with my hands. He liked to dabble in woodworking; in the late ‘30s he and Grandpa tinkered in the earthen basement of the house in Georgia. Calm, stable, sober, careful—my father was not inclined to sedition. Still, on the afternoon of December 7, 1941, there appeared at the house a policeman, who had been called by a concerned neighbor: There were Germans in that house, she had told them, and they were working at night in the cellar, doing, building, making no telling what kind of subversive manner of thing. The policeman asked questions, looked around, and left, satisfied that my father and grandfather were not plotting national mischief. I learn this story from my aunt, not my father, who did not tell stories, about himself or others.

He loved tools, maintaining an interest in them well past the time his health allowed him to use them; a table saw from Sears was barely broken in, and a drill press was still in the box when he died. His work bench was in the garage at our Old National house, a wooden counter stretched across the back of the garage loaded with rusty cans of screws, nails, bolts and washers; a vise bolted to one end of the counter, and a machine with a wheel for grinding or polishing on the other end. I loved to watch the sparks fly. The wheel could be a disk of rough granite or one of steel bristles; when it was in motion it was a blur and would take the surface right off of a pipe or knuckle that happened against it. He had a jigsaw, too, mounted on the counter. Its tiny blade moved up and down like a nervous twitch gone wild, and when Daddy moved a piece of thin

board around it on its platform, the shapes were curved and exotic. It took a steady hand to maneuver the board so that the narrow blade wouldn't bind and break. The surface of the bench was covered with jars and cans and tools, containers of sockets, nuts, bolts. Behind it, on the cement block wall, hung a piece of pegboard, where he tried to organize his small hand tools—the screwdriver, pliers, hammers, wrenches. It was hard for me to reach.

The workbench smelled of oil and dirt and sawdust when a project was in progress, of cold and dampness when it wasn't, even during the summer when my sister or I was sometimes sent to the garage to get some tool for the garden work—go get the “reberstat,” he would direct, and off we would go, not knowing what we were looking for but hoping unreasonably that it would identify itself from the wall or one of the shelves when we appeared. We would return, empty handed and say we couldn't find it—“Oh, honey, it's right there on the wall next to the humperstitchel.”

Back we would go, confident only that we were hopeless and helpless; I would grab Virginia and ask, “What does a reberstat look like?” Sometimes she would know, sometimes not. You would think I might learn eventually, but my memory is always of not being able to find what he needed and had sent me for.

His workbench in the basement produced occasional small projects like bulletin boards or Latin class projects, but in the days before I knew him, he was a craftsman of inexpensive furniture. For my grandmother he built a pine wardrobe in which she eventually stored quilts, and for my mother he took a class in Kansas and built a bookcase of golden oak, its edges routed and beveled smooth to the touch, its finish glassy. It is beautifully crafted--warm, oak and rounded edges, solid and comfortable at the same time. But it's what always sat on top of the

bookcase that draws my attention now. A square glass tray, near the left end of the shelf, held odds and ends and the contents of my father's pockets as he emptied them every night. Keys. Sometimes a stray button. A couple of paper clips. Loose change. This change was the source of our lunch money that we grabbed as we headed down the hall and out the front door to catch the school bus every morning:

"I need some lunch money!" we would cry.

"Look on top of the bookcase" was always the answer. And there was always what we needed, for the taking. He made an "A" on the bookcase in his class.

The same open-handedness was part of basketball games, too, where we went to watch my older sister play. Mother and Daddy sat on the top row of the bleachers, leaning against the concrete block wall, watching the game. At halftime, I would climb to them and ask for some snack. My father's response was always the same. Without a word, he would reach into his pocket and bring out whatever change he had. He would extend his hand, palm up, with its whole contents offered—I would take what I needed. These days we children are dividing what is in Mother's house as she leaves the farm; my first request is the bookcase from the hall. His craftsmanship, his solidness, his comfort, his generosity are in that piece—I want it all to live in my house.

For the first-born son who died early, he built a low clothes chest, in which we eventually piled toys and games. In my memory I am young, maybe seven or eight, digging in the chest for a toy pistol and maybe, if I'm lucky, the holster for it. The black and white fringed vest and tiny skirt that attached over my shorts were probably in there, too, and wearing them I became Dale Evans, riding my trusty stick Buttermilk across the dirt of the back yard and sometimes into the

woods next door, often with my cousin in her matching red costume, alias Annie Oakley, in pursuit of rustled cattle or bank robbers. We lived in what Bobbie Ann Mason calls the “rurbs,” part rural, part residential, a step beyond suburbia into the country but not yet farm or pasture land. The woods weren’t particularly deep, but they stretched far enough that I could lose sight of the house and not come out on the other side. One day when I was about ten and perched high on the gym set, I watched my father walk into those woods carrying a burlap bag holding the female puppies that our yard dog had given birth to, a mixed litter of fourteen, in a time and mind that held dogs to be animals more than pets, when spaying and neutering were veterinary procedures that cost money and thus to be eschewed. When he came back from the woods, he was alone. I may have asked, briefly, obliquely, about the pups, but their existence was clearly not a topic to discuss. Something, like the puppies, to be buried. I think with grief of the losses my father had to bury.

We were all practiced in avoiding what was difficult. On one fall morning I recall, I am standing at the front window in the dining room of my house where I am fifteen, looking to see if my father’s car is still in the driveway or whether he has left, as he threatened to do last night when he and my mother waged one of their battles. It is not yet fully light, and I have trouble finding the shape of his pale green car. I blink against the dimness. Then my father’s voice reaches me from behind. “I’m here.” His tone is gruff, not gentle, but I am comforted by it. When I turn around he has gone back into the hall. I get my robe and go to the kitchen, where my morning routine falls into place: measure coffee into the percolator and plug it in, lay bacon strips into the frying pan, butter a pan of toast, and get the eggs from the refrigerator. My blue corduroy robe smells of bacon; it has breakfast odors embedded in its fibers.

In the kitchen, Daddy joins me but does not speak. I ask only the usual morning questions: What kind of eggs does he want, is the toast ready, how cold is it out. We listen to Bob Van Camp on the radio give the weather and announce the news. Our eyes do not meet.

My mother is still in their bedroom. Last night she was in the hall, shouting at my father. I listened from my bedroom next door. At some point one of them pulled my door closed, but I could still hear the voices, staccato rhythms like icicles breaking. This morning she does not emerge for breakfast, an absence unremarkable. Even though she teaches private kindergarten in the remodeled basement of our home and her only commute is down the stairs, in this manic phase of her bi-polar cycle she increasingly relies on her assistant teachers. This morning I finish my eggs, stack the dishes, dress, and catch the bus for school, where I will struggle with quadratic equations and lose myself in Samuel Pepys's *Diary* and the Great Fire of London. My father will drive to work in his light green car and spend the day managing orders for batteries, then return home after stopping to get a loaf of bread for supper. The night before will not exist anywhere except as a ripple of fear under my ribs, that I will not acknowledge. It seems only natural, almost inevitable, then, that when my father's illness crept upon him we would not see it.

My earliest sense that something was not quite right came one fall afternoon about 1985 or 1986 when I had stopped to see my parents on my way home from school— I was by then in a temporary position at a regional college just twelve miles down the highway from the farm, and tried to get out there at least once a week. I found Daddy in the back yard bent over the red station wagon, its hood up, the air filter off. He was changing the oil, something he has done for years, dozens of times. I stopped to talk and he kept fiddling with the filter, screws, wing nuts,

fiddling and fiddling. It took me a while to realize that he was having trouble, to wonder what the matter was. It seemed a simple operation, I thought, to set the filter case on its spindle and screw the wing nut into place, but he was puttering and fiddling and not accomplishing anything. Still, it was auto mechanics– what do I know of auto mechanics? Oblivious, I chattered about this and that while he sputtered and fumed, putting the filter on and taking it off, losing the nut and searching for it. Finally I just left him and went inside; I don't think I even tried to help him, maybe mentioned it lightly to Mother. We just didn't believe it. We just looked the other way.

We looked away from the dinner table, too, when Daddy tried to pick up the pattern from the bottom of the plate with his fork. Or when, trying to make bread, he substituted a can of condensed mushroom soup for evaporated milk. Or when he lost his way driving to my house for Christmas, a house he's driven to repeatedly. How strange, we thought. Finally, the discrepancy between what we saw in my father and what we want to see becomes so great that the bridge between them cracks and falls in.

The loss of him happens in installments, between my visits home. I run them through my mind like a jerky film. In the fall of 1990 I have left a marriage I am not sure about to start school again in South Carolina, while Virginia and her family take Daddy and Mother on what will be his last trip to Texas. His confusion worsens and he becomes increasingly agitated, particularly in the evening; we learn later this condition is called "sundowner syndrome," a characteristic of Alzheimer's in which anxiety and confusion bloom near dusk. Perhaps the approaching darkness signals some corresponding darkness within the brain, each calling to each. By the time they get home, days after their scheduled arrival, during which time I am frantic in these pre-cellphone days, his mental deterioration is unmistakable. During the course of the trip he has pleaded with a

truck driver at a small town gas station to help him escape from these people who are kidnaping him, and later driven away in the car alone, leaving Mother stranded at another gas station; the Highway Patrol catches up with him an hour or so down the road.

