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Blank Page: A Teacher Begins

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Blank Page: A Teacher Begins

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 Arts
In
English

By

John Wolfe

B.A. Loyola University of Chicago, 1995

May, 2015

Dedication

This thesis is a tribute to my Punahou mentors Paul, Diane, Harry, Lisa, and Tim, all of whom helped shape my teacher self. A big Thank You to my family for their ongoing support. And a special dedication to my little son Eli, whose love helped me revise my life.

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Abstract

Comprised of seven essays, this collection of literary nonfiction explores one man's journey into the teaching profession. The author recounts his experiences from just before he heard the call, to his first year teaching as an intern at Punahou School in Honolulu, through his first three years teaching full-time, and the challenges, mostly internal conflicts, he worked through as he taught freshmen and then two junior/senior electives before eventually going on sabbatical to Tanzania for his ninth year.

Literary nonfiction; high school teaching; Honolulu; spirituality, bowling, truth

Prologue: Airplanes

In Ms. Herod's 8th grade Speech class at Jesuit High School in New Orleans, the anticipation of catastrophe loomed large. Probably none of us had given ten-minute speeches before. The kid before me was one of the cool ones, so he showed how to make a strawberry daiquiri. He plugged in the blender, loaded it cube by cube with ice from a fancy ice bucket, and spoke of the ability of the fruit-rum mixture to both quench thirst and give one a buzz at the same time. He apologized like a smartass for not being able to use rum at school and told us to imagine that his apple juice was loaded. He left enough room for about eight plump strawberries, and as we waited for him to pour the juice into the blender to give it the body needed to create an actual beverage, Granville put the lid on. He didn't have the rum but also had forgotten its substitute, the juice, and forgotten that he forgot. He hit Blend and the ice quivered underneath the berries. He hit Chop, Power Blend, and finally LIQUIFY, jabbing it like a mad typist of one word, "Shit," his face now redder than his mid-morning snack: strawberries atop ice cubes. Most of us laughed at him, but it didn't matter. He was already cool. I think he even had a girlfriend. Plus, he almost used rum. I didn't laugh. Not outwardly, anyway. I was next.

I was a little kid. I mean, I was a pre-freshman like the rest of them, but out of our 450-student class, I was the youngest. And everybody knew it, as there is something called gym class and my hairless balls seemed a magnet for everyone beginning to find ways of measuring himself against something or someone else. I wasn't a nerd, exactly. I was either relatively liked by the masses, or just tolerated, or generally ignored, not as an outcast, just as the anomaly I was. I really was like a mid-schooler to these tall, freaks of nature in my class, some of whom already

had five o'clock shadows by three. I still had toys, for crying out loud, and I half-realized that what I would be demonstrating in my speech was not going to make me one ounce cooler.

I walked up there for my ten minutes, confident in what I was doing, but shaking visibly for having to do it in front of 25 classmates I hardly knew, as all of my close friends were at other schools. I pulled out a short stack of paper and began elaborating on the simple, efficient, and quick-to-make Missile plane. I was an expert. No one laughed, surely not because my enthusiasm made them wistful for childhood days when such things mattered and girls were stupid. But probably because I just wasn't fucking anything up so obviously as Granville had. There was nothing exactly to laugh at. It was a good plane, made out of paper with six folds, and with little practice, and no talent, one could just throw it, and it would soar mostly straight for twenty feet. And this baby zinged over their heads directly into the back wall and could have gone much farther. I smiled, perhaps even thinking there'd be some hands clapping or an audible "Ahh," but there wasn't and that was okay because the next one was going to knock these premature seniors back in their desks.

The trick plane, or as I called it, the "Trickster," was my specialty. I even had the lack of self-consciousness of a little kid at this stage in my speech, getting all into the tricks it could do, the curves it would make, as I folded and talked and conjured up images of the Blue Angels. If any of them had little brothers, maybe they noted the similarities. Maybe this was why I never quite got my ass kicked for hairlessness, which lasted through sophomore year until, Bam, overnight, beard's shadow lurking. Trickster complete, I stepped back, spoke of how one must use more finesse when tossing this one, because its curves, like those of a woman, need to be respected. Nah, I didn't say all that, but I did, as such, emphasize the more delicate nature of the Trickster and how it had to be tossed lightly up and with enough forward momentum, but not too

much because it wasn't a missile and it was out to perform tricks, to show off—and I hoisted the plane up, paused like it was on a platform in a showroom, and thrust it gently outward. The plane first flew straight about a foot above their heads, then midway across the room arced upward making a perfect loop, only to abort its mission in the dead center of the forehead of the guy in the front row, Andy Abramowitz, first string defensive back, related by blood to the Yeti.

* * * *

It was only my third year teaching high school but my first time teaching this new elective for juniors and seniors that a tenured teacher who would not be teaching it the first semester had proposed. So, I was teaching a course unfamiliar to me with books I'd not read and concepts I'd barely grasped in college. Its description was, An Exploration of Spirituality and Ethics in Eastern and Western Literature. The difficulties can best be explained by naming two of its primary texts: *The Tao Te Ching* and *Waiting For Godot*. The real kicker was the way the class meetings were arranged, with three hour-long seminars per week, and one called, simply, Large Group, which combined the students of all three sections for one 90-minute class a week, totaling about 60 upper classmen in one room. This was not an uncommon format, the large groups usually used for lectures or films or field trips. But Diane, the Director of Instruction in the Academy, also an English teacher, had other ideas about Large Group. She wanted us to explore some of the more abstract concepts, especially of Eastern philosophy, in unconventional ways, and this time was allotted for such experiments. And whatever the experiment, the one and only hard, fast rule was that the entire class was to be silent for the duration of class. The teacher could talk, but no matter the activity, no student could utter a word. So, no group work, my

safety net and time killer in desperate times, or collaboration of any kind unless it was silent collaboration. The real, real kicker was that Diane didn't have, or wasn't sharing, any of her own ideas about what I/we should exactly do during this time. After all, she wasn't sharing in the actual teaching of the course until second semester. How perfect for her to come up with this idea and have me, the only other teacher of the course, as lab rat.

Diane was a great listener. I'd meet with her to brainstorm, all my anxiety evident in my sweat-drenched shirt. I'd bounce ideas off her, and they would bounce, let me tell you. Her usual response was, "You could do that," with zero inflection. "Or I could do this," I might say, and she'd say, "Or you could do that."

"Thanks, Diane."

"We'll never really know what will work until we do it, will we?"

"Maybe I'll just do nothing and see how that works," I said facetiously.

"You could do nothing."

My brain was a frenzied mess the night before my first Large Group, after a week of reading Tao passages aloud and putting students into small groups for discussions that made me want to keep them in small groups, not because their insights were riveting, but because I might've been helpless in there as well trying to say something enlightening about a line like, "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao." My sleeplessness was exacerbated not so much by having no ideas, but from having this one idea about actually doing nothing, just to see what would happen. I said that maybe I'd just do nothing, and she said, "You could do nothing," and with Diane that could mean everything, anything...and nothing.

I got to class early. Luckily there was no class before mine. I put one 8x11 sheet of blank paper on each desk in the massive, mostly empty classroom. I put sealed envelopes containing a

blank sheet of paper under each desk on the little wire shelves always too small for the book bags they're supposed to hold. I wiped the board smudgeless. Ready to whip up a flurry of nothing for these kids, and excited and scared shitless at the number of ways this so-called lesson plan could fall from the sky, if it were to take off to begin with, I waited for the door to open. I retained inspiration during these grueling minutes by viewing a scene from *Cool Hand Luke* in my head:

Dragline: Where'd the road go?

Luke: That's it.

Dragline: What do we do now?

Luke: Nothin'.

Dragline: Oh, Luke, you crazy handful of nothin', you wild, beautiful thing.

This helped. But. Do you know just how long 90 minutes is?

As the kids entered, one by one I made eye contact with the hushed finger over the lips sign to remind them of the rule. They sat. They stared at me. My heart was pounding because I truly did not know what I was supposed to do, except nothing, which was everything. But we humans, in our infinite weakness, can't deal with nothing. So I had plans. I held up a c.d. Then, I pulled out a boombox from the closet and displayed it on the table. I put the c.d. in, punched Play, and slowly turned the volume all the way up. They waited. I banged my head a bit as if we were all listening to Slayer together, which got a good laugh, which went against, somewhat, the silence thing, so I quickly made the hush face again. The c.d. was, of course, blank, as was the dvd I also enacted a viewing of, pulling the big, blank screen down the wall and pressing Play in slow motion until we gazed together, for several minutes, at the blue light of the screen that hovered over us like the Hawaiian sky outside.

At last, I said to turn to the sheets on the desk. Then I simply said, "Begin." I told them I had appointed one secret person to report anyone who spoke while I was out of the room, and I left, thinking that my continued presence would cause too many to plead for Teacher to, for godsakes, tell them what they were supposed to do. I went to the break room, got a drink of water, chatted with colleagues, killed twenty minutes the best I could, and returned to see what had become of my project.

As I returned to the classroom door I thought surely I would at least hear muffled laughter. But, silence. I turned the knob slowly and turned toward the door to make sure it shut without a sound. When I then turned to the class a paper airplane struck me in the center of my forehead. A Missile. Simple, direct, like the third-eye sword thrust of a samurai. I blinked thrice and saw the room's sky and ground cluttered like an airport with the formative materials of my life. Little Andy Abramowitzs and hairless John Wolfes and nerds and Asian gangstas and alcoholics-in-the-making and valedictorians and Holoku Hula pageant queens were all smiling at me. To thwart tears, I said, "You guys rock," and to add depth, "because a rock is majestic in its immoveable silence." They laughed, and I said, "You are dismissed, but be sure not to leave without the envelope under your desk, for it contains instructions for the rest of your life and an assignment due to me by the last day of your undergraduate years. And I will find you." And this was just the first week of the school year with this group. What was I going to do now? Maybe nothing. Where do you go from here? Maybe nowhere.

Maps

My last day as a temp in downtown corporate Chicago may have been a light, easy breeze, but that was because I knew nothing about what was next. I couldn't picture it. Sometimes when you can't picture something it's good. It helps you live in the present. Other times the feeling of impending dread from pictures of your own conjuring begin to materialize in your feet and you just wait for it to creep up and seize your heart. I was still in the denial phase: a bottle of Leinenkugels in each jacket side pocket, one inside the inner pocket, and a belly full of Gino's pizza from the weekly work party, and I was out—for good. But not before my co-superiors, Jim and Tom, bid me farewell once more, calling me "Temp Man" for the last time. "Once a temp," and "the one and only," they said. On the elevator down, Marisella, the sexiest woman in the building batted her lashes at me before parting ways with a "Take me with you," which sustained a month of fantasies, and Gretchen at the front desk half-frowned and said, "Lucky you, I'll be here forever probably. Say hi to Hawaii. Tell it, 'One day.'"

I made my trek to the Map Room bar across town, the irony of its name ringing loud. On the Blue Line I stood crammed with other suits from downtown. I took my tie off and let it drop to the floor and thought how I might never wear one again if things went well. When I got off at Damen, I detoured to my usual liquor store for a 40 for the two-mile walk. With that, plus the three already on me, I'd have to buy only one of their expensive beers that evening.

On the walk and sip, I reflected on the past year, trying to salvage anything good from it. It was fun, I couldn't deny it. I lived with my girlfriend who had a little community garden. My best friend had moved next door. We all smoked bowls and drank beer and cooked cheap food together and vaguely wondered if that was it. It's hard to think about one's next chapter

when the one you're in offers no foreshadowing. We all had college degrees and were without tangible prospects. So when I say it was fun, well. It was fun doing things to forget about our anxieties. We were not deadbeats, after all. We weren't settled.

Temping was certainly not fun. You register with an agency, and then wait around for a call. Then you go be a secretary or file clerk for a day, a week, a month, until they don't need you, and go home and wait for another call. I did get lucky with this last one, though. Was with them three months, and *I quit them!* Bill and Tom made it so I could've been there for a year plus. I have no idea why they liked me, besides my very basic amiability. By the second day they had dubbed me "Temp Man." They loved to laugh, and I guess because I have a good sense of humor and didn't mind being called this, they loved themselves for thinking up such a creative title for their minion. Plus, it described perfectly how I saw myself, and my stage in life.

And they treated me well. Initially my assignment as file clerk was to be for one month, but these guys made it clear they wanted me around and told their boss they needed me, though this was clearly not the case. I had little to do, and they said to always look busy, "with your poetry or whatever, in case the big guy pays a visit, which he never does." So I spent the last four months working on my own writing and feeling like I was getting paid for it. A fun year, then, to be sure, but no growth, not even toward figuring out where and how I wanted to grow. I was going nowhere. It felt as if, right when I was handed my BA degree, Magna cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa, the works, Life said, "What are you gonna do about it?" And I bought some weed and thought about that, but nothing came. It had been a battle between pursuit of the next party and pursuit of thoughtfulness, and the latter was losing. Wait, the acronym for Pursuit of Thoughtfulness is...whatever.

* * * *

I got to the Map Room buzzed and jazzed and out of breath. Coolest bar in the city by far. Made you feel you were reconnoitering at headquarters to get down to the business of self-assessment: Where have I been, Where am I now, and Where I am going? Of course, it's a packed bar with great beer and free food and the Bulls were in the playoffs for the third time, so the reflection usually went like this: Where have I been? Temp job, I think. Where am I now? Drinking and getting drunker. Cool. The end. But this time was different. It would be my last time there for who knows how long. I sat with girlfriend Heather and best guy friend Kelly, it was too loud to talk, and none of us wanted to talk about how I'd be leaving soon, so my eyes just traveled from one map to another, and I stayed mostly inside my head. It's funny, a map was to help you go deep into a place and provide bearings so you could navigate it successfully. With a whole room of randomly juxtaposed maps from all over and all times plastered all over the walls—ancient Egypt, Tyler, TX, the three ascents up Mt. Kilimanjaro, downtown Caracas, Iceland—you felt stuck wondering where your map is. Who's got it? How do you find it?

I just got lucky, that's all. I have said that after I got my degree nothing came, what now. But that wasn't exactly true. A month before graduation, I got a call from my lifelong friend Tim, who teaches high school in Honolulu with a guy named Mike at Punahou School. Tim and I have known each other since I was ten and he was eighteen and my summer camp counselor, but we actually became friends around when I was eighteen and we were both then counselors. He called up and said Mike wanted to make a road trip with him and some others on the mainland that summer. They were going to have two vehicles and there was room for me, and even Kelly and Heather if they could swing it. "Tim, I'm broke as hell..."

"I will give you a thousand dollars for the trip and you can pay me sometime in the next, say, eighteen years. I really want you to come. I think it would be good for you." He was random like that. "Well, no shit, it would," I agreed.

Kelly and Heather found a way to go, too. Come graduation, I hadn't told my family. I was 23, and it wasn't like I had to get permission. It was a violation of what they termed "common courtesy." See? They made countless sacrifices for me to go to college. And there I was, less than an hour after the graduation dinner, in their hotel room where they would ask me what I was going to do next, about to tell them what I knew they would not take well. I had been rehearsing, though. I didn't go to college for nothing.

"Mom. Minette. Robert. Thank you so much for coming all the way to Chicago. It brings me great joy to tell you I will be leaving in a few days to travel half the country by car with friends you know and friends you don't." I told them about how it was to be funded, explained the few logistics I knew, and assured them of my safety. My mom basically said it was the most irresponsible thing she'd ever heard but she could, of course, do nothing about it. Which was a damn good thing, because on that trip I went to a Michigan forest to play Frisbee golf, the Rock N Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, and the mall of Smithsonianians in DC; saw Ralph Fiennes in a one-man *Hamlet* in NYC, Van Morrison in Boston; took up painting in New Hampshire; and swam in Vermont rivers and lakes and in a lightning storm off Amelia Island in Florida, ending my trip by turning down my acceptance into the MFA program in Poetry at the University of New Orleans to head back to Chicago to...go from there.

And then it was just Crash. Nothing. Unless you call near-poverty and joblessness with no prospects something. Post-graduation year began with the feeling of pure comedown, a hangover not only from the trip but from the glorious days of undergraduate life where every

week was marked either by intellectual adventures or drug-fueled, drunken travels through space and time, or some bizarre combination of both, culminating beautifully in a scene right out of any classic story but one that hasn't yet decided if it'll be a picaresque or a bildungsroman.

I'd wake up for weeks going, "So, yes, this IS what having an undergraduate degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing looks like. And my minor in Philosophy? Oh so helpful." I bought more weed and a bottle of whiskey to go with it. It was Pursuit of Thoughtfulness 1, Partying 2. But somewhere in there, during that year, Mike visited Chicago from Hawaii. We hadn't really kept up since the trip, but were certainly confirmed friends now. A trip like that either seals the deal with someone, or severs it for good. This trip was all bonding, with everything and everyone. Over beers one day on his short trip to deal with a family matter, as he's from Oak Park, I casually mentioned to him that I wished I could've just kept being a camp counselor. That I loved working with kids. That maybe I should've gone to school for teaching.

"Y'know, John. Have you thought about the MAP program?"

"Doesn't sound familiar, but I like the sound of it already."

"Mentoring at Punahou. It's in its third year. It's like an internship program designed for those thinking about teaching high school, but without experience. You don't have to go to school for it, just need an undergraduate degree of some kind. Apply, have a phone interview, write some essays for the application, and see what happens."

I was shocked. Anything designed for someone just thinking about something AND with the words "no experience necessary" in the job description sounded good to me. When I told Tim on the phone later in the week that I would apply he felt he needed quickly to clear the air, saying, "I would've never thought to tell you, otherwise I would have. It's like, if I were

Buddhist, and you weren't, and I was going to visit a monastery, I wouldn't think to invite you along..."

"No worries, man. I didn't know. Who knew? Kids, though. Of course."

"Right on," he said.

"Let me say one thing now so no weirdness comes up later," I told him. I'm applying to be a MAP in the English Department, naturally. I, in no way, want or need you to do or say anything to help my application, if you know what I mean. People there are gonna know we're friends, they already do, so please, don't feel any pressure to involve yourself on my behalf."

"Understood," he said. And that's all that was said about it. In early summer I had a phone interview and was selected a few weeks later. Never having taught, I would be a teacher for a year. At least a year, that is. Mike said MAPs sometimes got hired full time the following year. Partying and Thoughtful Pursuit were now tied. I may have pounded a few beers during that interview, but weed began to disappear from daily life, and temping became a joke I no longer minded.

Reflections and dreams now waning in the Map Room, I began to fidget. It was getting late and the walk home would be long because it wasn't on the El route. We stumbled to our apartments, and I hugged Kelly as if I were getting on the plane right then, and in case I didn't see him the next day. I didn't need to get gushy with Heather yet, not only because we lived together, but because she would be joining me in Hawaii pretty soon after I got there.

* * * *

After ten hours the plane landed. Tim picked me up to take me to what they called "The MAP house." I know, you can't make stuff like this up. But here there would be no maps of any kind on how to teach. Tomorrow I would meet with the mentor who'd chosen me after a phone interview in which he asked me what I would do in certain scenarios in the classroom. He would guide me, perhaps help me draw up a map. Tim didn't offer many thoughts on the school or the program, and I didn't ask many questions. My year's journey had begun, and I'd know what I needed to know when it was time. It was an understanding. Keep it pure. This wasn't like I got a job at some firm he worked at and he could tell me the ins and outs and who to avoid and how to get ahead. Teaching wasn't like that, I understood. I was lost and, if anything, he did his best to make me feel that was normal and cool and even exciting. He did this by simply saying, "So, if you want to talk about anything, that's cool, but I figure, this is your experience and you should just have it." I kind of wished he had just told me exactly how to feel and what to think and what's the secret to effective teaching and of the whole universe for that matter. I replied, "That's cool."

"I thought, since it's early, I'd drive you around the island to my favorite beach, Waimanalo." I was thinking bar, but it looked like beach hopping was the thing here. Partying 2, PT 3?

If I had been a tourist, the drive would've been nothing short of breathtakingly spectacular and utterly sublime. I was not a tourist. I was a teacher with zero credentials about to meet many thirteen-year-olds, who terrified me to begin with, and tell them what I thought about stuff, and what to do, and how to do it, and then judge them by tacking onto their work one of the first few letters in the alphabet.

The discomfiting ridges of the Ko'olaus to my left, that disappear somewhere beyond clouds, and the unsettling shore breaks of Makapu'u and Sandy's to my right, along with the oppressive consistency of the sun on my skin in the jeep—Paradise? I asked myself. I was beginning to burn. The drive to Waimanalo was long, and when we got to the beach I couldn't move. I told Tim I was just too tired all of a sudden, that I hadn't slept on the plane. But really, the beach, the water was so incredible and delicious looking I felt somehow that I needed to earn my first submersion. That maybe after my first plunge into the classroom I could make my first plunge into the Pacific. It didn't matter to him, and we made the drive back just before sundown.

I crashed early, rose early, and made my first walk through campus. The MAP house was on the outskirts, and the campus was as big as Loyola Chicago's, where I lived, Tulane's, where I played and studied growing up, or UNO's, where I almost went. I felt like a freshman again. A freshman in college teaching freshmen in high school. That didn't sound like too big a leap, though when I was a freshman in college I was scared shitless, and when I was a freshman in high school I was too clueless to be scared. The scared teaching the clueless? That could work. As long as the former kept his fear well hidden and the latter admitted how little he knew...wait. I was both! I was scared clueless.

After walking past the chapel surrounded by a lily pond teeming with life—turtles eyed me suspiciously, koi made a frenzied dash away, and a frog jumped—splash—I noticed a constellation of tall palm trees dotted throughout the grounds underneath which a legendary spring called Ka Punahou flows. I couldn't tell if the heads of these slender trees with their loud fronds clacking in the breeze were applauding my arrival—"You won't be temporary much longer"—or trying to sweep me out of view like a bug in their eye.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs to Cooke Hall, its grand clock embedded in old gray stone ticking toward my first meeting with Paul. I ascended and then, inside, found my way up farther to where my office waited, empty, up on a balcony. I passed the other offices, empty of people but their desks heavy with years of books and uncollected final papers and pictures of loved ones and thank yous from graduated seniors, their shelves bursting with dog-eared books—I'd only read whatever teachers said to read—and file cabinets too packed to shut.

I sat at my desk, opened an empty notebook, and tried to fill a page before Paul showed up, to show him all the things I'd been thinking about. It was a staring contest. The page won. It sucked me into its bottomless void. I was a failed teacher before day one.

"John," a voice called from below. I tensed, then shuddered.

"Paul, yeah, up here, what's up?" He seemed so light and cheery. He practically levitated up the stairs. I was an anvil. We'd only spoken once since the interview, to set this meeting time. He was beaming.

"Hey, how was the trip? Tim take you to Waimanalo?"

"Yes."

"What? Well?"

"I couldn't move. Couldn't even get out the car. Fear seized me. I can't teach. Christ." God, he was easy to talk to. Or maybe I would've said this to anyone at the moment. I probably figured that if I didn't tell him, or someone, immediately, of my panic and pull toward the abyss he'd think I was a smooth, cool cat. I was a gnat in a lion's roar.

He sat down at the table near the rail and I switched to a seat across from him.

"I have no idea how to teach," I said, and he laughed.

"You don't need to know. Just to ask questions," he said. I squinted at him.

"One class at a time. Here." He motioned for me to grab my empty notebook. "Write this down." I waited, but before he spoke I couldn't resist more self-deprecation.

"All my lesson plans for the year are in this notebook." I flipped pages to make sure he saw they were blank. He knew. He got me.

"They will be. Write down what your goals are for the first day."

"Goals? To get through in one piece."

"To survive? So, you'll need to breathe for that, right? Write that down. Write, 'Breathe.'"

I wrote it. I wrote, "Remember to breathe," actually.

"So the kids come in. Picture it. Can you?"

"I guess."

"Talk it out with me."

"They come in. I greet them. One by one, I suppose?"

"Or do something else. Be writing on the board, reading a book, wait for them all to be seated, whatever you think."

"I don't know what I think."

"Then don't know and be okay with not knowing. Just do whatever. It'll come. They're nervous, too. They're freshmen. Coming to the Academy from Junior School, knowing only their own kind. You're the teacher."

"Who am I to tell them, to teach them anything? Who am I?"

"Exactly. You don't know. I don't know. They don't know who you are. They sure as hell don't know who they are yet. Write this down: 'Who Am I?'" I wrote it slowly at the top of the next blank page. I wrote: "Who Am I? Man Who Has Never Taught." I showed him.

Paul smiled again. He was always smiling. It might've gotten on my nerves but it was a pretty great one, the kind that gets the whole forehead and both cheeks all wrinkled up in pure sincerity. "Great way to begin your class. Your year."

"What?" I had no idea what he was talking about. Sounded like either something mystical or some practical joke in the works.

"Guess what the whole freshman year's theme is?"

"I don't know."

"'Who Am I?' You could ask the question on day one. Have them write. Have them share in groups. Get a couple brave volunteers, there's always a few at least. Make the first paper a personal narrative centered around the question. All the poems, stories, plays, can be read with this question in mind: What are the characters doing that's leading them toward or away from self-discovery? Something like that. Any variation."

"There's endless material."

"You got your whole first semester planned in 10 minutes. Only one more semester to go and it's summer. You'll spend the year reading and writing and discussing the reading and writing with kids who will like you."

I had to find my way WITH the students, not in my head first. I had to become the eye of my own hurricane. It was then that I felt sure the answer to the question "Who am I?" was someone who would always be asking that question.

I called Tim. I wanted to see Waimanalo again before school started. And swim.

Fresh and True

I got to my freshmen English classroom about the same time the sun came up, which was an hour before my class would begin. As I put the seats in a circle and sat at one of the desks and stared at the empty teacher's chair and its desk, the natural light began to mix with the room's light, and I thought about the only thing that separated me from my students: Bigness. I was big, and they and their desks were smaller. I was a grown-up. Big deal. Well, it kind of was. When I was a thirteen-year old student I was an oxymoron: a popular dork. My first year at Jesuit High School in New Orleans I was puny. The Louisiana History teacher, Dave Miroux, put limitations on my hand-raising by mid-quarter. Two questions per class, "so you better use them wisely." What a prick. I wondered what I would do if I got someone like me. I couldn't very well let one kid's questions just take over the 55-minute class. On the other end of the spectrum, what would I do about the ones who never spoke up? Paul seemed basically to say, not to stop wondering, of course, but to rest assured that all these kinds of things, how class would go and how I would figure out what to say and when and basically how I would evolve into a teacher would just happen with the first kid's entrance into the classroom. I kept eyeing the shiny, metal doorknob, looking for movement and thinking I had locked it from the inside so I could have total, private reflection time and be in total control over when they could cross the threshold into my realm. I was trying to prevent the inevitable as long as possible, the transformation from college student to temp to nameless wanderer skirting life's periphery and looking for a way in, to teacher.

I had so overprepped for my first day, my whole first week, that all my ideas, from what to ask or say to them first to what to assign for homework, if anything, had seemed to cancel one another out, leaving me completely blank. I wished I'd walked in at the same time they were

walking in. Antsy, I got up and wrote my first name on the board. I had asked Paul if I could have them call me John. He said he didn't see why not, but they might not feel comfortable and I'd be the only teacher, probably, they ever had, who did that. That maybe it would be good to establish that safe, familiar, formal element. I wondered how I'd handle discipline problems. I was no disciplinarian. I wrote a "Mr." before it and a "Wolfe" after it and then, "English One." I tried out the teacher's seat and was relieved that it was no more or less comfortable than their built-in desk chairs. I checked the roster and tried to get a feel for the names, some of which were Hawaiian and difficult to pronounce. Sure enough, twenty minutes before class, the mirrored knob turned and signaled, nothing to stop it any longer, the beginning of my teaching career.

"Hey there, c'mon in. John Wolfe, English Teacher. What's your name?"

"Uh, William."

"William what?"

"William Ing."

"Are you in the right place William Ing?"

"I think so."

"First time, first day in the Academy?"

"First day at Punahou."

"No way, me, too. Where you comin' from? Mainland, or just another school?"

"On Maui." William wasn't talking much. Didn't want to smother the poor guy, so I stepped back and just said, "Well, make yourself comfortable, William." Funny, comfortable for William was a seat in the back, behind the circle I'd made, where he put his head down on the

desk. I thought I'd give him his space and left the lights off. I pretended to be diligently preparing for the first day's lesson for about ten more minutes when more started rolling in.

"Hey," I nodded to each one. "Hello, welcome, welcome, grab a seat in the lovely, perfectly asymmetrical circle I've made. The class oval. Come in, Hi, John Wolfe. English One. Make sure you're in the right place." What was I, ticket-tearer at a circus? An usher for an Off-Off-Way Off show on the most geographically removed land mass on the planet, in a United State that barely made it? Forget being number one. Fifty. The pressure increased. I would always make sure of that one. "Uh, William." I didn't want to embarrass the poor kid, but..."William, we want, I'm sure, you to be inside the circle, unless you want to come up here and do the teaching." Gotta watch the sarcasm. That could've sounded mean. Always mean well, but sometimes it sounds, well..."I mean, I'd actually prefer that, someone to do the teaching today. Someone, anyone, the teacher's desk, please. I'm tired already. It's too early." I wanted to overcompensate for my sarcasm that may have embarrassed shy William. I went to the very back of the classroom and sat. "William, or someone, please, take over. Teacher dude is spent." No one moved. One half-looked over his shoulder at the removed voice sounding off in the back. I wasn't going to let my joke fail. Take it to the hilt, my friend. "Ma'am? Young miss with the pink headband? Kindly take over, please." I couldn't believe it. She ignored me. I thought of Glenn Close as Alex in *Fatal Attraction*, digging the knife in her side and saying, as she approached Michael Douglass shielding his wife, Anne Archer, from Alex's psychopathic rage, "I'm not going to be ignored, Jack." But I calmed myself. "Oh, alright. You aren't up for teaching your first day in the Academy when you're not even sure you're students yet and the sun just rose. I understand. We're all in this together. I'll take it from here. You'll have plenty of time to teach me stuff." I made my way up to the front as they settled in their seats.

"Good morning class, I'm John Wolfe. Call me what you will. How are you?" I had them make nametags with their first name in caps and asked them to write some things down to use to introduce themselves, "maybe something you did this summer, a movie you saw or book you read, whatever, just make sure you include at least one thing that best defines who you are, something that helps us best get to know you at this stage of your development as a human being, be it a hobby or a sport or just some characteristic that makes you unique, makes you stand out, something that represents you, specifically." My wordiness as a writer might be a strength as a teacher of freshmen, I thought.

After ten minutes I said, "Instead of going around the room in order—everybody will have to go anyway—just raise your hand, or not, and introduce yourself and tell us some of the things you wrote down, especially what best defines you." Class looked to be going great. I talked, they listened, they wrote, which I asked them to do. Now, they'll talk some more because I asked them to. A smooth, polished stone. How long had I worried about this? These might have been my thoughts at the moment, but my physiological reaction was one of mortal dread. Class felt, in the pit of my belly, to be a disaster in slow motion, and one that was just beginning and would continue for as long as I managed to pretend to be a teacher. Jolting me from my gloom and doom a voice perked up:

"I'm Tina Wakayama. I like to hang out with my friends and go to movies."

"Tina, tell us about a movie you liked this summer." She did. For five minutes. I asked others to chime in if they'd seen it, ask questions if they hadn't. The place had become like recess, as I watched, nodding a bit, but mostly pretty stiff. Fifteen minutes later, I said, "Well what did you write down that best defines you?"

"I can best be defined by my interest in horses. I ride at Kualoa Ranch and have three horses, Jenny, Jerry, and Jezebel." Five more minutes of that, then, after three more intros that felt rushed compared to the time I gave Tina, class was over. They filed out quickly as I told them goodbye as if that was the only time we'd ever spend together, saying nothing of the many possible homework assignments I had considered. Heck, I thought—which was significant because before meeting them I would've thought, "Hell." Even my internal voice was cleaning itself up, adjusting to the new youngsters in my life—Heck, at this rate, we'll be doing intros the whole first week. I couldn't just hurry it up now and breeze through the others after spending so much time on the first four. It wouldn't be democratic. This decision would begin to shape a style that would always bring me trouble but would prove worth it down—way too far down—the line, allowing time for thorough bonding at the expense of more skills drill work. I was teaching as if I was going to have them as my students for all four years of high school. I was a poor planner. I sucked as a teacher. Class went great, though, I thought. But I didn't *feel* good about it, even though I had stared evidence to the contrary in the face for an hour.