At home for Christmas that first bad year, I try to make Christmas happen for all of us in our fragile states, but the scene is surreal. The tree I get from the Jiffy Mart is too big for the red fluted stand they've used for forty years and a neighbor has to cut it to size. Tree trimming has traditionally been the department of Daddy and us kids, so when I finally start trimming, Daddy tries to help me string lights, but instead of attaching them, he is taking them off. This seems the last straw— I want to bat at his hands like those of a child doing something wrong. Mother finds me in a hall closet, staring at the wall.

"I need some help," I say to her. "I can't do this by myself." Without a word, she joins us, soothing him and encouraging me. I am grateful. Later she will tell me that after Christmas he took the tree out, dragging it to the back of the yard and the field beyond, with all of the ornaments still attached. Many of them broke.

For another year Mother keeps him at home, arranging for home health care and trying to maintain what she can of his function. My siblings and I establish a rotation for visits so that Mother can have some respite from his care; her own mental state is pretty frayed. One weekend I come in late from my drive from the university and we sit at the table. We're in the kitchen and it's late evening, nearly dark. We sit across from each other on the corner of the kitchen table. He is pleasant and sociable, asking about my trip.

"Where are you living now?" he asks.

"Columbia, South Carolina," I say. "I'm in school there."

He is pleased. "We have a daughter in South Carolina!" He marvels at the coincidence. I am jolted into another dimension, set beside myself so that I am not the daughter we both know but a stranger come to visit for a spell, someone with surprising knowledge of the family. Later we stand at the sink doing dishes, me washing and him at the drainboard. He asks me questions about where I went to high school. Somehow we settle that his daughter had gone to the same school. He asks me if I ever met her.

"Yes," I say, "I know her very well." Aware of so little, he recognizes that I am a little uncomfortable talking about this daughter, and he looks sheepish. He is embarrassed, feeling that he is being too inquisitive. He dries a glass and puts it into the cabinet.

"I guess you're tired of me asking all these questions." He says he is trying to put together some family information; I assure him that I don't mind at all. "And I learned something else about the family last night," he says, pleased to share. "That Neal Marwitz who has been coming around here is my son. And that other one, he said *his* name was Neal Marwitz, too! Is he your brother?" I say that he is. What a strange world of coincidences it is for him. It is too baffling for him to process.

Mother has been trying to dress him for bed, but he bats her hands away from the button and zipper on his pants. This woman shouldn't be trying to take his clothes off. Her voice rises in pitch to match his. I tell her that it's okay, that I will help him, and she leaves the room. We talk and I avoid the topic of his pajamas. He looks around him nervously and speaks of those "critters" in the room. I gather that he sees animals there, something like alligators. I run about the room, shooing them out, waving my arms and yelling at them. His face is a mixture: part relief, part anxiety, and part embarrassment.

Later we sit on the bed and he asks me about “those others in the kitchen.” I say he and Mother and I are the only ones here today. He shakes his head and tsk, tsks.

“It's pretty frustrating, isn't it?” I ask.

He shoots back, “You're durn tooting it's frustrating.” I don't know how to help him. I don't know how to help any of us.

By the next year he has moved to a nursing home and has lost the ability to respond to much of anything. On my last visit to him, his face seems to stare at me as I enter his room. His eyes show no spark of recognition, no glimmer, as if they are pasted on, as if I'm looking at a doll. His hair is thin. The nurses have combed it to the side of his head he never did; the part is crooked and a tuft sticks up near the back, where the chair cushion has caught it as he turned. His cheeks sag– he's gotten thin these few months. A blue vein runs across one cheekbone. His skin is thin, almost transparent. A bit of dried skin, part of a scab, clings to his cheek. At the corner of his mouth is a white crust. His movements are slow and out of sync– a movie where the voice doesn't match the mouth movements.

When I try to get him to speak, he turns to look at me. No smile, no movement in the lines that run from his nose down either side of his mouth. “Uhn.” His voice is soft, almost a question. I repeat my words to him, but he doesn't speak again. He looks down at the white webbed bands that loosely tie him to the chair to keep him from trying to stand up. He moves as if he would untie them; then he forgets what his hands were doing and why, and he picks at the white webbing. The orange plastic of the cushioned chair creaks softly as he tries to shift. He sighs, an escape of breath from between his lips, and looks out the window. His death from

pneumonia at age 76 is merciful, after his relatively brief four or five years with advanced Alzheimer's.

One evening before my father enters the nursing home, he sits agitated and restless in the rocker before the television in his living room at the farm, where he has lived for seventeen years. I ask him what he wants. "Oh, Honey, I want to go home," he says.

That desire, Susan Cheever writes in her memoir/biography of her father, is at the heart of all our actions. "We all want to go home," she says. I try to reassure him that he *is* at home, but he continues to fidget.

Finally, I agree. "OK," I say. "Let's go," hoping the choice will allow him to relax and postpone his departure, change his mind. But he is relieved, and gets up immediately to get his keys, the ones that my brother has altered. I go with him to the front door, and out into the yard, wondering how far I will let this charade continue.

"Where is it we are going?" I ask him, tromping across the grass in the dark, the stars dim and far away. He moves remarkably fast for a man in his seventies. He tells me impatiently that it's to Old National, referring to the house he called home for twenty years. We get across the yard, nearly to the car; it's dark and late, and I am trying to think fast. Finally I take his arm and beg him, "Daddy, let's stay here tonight. It's late- let's just stay here for one more night."

He protests, with a rare expression of preference. "But I want to go home." It's what we all want, I know. To find again that place of comfort and familiarity, where we are safe and confident and know where the light switches are in the dark.

“We can do that in the morning,” I say, “but it’s too late to start tonight.” He turns and lets me guide him back to the house, his neurons unable to find their way through the amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles, not enough acetylcholine to light his pathway to home.

Fall 2007: Brandonlee

Brandonlee is a football player who transferred here from a junior college in California and has missed 9 of the 14 class meetings we've had so far—NINE!! And against all logic I let him stay because he gave me a story of having been in jail for a suspended license and a rolling stop sign infraction. Now, I know about those rolling stop signs here in Statesboro; I've been cited for that myself. But how, says I, can you have a suspended license and not know it? Well, it happened in California with tickets that his wife was supposed to have paid, and didn't, and so the license was suspended, but Brandonlee was already Georgia-bound, ready to play football for the Eagles. So, here he is, rolling through a stop sign on a warm fall night, and he gets pulled over, and the license check reveals him to be driving without a valid one. A young black man with a moving violation in this small southern town: They throw his patootie in jail. Now, his first story to me is that he is there for two days. When I eventually press him, his actual stay turns into eleven hours. But in the first story, he is in jail and unable to come to class, and I feel sorry for him because I suspect he has gotten a raw deal from the local police. At his court appearance, which I also understand, because I tried to appeal my own rolling stop sign charge, he has to wait and then come back and wait again; a kindly judge has suggested that he could deal with him individually and get his suspended license charge dropped to a simple "driving without having one with him," given the circumstances of distance and uncooperative spouse, and the fact that he has since paid all the fines and everything is settled in California. So, I have some sympathy.

But over the weekend I think some more, and I realize that there are many days unaccounted for in his court-required absence from class. So, today I have a come- to-Jesus meeting with Brandonlee, and this time hear stories about his grandmother dying. He had gone to Florida to be with his family. Turns out the funeral was in Kansas, but his family was vacationing in Florida, so he went there, then couldn't get back because his ride was drunk. Ok, so he missed a day. But then two later days as well? A good looking fellow, about 25 or so with braids, a square jaw and puppy dog eyes, he implores me to cut him slack. Brandonlee tells me that he is a changed man, that he will be an ideal student and that if he has to drop the course, he will have to return to California, where there is for him nothing but gangs and despair. He has come to the east coast to play football, an escape from the violence of his streets. I'm being played, and I don't like it. I want to help Brandonlee, not to be the blow that breaks him; I want to be the opportunity that saves him. Stories abound about that one undeserved opportunity when someone was generous instead of rigid, and a life was transformed as a result of the extra chance. So I let him stay, and he maintains his enthusiasm and good behavior. Somehow he finesses the court appearance and it doesn't become an issue. But I hate feeling played. I am angry at him and at me for the whole thing.

Chapter Five: Eldercare Endgame

My retching and diarrhea seem to be related to my mother. In three days she will leave my home where she has lived for most of the past ten years, where she feels settled and secure, to make extended visits to my siblings. She has made visits before, of course, but most of the time I have been with her, and they have been relatively short term. This one is different. This time her departure is the result of a tiny melt-down that I had at Christmas a few months ago, where I announced to my siblings that I was feeling saturated with the considerable responsibility of her care, and where they, God bless 'em, announced that my "turn was up." So my sister Bonnie has made arrangements with her daughter to take on Mother's care for an undetermined, open-ended time, after which Mother will go to Bonnie's and then Virginia's and then Neal's, in a round-robin living circuit that, given her 91 years and deteriorating health, will likely not return her to my house. We are not telling Mother this part of the plan: that she is, in effect, moving out. Instead we are telling her that she is going to see Bonnie and her daughter Joanna for a while, maybe a couple of months. When she asks, "How long will I be gone? When am I coming back?" we give her a vague answer along the lines that, "It may be some time..."

I don't say to her that I have reached my limit with eldercare, that her needs are too much for me to handle with a full-time job, that I want a life of my own. I avoid telling her that she is leaving the life she has come to know and be comfortable with. I reason that knowledge of such a decisive life shift would stress her inordinately. My therapist would say at this point that I am projecting.

Saturday, February 7
Three days before departure

I sit in my study listening for movement from her bed. She spends a lot of time in bed, drawn to it partly by heavy narcotics prescribed to relieve severe degenerative arthritis pain and partly by a practice of sleep as escape. From there she can literally close her eyes to the losses that followed fast and followed faster—shopping excursions, easy movement up and down stairs, audible conversation, independent baths.

I have waked her a couple of times, urging her to get up for breakfast and meds and the trip preparation we need to make. Even when she doesn't mind getting up it takes three or four attempts to rouse her from the bed to the bathroom, and then another four or five reminders to get dressed and move into the kitchen. The process takes up to two hours. But she doesn't want to get up this morning, because she doesn't want to go away. I don't like the implicit deception that I am perpetrating. "Let's get you ready for your trip," I chirrup; not, "Let's pack your things for your move."

Half an hour later I wake Mother again. She is cranky, won't open her eyes. She typically ignores realities she finds unpleasant. "Ok, ok, ok. I'm trying. Just give me a little while." I stand beside her bed in the light of the lamp, the curtains drawn, she herself drawn into a slight crescent moon. She is layered under blankets and heating pads and sweaters, her angular face turned away from me. Family photos cover most of the wall. The night stand is covered with jars and plastic bottles and tubes of cream and lotions and ointment, most of them empty or nearly so, some years past expiration date. She doesn't like to throw things away. The air smells of lineament and medicine, stale cookies she has stashed in the drawer inside a napkin.

“It’s time for some breakfast and medicine. We need to do your hair.”

“OKAY. I’m cold.”

“Let’s get you dressed.”

“I’m hurting.”

“That’s why you need some medicine.” I stand for a while by her bedside, waiting, trying to give her some time to respond. I spend a lot of time standing by her bedside. If I had back all of the time I have spent waiting for my mother, I would be the smooth-skinned, lithesome figure of my youth. In a minute I try again.

“Mother, we need to get moving.”

She is annoyed. “ALL RIGHT–” she complains.

I help her sit up, lifting carefully against her back, not the left shoulder which is collapsed into a collection of arthritic bone fragments inside the socket and the source of most of her pain. I move her hand to find the bed rails that she uses to steady herself. “I’m COLD,” she says, her eyes still tightly closed. I help her to the bathroom, then find a task of my own that I can interrupt easily. I decide to sort laundry and change the sheets.

Twenty minutes later I wake Mother in the bathroom. Her personal routine is byzantine and allows no alteration or assistance, but her heavy medications make her fall asleep in the midst of it. Still, I stand by waiting for a few minutes, trying to help. When I reach toward her, she bats my hand away; I go back to my laundry.

In another twenty minutes I return to help Mother dress. “We’re going to put these on,” I tell her.

“Why?”

“It’s time to dress and have some breakfast.”

“Your hands are cold.” We get her clothed. She shakes her head in exasperation. “I have to lie down.”

“We’re going to have some breakfast and medicine first.” I speak into her ear: “Where are your hearing aids and glasses?” She pushes her wheelchair ahead of her without response, but with surprising force.

I find the aids and glasses in her room after just a couple of tries; she lost her glasses for good over Christmas holidays, and numerous thorough searches by an army of relatives and friends could not turn them up, so we eventually broke down and got another pair. They are in this house somewhere, and I expect that come next Christmas we’ll find them folded inside a blanket or quilt used for bed pallets. The hearing aids have been the subject of searches so numerous that my mind rebels at the thought; they are harder to find, smaller and more easily mislaid, and they, too, have been replaced a couple of times. Despite the electronic aids, however, her hearing loss is more than 30%; the doctor tells me that means she understands about seven words out of ten. Sometimes she works to fill in the gaps; sometimes she doesn’t.

At breakfast, I try to take advantage of the opportunity to have a chat, which we rarely do these days—repeating a comment four times at high-decibel range diminishes its intimacy. Even everyday interaction is marked by her increasing withdrawal. The result is that she has become something of a piece of furniture to be cared for and arranged around. But after we eat, a bowl of cereal for me and for her a single scrambled egg, soft, on a toasted waffle, with peach preserves and a cup of milk, warmed for 30 seconds in the microwave, we sit in silence and I venture a piece of my life.

"I got word yesterday that my promotion has been approved," I offer.

She looks up, a positive sign. At least she has heard me. "That's good. What does that mean?" she asks. "More money?"

"A little." I smile. "Not much else. Just a different rank; maybe some different classes."

She looks outside. "There's a squirrel out there."

When she finishes eating, I try to keep her moving so that I can wash and roll her hair before she goes back to bed. Once she lies down, we're talking a couple of hours to get her back up. I've been trying to get her hair washed and set for a week; she prefers that I handle it rather than the salon where she sometimes goes. I hate to send her off looking like a homeless person, and now, with her white hair stiff and pointing in clumps toward the various directions of the compass, the distinction is small. She's agreeable as long as the project isn't imminent. "You just say the word," she will tell me in the evenings, when it's not then possible.

"Let's go ahead and get this behind you," I say now. "You want to be ready for your big trip."

She looks at me. "I didn't know I was going on a big trip."

"You're going to Joanna's," I reply. "You knew that. And then probably to Bonnie's."

She nods, her eyes closing. I try again. "It may be a while before you get back here." I outline other stops she might make, to my brother in Atlanta and my other sister in Tallahassee. She doesn't respond.

"So, let's get that hair done and out of the way." I try to jolly her along.

She screws up her face. "Just let me lie down for a little while. I just have to lie down. Don't hound me so."

Frequently when she takes a nap on the living room sofa, she asks my permission to sleep there, imagining possible visitors. Today, though, she simply takes up her place and is soon deep in sleep, not stirring when I straighten the covers around her.

My friends Laura and Dixie come over to say goodbye, though they don't call it that, and Mother dozes sitting between them on the sofa. She doesn't participate in the conversation, but says the sound is "soothing" to her. By late afternoon I have washed and set her hair; she refuses to eat anything, just her Boost supplement and meds.

I collect stories from my friends about their caring for elderly parents. It's not hard to find them, especially from the women, who tell about their mothers' extensive, sometimes extended needs. I'm trying to fit mine into the group, find a pattern that will allow me to understand how to play what I believe is my endgame for eldercare. Nancy has seen to her mother's failing health needs from 200 miles away, keeping the highway hot between here and her mother's home near Atlanta. She would dash home after class and drive up to deal with hospitals and doctors and medical emergencies and diagnoses, and come in late the night before the next week's classes began. Finally she brought her mother here to hospice, where she died. Phyllis's mother still lives alone, but depends heavily on her daughter's regular visits and assistance, help that requires a three-hour drive each way if it's done in person. Evie's mother lives with her but takes regular, extended trips to see her other daughter. Carleen's mother lives with her, too, in an apartment downstairs they created for her, and with the aid of full-time nurse. Eileen summarizes her ten-year experience of residential eldercare for her mother by saying, "It wasn't all horrible, but it was all hard."

The narrative of my mother's care has followed a predictable arc: A difficult period of settling in and finding out the ways in which our lives could wrap around each other; then a goodly stretch of comfortable routine, a discovered pleasure in genuine interaction and respect, a growing affection and re-shaping, even redemption, of history and memory; and then in the last several years, incremental additions of required attention, more doctors, more help with routine activities, more reassurance, a narrowing of the scope of her awareness and ability—more and more attention needed, with less and less response. This point of diminishing returns is where I found myself at Christmas when I called a family meeting and my siblings declared my turn with Mother to be up.