We met four times a week, and after the last intro on the fourth day, and having not mentioned really anything about the course, what we'd be learning, what my specific expectations were, what we'd be doing, I felt like a tightrope walker who dropped his balance stick with another ten feet to go and had to leap to make it to the other side. On that fourth day, I had anticipated another full class of intros based on how long each kid had taken thus far, but, probably getting weary, the kids sped up near the end, and the last couple were done in five minutes, leaving me 50 to go. I knew we were moving into an overview of the course, the five skills—speaking, listening, reading, writing, and thinking—and I should've recognized that we'd just done all the leg work for speaking and listening. All I would've had to do is ask them to

reflect on the speaking and listening skills they'd just used the past week, their strengths and areas for improvement, then move into the bigger reading and writing stuff. But alas, I did what Paul and I had planned when I needed every little thing planned out. I used the rest of that class and the whole next one to have them generate class lists on the board about what good speakers and listeners do. As if they were mentally challenged, or in, maybe, fifth grade.

"Yes, that's right, good listeners look attentive, they show they're listening by not fidgeting or staring into space or whispering to classmates. Let's practice. David, tell us about your day yesterday, what was memorable. Thank you. Now Kelly, can you paraphrase what David said? Thank you, Kelly. Meagan, name one thing Kelly left out to show that you were not only listening to David, but to Kelly, as well. Class, who can tell me what Brandon said on the first day of class is his favorite movie. Class, for extra credit, what's the seventeenth word I said in today's class? No one. Okay. See? Always room for improvement. Practice, practice boys and girls." I was condescendingly thorough. "Speaking and listening. Good speaking and listening are what make up good discussions. What, more specifically, makes up a good discussion?" Now I was having them articulate what was going well with the speaking and listening we had been doing while talking about speaking and listening? I didn't know I was so meta-inclined. Fortunately, I could tell sometimes when I was getting too serious or too tedious. "Okay, that was a boring discussion, wasn't it? Sorry. But I had fun, did you? Christine? You did, didn't you, I see you smiling. You had fun, AND it was boring. Isn't it ironic...don't you think?" I sang it, the current hit by Alanis Morissette, "Ironic." Twice. I couldn't help it. "And isn't it ironic...Dontcha think?" They were in hysterics. "K, re-focus, please, your teacher was not hired to sing."

When we wrapped up what makes a good discussion—connection-making, clarifying questions, building upon one another's responses, circling back when necessary, taking notes sometimes—it was time to move to active reading, what good readers do. It was the middle of the second week, and we spent a whole class putting up another obvious list on the board: highlighting, annotating, re-reading when you miss something, paraphrasing in your head as you read, etc. I'm not really sure why, but I had yet to assign any homework. The beginning of the next class I passed out a poem Paul was using. I actually had enough forethought to make copies for everyone so we would finally read something together. You know, read? That thing you're supposed to do in English class? At last, I'd see where the freshman mind dwelt.

It was William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark." I already learned that there was too much to talk about and I had to be careful. That one little question could get these kids talking for an hour. I picked something easy with a nice, simple title. My singing Alanis Morissette seemed to inspire two girls to talk to me as if I was a slightly older boy who was safe to "flirt" with. Laurie and Shauna began every class with comments on something about me that I would've never imagined being part of a teacher-student dynamic.

"Mr. Wolfe," Shauna said, as I was about to pass out copies of the poem. "The blue, that shirt, does not go with those pants."

"Thank you, Shauna, I will prepare more thoughtfully for class from now on."

Laurie, laughing, chimes, "Yeah, Mr. Wolfie. You have a green stripe on your shoes, too, so a green shirt would be better. But I like the nose-ring." Wolfie? I said nothing. I couldn't deny it was endearing and clearly intended to be. And for as long as I would keep the nose-ring in during the coming years, it would remain a hit of sorts. Students just couldn't believe it. I had had

it for at least four years already, never having taken it out. I never thought about it, and no grown-ups ever mentioned it.

I read the poem aloud and told them to follow along.

Traveling Through the Dark

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.

It is usually best to roll them into the canyon;
that road is narrow, to swerve might make more dead.

By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car
and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing;
she had stiffened already, almost cold.

I dragged her off; she was large in the belly.

My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—
her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting,
alive, still, never to be born.

Beside that mountain road I hesitated.

The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights;
under the hood purred the steady engine.

I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red;

around our group I could hear the wilderness listen.

I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—,
then pushed her over the edge into the river.

I suddenly worried that it was a bad choice, that it was too simple, that we'd breeze through it. No challenge. They'd think I was easy breezy, too. Easy, funny guy, who they could get to sing and whose attire they could amuse themselves with as they called me pet names. I looked pretty normal, even with the little hoop in my nose. I had a full beard, medium length hair, and wore a button down, short-sleeved, solid color or aloha shirt, which was a shirt patterned with flowers or some island motif that was even more common in Hawaii than a solid color, and brown shoes with subtle, little olive green stripes swimming horizontally across the sides, shoes I bought specifically for teaching—my teaching shoes. I'd only read the poem twice before, and not actively. Paul's insight about doing along with them, though nerve-racking outside the classroom, made the moments of potential learning inside electric, a feeling that every and any given moment could be fireworks or damp fuses. It was up to me in the moment to electrify.

I asked them to read it to themselves once, then a second time with pen in hand, doing all the things they said good, active readers do, like underline words they didn't know and write a couple of discussion questions, "divergent" questions, along with any clarifying, or "convergent" questions they had. They were diligent. I could see the pupils in their retinas swimming around the words and darkening the empty spaces of the page with the purposeful strokes of their pens. It looked like serious inquiry that couldn't be faked. I had touched down. I was a god, a commander, a chief. I said go seek and bring me fruitful insight and make me proud, and they were all hungry to appease their master who would surely pave their way to college and beyond

with A's sewed on their clothing...wait, that doesn't fit...then again, they hadn't even heard of Hawthorne yet. It still didn't work. Even my idle talking-to-myself couldn't sustain coherence. The ship was sinking before I could build it.

It was time to discuss great contemporary American literature.

"Mr. Wolfe, can I start?" Tina. I wasn't ready for Tina. I think she was smarter than I was. She was sure to ask me something I couldn't answer. Better put them in small groups first and get a feel for the kind of stuff they were going to come at me with.

"Tina, class, begin getting into circles with two or three others. You've plenty material—all your active reading notes, the list on the board for reference—to keep your small group discussions charged for the last twenty minutes of class." I chickened out. But I convinced myself I was a tactical spy. I listened. I shrank at what I heard. I had naively thought discussion would quickly move to the nature of the narrator's insights on the transience of life, the juxtaposition of life and death, the big choices humans must make when thinking broadly and considering things greater than themselves, doing what must be done after weighing the important facts handed to you from above and boldly acting based on a conviction grounded in a fundamental moral good you are obliged to contribute to. Instead, I heard questions and comments like: "Why is he on a river road?" "What's a river road?" (That's right, they lived on an island and knew only of one ocean road, which was a highway that circled the island.) "Who's Wilson?" (Amit responded: "The name of my football.") "What 'group' is he in, maybe it's a rock band?" and "I can't believe he killed the deer, that's, like, evil, cuz it had a baby in it, too. He kills babies. That's why he's got a lot of thinking to do."

It was too much to bear. I suddenly felt as if I was teaching fifth graders after all. "Good work, people." I forgot to assign anything for homework. I could've at least said to read it twice

more and write a half page on the deepest thing you can think of regarding what the poem's about. Now it would be the end of the second week. Things felt clogged. I had a scheduled mentor meeting that afternoon and there would be no shortage of pleas to Paul for guidance.

I walked into his office and before sitting down launched right in: "Paul, we haven't even discussed a piece of literature yet, much less written much of anything. I'm in trouble. I haven't even assigned paper one yet, nor have I mentioned the class book we need to get started on. Time is getting away from me."

"Well, you DO need to get the writing assigned. The reading stuff, I don't see a problem that you've only read a poem, it's not like you're not teaching and they're not learning; my only concern may be open house in a month when parents are wondering what's been up and their children haven't been getting much homework—papers or chapters of books to read. Make sure that by two classes from now you've started them on paper one and the writing process, by actually assigning it and passing something out. AND have that be something that you pass out to parents so they'll see what their kids are getting at the same time. And just assign a chapter or two in the book; that way, things will be in sync and you won't get caught off guard. Assigning homework is half your work, because then they come ready to go with something and you're not starting from scratch at the beginning of each class." Made sense. Next class I would have to wing it but would make sure to assign homework that moved us forward at a greater speed the class after that one.

Walking into class next time knowing their expectation was that we'd dive right into the Stafford poem, I felt torn. We needed to move on and I didn't know how. I wasn't going to lecture on the poem, *give* them the insights I arrived at. It wasn't that kind of course (or school), and I wasn't that kind of teacher, which is ironic because all my high school teachers were

lecturers, it was all I'd known, even, mostly, in college. As usual, I didn't have a plan, I had several possible plans, and I was waiting for the moment that something outside myself would select the best option.

The door creaked open. It was Ed, a colleague. You have to be kidding me, I thought. One of those surprise visits I'd heard about. He was here to sit in, a euphemism for: Evaluate my teaching and write a letter that would go into my file and help determine if I should be hired full-time the following year. "Mr. Moore, please, make yourself comfortable anywhere. You want inside the circle?"

"Thank you, Mr. Wolfe, I'll sit right back here. Carry on, don't mind me." Now I was even more wary of having a group discussion on this poem and dealing with the kids' dumb questions. I said, "Class, let's read the poem again aloud." Rewind, I thought, good move. The man is watching now. "After I read it, write down what you think is your best discussion question." I was sounding desperate. "One that you think will produce the best discussion about this poem if we only could ask one and only had one day in the whole world to ever discuss this poem." I read. They wrote. I had five volunteers confident enough about their questions to write them on the board. We all looked at them and discussed which ones we thought would produce the most involved discussion while at the same time most drove toward the heart of the poem. When we'd narrowed it down to a question about the narrator's dilemma, what he meant by "my only swerving" and "I thought hard for us all," and then his final action and why he did it, almost everyone participated and, as Frank McCourt said of a similarly unexpected triumph in *Teacher Man*, "There were fireworks in my head. It was New Years Eve and the Fourth of July a hundred times over" (146). As the class filed out, I told them we'd talk later about what made the final selected questions so good and why, in general, some questions are better than others. As the

first kid was almost out the door I yelled, "Stop! How long did you think you were going to get away with no homework in here, huh?" Great, I thought, I just gave myself away to Ed. "Read 'How to Tell a True War Story' in your *Things They Carried* book, bring the book to class, and come ready to kick it into overdrive as we embark on our first book's journey together." And then I added more, just so Ed would get an earful of the vast and varied things we had going on in my class, the breadth and depth of this Teacher Man's vision, its extensive and rigorous reach: "And we'll begin brainstorming for your first writing assignment soon, so start thinking about the question, Who Am I?" Whoops, all the other teachers were probably collecting final drafts of that by now.

It was nearing the end of our first month together. They'd read but one poem, scribbled a bit, and done a lot of talking and listening. It was time to launch them forward on greater journeys into reading and into their own meager-thus-far writing lives. And I was behind, so we had to do both of these things at once. I was still winging it basically, but kept Paul's eternal question whispering always in my ear: What are your goals? I didn't really know, specifically. Only broadly. I was comforted by how things began to take shape once I involved the kids in my mostly directionless vision. I began class by asking, "What are some good and bad experiences you've had with writing that you can remember?" but after Tina got going I saw this taking up another whole class. It's like I was wired to put off the real stuff, the bigger, deeper stuff, the harder-to-teach stuff; either that or a part of me just felt that the more groundwork the better. But, still, maybe I was overdoing it. I kept trying to leap but there was a seatbelt. I needed to self-eject. A launch button. I tried to segue from beginning the writing process to the book, feeling more in the mood to read, but I bumbled instead.

"Uh, this O'Brien guy sure had some bad experiences, but the writing of them, I mean, he turned that into something amazing, don'tcha think?" Blank, though polite, stares in reply.

"Okay, turn to 'How To Tell a True War Story' on page 75. We'll read it together. We could start at the beginning, with the first story, or chapter, but this one has some essential themes that carry from the beginning of the book to the end, and I *really* like this one." It was the only one I'd read completely, a while back, so I was still speaking the truth. "I'll read, ya'll follow along, and we'll stop every once and a while, as necessary, to touch base, okay?"

Speaking of truth, I read the first sentence, which was its own paragraph: "This is true." Something happened just then, only three words in, a tingle in the back of my head, not quite like a small bottle rocket whizzing upward from the palm of my own thirteen-year-old hand, more like a few years before that maybe—a sparkler in my hand, perhaps—the pre-explosion days when just a little harmless flame blazed dangerless before my face. I got into the reading, becoming the characters at all costs, full of every bit of expression necessary to match the pace and directions the grammar and punctuation and what I thought the writer demanded of me, dictated, and I'm moving along, briskly, the story unfolding about a soldier whose buddy gets killed and he writes his dead friend's sister telling her what a great guy her brother was and one of the guys listening to this story asks, "So what happens?" and it was there it happened. Caught up in the heat of good writing and in character, I said like I meant it, "The dumb cooze never writes back."

Not just a few hairs, mind you, but the forest of hair that covers my upper back bristled at once. I looked up. I couldn't read their faces. I felt like the underside of a movie theater seat, or worse, what I imagined of a porn booth. But, I thought, could it be true? Maybe it was. After all, I didn't remember knowing that word at that age...

"What's 'cooze'?" Kristen asked. It was true! I scanned the room. No one knew. Now the dilemma was whether I should, would, oh no, be the one to introduce fairly new teenagers to a new curse word that was arguably worse than "fuck" and *at least* as bad as "cunt."

"It's a really ugly word, you wouldn't want to say it to *any* human being for *any* reason, *ever*, not only because no other human being could *ever* deserve to be called such a thing but also because the person who uses such a word becomes *as* ugly as the horrible, filthy word itself." Where all that came from I had no idea. Just a year prior I was watching George Carlin, my favorite comedian, live, recapping his heyday when he declared, "There's no such thing as bad words. Even 'nigger.'" "Nigger" is not a bad word, it's just a word. It's not the word we should be concerned about, it's the racist fucker using it we should worry about." I was not ready to teach them that words could be viewed with practiced objectivity and potentially rendered harmless. Certainly not a truism to say the least. Language was their, our, primary tool for understanding and being understood. Here was what was called a teachable moment, and I could not rise to it and teach. I would now never be a teacher because I could never teach them about language well enough, and if I couldn't teach them about one word, then I couldn't teach them about any words, because words are words, and so what was the point of teaching them anything?

Worse, I quickly realized as I continued reading that I just created a barrier between these kids and their ability to empathize with this poor, young, heart-broken, disillusioned soldier in the story who hadn't had the language skills to express himself or the ability to empathize himself with this nameless sister who didn't write back. And I didn't know what to do, how to backtrack, it was happening so fast. I hoped the story's context would assist me, and I said, "Let's see where the story takes us and if it sheds any light on the use of the word." I vaguely

remembered having read that word again in the piece. I continued as if I was tiptoeing through a minefield.

"A true war story is never moral," I continued. "It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior." I was getting lost in the hypnotic trance of killer prose again. "There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil." C'mon, O'Brien, easy now, these are little ones, war is video games..."Listen to Rat Kiley. Cooze, he says. He does not say bitch. He certainly does not say woman, or girl. He says cooze." A counter had gone off in my head. "Cooze" four times in five minutes in one class, before 8:00am, and once from the mouth of fourteen-year-old girl. I hadn't breathed in several sentences. "Then he spits and stares. He's nineteen years old—it's too much for him—so he looks at you with those big sad gentle killer eyes and says *cooze*, because his friend is dead, and because it's so incredibly sad and true: she never wrote back."