Not long ago I glimpsed a reflection of myself in the black screen of my computer, and I recognized my mother's face in three-quarter profile, staring into space, unsmiling. It was the mother of my adolescence, when she was most difficult for me to like or relate to. The similarity was unnerving; I saw the set of her jaw, the underlay of unhappiness; and yet I am not unhappy. Perhaps it is discontent that settles on us both, the sense of a life different from what we had envisioned for ourselves. What had she imagined for herself—wasn't she then, in my adolescence, just what she had wanted? A wife and mother, rearing children in a home of her own far more comfortable than the Rock House she grew up in. Perhaps anxiety generated by her emotional illness transcribed itself into the set of her jaw. In that jaw is determination to deny the source of the anxiety, to look away and beyond. Some time ago, single and without children, I announced plaintively that I wanted to be *primary* to someone in the world, imagining a romantic partner. I didn't count on my life partner being my mother. She passed this penchant for avoidance along to me, together with the square face and prominent chin.

Sunday, February 8
Two days before departure

I follow the usual routine: Wake Mother several times, help her dress, urge/encourage her to the kitchen for a meal. Our conversation with Laura and Dixie yesterday helped me feel less duplicitous about what is in store for her; they had spoken of her trip and all that she would see/do on it. She was noncommittal. I know she expects to return here, and I think I expect it, too. But we're letting her health care aids find other jobs. Elsie is part of a Senior Companion program I discovered at school; she is past seventy herself, a tiny, tidy woman who goes about yeoman's work with quiet competence. She has become one of the joys of Mother's day. Tara is a nursing student at the technical college here in town and her youthful good spirits help raise Mother's; her grandmother, also youthful in her mid-sixties, sometimes sits in the evening when Tara is occupied. Part of me panics at their departure; what if Mother returns?

What if she doesn't?

My friend Phyllis comes over to say goodbye, but Mother is occupied in her bathroom and emerges only a couple of minutes before Phyllis has to leave. Phyllis tries to interest her in conversation about the grandchildren with marginal success. When Phyllis leaves, she lies down for another sleep on the sofa.

Tara and her grandmother come by. They don't want to wake her, but I try to convey how temporary an event waking her is. They speak loudly:

"Miss Erma?" She stirs slightly.

"Mother," I say brightly, "You have company—sit up a little."

"What?" she says slowly.

“You have company. Tara and her grandmother are here.”

“Who?”

“TARA AND LINDA HAVE COME TO SEE YOU.”

Tara and her grandmother move closer and lean in. “Miss Erma? We come to say goodbye.”

Now her eyes pop open. “WHAT? GOODBYE?”

Linda looks at me wide-eyed, fearful that she has spilled the beans on our moving project. “Before your trip,” I say.

“BEFORE YOUR TRIP,” she shouts to Mother. “*We’re* not going anywhere.”

I imagine my weeks ahead, without the fabric of responsibility cloaking me, soaking up time and energy—maybe it’s the energy as much as the time that gets absorbed. I envision writing, sitting meditation, walking Buster—all before my morning class. But there’s no reason that I can’t do that now, I argue with myself. I often do little for Mother in the mornings and Elsie steps in to take over when I leave for work. I could fit it all in if I could just organize things. Maybe I’m just being selfish. Why should I upset my mother at her age just for my convenience? I fantasize about a house without the faint smell of urine, about not being delayed when I am rushing to leave for a meeting or class because she needs, one more time, to understand where it is, again, that I am going and when I will be coming home. I look at corners in the house and imagine them swept clear of her clutter. No more piles of mail, magazines, napkins, catalogs, photos, empty bottles, newsletters, and grocery flyers that threaten to topple off of the kitchen table or her

dresser; no more emergency runs to the grocery store for milk or supplies. A cleansing breath. Jeeze, what kind of daughter am I.

Eileen's story, I think, might offer me some insight into this business of extended in-house eldercare and seeing it through to the end. Her mother lived with her for ten years before she died with cancer six years ago, having suffered from bi-polar disorder and alcoholic dementia, as well. She has both experience and perspective to offer, just the kind of information that I need. I want to set her story beside mine, see where the intersections are, learn something to validate my own narrative.

When I met her more than five years ago, I was two years into the full-time, permanent care of my mother, after three years of shared custody with my sister Virginia. Eileen had just ended hers. The tales of medical consultants, trips to specialists, therapy of various kinds all struck a familiar chord. When she told me that care had lasted for ten years, I quailed—TEN YEARS?! How? I simply couldn't imagine that stretch. In the beginning I juggled full-time teaching with finding home health care, interviewing student nurses for an at-home program, coordinating physical therapy visits, first at home and later in the center's facility; arranging for a cadre of medical professionals: eye doctor, gastroenterologist, dentist, orthopedist, general internist, pain clinic physician; dealing with pharmacies and health insurance claims and rejections, searching for and researching agencies that provide in-home aides, and re-fitting my house with the equipment that made her more comfortable. Despite obvious differences in the variety of demands, what I *can* identify with is the effort to do it all right.

This business of caring for an elderly parent is tricky in unexpected ways. Friends suggest that it's like caring for a child, but I don't have children and never had to learn the relentless

responsibility of parenting. Besides, the comparison is only partly true. It *is* true that we who care for elderly parents must learn to think for them—to make their appointments for doctors and haircuts and get them there; to fix a plate of food, perhaps cut it up and coax them to eat; to remember the sweater and extra pillows that will make them comfortable; to be patient with their lack of agility. Often they must be dressed, fed, bathed, even diapered. I arrange for sitters, I fret over her sniffles, I worry that she will fall. I grow irritable when she needs milk and I am late for work.

But it's more complicated than that. Mother and I act out a subversion of the natural order: a child gains strength and understanding with time; Mother is losing both. A child moves toward independence; every month Mother needs me more. This relationship is more than my mother becoming, in effect, my child. When I tease apart the difference I find this: She is still my parent, even in her diminished state, and children of my generation don't tell their parents what to do. I do not cease being my mother's baby girl even as I assume responsibility for her physical and emotional well-being. More than a reversal of roles, eldercare requires an uneasy combination of them. The doubling puts my psyche out of joint.

Monday, February 9
One day before departure

I leave the house for a full day at school. Mid-afternoon, Bonnie, who has arrived to help pack and move Mother, calls to tell me about another toilet incident. Another stop-up, overflow, flooding of the bathroom. I've wrestled with Mother's toilet function for years, and just lately the problem has reached critical mass. Over the holidays when a crowd was here, overloading the

system, I attributed it to them. But even since their departure every flush has become a suspense—water flows into the bowl and rises, rises, rises, while I plunge the rubber funnel frantically, hoping for a gurgle. Most times it works, the water subsiding with a reluctant, half-hearted sigh. The plumber I called last month poked and prodded and flushed, then announced the problem to be “not in the house,” but probably in the septic tank itself; the only way to determine precisely, he suggests, is to dig up the tank and take a look, a project of such heroic financial and physical proportions that it sends me into my standard mode of coping: Maybe it will go away. I am my Mother's daughter.

My therapist suggested that the clog in the line was also metaphoric, an image provided by the universe to demonstrate to me my own inability to process shit well. However, I'm thinking that if we can limp along with plunger action until Mother leaves, I can give the toilet a good septic treatment with a liquid from the hardware store and let it work undisturbed while I am out of town for a few days; maybe it will restore itself. What's wrong with that plan? I've tried this bacterial treatment a couple of times, but it is difficult to keep the flushing activity down when the toilet is in constant use. Last week I bought a toilet auger, and thought I had solved the problem. Water gurgled in happy swirls around the toilet bowl for days of flushes. I thought we were okay.

The retching began at about the same time, it occurs to me now. I had been writing—about Mother, as it turns out—when I felt unmistakable abdominal twinges. Ten minutes and half a dozen empty heaves later, it was all over. That's odd, I say to myself. Two days later, I was writing to Virginia about the difficulties of Mother's care. Again the unexpected spasms and short-lived abdominal distress. Hmmm.... Finally, the thing came on me at school; I was talking

with my friend Laura about my anxiety over misleading Mother, my anticipation of her absence. Whoosh, all of my lunch sent into the university sewage system. My therapist would love this.

Now the day before departure, the toilet clog is back, apparently worse than ever, with water running on the floor toward the hall and under the wall into my adjoining bathroom. I tell Bonnie about the augur and go to my next class. When I call afterward, she has brought it under control for the moment. I linger at school, tinkering with work, aware that the two of them are at home, waiting. I beg off an evening departmental gathering, and spend the time with them. Mother is quiet. She knows that we're not telling her everything.

And what of this avoidance on our part? Do we not give her a clear answer because we don't want to confront her diminishment and approaching death? To suggest that she won't survive an extended absence? I imagine her avoidance of that reality; her mind approaches the hard sharp edge of it and skitters off, unwilling to know it deeply. I tell myself that I don't want to worry her unduly, don't want her to feel ousted from the place she has come to consider home, and that is partly true. The whole truth is less altruistic; the whole truth is self-protective: I don't want to be the bad guy who is shipping her out. I don't want to be the daughter who couldn't handle it, who had to cry "*Enough.*" I want to be the one who keeps our mother alive and well with grace and competence. When I say that I don't want Mother to feel that she has been too much for me to deal with, too great a burden, I mean that I want my mother to believe that I can do anything, everything. It is the self-sacrificing model we inherit from our culture, and as the youngest daughter and the only one without children, I feel the suction pulling me toward that vortex. But I am not that ideal woman.

Weeks from now I will come to the knowledge that it is okay for me to have reached my limit, and further, that it is okay for Mother to know it, too. It is okay for her to recognize that her care is not easy. I will begin to understand that being without children created for me a double-whammy need to prove myself in a nurturing, care-giving role. But tonight I simply reflect on the number seven, the number of perfection, the number of years I have been the sole primary caregiver for my mother. The title has a sociological authority, recognized by medical communities. The role has swelled to take the place of a romantic social life, nibbled at the edges of my professional career, became the structure around which I shaped my household and most of what I did or didn't do. My logical self knows clearly that I have other identities, but the amputation of this one feels significant.

Amid the self-doubts and sacrifices of eldercare, Eileen reminds me, benefits and wisdom accrue. "The biggest benefit," she says, taking a deep breath, "is that I got to know Mom as a person and I felt compassion for her, and learned that we come to conclusions based on incomplete information. A lot of times we just don't bother to ask, 'What's inside of you, what happened for you?' We don't often go there with our moms. You figure you grew up under your mother's care and you know everything you need to know about it, but there's no way to know what shaped her life, or what shaped her decisions, or how she functioned."

Tuesday, February 10
Departure Day

When I woke this morning I had a peculiar day-of-the-prom feeling—almost equal parts anticipation and anxiety. Bit by bit, we have packed Mother’s life into suitcases and bags, her room in tension between items she will need and those she will likely never see again.

“Oh shit.” The bottle of Boost she is shaking was open, and has spilled. She doesn’t swear often, and this occasion indicates her rising stress level. She is sitting on the side of the bed, the overhead light on in unfamiliar brightness, her feet carefully slipped into the loafers that she insists on having on before she can swallow her medicine. The chocolate drink spots her pink sweat suit and part of the sheet beside her. I help her dress, and start what I think is the last load of her laundry, but which in fact becomes the first of three. I am more patient than usual, don’t seem to mind the delays and complicated arrangements she requires for her personal care. Changing her socks, I notice that her calves and feet are dry and chapped, so in a surge of tenderness, I cup them gently in my hands and smooth them with lotion.

“Ooh, your hands are cold,” she says.

After breakfast, she has a little lie-down before her appointment at the pain clinic, from where she knows she will leave town, leave home, leave me and what she feels comfortable with here. When we give her “last call,” she gets up and heads for the bathroom. “Shit,” she says, to no one in particular.

While Bonnie takes her to the clinic, I make one last run to the pharmacy and then to the hospital records office to secure a copy of her DNR order on file there. My niece has said that it would be good to have the order on hand in case of emergency, as paramedics are required by law to resuscitate. I try to imagine the scene of her not breathing, of the medics’ arrival with an ambulance. I’ve watched her sleep, her mouth open and eyes closed, the skin slack around her

jaw line, translucent and blotched. I've imagined her lying in a coffin on those occasions. I've imagined her dead; I have not imagined her dying. Now that she's leaving here, I don't know that I will be present. I would like to be. I think. I try to imagine what it will be like to be an orphan. Both parents dead, untethered to a previous generation in the universe.

As we move from the clinic to the car, down the hallway with Mother pushing her chair, my sister on one side and me on the other, Mother's crocheted shawl trailing, Mother says, "One of these days you girls won't have all this to worry about." Bonnie and I exchange a look.

"What 'all this' do you mean?" she asks Mother.

"All this taking me to doctors and taking care of me."

"Well, we don't mind it, not for a long while yet," Bonnie responds as we approach the door.

At the car, we get her settled into the seat; I retrieve her make-up case, then tell her goodbye one more time, leaning into the car. She shuts her eyes. "I don't want to go," she whispers to me. "When will I come back?"

"Maybe a couple of months."

Her eyes widen in horror. "You need to spend time with the other kids, Mother," I say. I realize this remark has multiple readings:

(1) "Your other children want to be with you."

(2) "You need to let someone *else* take care of you for a while because I need a break and they need to learn what I've been doing."

(3) "You don't have much time left in this life and you should share it with the others."

Now I can't remember whether I said that *she needed* to spend time with them or that *they wanted* her to spend time with them. I suppose it doesn't matter.

I am surprisingly calm as I wave them off. Slight tears had come earlier, as I told Elsie goodbye in our driveway. In the weeks to come I will ask to be put into the rotation cycle for her visits. But now, I am no longer the primary care-giver for my mother, as I have been for seven years and for another three years before that in concert with Virginia. During those ten years (the number of completion, I note), I have thought for her, obeyed her whims and wishes most of the time, tried to please her, and maintained a physical and emotional environment that is predominately nurturing. Ok, so there were nights when I stayed at school playing computer games so that I wouldn't have to go home and take on her care, or evenings when I just didn't want to keep her company at the table when she ate, I having given up and eaten my own supper long before, while she was involved with her excruciatingly slow occupations. My attendance to her needs was often mechanical and perfunctory. And now, those needs are someone else's job.

To do:

- turn down the thermostat from 74 degrees to 68
- paint the hallway and spackle the wheelchair scrapes
- try to clean the dark tire tracks out of the carpet
- sort through her closet and box up her unused clothes
- toss out as many *Reader's Digest Large Print Editions* as I can without her missing them, as if she will be here to miss them
- vacuum the layers of talcum powder from all surfaces

- clean and reclaim the hall bathroom, which with her equipment re-routes all but the most intrepid guest to my own master bath
- find another reason that I am unable to complete my thesis

The Administration on Aging estimates that, out of roughly 106 million USA households existing in 2003, more than 22 million (or roughly one in five) were providing informal care to one or more elderly persons. We do what we were brought up to do, and there are a lot of us doing it: We take care of our mothers. It is hard and costly, but we do it because we believe we are supposed to. As we deal with the experience, and it is largely a female experience, we work out the tangles of the past, if we're lucky. The reward for doing it is the same, I think, for Eileen and me: to learn something new of the person we had a bad relationship with. Now, six years after her mother's death, Eileen is still shaped by her time with her mother, and still seeks to reconcile its complex parts. Sorting through, we are still trying to get it right. I consider Mother's departure and realize that we shouldn't have tried to fool/protect her; we didn't give her enough credit. I am sorry that we didn't play it more straight with her.

When class is over I go home, stopping to buy another toilet treatment to work its bacterial magic while I am out of town at a professional conference. It's dark when I arrive, no sitter to greet me, no lights in the kitchen. No report to get about how Mother is feeling or what she ate or didn't. No sense of transfer of the cloak from Tara to me. The house itself is still; the dog has to be roused at my entrance. He keeps me company as I pack. When I go to bed, I turn off her night lights that have glowed through my sleep for years, and the house is dark. Really dark. I like it.

Sunday night, February 15
Post-Departure

Home again after my conference, I have the place to myself with the sense of extended physical space stretching through time; not even the dog is here yet. I feel on the edge of miserable tears and joyful dance at the same time. I think I hear her clearing her throat in the next room. I ignore an impulse to find something to tempt her appetite. Emptiness wells up and shimmies like water balloons, fragile and full. I've been on the phone for an hour with my cousin and no one has interrupted to ask for a refill of Gatorade. No one needs help dressing for bed. I don't sort meds in the blue weekly pill dispenser nor call the pharmacy for refills. My veins pulse with intermittent expectation and relief. It is slightly chilly, 68 degrees; I put on a sweater.

The toilet seems to be working fine.

I pull the ambiguous and generous dark around me like a stole. And I don't feel like throwing up.

Spring 2009: Nigel

From the first day, he raised eyebrows from his peers, with his high, almost falsetto, voice, his eyes that didn't seem to focus, his detachment from the activities of the class. He sat stiffly upright in his chair as we played introductory games of learning names, never turning in his chair to face the others, never looking at them. "You can write them down as we move along," I said to the group to ease their performance anxiety, "and refer to your list if you need to." A writing class depends on being comfortable with peers who will be reading your work, seeing into your personal experience rendered on the page in ways that content courses don't call for. We get pretty well acquainted in these classes, and building community early on is important to the work we do together. On this first day each person in turn pointed to his classmates and identified him or her by name, only slightly self-conscious, turning to his list or a neighbor for help when needed, laughing at himself and the others. Then we came to Nigel, and he began to read the list he had created, looking only at the page in front of him. "Whoa," I interrupted, "you have to put the names to faces in here. Who is that?" I asked, pointing to a student behind him.

His response was without drama or inflection. He raised his head and blinked. "I have no idea," he said. There was no apology or facial expression. No embarrassment. He stared at me. I tried again from another direction.

"Read me a name on your list." He did. "Now, where is Jessica?" I asked.