I looked up. The room appeared like a still life. Frozen frantic energy. Colors, distorted shapes. Expressions seeking expression. Faces contorted inward. Young minds with growing pains. I glanced at the page and saw respite was near. A small space up ahead between paragraphs. I soldiered on:

"You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you." My unintentional pause heightened the effect of the reading. I was ebbing and flowing with the narrator, my holy savior, and his author, my new god. He was taking over. He was teaching now. This is how it should be, I thought. I'm no teacher. A vessel was all, my simple calling. "If you don't care for the truth, watch how you vote." This is no time for politics, my lord. But at least this wasn't college. "Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty." Damn, another argument in favor of cursing. "Listen

to Rat: 'Jesus Christ, man, I write this beautiful fuckin' letter, I slave over it, and what happens? The dumb cooze never writes back'" (76-77). Don't listen to Rat, kids, I didn't say. We're in peacetime, people, a nice, little paradise here.

I wasn't ready. Great teaching moments were whizzing past me. I was hiding in the trenches of the book hoping it would ultimately save me if I just kept reading, read further like Paolo and Francesca failed to do, which led them to hell. Read on, John, and you can be saved. I didn't break like the text allowed for. The space said, Stop if you need, collect yourself, gather your flock, young shepherd, and preach the good words about cooze and war and all the other things you know nothing about. But I pressed on toward another little signal lower down the page, a short sentence: "It's all exactly true." Saved by truth again! A sparkler, like before, a tickle around my cerebral cortex, but more of them, warmer, closer-like to real fire. That was it. I was on a quest for truth. There in the reading aloud. There in the conversation taking place in my head while reading aloud. There in the empty space around my beautiful still lifes. There in the room of the first month of my teaching career that felt as if it could end with each clock's tock and the growing number of "coozes" moving in, mouths widening. It was all exactly true. Truth in all its absolute relativity, its deathblack cloak of eyes-wide-shut light of a thousand nights. But I didn't know yet what I was saved from, nor did I understand the nature of the saving force; or I did, but it was entirely inexpressible. It felt like a nerve connecting the brain to the body short-circuited, like when you hit your funny bone, a jolt of unfunny pain but the funny is there and it's not exactly pain. I only half-realized that it did have a name. It was called: Reading Great Literature with Kids.

I couldn't face them anymore that day. It could only be me and the book for what little time remained. And I felt safe knowing that anything I read, or said in direct context of the text, I

couldn't be held accountable for, because not only did I not write it, but the school that hired me assigned it. To the *whole* school, as it was what was called a "Book in Common," whereby all grades read one book over the summer creating a shared a reading experience which just might foster campus-wide literary discussions outside of class. I pictured seniors and freshmen waiting in the lunch line talking about "cooze." I was doing my job well if I read what was assigned to all of us, I told myself. The good word, the good news. And especially if I read it well. I eyeballed the clock. I knew I could finish by the end of class, and I knew I would see them the next day. They would come again. The second coming. Of Truth and Cooze would be a book I could write. I read and I read. And I prayed, almost audibly, because I didn't remember the ending: "God, end this nicely, neatly." What was I saying?

I continued: "In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way." When staring at the dead-on truth of a situation, when you're looking directly into the face of reality, I paraphrased in my head like a good, active reader, "you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*." My heart beat in time with the clock hovering behind me, time, which in fact stood quite beyond me. I knew, while reading, that one certain truth was being laid bare, for me at least. And that was that good stories, the truest ones, were messy, and I was a teacher of teenagers now, and though I didn't know for how long, I did know that things were going to get messy if any good teaching, if any real learning, was ever going to take place. And that teenagers liked things neat. Maybe not their rooms, but certainly what their parents expected of them, what

relationships were true and which were not, where they were supposed to go and what they were supposed to do when they got there and for how long and what signs they were to look for along the way, what exact, unambiguous signs. They wanted fairy tales with endings there would be no mistake about if they were going to survive, the moral of all the stories like cheat sheets in their hand while they read their days from the break of dawn until the sun set so that when the sun set the dark would not represent fear but time for comfortable sleep. I paused again, like something was caught in my throat, then I read:

"All right," I looked at them as if I was asking it too, "what's the moral?" This was getting weird. I paused as if I knew what was coming. "For a long while he was quiet, looking away, and the silence kept stretching out until it was almost embarrassing. Then he shrugged and gave me a stare that lasted all day. 'Hear that quiet, man?' he said. 'That quiet—just listen. There's your moral.'" I looked up at them, glanced down quickly at the coming sentence, looked back up, and said, "You guys want morals to your stories, I understand. But..." and I continued reading:

"In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story," "or anything that's true for that matter," I interjected, before finishing O'Brien's sentence with: "except maybe 'Oh'" (84). I kept feeling like I should stop, talk to them, but I couldn't leave the ending for them to read at home, without me. I felt like their caretaker. What if they were reading alone at night and encountered a giant cooze? Who would protect them?

So I read on: "How do you generalize? War is hell, but...war is also mystery...and longing and love...The truths are contradictory...war is grotesque. But in truth war is also

beauty." I felt like I was falling apart and being reconstructed at the same time. "Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true. At its core, perhaps, war is just another name for death, and yet any soldier will tell you, if he tells the truth, that proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life." The class nearing its end, I could feel the victory of living to see another day at hand. "After a firefight, there is always the immense pleasure of aliveness...All around you things are purely living, and you among them, and the aliveness makes you tremble. You feel an intense, out-of-skin awareness of your living self—your truest self, the human being you want to be and then become by the force of wanting it" (87). Yes! Oh, yes, I want it! Give me the truth! I swear I almost screamed that out loud, and I swear that would've been the end of it all.

And getting near the last page, when I was sure I was clear of the scary "cooze," it gaped: "I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, *You dumb cooze*" (90). I felt like it was their parents' faces staring at me in what would be open house the following week in this very room, older versions of these boys and girls sitting before me and scrutinizing this scum teaching their kids the gutter life. I looked at the clock. I had thirty seconds to say something, something, anything, no, *not* just anything. "Just dwell on these words here, near the end there, see, where it says: 'adding and subtracting, making up a few things to get at the real truth' (91). Think about that for homework, which is to write a page exploring yourself more in depth than that little intro you wrote a couple weeks, months, years, however long ago that was when we first met." Huh, What, and I don't get it, stained their faces, and I added, "Do what you can, but don't come without a page. You can't do it wrong, unless you do nothing." I figured we'd sort it out later, figure something out, together. "Oh, and keep reading. Start from the beginning now. Read the first story in the book, the one with the same title as the book."

As I left the room in a bit of a daze and stepped into the direction of Paul, whose office door was open, I said, Screw it, I don't need to run see Paul for everything. I veered out the main door where I was blasted by morning sunshine and walked shadeless to my office upstairs in Cooke Hall where I promised myself—I had no other classes that day—that for once, I would take the rest of the day off from thinking about teaching. But that was impossible, as I began reading O'Brien's first story in our book, "The Things They Carried," and I realized, with every word I read, there's no hiding from it. I was a teacher now.

* * * *

Next class I had a vague sense of what my assigned homework was, writing about self and making stuff up. I didn't know, it was making less sense in my head as they walked into class. I found myself staring at each student as they entered, looking for some new clue for a good class. I heard students didn't like it when you assigned homework and didn't collect it or even do anything with it. I could respect that. But something that should have been obvious earlier on—would've been had I read the book, but even the title should've tipped me off—was using the things *they* carr... "Liane. Whatcha got in your bag?"

She smiled shyly. "Why? Books."

"Amit, you?"

"Books." They were all coming in.

"Tina, what are you carrying in your brain?" I had to stop calling on her. She was too good.

"Knowledge."

"What specific knowledge is your brain heavy with this morning?"

"Algebra Honors. I have a test next period."

"Weighed down with x's and y's then, are we?" Her face crinkled with puzzlement. "Hey, you back there, Sleepy Peepy, head up. Brandon. Still carrying around some z's from last night's sleep? Kelly. Do you have one thing in that enormous purse of yours that may be kinda personal but that you wouldn't mind sharing?"

"Will I get an A?" I couldn't help but ignore that, and her, in that moment. She had recently come to see me in my office to tell me that she had to get into UCLA, so she needed an A in every course, what did she need to say and do to get one. I was vague, at best.

"Christine? Anything, any one thing in your bag or purse you could share that's even kind of personal, but maybe not too personal to share?" I had an idea, I was feeling around in the dark for its proper shape. I felt like I would know it fully once I saw it embodied in an object, but I didn't know what kind of object exactly. She pulled out lipstick. "Is that personal?"

"Not really." It was too early to press for the personal.

"Why do you carry lipstick, Christine?"

"I like it."

"But why? You like the way it makes you look?"

"I guess."

"You want to look good. Who for?" What was I doing? This wasn't sounding right.

"Myself." Good for her. I was trying to get at what she was carrying around figuratively, like vanity, or pride, but this was dangerous territory.

"Okay, can someone share something personal that's bothering them this morning?" Let's regroup here, I thought. "Yes, Tina, thank you." Never again complain about Tina. Never complain again about Tina.

"I got in a fight with my brother this morning. He's so stupid. He made fun of me at breakfast."

"How old is he?"

"Eleven."

"So, about three years younger?"

"Yeah. I don't usually care about anything he says, but he called me...he called me something this morning and I didn't know whether to cry or hit him in the face."

"What did you do?" Jordan quipped.

"I hit him."

"In the face?" Jordan again.

"Yes."

"Ha!" Jordan, then the whole class laughing, then, thank god, Tina, too.

"Tina?" Time to re-focus. "Didn't you say you had a big math test this morning?"

"Yes."

"And this little altercation with your brother..."

"What?"

"Oh, altercation, uh, fight, quarrel..."

"Yes."

"And that bag. Full of books. Class? You with me here?" Too early to tell. Not one nod. But not one shake. All eyes locked on me or Tina. Gotta keep the humor. We all want to laugh,

and if we're laughing, and someone slips a little learning in during a little chuckle or a big 'ol guffaw, well then... " Jordan." Get the class goofball on your side. Make him work for you.

"Walk to the front of the class and then return to your seat. Do it while imitating the way you think a successful businessman would walk into an important meeting." Why would I call on the class clown for this, though? No idea. He walked up, dignified, did a 180, and just before sitting back down just had to spank himself once, hard. "Class, on his walk up, Jordan carried himself very nicely, wouldn't you say?" They nodded. "What did he seem to carry with him on his way up? Yes, Megan?"

"Confidence."

"Yes, thank you. Liane?"

"And he carried silliness." The quiet ones, always hiding their insights.

"Yes, in the end."

"No," Liane was beginning to carry some confidence herself, and persistence, "not just in the end, because he had to be carrying it the whole time for it to come out in the end when he hit himself." That might have been the breakthrough into greater depth. I kind of froze. I just didn't see that almost metaphysical meteor coming down to earth and landing in my classroom. I knew it wasn't ever going to come from me. Last class, Tim O'Brien. This class, Liane Hinaga.

I hopped to the board. We quickly got on the same page about what was meant by literal versus figurative. I asked them what they literally carry. I wrote on the board: pens, cell phones, lipstick, calculators, etc. Then, figurative: love, hate, jealousy, determination, acceptance. To get more deliberate and connective I asked them what figurative things might match the literal things. What emotional or psychic weight, for example, came with the literal weight of, say, their geography textbook.

"Fear of failure," Meagen said.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's soooo hard," David replied.

"For you, too, huh? That's the only class I ever failed."

"You failed? In school? But you're a teacher."

"Ah, an English teacher, Shauna. Yes. A big 'ol F. Oh, and that was college. I failed a Chemistry class junior year in high school...a 66 for the quarter. Mr. Clark. Worst teacher. I went up to him once during a test and asked him a question and he said, 'That's simple math, son. Sit down.' So yeah, I obviously still carry around some resentment, some anger, some humiliation. But over time, can laugh at it."

"So *you* carry around some silliness too."

"All the time Liane, all the time. It cuts the seriousness down. One life to live. Gotta have some fun, too, right?" Was teaching becoming fun? Permission had been granted, it seemed, and I didn't even know I'd been asking for it.

Class ended and though we still hadn't got to their homework on truth and writing and Who am I? and such directly, the things they carried looked to be a promising start on all kinds of things. It was kind of like we'd done some pre-writing for their first pieces and pre-reading prep for the book while beginning to get deeper in discussions and build a little learning community all at once. I realized, too, that the whole month had been a kind of pre-writing for this new teacher chapter of my life. Revisions were, and would always be, underway as I strove to get at some greater truth about myself, others, everything, no matter the dense fog of anxiety I would almost always be moving through. At least, I knew now, when stagnant, just start moving.

When blank, start scrawling. Then step back, see what you've got, and revise accordingly. Time and space were friends. For now. I had half the load of a full-time teacher.

My Bowling Shoes

It was my first full year teaching high school. The previous year's half load I was carrying was a distant memory, as was whatever progress I'd made as a teacher. I could barely see beyond the eight or ten hours a single day offered me. I had to pick up the pace, cover content, or pretend to, well, just to keep up with the variety of colleagues surrounding me, some assigned to formally evaluate me, including the principal. I couldn't really do the things I had managed to do, had the luxury to do, during my MAP year. Or could not do them well, at least. I had a total of 93 students in my charge. I had three preps—Freshmen English, English II: Poetry/Drama, and all juniors in American Literature—and most of the texts I'd never read before, or only skimmed, or substituted Cliff's Notes for to pass a test in high school. In addition to three grade levels, I was juggling three grading systems, one portfolio-based for Freshmen, one points-based for juniors, and something in between for the sophomores, all of which were always under construction so to speak, debated over as topics in the weekly sub-department meetings. I was trying to figure out if I identified as a teacher in the rigor camp, or in, to use their term, the touchy-feely camp. Do I care more about the students' final drafts, or the process through which they created a body of work over time? Should my lessons be lecture or discussion based? How effective is small group work? Will I give tests and, if so, will I teach to the test? And in the middle of the first semester with these concerns consuming my life inside and outside the classroom, on and off campus, my waking and dreaming states, the English Department Chair Harry told me the principal said to tell me that teachers are expected to take on coaching, too. Or at least be an advisor for a club or after school P.E. activity or something.

Coaching the big sports, fortunately, was already in experienced hands, and clubs seemed all to have advisors, so I was simply to be ready to accept whatever came along. Eventually—and I don't remember if Harry mentioned it or if there was an announcement in campus mail saying the position needed filling—it began to appear as though my assignment in the Spring semester would be, drum roll, Bowling Coach. I didn't really have a choice. I couldn't keep waiting for something else if this position needed to be filled and I was the new guy who needed to do his extra part.

My first thought was, "That was a close one. It could've been Speech and Debate." I'd heard "Debate," as it was called, was all-consuming, involved whole weekends of judging high-schoolers from around the island on their argument-crafting skills, and unlike a given sports season, carried through most of the school year.

My second thought was, "Film club would've been nice. Start my weekend each Friday afternoon with a flick I choose, talk about it over pizza, then head out."

My third thought, which came like a 10-minute fast write as I began to accept the reality, was: "Okay, hey, I bowled in high school and as a kid at parties. I tried out for the bowling team at Jesuit High School in New Orleans and almost made it. We practiced on the lanes that became the nationally popular hotspot Rock n Bowl. In fact, while my friend Todd and I were practicing one afternoon after school, this guy approached and introduced himself as John and said he was going to be buying the place and wondered if we had any suggestions for improvements or...and Todd jumped in and said, "Just make sure you keep it so the balls come back on top, I hate bowling alleys where they disappear and you don't see them until they resurface," and John said Thanks and that he would make sure of it, and sure enough, this guy John invented Rock n Bowl and kept the balls on the exterior..."

I was simply trying to psyche myself up and the thought that I helped co-found Rock n Bowl and was taking my show on the road, across the ocean, in fact, to Hawaii, was doing the trick. For a little while, anyway. Then reality hit: I would be coaching, not rocking out to live music at a bowling alley that served alcohol and seemed to encourage clouds of marijuana smoke to mingle with the cigarette smoke. I would be teaching kids how to bowl to win. I hadn't made the team. If memory serves me correctly, the team I hadn't made at Jesuit was actually intramurals, which was too full, so they had to say no to those who couldn't bowl a 150 average. I had a 146. Todd about the same. Of course that went up to 200+ once Rock n Bowl nights took off in the few years after high school. But now I was in my mid-twenties, and I hadn't bowled but a few times since moving to Chicago for college, and it was time. Here was a chance to reconcile the rock n bowler in me with the nerd who couldn't make the intramural bowling extracurricular activity non-team. And this is how my more involved pep talks to myself usually went.

During the week of hearing of my good fortune, but before getting complete clarity about it, I asked around. Some days I had many classes back to back and saw few colleagues, so I got news of the outside world from my kids. Sure enough some girls on the team, buff, serious tomboys, confirmed that the bowling coach was, in fact, leaving. This confirmed it for me. I pressed further and gleaned that the team kicked ass year after year, won State more than once, travelled to the West coast, and I guessed that each player had her own ball, glove, and thing of hand powder.

A couple of days of considerable anxiety went by before I was able to go to the Athletic office on the other side of the massive campus and properly inquire about what I heard might be my new position. I needed the administration to tell me exactly what its expectations of me were, and I needed to lay out for them, without hesitation, exactly what, and how profoundly limited,

were my limitations. For crying out loud, I thought, Bowling Championships in Los Angeles! How could they be asking me to step into that coach's shoes?

The answer was, they couldn't. They couldn't be. They were not. I wasn't sure where I got that from exactly. I was new. I misunderstood. It was, in fact, intramurals, or ASPE, After School Physical Education, just like the thing I didn't make ten years earlier, only here it was first come first served, not skills-based. I'd be riding on a bus to a bowling alley in town, chaperoning, you could say, but still teaching them to bowl and testing them on their knowledge for they still must earn a C or better to get credit.

None of this changed the fact that I didn't know how to coach bowling. It should've put me more at ease than it did, but I don't get put at ease very easily. No. For me, getting to where stuff's easy is a long, roundabout, self-imposed pilgrimage of pain. If on the most basic level, coaching, or teaching, meant to show someone else how to do something you know how to do, well, I guessed I could show them how to pick up the ball, insert their fingers into the three holes, and what direction to heave it in. And maybe how to score.

My mentor Paul who'd been teaching for almost ten years and was quite used to me and my amusing insecurities by now said, What's the problem then? Do those things. Then sit back and watch them and give them pointers. "Okay. He's right," I thought. "He's always right. But he never seems to take into consideration that Bowling—the bus twice a week, the exams, the thinking about grades and ...on top of my preps and papers and...He's been teaching for...easy for him to say... I'm juggling three grading methodologies, reading what my students are reading...it's true, he's guided me successfully with some of these things, like reading with the students, not feeling like I have to read and become an expert on a text before each class; and he's reminded me, always having to remind me, of things like: they don't care about every one of

your written comments, so allow yourself to do less; and their parents are not going to call the principal and complain about you unless you're snorting cocaine at your desk during lectures or saying to the girls how happy you are the dress code is so lax." All this helped, but I was just a nervous little mess before every class regardless, and a big mess before new classes, even it was bowling. My saving grace was that I didn't show it. I just talked about it a lot to a select few.

* * * *

It was Thursday at 3:40 and I was meeting my bowlers for the first time in a classroom for intros and to go over rules and expectations. I hadn't thought much about my new position over the few months since I'd accepted it, which was a miracle, an 8th wonder, and now there I was staring at the blue folder with all the official stuff in it I'd maybe glanced at once: How-to-score sheets and bowling posture tips and sample final exams. I hated official stuff. I felt the panic rise. The following Tuesday would be all systems go, full on, forward march to the front lines of certain death and—there was a moment right there of pre-thought, of sensing an idea and tackling it before it had time to say to the world, "I am an idea, figure me out"—I grabbed the folder and wrote with a sharpie in big, red letters: Sergeant Wolfe. I didn't quite know why, but it was too late for why to matter. If anything, it was time to go find out why.

I descended the stairs from my balcony office to another flight down from the first floor to the basement classroom where about 25 kids I'd never met, from sophomores to seniors, waited. I walked in with a grimace. I passed out blank score sheets. I drew on the board. I said, I'm Wolfe, You'll call me Sergeant, not Mister, not Sarge, at least not until you've earned it. You're here to bowl. I'm here to teach you how. My goal is to win. That will be your goal, as

well. You are not here to have fun. If you thought that was why you were here, I'm sure you see the door, and can walk to it, and can open it. Just make sure you close it behind you.

To make sure nobody got too uncomfortable and started crying, or worse, actually leaving, I pulled out the *Cajun-in-your-Pocket* I kept in my bag for emergencies. You've heard of those little toys? Hard, heavy, little plastic things, about four inches long, with a little speaker built in. There's a *Mr. T-in-your-Pocket* and *Ray Nagin-in-your-Pocket*. They have six buttons you press to hear stereotypical phrases attributed to its subject. Don't ask why I had one. So I pulled it out and said, "But don't worry," then pressed a button which signaled, "Oooh, I love you like a pig loves corn." I handed it to someone in the front and motioned for him to inspect it—"Always inspect things, son, in case they're bombs"—and pass it around. And as I continued my drill on bus rules, alley rules, tardiness, and of course how they would most definitely FAIL if they did not get at least one strike per day beginning the third week and no less than twelve strikes by the end of the quarter, all of which I called "Basic Training," I noticed the most perplexed look on their faces. And it wasn't a reaction to me. They looked like they were holding an absolutely alien pet in their hands—remember, this was as far as you can be from New Orleans while still being in the same country. And with what became like a soundtrack to our first meeting, this pet just kept right on yapping, "Laissez Le Bon Temps Roule," "We Gon Pass a Good Time Yeah, Cher," "You gotta suck da head on dem dere crawfish," and as if cheering on my new team, "Aaaiyyee!" (I had used a butter knife to disable "Oh Cher, looks like you got a Cajun in your pocket.")

I had 50 minutes to kill, so I started drawing diagrams all over the board, showing little androgynous stick figures around the base of a lane watching their comrade bowl. I demonstrated proper stance and approach but probably looked like a drunken model on a runway. I asked for

volunteers to be pins as I pretended to bowl, but only after they pledged aloud, repeating after me, "I will fall when Sergeant Wolfe bowls because Sergeant Wolfe only gets strikes."

Then I turned to scoring. I'm terrible at the technical, left-brain aspects of things, like computing grades, taking attendance if a computer program is involved, using a calculator beyond +, -, x, and =, and scoring unless it's easy like kids' soccer, one for you, one for me, TIED! I am the least competitive person I know. I like to rant, "No One is LESS competitive than me, I'll take on all you chumps who think you can be LESS competitive than me." So I asked who's bowled before, then who's bowled seriously, then who's bowled seriously AND actually kept score. I got one who was shaky then one who was sure and said to him, "Well then get on up to that board and show us what's what, youngin'." I assisted the boy by writing squares on the board and doing the x for strike, / for spare thing and the little square in the top corner while he explained. When they seemed to be getting it, I said, "Like anything, with practice, you'll pick it up in no time." I looked at the clock. The hour had swallowed itself. I abruptly straightened my back and stared just above their heads at the wall behind them for a long time. Over a minute. Seeing they weren't getting it, I said, "Tennnn Hut." They stood. I saluted, they saluted, and I told them—I couldn't resist—to line up single file. "Cadets! Dismissed." And they disappeared into the always blazing sun of the late afternoon.

* * * *

I didn't really think much about Sergeant Wolfe after the first day over the seven years I would be Bowling Advisor. In some vague way it was clear to me even while I inhabited him that he couldn't last, and that to remain him even for a few minutes during our next meeting waiting for

the bus to the alley for the first time would be overkill. So I was back to friendly civilian Mister. But alert now to other voices that might step in and assist me in times of need. Like later that first week when Vanessa asked me how she was ever going to get a strike: "Vanessa. You have to become the ball. That's the only way to merge with the pins. Look at me, Vanessa. Do you understand what I'm saying to you? Be the ball so that you may become the pins until neither you, nor they, exist."

Large, Containing Multitudes

As alert as I may have been for voices like Sarge's, I couldn't find or summon any in the classroom for a long time. Don't get me wrong, classes were going just fine, but too often things felt stagnant, and my role as teacher felt forced. After-school bowling always felt fun and natural. Teaching English should too. That's all there was to it. I loved reading and writing and talking about reading and writing, so why didn't this feel natural in the classroom? A semester would begin with introductions and I'd establish a good vibe, but outside of the classrooms all I'd do was worry and plan and over-plan. Taking freshmen through *The Odyssey* and juniors through two hundred years of American literature could be boring and tough, and I knew that when it felt this way it was my fault, even if it was at least partially a problem with the students' attitudes. It certainly wasn't Homer's fault, or Dickinson's or Twain's (but sometimes maybe Melville's).

Though I once liked the mystery behind how Sergeant Wolfe came to be, about every week I'd wonder what allowed me to inhabit him that first day as Bowling Advisor. But I always found myself staring into the void. Though I hadn't been a Lit major, I had concentrated in creative writing, so damn it, there was no excuse for any lags in fun. These were my whiny thoughts while rushing to an early morning freshmen English class and running into Paul entering his office. He was beaming, as he often was when he saw me looking harried and disheveled, and said, "Wolfe! Doing some teaching today?"

"What? What do you mean?"

He put his palms up as if to say, "What do you mean what do I mean, you're a teacher going to teach, so you respond, 'Yes,'" and actually said, "Come talk to me after class."

I was the last to enter my room, which was rare and made me feel even more out of sorts. Being reminded I was a teacher before going to teach probably had the opposite effect Paul intended. My mind was suddenly blank. I had selected guiding questions and passages, just as I had instructed my students to do. All the fuel necessary to run a lively class, so long as I felt lively. I put them into groups to discuss two chapters, which was common, but I ended up keeping them in groups for most of the hour, even after they showed signs they were done discussing their questions and were ready for the teacher to enlighten them about some things. About several things probably. I wasn't up for it. You can't just not be up for it when you're a teacher. If you're not up for it you fake like you are up for it and you teach. Who did I think I was?

Paul said once I didn't always have to try to be an A teacher. "I'm a B father some days, a C friend pretty often, and an A teacher maybe a couple of times a semester if I'm lucky. Don't be so hard on yourself."

I didn't care about *The Odyssey* that day, and I had trouble pretending to care. I felt like an F. Like my teaching days were over. I just walked around and listened, pretending this was part of a good plan, to stay in groups the whole class.

"Mr. Wolfe, we're done."

"That's silly, Alex. That would mean you've interpreted and discussed every line and looked up every word you don't know and could expound on the interrelationships between Odysseus and his men and draw inferences about the intra-relationships among him and his men and the gods. In 45 minutes. Back to work now." Zeus, I was in a bad mood. I kept eyeing the clock and then forgot to assign the next two books for homework before dismissing them.

Paul knew I needed to see him. He would always be my number one mentor, even though I wasn't a MAP anymore. His door was open.

"I hear Bowling's going great" He turned his chair to face me directly and leaned back, forever relaxed, in his chair. "I'm sure your English students love you, too." He knew I was uncomfortable with praise, so he just waited, patiently, as if to say, "You've just been praised, deal with it."

"Those are two different things. Am I likable? Maybe, though I was an asshole ten minutes ago. Can I teach them anything? I highly doubt it."

Faced with managing my emotions again, he said, "Well, you just don't know yet. You can't see it."

I cut him off before his usual pep talk could get rolling. "Plus, with bowling I'm a fucking chaperone and you know it. You think they're learning to bowl?"

"I know they're learning something from the Sarge." He pointed to my blue bowling folder sticking out my bag with the inspired red letters from the Sharpie written in that inspired moment before day one of Bowling in the classroom.

"What do you know and how do you know it?" I asked, peeved and desperate for evidence.

"Kapon Richardson told me you made him feel better about a C he got in chemistry and he said, 'Bowling, shoots, Mistah Wolfe's alright.' Melissa Fukushima told me to ask you about the cheer you made up for her when she was frustrated and kept throwing gutter balls. Said she didn't gutter another the rest of the hour."

"You're kidding me. That's our secret."

"You're not leaving my office until you do it, full on. That's what she told me to tell you. So, you're not leaving until you do it. Full on."

It was very difficult to fight off the smile cracking past my grimace. I stood up before Paul, pretend pom-poms in hand, and worked it:

"M-E-L-I-S-S-A---Fukushima Fukushima HEY-HEY-HEY!"

Paul was keeled over in a kind of extended, slow motion, silent guffaw.

"What's that got to do with bowling? Or teaching? If I knew I could get paid for making kids laugh I would've skipped college altogether."

"John. Forget about what you think teaching is. That's obviously getting you in trouble. I haven't seen Kapono enthusiastic about anything before. And Melissa hasn't smiled since she and her boyfriend broke up last summer... what's that tell you? Like with Bowling, you have to bring your out-of-class self into the classroom. Don't be Wolfe and then become Mr. Wolfe as the door shuts behind you. I gotta run to class now."

"K, Paul."

I sat in his empty office for a while. We didn't get to half the things I wanted to talk about, but on my long walk home from the Academy, past the junior and middle schools and through the new Kindergarten Complex and up the mini-mountain to Bowers Campus Housing, I pondered the Zen koan that Paul had, in effect, given me: How do you fuse two versions of your self when you're young and you haven't figured out the first, pre-, non-teaching one and have yet to recognize, or even acknowledge, the second, so-called "teacher self"? Every thought about this mental monstrosity would contradict itself before I could follow it. I couldn't even articulate the question as simply as it should've been: How can two selves be made one?

"That's where thinking gets me," I yelled, as I threw the front door open and saw my Whitman in the center of the floor face down to the middle of "Song of Myself," where I left it as a reminder to start prepping a lesson for Am Lit the following week. I pored through it looking for a quote I had etched on my college notebook back in the day until my eyes finally locked with Whitman's:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself;

I am large I contain multitudes.

It was a piece of the puzzle. A ticket for admission. A guardian's signed slip of permission. Uncle Walt saying, "You will hardly know who I am or what I mean, But I shall be good health to you nevertheless, And filter and fibre your blood" (Koch, *Sleeping* 35). That night I slept dreamlessly.

On the walk to that same freshmen class early the next morning, descending the six flights of steps from atop the small mountain apartments, working my way back from kindergarten to high school, it occurred to me that the reason Sarge or anything like that wouldn't work in the classroom was because Sarge wasn't really a version of myself. He was only a gimmick drummed up to combat nerves and, once used, was killed off and forgotten, not returned somewhere inside me, not put back on the shelves. I then realized when almost at the door that I had not thought about this particular class since I left it, and when you have a class like the last one from which you've removed yourself so completely, you had better make up for it soon. Once dread sets in with these kids there's no turning back.

Sure enough, though, there I was, strolling about their little groups, killing time and wondering what fun could come from yet another discussion of another chapter in this guy's

meandering, unending odyssey? In my head I addressed the hero: Go home, for chrissakes. You have a son, a beautiful wife. Out there people have one eye and women have snakes for hair. Go home, man. I thought about my selves. How do I bring my outside self into the classroom? I didn't know. How do I get my bored self out of this classroom and bring in someone else altogether so I can go to the beach? Does it mean I'm a bad teacher that I had such a thought while teaching?

I swore I would not keep them in groups for more than 20 minutes, but this time, probably because it was the Sirens part, which is pretty cool, they were chatting it up. It's such a big book. No one said I needed to take the whole semester to teach it anyway; we were simply allotted the whole semester. We could branch off and do other things. Ms. Dare had them draw life-size characters and write descriptions and quotes inside each; Mr. Jenkins had them write their own stories using Homer's characters; Lisa, the sub-department head, said it didn't matter what we did as long as our common themes were the book's common themes: Home and Journey. So why was I still doing a linear slog through the bog? I'm creative: "I skirt the sierras . . . my palms cover continents, I am afoot with my vision" (30). But I didn't know what it was.

"Mr. Wolfe?" A girl's voice. "Mr. Wolfe?" I looked but no words were available to me.

"Can we discuss with the whole class now?" another voice asked. I just let the voices pour over me for a minute.

"I don't get the Sirens. What does it mean that they lured the men? How?"

"Looks like Mr. Wolfe's hearing sirens?"

"He's gone." They knew I was just goofing.

Without my having said a thing they returned to the main, big circle as a whole class, and as I stood on the outskirts, they started discussing the Sirens with no direction from me. It's rare

but it happens. I just listened and hovered, and after about ten minutes they got silent again and eyes were on me to push things along. Well, now there were only ten minutes left of class, and any interest left in me for the Sirens or any of these wayward cats and their temperamental gods vanished when Kai had said, "He's gone" a few minutes prior. There was half a bag of potato chips on my desk. I knew we would be moving into poetry eventually—in fact, it was up to me when. It was up to me when we did anything, why did I always forget that? In my head, Walt urged: "I too am not a bit tamed I too am untranslatable" (36).

"Mr. Wolfe," called Eric, a small student half-hidden by his *Odyssey*. "We gonna read this *whole* book?"

"Class, do you all know what 'juxtaposition' is?" Not really. No. Half nods. No hands. I went around to my desk from the outer circle and lifted a plain *Lay's* potato chip slowly out of the bag and held it up until my arm was outstretched. I moved my wrist like a pendulum so that the chip was like an amulet on a hypnotist's chain beckoning them to follow as I side-stepped in slow motion to the back of the room where I crouched down to an open electrical socket. When I touched the chip to the open holes peering out from the metal rectangle I pretended to be electrocuted, my arm convulsing as the chip burst into crumbs all over the floor. I waded back through the thick silence to my desk up front, smiled and said, "That was called, 'Electric Potato Chip.' Thank you." I bowed deeply. "Thank you. Thank you very much. You've been an amazing audience." I think they clapped because they didn't know what else to do. Time was up.

"Your homework assignment is to fast-write on what a poem is and can do. Look up 'performance poetry.' Look up 'juxtaposition,' and write down two ways that juxtaposition was used in class today. "

"What about *The Odyssey*?"

"Who?"

"Do we read the next two chapters, too?"

"Um. That's too much work, don'tcha think?"

They nodded.

"Look. Just finish it by the time you graduate, at which time I'll quiz you on it right before you receive your diploma, as in, the President, Dr. Scott, yes, is handing it to you, you just shook his hand, and right before diploma meets hand I pop out from the floor boards like a wolf-in-the-box and Bam: 'Hi Kendra, 'member me, English One? Describe the bloody deaths of all the suitors when Odysseus returns! And how many arrows did he use?"

"Mr. Wolfe! You just gave the whole thing away!" someone yelled.

"Oh, um, no, the suitors, they *apologize* to Odysseus and then TeLEMachus, or however you choose to pronounce it, learns to breakdance and they all bust out the kalua pig from the imu and feast. Dismissed."

* * * *

I caught up with Paul later in the week to get some feedback on the turn my freshmen class had taken. He said I could get back to *The Odyssey* later in the semester and that juxtaposition could be used now as a teaching tool in the larger scheme, as long as I got the students to see what I was doing at some point. We also looked at the *Handbook of Poetic Forms* some teachers used, and in it we found the "Event Poem." It is described as being like "the written equivalent of a Happening," which is "a dramatic presentation that might use performers, sound, lights, costumes, props, and music. But unlike a play, Happenings have no stage or 'story.' Instead,

strange and unpredictable things happen, some by plan, some by chance, sometimes among the spectators" (Padgett 74). I could get the students to write and perform some of those as we segued into poetry, then we could return to Homer with eyes of poets.

It seemed that Sergeant Wolfe was like a piece of performance art, as well. I told Paul I had been desperate to discover where that dude came from, and he said one of the questions he asks in his Creative Writing class is, "What is Creativity, or Inspiration, and where does it come from? I felt like these were more koans, and I was beginning to answer them through action.

"I want to teach Creative Writing," I said.

"Well, you will, I'm sure, at some point. Until then, it doesn't look like anything's stopping you from teaching it in your classes. Just because they're not called 'Creative Writing'.... as long as they're practicing and progressing in the five skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking, you can keep seeking your voice and allowing them to seek theirs in ways you see fit."

The next day in my Am Lit class, juniors were discussing "Bartleby the Scrivener." I had selected Melville, convinced I could get students to like something if I liked it.

God, they hated every syllable of that thing. "'Prefer not to'? Why? Why does he keep saying that? Is he retarded? Why is he staring at a wall in the end? This is dumb. What have you given us? What are you doing to us?" I abruptly moved to Walt and had us purge ourselves from Melville by reading "Song of Myself" out loud for a bit; and with Hawthorne creeping around the bend, I told them to just read *The Scarlet Letter* by the time they graduate, that it is an important book, but that "Now it's time to sing the song of *ourselves*, so get out lots of paper, cancel all appointments, skip your other classes, and call home to say goodbye, 'cause we're going in and we're taking everything with us."

For the next three weeks we would work on our own epic poems modeled after Whitman's. So much for the "survey" course described in the handbook. I used an exercise from the poet and teacher Kenneth Koch:

Write a poem that is a song of yourself, a celebration of yourself. In ordinary life, we are constantly made aware of the limitation of our powers. In this poem forget the limitations. Write as if you actually are the way Whitman imagines that you are. Write as if you were all of life, as if you were everywhere and in all time and were everyone and everything—seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding, being everything that there is. (38)

Each day throughout the writing process, before discussing Whitman's poems, and then, Emerson and Thoreau, we'd go around the circle and take turns standing and reading sections of our poems-in-progress. The readings became like class-collaboration poems, individual songs reflecting 20 individual juniors coming together in one poetic voice for about ten minutes. Images and thoughts and questions from the lives of all our glorious selves would leap and soar, commingling in a shared aural space.

I told them to listen for how the class reading, as we went around the circle, was like one poem and begins to achieve the kind of expansive unity Whitman was going for. One group of lines from one boy shifts from his catching the winning touchdown to the first and only time he swam in a river when he was six and was with his uncle in Missouri; a girl's voice follows, she grew up in Hilo with her tutu, her cat's name is Grayson, she "skirts the sierras" too in her dreams of playing varsity softball for Arizona State; I add my lines about scuba diving and seeing a squid change from pink to blue to gray to a yellowish brown and how I heard this change relates to its emotions. And so on and so on, they wrote and wrote, and I had to collect

them eventually. The reckoning. For three whole weeks, a record for sure, no junior asked about grades or grading.

By the time they were "done," after I'd made it clear that they would never be done, that, figuratively, they would be writing the song of themselves for their whole lives; after I'd been doing my best to inspire them to keep adding to their poems even beyond high school and that they could send them to me for feedback or just to share when they're 50 years old, I found myself staring at a stack of 10-20 page free verse poems. I wanted to cry, the stacks were so beautiful. I hated that they were suddenly "papers" again, as if they'd been reduced from individual songs. I feebly moaned.

Though I most certainly panicked—things were messy, and thunderheads gathered—I had successfully and effortlessly turned Am Lit into a creative writing class. But now I had to turn it back, somehow. How could I grade their personal songs, written with unfettered spirits and with a sense of trust, I must add, in me, their teacher, that I knew what I was doing and would not suddenly turn on them with loaded red pen? The point was to write without thinking about such things. The stacks of poems were awesome.

Paul and my department chair Harry thought so too. They helped me come up with a plan: I told the students the poems would count as half of one major paper grade, which is a lot, and this half would automatically get an A *if* it was free of typos and thoughtfully put together. The other half would be a two-page reflection (but I called it "essay") comparing sections of their poems to Whitman's with specific reference to poetic elements, like line length, rhythm, diction, tone shifts, etc. The experiment worked because it was born of spontaneity and I didn't over-think it once it got going. The experiment worked because I had supportive colleagues who helped me adjust and reconfigure logistical and grading aspects of teaching which always

seemed absolutely foreign. And even with Paul's and Harry's help, it is safe to say that grades were exceptionally high on these poem-papers, and that was just fine with me. Even more than rigor, give me beauty. Did Thoreau say that?

It made sense that I was never asked to teach American Literature Honors or AP English. Punahou is a very generous, gracious place. I don't know if anyone had ever wanted to teach Creative Writing so badly before. Colleagues with seniority who might've wanted to teach it were probably like, "John wants to? Fine, give it to him. That's where he belongs." Who knows? Detractors might've been saying, "Well, the kids aren't going to get into college if he teaches them regular English." But that stuff was just that stuff. Clutter in my head.

* * * *

And sure enough, I was teaching a section of Creative Writing the following year in a building called "Old School Hall," and nothing I did seemed that odd anymore. I was at home. One boy came dressed one day in full cow costume. Never said why. I didn't think to ask. He participated with his normal, articulate voice, not silly moos like you might expect. One girl said she wished she could take a class to learn to speak with accents from different countries—that she didn't want to learn different languages, just appear to be from many different places. One girl, Erin, midway through the semester, came up to me and said, "From now on, I'm Batman." No one questioned it or even laughed. She was addressed as such everywhere by everyone. Some mornings we'd pass around a thing of shampoo I found in the bathroom of the classroom—what I called "The Shampoo of Creativity"—rub a little in our hair, all 18 of us, and write for the first

20 minutes of class and then read aloud and talk about various forms and about revision as they worked toward a portfolio of best works.

* * * *

A couple of years later—about five after that first day of Bowling—a student I had never seen before named Vaiva came to my office and asked me if I would be the advisor of her new club. Whether it was a standard club, like Chess or Film, or something new and made up, students needed a faculty advisor to take responsibility. I never heard of Fluxus before this junior came knocking. From what I gathered from her explanation, it's a Dada-inspired international art movement, it began in the early 60s, and it can best be described as playfully subversive and out to push the boundaries of what can be conceived of as art. When I asked Vaiva, "What will we do?" and she replied, "I have no idea," I knew for sure I wanted everything to do with it. And before long Flux Club—strapped with scraps of poetry collected from students across grade levels—and I, with borrowed megaphone in hand, would skip forth across campus, "Calling all poets!" on our unified quest for the source of creativity—one of many such activities on our endless, amorphous agenda.

Splash

It was my third year, and I was teaching yet another new course. Well, I would always teach freshmen and was always trying to make English One new, and I was teaching Creative Writing for the first time, but I was also now teaching a course new to the school, as well, one that I helped design with Diane, the Director of Instruction, who was also an English teacher. She named it On Lily Pond, a play on *Walden Pond*, and I helped write the subtitle: An Exploration of Spirituality and Ethics in Eastern and Western Literature. I had not had a conversation with Diane before we began our collaboration. The semester prior I was in the workroom one day and saw a copy of the course proposal left on the printer and thought, "This is what I want to teach." I met with her and she seemed delighted to have me help launch the new elective for juniors and seniors. My short life as a teacher thus far was opening space for my creative self to thrive, and now it was time for the parts of my self I had glimpsed in college, but had since largely neglected, to come together and find their fit. And I would be doing this really for the first time, at age 27, through "teaching" 17-year-olds how to begin to do the same.

The course was both mine and Diane's (I like to think she would allow co-ownership), but it felt like mine initially because I was the first one teaching it, as she only taught one English class a year, and her section would not be until second semester. I put added pressure on myself to make the course a great one in hopes that it would have staying power in the elective circulation and get a big sign-up in coming years. I would teach many different courses over the years, but On Lily Pond would become the course that most directly felt like it was coming from me while teaching it, from my life and who I was, had been since birth and before birth, and who I was becoming. My first students ever, three years prior, were freshmen in their first stage of

one of the most important journeys of their lives—high school—and now I would mentor the boys and girls at the end of that journey and on the cusp of beginning young adulthood in college, a journey I just recently had completed myself.

* * * *

They walked in, mostly seniors, all cliquing up quickly into various sub-societies, all ignoring me and with no fear of teachers anymore, as most had found their place in high school and were winding down. I had few juniors because most still had required courses to take. At a glance my new students seemed to know who they were. Many knew where they were going the next year and to what degree they needed to work hard in my class. Most were naturally social beings by now—one group talked about a concert the previous weekend, some about trips they went on over the summer, some sports—and the quiet, detached ones seemed to be that way by choice at this point. And by now I knew better than to have lengthy introductions and the drawn out pre-class stuff I was used to doing with freshmen, that this would be unnecessary and probably unwanted. But I also knew, especially in a course like this one, that we would have to bond quickly as a community if we were to attain something meaningful together.

"Hey guys, Mr. Wolfe here. Welcome to On Lily Pond. Make some name tags to help me out, will ya? Then jot down a totally honest answer to this question." I wrote on the board and said aloud: "Why are you taking this class?" Then I said, "Don't even put your name, I don't need to know who said what."

After five minutes, I collected them and began reading and responding aloud: "Because I like the name." Many were talking like class hadn't begun. "Yo. Class, everyone, ho, up here,

teacher, me, students, you, the clock says you're mine now, so settle down." They did. This was not a school marked by discipline problems. I hadn't thought about how I was going to respond to their answers, nor had I planned to read them aloud. It just kind of happened, which seemed quickly to put us at ease with each other, because I was remembering my first day goals: to be myself and not take things too seriously—there would be plenty of time for seriousness—and build rapport during the first day. I knew how especially important this was for a class of this nature. Discussions, sharing, opening up, were essential. I needed all of them on my side.

To the first question I responded, "It *is* a nice name for a course. I don't know if this person was being sarcastic, but I thought the name was pretty silly at first myself. In fact, it wasn't until just now that I realized it's a cool name for an English elective, it's unlike all the rest."

The Lily Pond was a beautiful little body of water that surrounded the chapel on campus. It was full of koi and turtles and frogs and lily pads, and it sat equidistant from the lower school, junior school, and academy. The majority of Punahou students have been attending since early grades, and classes across disciplines have used the Lily Pond for a variety of purposes, as did the larger community. The Lily Pond, or chapel—they are inseparable really—is a site for science lab experiments, poetry lessons, marriages, funeral services, and clandestine first kisses—"Hey," I once had to yell, "not on campus you two." Then-senator of Illinois Barak Obama would even speak one day at chapel, on a visit to his alma mater. I had convinced myself that the name was only hokey if you didn't think about all the connections to Walden and the many themes central to the course. The only small problem was that it connoted something other than a rigorous and serious English course. That, and its lack of clarity in identifying the course content. At least with other electives like Identity and Culture and Fiction and Film students had

a fairly clear idea about the course just by reading the title. And who knows who read past the title?

I read some more. "I like swimming.' We won't be swimming. 'I like the Lily Pond.' Well, we may go there, once or twice, for something, I don't know, I'll have to think about that one. I'm open to ideas. 'I took it because I thought the class would be held there.' Well, I'm sorry you were misled. Hey, question: Did anyone read the course description before selecting this elective, this course that you *chose* to take?" No response.

I continued reading. "I need it for credit to graduate.' This is true. Yes, for those of you unclear on the new installment of graduation requirements, pick up a pamphlet by the door on your way out. There have been assemblies about this, and your deans probably explained, but if you missed all that, make sure you find out. In short, you need to take a certain number of courses for Critical Thinking credit and a certain number for SECR credit. SECR stands for Spirituality, Ethics, and Community Responsibility. You'll get SECR credit for this course, and you'll discover why and what that means as the course goes on."

I read more. "'I heard you were cruise.'" That's like, slack. Easy, as in, cruise control. I *had* heard I was getting that reputation. I knew that was my rep among the little voices in my head, but not out and about. What can I say? If in the end it was between a B+ and a B- I gave an A- if a student seemed to be doing everything he or she could to be a promising human being. They all seemed to be. Sue me. No, I just struggled with making the grading thing work. So unnatural.

I deflected that question and asked again, "Seriously, though, did anyone read the description my colleague and I spent so long writing? Surely some of you read..." One hand. "Yes, um, name?"

"Nicole."

"All of you, face names out toward me, that's the point, right? Nicole, yes?"

"Something about spirituality and getting to know yourself better?"

"Thank you, and is that why you took it?" She shrank into a pool of shyness. I had to be really careful with this personal stuff. I had basically just asked a teenager, in front of other teenagers, if she was here to find herself, one of the dorkiest things ever. They weren't there for any of that, who was I kidding? They were there because they heard I was an easy grader and that I was fun. Well that was just fine. I would keep trying to get better at being a harder grader, which sounded like a ridiculous goal. Fun I could go along with. It could be my way in to them, get them feeling like they're having some fun, and just when they're not looking, Whack! Like zen master to disciple, hit them with DO YOU KNOW THE SECRET OF YOUR SOUL YOUNG MAN?