"I have no idea."

“Well, that’s what we’re here to find out.” I tried to jolly him along, and we muddled through his list, my calling forth response from the class and matching them with his list of names. At last we were through and went to the next person. Who was this strange fellow?

In weeks to follow I watched him, fascinated. My assessment was that there had to be brain damage, of unknown extent. He moved slowly and deliberately, putting one foot in front of the other as if his balance was in question. He might have been carrying a basket of fruit on his head for the care he took. His shoulders didn’t swing naturally, nor was there ease along his neck and head. His features were virtually immobile, his face forward, only his eyes moving slowly, looking down, half-hooded as he concentrated on his progress. After class he would often stop me, particularly after I had returned papers. His were pretty good, actually; though not always directly on the topic, they were elaborate detailed responses that showed command of writing conventions. I had come to expect his high voice and no longer had to stifle surprise when he spoke.

“Hello.” On this afternoon he stops me in the classroom.. To say his social skills are a struggle for him is to minimize his efforts. “Umm.... can I ask you a question?”

“Of course—” I give him my complete attention.

“What did you mean by this comment?” he asks.

He points to one of my marginal comments that says, “This assertion needs support—what examples can you give?”

I hesitate, stymied as to how to elaborate. Finally, I say, “I need for you to offer some evidence, some examples that support your assertion.”

"Oh. Okay. Thank you." His voice is almost a song, high and lilting. "Have a nice day."
He turns and moves toward the door, face straight ahead, eyes on the ground, feet stepping into careful places, one by one.

When we do peer reviews in class for papers in draft, I ask students to exchange work with a classmate and respond according to the sheet I have given them. There is a flurry of activity, I move among the desks answering questions, and explaining the process, and at last the room settles into relative quiet, a hum of what I hope is productive engagement. Half an hour into the process, I notice Nigel, sitting silently at his desk with his hands folded on top of an essay, staring straight ahead. "Are you through reading already?" I ask him. "Whose paper do you have?"

He turns his head to look at me. "What?"

"Whom did you exchange papers with?"

"No one."

No explanation accompanies this remark. He is simply Bartleby; he would prefer not to. I explain that this process is part of the course, and that he will need to participate in it. He looks at me without comment.

The term project is a field working study, requiring that students identify and study a subculture that they are interested in, pursuing primary and secondary research, observing and interviewing participants in cultural sites that range from tattoo parlors to student newsrooms to barber shops and beauty salons. Nigel is, predictably, slow to identify his chosen culture. Eventually he settles on the commons area of the Student Union Building. "I'm just not

comfortable talking with people, "he tells me when I ask about his primary research, particularly the assignment that requires an interview. "I am not very social."

Certainly he is right about that, but I try to give him confidence. I suggest strategies for the interview, offer to review his questions. I tell him that part of the experience is to draw him beyond his comfort zone in hopes that he will learn something new about himself and the world around him. I am not hopeful about his results. Lord knows how he will respond to the final requirement of an oral presentation of their research findings.

Sometimes in our individual conferences he giggles, when I say something particularly outrageous, trying to stir his response. His eyes squint and his mouth twitches, and he puts his hand over his face, three fingers pressing against his lips. One day after class he stops me. "Can I ask you a question?" he says. The last word is drawn out with an extra beat between syllables, each one given equal emphasis. Quess-chun. I give him my full attention. "Am I annoying to you?"

This has come after a series of questions that have led us along the same circular path of resistance to the primary research. I decide to be direct. "I am not annoyed, Nigel. But I am occasionally frustrated when I can't get you to answer my questions or follow directions. We both need to extend ourselves here."

"I'm just not comfortable talking with people I don't know," he repeats.

"I realize that, and I understand that this is a difficult part of the project for you. But you chose this site, so there must have been something about it that interested you. Try to concentrate on what you want to find out. You'll just have to take a deep breath and launch into it."

"Ok. Thank you," he sings. "Have a nice day." And he moves carefully out the door.

We got through it all, Nigel and the class and I; one student from another section wrote in her field study of a campus grocery store, of "Nigel, that boy who walks so incredibly slow." He is a feature of the campus, like the six-foot tall transvestite who is undergoing sex change therapy to become a woman, or the young woman in a wheelchair with a service dog who opens doors for her. Students recognize him and move around him and talk about him but not to him; they don't include him in their lives. Perhaps that distance is more comfortable for him, too. And what of my role, my interaction with him? What did he learn from my class? What did I learn? Patience, maybe. Maybe. Maybe the experience of imagining myself in that head, fearful of the world outside it but with enough courage to go into it. I never asked him what his major was, what he intended to do with his university education. Computer interface, perhaps; his first choice for a culture study was an online site, where he could sit at home and not see people in the flesh. I imagine his online persona as readily accepted, a trifle stilted, but articulate and confident. Who's to say not? I grant some space to the technology that is often difficult for me; thank goodness for a niche for those square pegs of us who don't fit neatly.

Chapter Six: On Being a Student

In Madrid's *Escuela de Tauromaquia* on the edge of the city, students learn the life and art of bullfighting in a complex of small buildings loosely gathered near the *corrida*, where they face the bulls. This evening a friend and I, students ourselves on a summer program in Spain, have come to watch the final exercises of young bullfighters at the cusp of their careers, ready after tonight to enter the professional ring as *novilleros*. Raul Rivera, at fourteen the youngest of the graduates, adjusts the final pieces of his *traje de luces*, his "suit of lights." I watch him with a student's eye; I am taking classes to learn about the life and art of writing, with a focus on bullfighting. It's a far cry from the classes of first-year composition I teach in my regional university back in the United States, where I have taught since Raul was a toddler. (I am not the youngest member among *my* classmates.) I project onto Raul an image of myself—insecure, but committed to doing the hard thing, trying to make himself ready. His preparation and *traje de luces* guide him; I depend on the structure of classes.

This is actually the third time I have returned to school when I've faced frustrations and disappointments like charging bulls; it's brought me into a discipline that demands my full attention. The first time I was trying to get pregnant; the second I was leaving a marriage. This time I'm facing a career shift and elder care and my own aging self. In the early days of being a student and for a long time I believed the rituals of school protected me from the vagaries of life by giving me something to control, and in some way perhaps they did. Now, I see another appeal: as I stretched into the difficult territory of the mind, I left behind the world as I had known it, entering the unknown. Managing school became a different difficulty that tested me as much.

Raul and his classmates will be tested by young bulls tonight, smaller than those in the professional ring, but even under the watchful oversight of their instructor, they know the potential for injury. Young bulls or no, these animals have horns and are bred for aggression. Each spring at *ganaderias* where bulls are raised for the ring, the cows about to be bred are tested for *casta*: the fighting spirit necessary to perform well, which is believed to be inherited through the mother. In this proceeding, picadors on horseback take the cows on, one at a time to see their reaction to pain. Some of them try to escape the lances lightly nicking them; bellowing in protest they retreat to the far side of the ring to nurse their wounds. Others react by “running away in reverse,” their flight/fight response triggered into a forward rush; enraged by the attack they make their own charge, determined to eradicate the source of the offense. These are the cows that are chosen for breeding. Their offspring have killed matadors in the ring, plunging horns into the hearts of those who would try to subdue them. Raul knows the stories of death in the afternoon, all of Spain does. And yet I recognize his impulse to become greater than himself, to step beyond what is known, to access the paradox of control and mystery. Inhabiting that liminal space where both destruction and exaltation wait, must be worth the risk. This, I argue, is the nature of being a student.

One matador I spoke with suggested that the torero’s suit itself leads him to that space. For him, he says, donning the suit is *todos transformado*, like being “*con Dios*.” A torero’s suit is unmistakable— its ornate, box-like jacket encrusted with beaded embroidery, its silk tights and black slippers, the heavy satin parade cape and the smaller red *muleta* that hides the killing sword. I had seen my first *traje de luces* at close range just days before, at the shop of Justo Algaba, right off Plaza del Sol, one of two places in Madrid where they are made. I stood before

the shop window, the afternoon sun like a cape across my back; behind the glass a brocade suit flashed gold and red beside a capote of deep pink lined in bold yellow. The jacket hung on the back of a wooden chair and across its caned seat lay folded, with the precision necessary to avoid creasing the heavy gold embroidery, its pants. At its bottom edge arranged almost casually as if they had just been slipped off, sat two pairs of black shoes: women's with high heels and a strap across the instep, and men's with flat soles, decorated with openwork across the toe. Beside them lay more accouterments of the trade: silk rosettes, tooled leather hatboxes and two crossed *banderillos*, about three feet long with barbed metal points on one end and green paper curled into wig-like swirls on the other. I peered as if the black braided *coleta* coiled into a tight knot held secret knowledge.