I quickly fixed the situation by saying, "Uh huh, ok, then, of course that's not why we took it, we don't really know why...in fact, maybe we all took it because we wanted to go find out why we signed up for it. We didn't know, some outer-planetary force moved our eyes to the On Lily Pond course description and something in our veins caused a current in our blood that moved down our arm to our pen fingers which quivered across the form leaving us breathless and in a state of perfect mystery as to why we just signed up for that silly sounding class. Let's begin there, shall we? With mystery. The not knowing but the yearning to know, to go find out. The mystery of everything seems like a good place to begin. When faced with things unknown, what do we do? Yes, ask questions." I was moving. Drinking coffee fast and talking fast. "What do we do when we don't know and we go to find out but no one else knows either? What are some examples of questions that don't have simple, or readily available answers? Instead of me

just telling you the kinds of questions I'm talking about, because I think you already know, or can guess, you tell me. What are some examples of the Big questions of life? This is what the course is about. Big Questions. Yes, umm, Ryan?"

"Why can't we have superpowers?" Always befriend the class clown, the wise guy, right away. Remember that that was you, that as early as sixth grade, you got an F for conduct for raising your hand, after the teacher said he couldn't have us constantly going to the bathroom, and asking, "Can we bring buckets?" Get him on your side, turn him into a productive leader, for he will make or break the rhythm of the community.

"That is serious. Why can't we? More importantly, what questions need to be asked to assist that one, to help that one achieve a higher level of direction and purpose?"

His face, their faces, read "Huh?" I lost them. "Well, here's what I mean. I'll pretend I asked the question. Here's a glimpse into my brainstorm on that question to give it a lift upward: What do I mean by superpowers? What is a superpower? Where am I getting this term from? Tv, or a particular book or game? Which one? Is it super because it's superhuman, that is, do humans not currently possess such powers? Who does, then? What do I mean by power, anyway? And who's this question addressed to? God? What's that? Who's God? Does he exist? Why did I just assume it's a him? Etc. Ryan? Good work. Class, let's take my *and* Ryan's lead and write down, say, one serious-minded question, and one, well, not that Ryan's wasn't serious, I can tell Ryan is a very serious young man who is here to learn at all costs—at all costs, people—and one, let's say, more fun-spirited question. Silly, if you will, but silly only on the surface. Silly with hidden, serious intent. Like Ryan himself. Right, Ryan?"

"Right, Mr. Wolfe." He smiled. Yes. I had him. First day. Points.

"Mr. Wolfe?" another asked. "What kinds of questions again?"

"Okay, I don't want to give too many away, there are so many, though. I want to see what you come up with. But, questions like, for the silly-fun type, I guess, What food would you choose if you had to pick just one for the rest of your life? or, If you could be any insect, which one? And the serious type, I'll just use the most common, obvious one, so ya'll can't use this one: What's the meaning of life? Two good questions that could generate many responses, more questions. Don't worry yet about writing all the questions that the initial one could lead to, but be thinking of those.

After five minutes, as class was winding down rapidly, I just had each student introduce him or herself and offer a fun question which a few commented on, like, "If you had to choose between flying and breathing under water, which would you choose and why?" Knowing my proclivity toward letting intros extend across vast expanses of time, as well as letting silliness go on a little too long, I told them their homework was to take the serious question and turn it into a five-part question. "Like," I demonstrated again, "if my initial question was What's the meaning of life? which, remember, you can't use, at least not exactly as I've used it, but yours can be related, then the four connected questions that stem from that one might be—no right or wrong here—might be: How would I know if I found it? Does anyone know? How can you tell? And what is and who determines meaning anyway? Get it? Good. And, boys and girls, listen. You guys, most of you seniors, but I'm speaking to everyone here, do NOT fail to do your homework for this course. It won't take long. It's essential to the flow of classes. Don't ever say you didn't do it because you didn't understand it, because the only wrong way is no way. That sounds like a poem we'll read soon. See you next time."

After a good two classes workshoping their questions as a way of warming them up for the kind of subject matter we'd be tackling, not actually discussing the questions themselves

(that's what their first paper would be for) but practicing how to open each one up, oiling their minds for deep discussions to come as we approached the difficult texts, I wanted to get them personally invested in the course's subject matter, and we needed some common ground with respect to concepts such as spirituality. It was the second week. I last saw them in our first Large group amidst silence, nothing, and paper airplanes. No one asked me about Large after I put a finger straight over my lips upon its mention, as if to say, shh, it's a secret, no words, please, respect the Nothing. It didn't matter if they really got that. Or if I did either, yet. I felt readier than ever to begin an exploration of self with students in ways I couldn't even yet imagine, and I was surprised and delighted this feeling came so early in the semester, and having connected with them through, of all things, nothingness. My suspicion that I had made this up, convinced myself of a connection and of my readiness, also did not matter.

Before that Large group, in the last small group seminar of the first week (there were three smalls followed by the one large each week), I had asked them for homework to write a list of their most memorable moments ever. I said to take that out and turn to a blank page in their notebooks. I wrote on the board: "Spirituality-a working definition," and said to write fast and whatever came to mind for ten minutes. We discussed the concept, and at some point during the discussion, as notions of the Self's quest for understanding emerged, and student's comments ranged from doing for Others, to a connection to Nature, to different takes on God, I saw the acronym SONG staring me in the face. Our SONGs. The SONG of our selves.

Inspired, I told them to go home and divide up and add to their list of memorable moments from their lives, according to the acronym. I said: "Self-Others-Nature-God. Put under Self moments where you were alone, or had insights into yourself, or anything that seems to fit just Self; for Others, moments where you had insights into your relationship with others in

general, or a specific person, your father, a girlfriend, the whole human race, or where the moment was memorable because you were among people; for Nature, put down moments where Nature played a role in making the moment memorable, a sudden rainstorm, an unexpected rainbow, it doesn't matter if you can also put a moment in other categories, there's no right or wrong. And for God, maybe it was a moment of prayer, or of a time you questioned God's existence. This isn't a religion class, you don't have to believe in God, but we all find ourselves accepting or rejecting or feeling ambivalence toward a belief in God, so you would still have something to put in that category. Try to have at least five moments under each category for next time."

Next class I had written on the board before they arrived a quote from a Kenneth Koch poem called "The Boiling Water": "A serious moment for the match is when it bursts into flame/And is all alone, living, in that instant, that beautiful second for which it was made" (*Collected* 332). I often planted little things that I never addressed, unless asked, I think as a recognition that learning comes from many sources, many of which are not direct, but hover along the periphery of our conscious lives and become, or not, available to us when we need them. I think I did this as an unconscious paean to the Mystery, an invocation to the Unknown, alms, as a way to let what I could not see nor understand come in and do its thing whenever and wherever I fell short, which was often. As a way of picking up my slack, so to speak. Things like at the end of that first Large group when I gave them blank directions for their lives, things I'd never explain, and that they usually would not ask me about, things that would remain like fireflies sparking and dimming in the night, present yet elusive. None of this was I conscious of myself at the time. It just felt random, but I sensed it had purpose.

I had them look at their lists of SONG moments and select one, any one, and before putting it on the board, to chisel it down to the actual moment, a succinct blip of time—so, not this great day you had with your big brother before he went off to college, but either the moment you realized something important about the day, or him, or your relationship, or the minute or so during the day that stood out as the most significant in making the moment so memorable, be it something that was said, a look, something about the weather, whatever. "Just do your best," I said, "don't worry too much about all my little directions. Go with your feelings."

When 18 moments were on the board, we studied them carefully together. They were all so different. I had them write observations about patterns, questions, connections that arose, and we discussed tentative conclusions that could be drawn about moments, about what we were calling spiritual, and about the importance of recognizing and reflecting upon such moments in our lives. For instance, some occur unexpectedly, and in fact arise out of the unexpected. This would lead to a question like, Can we seek life-changing moments or must they come to us? If they have to just happen, do we just sit around and wait? One student's moment would be obviously profound—being with her grandmother in the hospital as she took her last breath—and others would seem common and trivial, so I'd try and make sure students saw their own as potentially equal in profundity.

For instance, a boy said his most memorable moment ever was this great day surfing. I helped him narrow the day to a particular wave he caught and asked what about the quality of the wave, the weather that day, his feeling as it lifted him and he rode it to shore, made it special. Was it a first wave caught, the longest, had he been trying all day, or for years, to have such a day, and what role did expectations, or the letting go of expectations, play in making the whole experience powerful enough to put it at the top of his list?

I realized after a couple of great classes that we could go on and on. And there were texts that needed to be read, so, moving things along, I turned what we were in the middle of doing into the next big writing assignment. It would have three parts, and be 5-6 pages minimum. They were to tell the story of the moment in the first part, what led up to it, or whatever needed to be shown in whatever way they thought best; in the second part they were to explore what made the moment memorable, or spiritual, if they wanted to go there, and how the moment shaped who they were, or changed them somehow, and in what way. Finally, they were to draw some grand conclusions, however tentative, about moments in general, how they function in our lives, and what further questions thinking about moments led them to. I kept reminding them, so they'd feel as uninhibited as possible, that there was no right or wrong in how they structured the piece and especially not in what they said.

"I'm not looking for you to give me answers that match what's in my head," I told them. "Hell, my mind is usually blank anyway. I'm here to learn from you. You're teaching me. I just pose as a teacher, I'm here to get free education from you. There, I said it. The truth. You found me out. You should be getting paid. Now go write. And enjoy the writing, or you can't pass this class. I'm grading you on your degree of enjoyment." I often made a mockery of grading, which was not fair to students who held As up in their mind as a grail of sorts. I couldn't help it. I knew I'd never be able to grade the quality of their spiritual journeys, only the grammar and such, so I either pretended that I would never have to grade, until the dreaded end of a quarter, or I deflected questions and concerns about grades with absurd comments. I think I was an excessively high grader to overcompensate for an immensely vague grading "system."

* * * *

With their first papers on Big Questions coming in, and their second, three-part piece underway, I was on a roll. This was a new feeling for me. This had been my most successful start to any class. I had found some voice. I felt ready to dive in to the difficult material coming, like "Teaching a Stone to Talk" by Annie Dillard, *The Tao Te Ching*, Alan Watts' *Become What You Are*, and Thoreau's "Solitude." Not to mention our first poetry anthology. The next Large group, something I used with less and less originality than that first time, and more and more practically, something I was not particularly proud of—I just couldn't come up with great new ideas weekly for a silent hour-long class—I had us make a silent "pilgrimage" as I called it to the actual Lily Pond, with the first book we'd be reading together. This ingenious idea came about when I realized I had forgotten to tell them to bring their books to the next small group. So I had written on the board as they walked in, "If it's not with you now, go get your already Enlightened Hearts, and take them gently in your hand and on a pilgrimage to the Lily Pond where you'll read them inquisitively and compassionately." *The Enlightened Heart* was a collection of spiritual poems from across centuries. It was perfect in a way, because they could process it alone first, thumb through it at their leisure, read some or many or meditate on one the whole class, and they would already be doing their homework, preparing for the next small group, so I could be sure we'd all be on the same page then, which would ensure a productive class.

The *Enlightened Heart* sessions went beautifully because I felt little sense of urgency to hurry and try to cover the whole book, as in a survey course. So, if one line of one poem turned into three classes, the class had been set up to allow for this. With the freshmen, I got myself into trouble by spending three classes on one passage of a text because there was great breadth to cover. Here, there was only nothing to cover. I jest. Sort of.

At the start of the first small group discussion class, after the Large group pilgrimage, I said, "Class, please take out your *Enlightened Hearts* and turn to the most significant poem in the book, on page 170.

"Mr. Wolfe, that page is blank in my book," Ethan said. It was one of the blank pages in the back.

"Class, allow me to read." I stood up, cleared my throat, and let the silence move in upon us all. Again, it didn't really matter to me that I may have been the only one getting something out of this moment. What did matter to me is that the moment got stored in them for use, somehow, later, and, I hoped, as more than a little prank. I stood there for a long time with the book held up before me. I didn't move. Just breathed. Not a sound in the room for almost three minutes. I slowly lowered the book, sat back down, and said, "Your turn. Pick a poem that struck you, we'll read it aloud, and proceed from there."

We were in this together. The self's SONG journey, theirs and mine. Little did they know that what made it so easy to stand before them in silence for so long was that I was stalling out of nervousness over them picking poems I didn't understand. Not that I hadn't read things for the first time with students before, I had done that quite a bit; but a lot of these poems were intimidating, some for their complexity, some for their simplicity, and most for how they seemed to call for a deep background in zen philosophy or of the Christian or Sufi mystics, to understand. I thought, "The problem is, they're only teenagers." Then, I remembered: "Oh, yeah, that's why there's no problem. I am a teacher of teenagers." I had my little pep talks down, ready to go for just such moments of doubt.

"Maggie? We haven't heard from you in a while. Will you start us off with a poem you like?" I could see something was troubling her, something outside of school or class. She shook

her head. "Maggie, good news. Just pick a poem, point to someone else to read it, and Voila! You will have participated in class today." I was beginning to learn not to first assume a kid was just unprepared or being unruly or uninterested, but that, hey, they may actually have things going on in their lives that were more important than my class.

"Okay, the one on page 40. Blake, read it." As they flipped to the poem I managed to whisper to Maggie to take ten outside of class if she needed some time to deal with whatever. She did. Sometimes students took advantage of my permissiveness and openness. As the years went by, most of them seemed not to. As long as I was as honest as was appropriate, kind, and gave them the respect they deserved as fellow human beings who walked on parallel ground with me, I usually got all that in return. It was easy, I just always kept in the forefront of my mind that I was once a teenager and it sure would've been nice if more adults, teachers especially, treated me how I was treating my charges now.

Blake read a poem by Izumi Shikibu:

Watching the moon

At dawn,

Solitary, mid-sky,

I knew myself completely:

No part left out.

I told them to write observations and questions for a few minutes to prepare for discussion. There was a lot to work with here. Kids asked how by watching the moon one could come to know oneself better. I asked them about times in nature when they may have had a similar experience. Many had moments to share. We talked about what it meant to know oneself completely. Most agreed they didn't know how one could, and that it would be hard, but that we could always be

working on it, on ourselves. We speculated on the ways we could know ourselves better, like interacting with as many people who were as different from us as possible, keeping an open mind. I threw in reading a lot, of course, the token English teacher response, and then we spent the whole rest of class on the last line. It was still my style, as I've said, to just let discussion go as long as the discussion needed to go. Which is why I had pushed for fewer texts than most English classes. Which is why I was probably considered "cruise" by students and some colleagues alike. Oh well.

"What's 'No part left out'?" they asked. I had them freewrite on what they saw the parts of themselves to be. We got heart, soul, emotions, intellect, blood and skin. And hair, which keeps growing after you die ("so our hair is immortal?"), and mind and spirit. So many had so much to say about this line that I ended up putting them in groups toward the end so they could all get their voices heard. The next day I said we would move on to other poems, that we needed breadth as well as depth if we were going to tackle all the themes of the course, and I assured them that unfinished discussions left seeds in their wake and future discussions, in this class and beyond, would sprout in direct response to what we had planted there that day.

I was finally reaching a point where I was comfortable not knowing, as long as I didn't hide that feeling from the students. Although I was rarely comfortable when thinking about what to do in the vast silence of Large group. That first one that ended in paper planes seemed like a one hit wonder. Before we met in small group again there was another Large. Large was about giving them an experience. I thought about this upcoming sustainability fair on campus where there would be educational booths set up and fresh produce grown by classes from across grade levels for sale. An email had gone out asking if anyone could help with this massive corn-

shucking effort over by the chapel. I checked and sure enough, Large group coincided with when they needed shuckers. I knew some shuckers.

When my students walked into the big classroom, a poem from our book was waiting for them on the board. I was waiting for them by the Lily Pond outside of chapel. The poem, by Layman P'ang, read:

My daily affairs are quite ordinary;
But I'm in total harmony with them.
I don't hold on to anything, don't reject anything;
Nowhere an obstacle or conflict.
Who cares about wealth and honor?
Even the poorest thing shines.
My miraculous power and spiritual activity:
Drawing water and carrying wood.

I replaced the last line, however, with "Corn shucking by the lily pond," followed by, in parentheses, "which is where you should go immediately, and in silence." I would confess my tampering later, and return P'ang's words to his poem back in small group, where we would end up having a full class discussion on how "drawing water and carrying wood," or corn shucking, could be seen as giving one miraculous power, and how it could be spiritual activity. One kid noted that everything, just standing, could be spiritual activity if your mind was in the right place. Another kid asked, "But is it really about your mind?" And in this manner, class carried on, the students guiding me, as they so often did.