Buzzed in through a smoked glass door, I could see immediately that the space was intended for bullfighters. The shop had the air of a Degas painting, all preparation and anticipation, from a green leather love seat flanked on one end by a table holding bullfighting magazines to the bolts of silk just visible through the door of the workroom. Suits for both adults and children, a sign said, are the handwork of two months, the intricate paisley scrolls and flowers in designs more than 300 years old. On long shelves behind the counter were displayed awards and posters from multiple bullfights, signed by the toreros who had worn the suits made here. I felt unsure about my presence; my access to this world was as a writing student, certainly not one who knew its brutal grace from experience. I was an outsider. Still, writers, like insiders here, feel the potential for entry into another world, and the threat of destruction, of offering oneself to dangerous vulnerability at the hands of that which we love.

That afternoon I wanted to feel the heft of the fabric and smell the metal of the swords. I picked up a *capote de paseo* folded on the counter, surprised by its nearly ten pounds. Its heavy pink broadcloth was lined with yellow, its edges neatly hemmed, a collar top-stitched in white. These are the capes that the bulls see first, that the *banderilleros* drag along the sand to see how the bull follows; they are wide and cumbersome, and to see them lift suddenly at the end of a pass as if floating on an invisible graceful spiral around the hips and shoulders of toreros is to participate in the paradox of beauty and brutality of the *corrida*. Then I spied a *muleta* on the shelf, the capes used to dominate the bull, to draw it forward in a hypnotic sweep. Holding it, I inserted an imaginary sword into its top hem, moved it along the tile floor of the shop, imagined dragging its unfinished edge in a red semi-circle on golden sand. Its frayed ends surprised me, curiously incomplete. I had learned a lot about bullfighting these past weeks, but it, too, was incomplete. How did all these pieces fit together? What synergy of fabric and will yielded the ability to stare into the eyes of a charging bull of 1200 pounds and stand perfectly still? How do we get to be *todos transformado*, in both this world and another, beyond ourselves, beyond the limits of the known? What is at stake is the ability to stand still in the ring and face danger. The process takes every matador beyond himself.

Not long after my return from graduate school the first time, my friends Katherine and her husband, Michael, an Episcopal priest, asked me to be a godmother for their daughter's baptism. That afternoon I sat in their living room and wept for long moments, unable to reply. Katherine knew my struggle, knew that I was both thrilled and jealous at Maggie's birth, knew that I was not feeling spiritual. The clock ticked on the mantle, people came and went through the room, the

evening light gathered into pools on the coffee table, and I simply wept. Finally I asked what I had to do, what I had to say to participate in the ceremony. Michael, my priest and friend, replied, “You don’t have to *believe* it!” To him, being *con Dios* was instantiated through acts of will as much as spiritual visitation; showing up in honesty, if not faith, counted for something. I was shocked—and liberated. Freed from the burden of belief, I could enter the structure of the ritual itself, sustained by the emotional connection to people I loved.

I went through with the baptismal service for my friends. I confronted the baptismal font across from Michael in his priestly vestments: a white satin chasuble, heavy with gold embroidery, his white alb girdled with a tasseled linen cincture, a white linen maniple draped like a napkin over his left forearm, a white baptismal stole around his neck, each piece part of the priestly function. With the others in the late morning light, standing in the small wooden church building near the front door, I repeated the responses. I watched myself on the edge of the circle as if from a distance, aware that I was following a form I didn’t fully inhabit. But I was held by the sharp incense, the splash of the water, the gray marble of the font, the pale light through wavy glass windows, the robes of the priest and the words we spoke together. To say that I was elevated beyond my own grief in the greater celebration of life is too easy, and not true. I remained stiff and angry and self-pitying. But something in those rituals connected me to centuries of tradition and belief in a fabric woven from thousands of prayers and acts of faith, irrespective of my confidence in them. It would be years before I began to understand the framework of ritual as a structure, the formality of the language, the movements, the vestments, the measured sequence of events as a door. On one side we live in what we know and try to

control; on the other we enter a realm beyond naming. Each of my returns to the classroom as student brought me again to that door where the unknown waited.

The second time I found myself in graduate school, I was running away from a foundering marriage. One afternoon early in my new literature program, I sat across the desk from my professor to discuss my class presentation that afternoon. He was a small man with black hair thinning on top, wire rimmed glasses, and eyes behind the glasses narrow and small despite the power of the lenses to magnify, and he handled papers and books with propriety; they were his property and what was in them was his, too. As he quizzed me on our text, I stumbled through the answers. "You missed a lot," he said. "You missed a lot." Then questions on my background. It had been ten years since I last took classes. This seminar was designed for someone who had taken his earlier course on Naturalism; people needed to come to its study with some groundwork already done. "You have a lot to catch up on," he said, peering into my face. "Can you do this work?" I didn't answer; I didn't know. I went home and put myself to bed, where I stayed for three days before I took myself to the library and "ran away in reverse" into the work.

One evening after class I was slow to gather my papers from the seminar room, now emptied of everyone but the two of us. Outside, the fall semester had become November and it was cold. My professor gathered his papers and books and stopped briefly to look at me. "How is it going?" he asked, with enough gentleness to make me notice. "How are you doing?" The question caught me off guard; the opening into my personal effort, made me, for an instant, aware of myself as a person who was struggling in a strange place with difficult material in a

process that threatened to undo me, and invited me to believe that someone else cared about that struggle. Tears sprang to my eyes in a flush of gratitude, and I wanted to tell him how I was, how I really was. Stammering, I started to speak, when something in his face told me that to make myself vulnerable here was not a good idea.

“I’m working it out,” I said, passing a metaphorical cape beside me. I needed to let him know that I could handle it all, that I was the kind of student who belonged there in that program. “It’s coming together, bit by bit.” I think of Raul as I remember this. What is at stake is the ability to stand still in the ring and face danger.

Bullfighters are notoriously superstitious. Knowing they are about to enter an arena in which they have limited control, where skill and art are not always enough in the face of a charging, unpredictable animal, they exert control over what is possible to control. Many avoid the color yellow; some don their attire in exactly the same order each time; some carry portable altars for spiritual icons from hotel to hotel and follow a careful ritual of prayers before each corrida. With a kind of superstition, I pay attention to decades: At every birthday milestone with a zero, I have been in school, pursuing a degree that I believed would enlarge me, pull the world within the circumference of my mind and body and make whatever problems I had elsewhere shrink in proportion.

When I turned 20, I was in undergraduate school, hardly aware of the variety of challenges ahead, but fully aware that I was in pursuit of a degree that would help me shape and direct my future. When I turned 30, I was pursuing a master’s degree, working in a program where I had some control over the result. When I turned 40, I was doing doctoral work, pushing

my mind to extend its reach into uncharted possibilities. When I turned 50—when I turned 50, for the first time in my life at a decimal birthday, I was not in school, and I didn't know what to do with myself. If I was not a student, what was I? Without a degree to look toward as I entered another decade, a goal to pull me through the turnstile, I felt adrift, stagnant, stuck. It was not a happy birthday. So, nothing if not consistent when my life goes awry, I returned to being a student. I knew how to do that, I said. I've done it before and I'm good at it, I'm comfortable there, I said, somehow blocking out the memories of self-doubt. School would give me purpose and confidence.

I've lied to myself for years about the appeal of school to me as a student. Details of my educational days don't mark the happy, successful, smooth sailing escape they appear in my revisionist narratives—there is much struggle and hard-won achievement, much to make me doubt my abilities and the identity that I have sketched for myself. If that narrative of school as a haven is not true, then what is? It *is* true, according to chronology and circumstance, that I have returned to school in times of distress. The question is why? When I go back to school I inevitably confront material and circumstances that confound me, that tear at me. Why would I choose that confounding and tearing at my self-esteem, which is already under attack by the very life situations I am trying to avoid?

One answer is geography. I have, literally, gotten the hell out of Dodge with each return to school. On the map of my experience and history, school provided a culturally sanctioned means of running away. New places, new faces, new struggles. Another answer is distraction. Student-life takes me away from that thing that is too painful for me to face head-on and so

allows me to shift it to a subordinate position, one that I must deal with in a secondary manner because after all, classes have assignment deadlines I must meet. The issues that confound, I can, in the best ostrich tradition of my mother, simply Not Think About. Some people find that distraction in their work—but mine didn't offer enough. So school is a defense mechanism, yes, but not in the way I've been telling myself, not a comfortable, familiar haven but a storm so fierce it requires my full attention and in the process prevents me from facing my demons head-on.

But there's more. The hypnotic lure of learning is as seductive as a bullfighter's cape. In the end, the danger and thrill of opening doorways into the unknown is at the heart of being a student for me, and what continues to draw me to the classroom as a learner.