My other classes were going well, too, but my Lily Pond class I was obsessed with. When I went upstairs to my creative writing class right after the corn shucking discussion I

glimpsed the notion that all classes should be, at their core, like the Lily Pond class. I felt like I was merging with both classes as they merged, the spirit and the creative spirit, or something like that, and that all classes everywhere and for all time should have at their core a SONG of some kind, a nod, or glance of recognition at least, however fleeting, to the Mystery of everything, the source where all desire to learn comes from. For, without this mystery and the desire it inspired, why would we even pick up a book or pen, or take a stroll outside, if we didn't want to learn something?

These thoughts circled my brain as I entered class. We always wrote for the first 20 or so, either with a prompt from me or from a student, but on this day when I asked them, as usual, to turn to a blank page, I paused for a long time. They sat there staring at me, wondering what antics I was up to. I smiled mischievously and said, "What? Go 'head."

Someone said, "What's the prompt? Or do we just write anything?"

I said, "Face the blankness and grapple with its mystery staring at you in the face, waiting, patiently, saying, 'Whatcha gonna do about me?'" They just smiled and kind of shook their heads as if to say, "That crazy, silly teacher of ours, whatcha gonna do with him?" and started writing.

Back in Lily Pond I needed to wind down our discussions on *Enlightened Heart* poems and remember what I had told them: That these questions and themes will be coming up throughout our semester in other texts, and, we could hope, throughout their lives. I devoted one more day to poem discussions and assigned a paper asking them to pick three, including at least one we'd not discussed in class, and make connections among them.

That last day on the poems I felt off. Some days, teachers are off. Teachers are people too. Some days they're just rusty. Some days they're blank. What I was learning about myself is

that when I was blank, that meant spontaneity was waiting to leap upon the blankness like an accidental paint splatter. Something Jackson Pollock said comes to mind: "I don't use the accident, because I deny the accident." I don't use my unintentional teacher's block as an excuse for a class going poorly or as a reason for it going surprisingly well because I deny the thought that the block is, in fact, truly unintentional, and recognize instead that it has arrived as an unexpected gift from the divine abyss or whatever name best suits those who know what I'm talking about. I would not have been able to articulate this back then, but the seeds of this understanding were beginning to develop at this time, and over the years of teaching On Lily Pond I would come to understand more fully such things. And I am not saying that, just because I was able to allow room for spontaneity to move in that anything like clearly identifiable learning took place, or even that something productive came out of it, necessarily. I am not saying that. Don't send the people evaluating the school for accreditation to my class. But it was...something. Something better than making a fool out of yourself trying to be someone you're not. Embracing the not knowing. Know when you don't know. Something like that. Make "I don't know" your mantra as long as it's immediately followed by "let's go find out." These are the insights that would eventually manifest from days like the one that follows, our last one flipping through and reading at random from our *Enlightened Hearts* together, my eighteen young seekers and me, before joining Siddhartha and Govinda on their journeys.

Ryan, who had continued from the beginning to balance successfully smartass self with productive leader self, got us started by reading aloud a poem by Ryokan, one he said caught his eye because, "that first line is so totally me."

Too lazy to be ambitious,

I let the world take care of itself.

Ten days' worth of rice in my bag;
A bundle of twigs by the fireplace.
Why chatter about delusion and enlightenment?
Listening to the night rain on my roof,
I sit comfortably, with both legs stretched out (98).

Ryan has a strong, stubborn personality, he's popular and outspoken, and he's a great guy. He did as little work as possible, partly because, I think, he's so good at football that he was already set for college, and Bs and Cs were just fine by him. But he's so much better than Bs and Cs, he just didn't see that nor did he seem really inclined to try to see that. He always did his homework for me, but the absolute bare minimum. His participation was consistently, well, vocal, if not particularly insightful. He was a talker. On this day he seemed more passionate than usual, but passionate about celebrating, or justifying, his laziness, trying, in fact, to make a case for it.

He said, "Yeah, just do whatever, be happy. I like what the guy's saying."

I said, "Do you think that's really what he's saying, or, class, is there something more to it?" I hesitated to say "beneath the surface," because I was wary of getting them to think all poems could only be appreciated if you sought out underlying meaning, which may or may not be there.

"You mean, like, something hidden?" Jessica asked.

"Well, I mean, do you think it's clearly and definitely and automatically a poem that's espousing laziness and lack of ambition?" I was kind of nervous. It *did* seem that it was to me. What was Ryokan doing to me?

"Mr. Wolfe," piped Seth, another slacker student, but unlike Ryan, without any history of speaking up in my class. "We've been talking a lot about illusion and things like enlightenment

and stuff, and this says why, what's the point? I kind of agree. I mean, why do we need to talk about that stuff all the time?" Son of a! The whole foundation for the course trembled, its trunks exposed as twigs.

"It just seems like," added Katie, "that the guy in the poem has just what he needs and that's enough. There's a time to talk about important stuff and a time to just be quiet."

I felt a little better. I was about to go off, take what she said and run with it, using it to refute to the core everything Seth and Ryan had said, had done. But I just sat there. I'm sure there was truth in what they had said, too. A good part of me knew Ryokan was essentially right. Talk, words, all transient, without value when facing the purest form of reality, the reality of life and death, beyond which nothing really matters. But c"mon! We weren't on a zen pilgrimage together, me and these kids, off to the woods and streams with a koan in our heads out to find a bodhi tree to sit under, full lotus, and disappear into and out of ourselves. This was life 101. That was life 1001. Actually, this *wasn't* life 101, this was high school English class. Plus, I was up against pure Western thought here. I didn't know what I could say to young workaholics (many) who have been working and competing to be the best in everything for over a decade in one of the best college prep schools in the capitalist empire of America, and who were just learning the value of community service. Ryokan was a hermit! I thought of him and laughed, finally breaking what was becoming one of the only awkward silences of our time together. After all, the silences of Large group, awkward as they could feel sometimes, were set. In small, language was expected, the only tool we had to work through the morass of silence.

I remembered the bios in the back of the book and thought it might be interesting to check out Ryokan's. "So. Let's see what this guy's all about anyway, shall we? Go to the back and let's find out." We read it quietly and I picked up in the middle when it became entertaining.

"Ryokan," I cleared my throat, a little nervous still, "is especially known for his kindness and his love of children and animals; he even used to take the lice out of his robe, sun them on a piece of paper on the veranda, then carefully put them back into his robe. He used to smile continually, and people felt 'as if spring had come on a dark winter's day.'" My students were shaking their head and smiling as if to say, "that crazy, silly Ryokan."

I had abandoned long ago any concern about the abruptness of my transitions. In fact, I convinced myself, the more suddenly I shifted from one thing to another, the more it was like I was creating an effective juxtaposition for us to muse upon later, should the subject ever come up. I said, "We probably have time for two more short ones or one long one." Thank you, Ryokan, for participating, see you another day. "Yes, Theresa."

"It's by Basho, on page 92. I don't get it. I mean, how's that a poem?"

"Go 'head and read it first," I said.

She did:

Old pond,
Frog jumps in—
splash.

I had secretly hoped I would never face this poem with students. I didn't know what to do with this poem outside of my own head. I knew it was deep, I felt its depth, and I had no way of articulating it.

The year before when visiting the class of a colleague, a seasoned professor of Humanities of twenty years and a published poet, this poem came up. He read it. The class was already intimidated by the guy's brilliance. I couldn't wait to see what he was going to do with it, to say about this poem, which I felt I only understood because I studied eastern religions for a

semester in college. His class was silent, as mine was. He said to them, "There's nothing, the frog jumps in, then something happens. A splash. Monumental thing going on here." He kind of grumbled something and they moved to a different poem.

Even though I felt validated in also not being able to do much with the haiku among high school students in a quick, easy way, his comment about the jump and splash being monumental stayed with me for a long time. I repeated, without giving the guy credit, "C'mon, monumental thing going on." Nothing. They certainly weren't splashing about.

"From nothing, comes something, which could not come without the nothing, which would not exist to begin with if there wasn't also an inevitable something waiting to validate the existence of the nothing." That's what I wanted to say but didn't. I just thought all that but was frightened of it in the moment for some reason and moved to a different poem after first saying, "This poem scares me, frogs, splashes. I'm not ready to go there with you people. It's just too deep. Not just for you but for me, too. Maybe in the next life. Of course, I do expect you to feed me at least one of the secrets of the universe before you graduate, and should you be able to incorporate your growing understanding of this little gem into that secret, I would be most grateful." A baffled look on their faces. I just chalked it up to another elusive firefly moment they could think about, or not, later on down the line.

Funny, as much as I dreaded Large group, or rather, trying to think of something to do there, it often served to address moments created by poems like this one, which words were insufficient to address. I thought that maybe in a near future Large I'd have them to go to the pond again, with this poem in mind, and just sit for the whole hour staring at the lily pads, the frogs, listening for the splash. But I was pretty sure they'd resent me for that one. I don't think I ever did that, but something tells me I might have just blocked it out.

Finally, Seth, two shares in one day, volunteered to read Issa's little poem on page 99:

The man pulling radishes
pointed the way
with a radish.

They didn't get this one at all. They were only trying to see it as metaphorical and were making things very difficult for themselves, treating "way" as if it could only be "The Way," and as if the radish must be a symbol for something they had to figure out. Good 'ol western thinking. As with the previous poem, I did but did not have words I felt capable of expressing. I wasn't a lecturer, and if I had any lecturer in me, it was dwindling faster and faster in this course.

"Mr. Wolfe, what does this poem mean? Why is it deep? Why is it in this anthology of deep, spiritual poetry, if it's not symbolic?" someone asked.

I said, "Y'know...picture yourself that day shucking corn outside chapel. Was anyone in the corn-shucking zone? Yeah? Just shucking away, not thinking about anything else. You know, the zone? That thing you get into when you're playing a sport and it's all just coming directly from you without any thinking. Natural like. If someone, a visitor to the school perhaps, had come up to you when you were shucking and said something like, 'Say, where's the chapel entrance?' can you see yourself not saying anything, just pointing automatically in the direction of the front door just around the way because you know so completely and automatically what that way is? And what might you point with? Yes! my friends, yes. The ear. You'd point with the one thing you know best and have basically become one with in that moment. Another monumental thing going on, you, perfectly at one with your miraculous, corn-shucking activity, pointing the way to the simple truth with all you know, that thing, that activity you are perfectly at peace with, all you know in that moment. In that moment you are exhibiting perfect truth."

It was moments like this, and there were several, where I convinced myself I was an excellent teacher even though what I was saying sounded to me like complete bullshit. I didn't like it when I talked too much. It was enough sometimes, on these rare occasions, to feel like a good teacher for a change, to let the confidence seep into me. I knew I would never completely believe that I was a great teacher, but that I could be great at always becoming. These moments of confidence were enough to get me from one pad to another so I didn't—splash—drown.

I glanced at the clock as they shifted in their seats, and with seconds left, said: "The students and teacher, holding their partially but increasingly enlightened hearts, pointed the way with"—I held up my book to the sky and signaled for them to do the same—"their *Enlightened Hearts*." Books raised above us, I waved mine forward in a single thrust, as if to say, "Enough of this for now," and they imitated as I followed with, "see you next class," and then, of course, forgot to assign homework or tell them to bring the next book we'd be reading. A fitting end to the first third of our semester together.

Epilogue: Nothing, Like Paper

"Looking out from the center, you can talk about the circumference. But really, there is no circumference. Everyone, everything, is joyfully included" (*Enlightened* Foreword, Mitchell).

And so it went. Teaching and learning. Learning as a way into teaching. I looked up one day and found myself in my ninth year and realized I was eligible for a sabbatical the following year. I would soon discover that my wife needed to spend that next year in Tanzania, East Africa doing field research for her PhD dissertation in medical anthropology. I would begin to reflect upon a near-decade's worth of insights into myself and where I had taken my students in pursuit of our SONG, truth, and the creative spirit, and I would propose to accompany my wife and continue that exploration abroad. I would continue setting my students off on their journeys for these elusive grails and find myself mid-year opening a letter stating that I had been granted a sabbatical.

Come summer I would find myself packing the things I would carry for a year on the other side of the world where I would again be traveling through dark, negotiating the empty, formidable landscapes of the soul and of vast silence and emptiness, once again measuring myself against the negative space inside my own still life...

Where I would carry an asthma inhaler, loneliness, anti-malaria medication, incomprehensible joy and Prozac and fear of the unknown...

Where I would lose myself time and again and find myself, about a month in, on a trek with my wife deep into the West Usumbara Mountains facing the pure blankness of the current page of my life...

Where I would be sitting on a rock just outside the shade of a single tree, upon a cliff in the rural mountain village of Bagai, above the tiny town of Mlalo...

Where I would be doing nothing from morning until night unable to accompany my wife on her day's trek to collect plant specimens in the forest with village women elders...

Where I would sit with limited language in my throat and with one book, *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions*, but unable to read, stunned into deep solitude, and with an empty notebook on my lap and an inkless pen...

Where the phrase "nipo tu"—I am just here—one of the few Swahili phrases I knew outside of basic small talk turned over on my tongue and swished around with my saliva until it seeped down into my belly...

Where I would stare over the cliff's edge across rooftops and hear voices in kisambaa rise like a cloud and become one sound, like the Om that awakened Siddhartha by the river...

Where I would spy a small boy of about ten peering from behind a bush...

Where I would call, "Njoo," Come, and he would approach, shyly, slowly...

Where I would look around for something to offer him, something, perhaps, I could teach, or for something he could teach me...

Where I would find only my notebook I had yet to write a word in...

Where with no toys or words or plans or wit I would find myself again facing a child, both of us blank...

Where he would reach out and touch the cover of the notebook and hand it to me as if to say, "Read to me"...

Where I, my palms feeling the notebook's cover as if it were Braille, fingering the crisp pages and hearing them whisper, would begin tearing a leaf from its binding...

Where I would then fold the piece of blank paper into a Missile, and then another one into a Trickster...

Where we would launch them into the sky and watch them—one shooting, the other looping—disappear over the cliff's edge and into the abyss...

Where he would disappear and return, disappear and return, my fingers tearing and folding and handing off faster and faster until more children arrived, children of all ages...

Where an older child, a teenager, just back from school, would offer me her own notebook and reach to show me its pages, which were not empty, and motion for me to tear one of her pages out, too...

Where I would ask her instead, *Naitwa?* Name? To write for me her name...

Where, not understanding, she would excitedly write down 1+1, 2+2, 3+3, and so on, A through K of the English alphabet...

Where, trying again by writing my own name, "Mwalimu," Teacher, followed by John, she would write, "Riziki Abasi"...

Where behind her several more children of various ages had gathered, had heard the word "mwalimu," and stood eager to show me their pages...

Where the little Swahili I did know was enough, where if nothing was not enough, next to nothing was just enough, as I greeted them: *Habari zenu?* How are you all? *Habari za shule?* How is school? and began inspecting their notebooks: *Ahh, nzuri, nzurui sana! Hongera!* Good, Very Good, Congratulations!

And where, as the last child stepped aside, I would turn around, the dusk settling to pitch, and see my notebook on the ground, emptied, all its sheets now planes either hovering in mid-flight or grounded upon the mountain's top, children everywhere.

And when the last child was called home, and I would sit back down upon the single rock on the cliff's edge and wait, a poem by Li Po would rise from a distant recess of memory and settle just inside my breath, centering me between the east and west hemispheres of my self until there was no distinction.

The birds have vanished into the sky,
And now the last cloud drains away.

We sit together, the mountain and me,
Until only the mountain remains. (*Heart 32*)

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Vita

John Wolfe was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. He received his Bachelor's degree in English, with a concentration in Creative Writing, from Loyola University of Chicago in 1995. In 1996, he was accepted into the MAP Program (Mentoring at Punahou) at Punahou School in Honolulu where he began teaching high school English full-time in 1997. During his fourteen years of teaching he was granted a year-long sabbatical in Tanzania, East Africa and was awarded a TEA Fellowship (Teaching Excellence and Achievement) through IREX/US State Department to travel to Ghana, West Africa to observe secondary schools. In 2013, he moved back to New Orleans from Honolulu to pursue a Master's degree before returning to his vocation: Teaching high school English.