Raul waits for his bull in the barricades along the side of the ring. As the youngest of the six students being tested, he is last on the cartel. I watch him from my wooden seat in the shade, out of the punishing Spanish *sol*. A class favorite makes a good, swift kill, and the friendly audience cheers wildly. He takes a celebratory lap around the ring, strutting in pride, holding a hoof aloft in each hand as he faces the waving, cheering crowd. Sitting among them, I feel none of his confidence in the future. Beyond responsibility at home for my mother's emotional and physical well-being, her frailty warns me that my own seemingly abundant options have an expiration date; I can hear the footman snicker. So, past fifty, single and child-free, here I am a student in yet another degree program, this time without experience or expertise in the field. This time the impulse toward school is not to find control in the face of an uncooperative body or a dissolving marriage, or even escape from distress. This time I want the other side of the door. I

want *todos transformado*. Rather than a consumer of language and letters, as with my previous work, I am learning to be a creator of them, and all those academic papers in my past don't add up to much. I'm stepping into new ground, testing my creativity rather than my intellect, and I am terrified. Its rituals call for rigorous practice and unflinching confrontation, and lead potentially to a mystical encounter with the unknown. I believed I came here to study writing; maybe I have come to Spain after all to discover a mystery that will allow me to confront my age and its prospects of limitation. Writing is a mystery; all learning is. It is terrifying, this unknowable mystery, and yet we seek it from our deepest level as a release from the confines of control and responsibility.

At last Raul moves to the center of the ring. Late afternoon sun catches the red beads and gold threaded embroidery on his *traje de luces* in a sudden flash of light and then drops into shade at a line between us. Perhaps he is ready for this contest in heart and mind and body, full of faith in his training and desire for transcendence; perhaps he is unsure. His slippered steps cross the yellow sand and stir it briefly, and he plants himself in the path the bull will take when it charges through the gate.

Epilogue

When I took swimming lessons as a child in the municipal pool where we lived, we sat on the edge of the pool with our legs and feet dangling in the cold water. While I turned blue from the morning chill, our teenaged instructor explained how to stroke with our arms, turn our heads from side to side and breathe when we turned our faces to the surface. This rhythm sounds logical and easy; it is one I never accomplished. Though I did eventually learn to move my arms and legs in a pattern that would propel me through the water, I never learned to breathe. I would take a huge gulp of air and strike out, sure that this time I would get the timing right. Inevitably, after a half-dozen strokes and two or three frantic attempts to get new air, I would stop and pant, my lungs aching, my heart pounding.

Recently I read an article about asthma, and discovered what must have been my problem. Asthma sufferers, this article said, *think* they have no air in their lungs and so gasp for air when they are having an attack. But in reality, they are unable to expel the air that is already in their lungs, and so they are unable to take in fresh air; their lungs are already filled. Of course! That's what was happening to me when I tried to swim: When I needed more air, I would try to take it in, with my face turned up, as the instructor said. But my lungs refused to expel the air I held. I couldn't get a fresh breath because there was no room. I couldn't let go of the stale air I was holding on to.

The path I have traveled as a teacher and student tells me that I need to learn the lesson of College Park swimming pool: Let go of one breath in order to take another.

Here, then, are some of the breaths I am learning to let go of—and some I am learning to take in.

I've become aware of how the dynamic of illness at home shaped the kind of student I was, and later the kind of teacher I became. Much about that shape was unsuccessful for me as a teacher, as I re-enacted patterns of avoidance, criticism and grudging approval. But decisions conspire with circumstances. I realize that I have made choices, all by myself, that contribute to my crisis. To settle into that familiar victim mode belies my agency in my situation. As part of the problem, I can become part of the healing. As I confront who I am and what I am doing here, queries always worth asking, Mary Rose O'Reilley says, I find someone fearful, arrogant, defensive, old-fashioned, critical, enthusiastic, weary, uncertain, aging and limited. How can I give my students my best efforts without resentment or frustration? It's an inside job, my friend Laura says.

I probe my relationship with teaching. One appeal is the desire for it to give me status and confidence, to be the one whom people listen to. When administrations require yet another round of assessments and evaluations I bristle at the need to justify myself and my work, to validate my inclusion in this body of professionals. So it taps into deep wells of insecurity—am I good enough, have I “done better.”

Students in my classes are in the midst of the journey from self-absorbed teenager to responsible adult. When I refuse a paper topic or cut them loose after absences, what do they learn? Maybe to push their intellect to a new layer of discovery, to take responsibility for decisions. Those moments, incremental, accumulate and weave themselves into a fabric for the

mantle of authority they will eventually wear in their professions. My students won't likely become captains of industry or the judicial system; most of them will be real estate agents and car dealership owners and the occasional regional branch bank manager. What of the thousands of students who came and went under my watch? What is my task? To be present with them, to be attentive to the people they are and maybe even to who they hope to be, and to help them glimpse that possibility for themselves.

I like the problem-solving nature of teaching, the designing, planning, putting pieces together like a puzzle or a quilt. And the sense of closure that becomes a gift to me, who is often unable to bring things to finish on my own. Every semester is a season with a clear beginning and end, like an essay, and it needs to say something worth saying. Students are always learning, but not always what we think we are teaching. Teaching is both process and product; each class both process and product. It grows, changes, like a flock of birds that lift from a tree and tilt as if tied together, a piece of fabric being flapped in the air, wheeling and dipping and turning together.

Becoming a student again helps me know in my gut what is going on in theirs. Parker Palmer calls it a "discipline of displacement" and argues it must be practiced regularly. We need to feel student frustrations, boredom, insecurity, defensiveness. Still, being a student is for me what travel is for Liz Gilbert, what she imagines must be true for mothers of babies: It can cry and spit up on me and pee on my pants and I will still love it.

New Breaths:

Last spring a student was giving me trouble in class with his social chatter and banter with classmates, his erratic attention to the work and me. It became the foundation for a restless hum of noise I had to wade through each class meeting. Finally, when he came to my office for a conference, I knew I needed to confront him. He had told me he was a business management major and hoped to run a company some day; his “networking” activities in class seemed linked to that sense of himself as a gregarious businessman, and he was indeed a likeable, pleasant guy. Typically I would, in these situations, explain that the class needed to focus on its work, and that he was disrupting that focus, perhaps without knowing it, but that he needed to change his behavior because it was a problem; *he* was a problem. Whatever had made me think that students would accept this admonition easily? Just as I was about to introduce it, it occurred to me that shame and blame might change behavior for the short term, but its price would be his investment in the work we were doing.

“Ty,” I said, “I need your help with something.” He looked interested. “The noise level in the class during our meetings has grown as people have gotten better acquainted with each other, and it’s become such that I often have a hard time getting people’s attention.” He nodded. “I wonder if you could use your influence to help people settle down.” He seemed to grow slightly taller. “I would appreciate your leading the way here; it will be good practice for your management skills.” Well, even I could see that this was a good move. How many times had I chastised students as I tried to educate them into the ways of college behavior? Granted, this new approach will not always work, but it’s a new breath of air I didn’t know I could take.

Last summer a student came to my office about his essay; he didn't know what to write about. He said he couldn't really concentrate because he wasn't sleeping. His father had died the previous winter, he explained, just a few months before, and though he was fine during the day, at night when he tried to go to bed, his mind would fill with memories of his father, and conversations they had had, and he couldn't get to sleep. His mother told him that the subject was too painful for her to talk about, and his younger brother, he said with a shrug, didn't really understand; so he couldn't talk about his father with anyone at home. When I asked if there was anyone else he might talk with, friends, maybe, he insisted that he didn't want to.

"I just don't talk about him at all," he said with finality.

And then for the next half hour, he talked steadily about his father, telling me about his illness, his smoking and lung disease, his time in the hospital, his return home, then his collapse and denial of serious illness, his death. "That's just Frank," he said repeatedly. "That's just who he was." He talked and talked and talked. I nodded and gave him my full attention. I tried simply to listen, to be nonjudgmental, to "be with." I told him he could write about something else if he wanted to, but he persisted. "No," he said. "I think I need to write about this. I want to."

Teaching is a relationship not only with students, through they form the warp and weft of the fabric, but with a system, with a process. Students are rather like the waves that continually arrive at the shore, transferring energy from one point to another. Each one is different and they keep coming, but the learning process is the energy that carries them forward; it is that energy that we must be in relationship with. Learning to ride it, to interact with it, to adapt to it and give ourselves to it, and allow it to carry us up and down—this allows us to keep from drowning and to

enjoy its buoyance and support. In the waves we learn lessons of impermanence. We learn that despair endures for the night and that joy cometh in the morning—but that joy and zest are also impermanent; they, too, will give way to darkness. The answer is to accept it all, the full monty, the good, bad, ugly, all.

Be generous, be patient.

Keep moving.

Breathe.

Vita

Mary Marwitz was born in Leavenworth, Kansas, and received her B.S. Ed. from Georgia Southern College in 1972, her M.A. in English from Baylor University in 1982, and her Ph.D. in American Literature from the University of South Carolina in 1998. Her work has appeared in various academic journals as well as *Perigee: Journal of the Arts*. She has been teaching school since 1972, and currently teaches first-year composition and creative writing at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia.