

Under Wendy Bishop's Eye:
An Autofictional Account of Teaching and Learning in a 21st Century (Creative) Writing
Program

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Abstract

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“Under Wendy Bishop’s Eye” examines the teaching, learning, and social environment of a graduate student in an American creative writing MFA program in the early years of the 21st century. This dissertation is a work of autofiction; it is both an autoethnography and a fictionalized story written in the form of a novel. The project uses the scholarship of writing studies’ leader Wendy Bishop to discuss and analyze the dynamics of graduate student learning in creative writing courses, undergraduate learning in creative writing courses, graduate student teaching in creative writing courses, and graduate student teaching in expository writing or first-year composition courses at a four-year college. The project addresses the limitations of the “workshop method” for teaching creative writing, while supporting the benefits of writing pedagogy that includes cross-genre writing exercises in all university-level writing courses, specifically bringing “personal writing” and creative non-fiction into both creative writing and first-year composition course.

Note to Readers:

This is a work of scholarship and autofiction, and therefore resemblances between the characters in the study and actual persons living or dead are quite deliberate. Effie and Lawlor (2022) state that autofiction can have a broad definition, but this work exhibits elements of autofiction insofar as it is comprised of “a combination of real and invented elements” and incorporates “hybridity and experimentalism” (1;2.) Readers must bear in mind that the narrative is fictionalized and therefore the actions and experiences of characters in the study are more often than not factually inaccurate, yet emblematic of a metaphorical truth.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 September 7 2010, *Knickerbocker University (Maura)*

The professor began: “Call me Dan. I was in your spot a little under a decade ago. I’m a graduate of this program, too. But back then we didn’t have this fancy building, we were put into gen pop with the real graduate students in English Lit.”

Gen Pop. The phrase echoed through Maura’s mind and made her wince. It didn’t feel good, the group of people sitting around her in her first MFA workshop, chuckling about prison terms like that.

Dan continued, “The way that I wrote my first novel was through sheer will. I had the shittiest job. The shittiest office job ever. It was a nine-to-five. I’m not like some of the other students I was in this program with, I mean I had to have a job to live. But this shitty fucking job—” His rage at having to work a day job had not disappeared. The freshness of it was palpable in the classroom air. “So every single time my boss walked away, I was there on my computer, working on my novel. I was dogged; insistent. I probably worked at the job about two hours a day and wrote my novel for about six hours.”

Everyone smiled. It was an inside joke. Maura was finally with her people. She also hated boring jobs; she also liked being sneaky.

Dan said, “I told myself: I need to publish before I turn thirty. If I don’t publish a book by thirty, I’m going to give this whole thing up, and dedicate my career and life to something else. But sure enough, my first novel came out when I was twenty-nine.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief, as if they hadn’t known the end of that story.

1.2 Autofiction and the Novel as Scholarship

This dissertation is, at its heart, a work of autofiction. By this, I mean to say that it is a fictionalized novel based in both autoethnographic research and document review from the work of Wendy Bishop and other writing studies scholars. At the start of the novel, the primary character “Maura,” is a twenty-five year old student whose experiences are rooted in my own experiences in an MFA graduate program in fiction writing at large urban university, from the years 2010-2012. The secondary central character in this novel, “Wendy Bishop,” is portrayed as a ghost who works in a fictionalized department in the afterlife called “The Department of Helping and Learning.” My “Wendy Bishop” is imagined, but her thoughts and beliefs—and many direct quotations—come from the published work of the real writing studies scholar, Wendy Bishop, a leader in the field of Creative Writing Studies who passed away before fulfilling the potential of her scholarly work.

Effie and Lawlor (2022) point out that the term autofiction is broad and often diffuse. French writer and theorist Serge Doubrovsky initially coined the term autofiction, and in a 2005 interview “...he describes ‘autofiction’ as a postmodern variant of autobiography, suited to a moment that no longer believes in the literal truth of historical narrative” (as cited in James, 2022, 44.) With the use of the autofiction technique, I am indeed trying to access a deeper truth than a straight retelling of factual events would provide. This autofictional novel will address the overarching research question: *What is the essence of the experience of a graduate student teacher in a Creative Writing MFA program?* While exploring possible answers to this question, I will use academic research from the body of work of Wendy Bishop to explore the sub-question: *How could Bishop’s scholarship inform, and even transform, the student and teacher experience in American MFA writing program?*

Wagner-Egelhaaf (2018) states that “Goethe’s notion of poetry as promoting the ‘truth’ of his life comes fairly close to the current understanding of ‘autofiction’” (3.) In this work, imagined scenes based in varying amounts of factual reality, involving both Maura and her professors, and the theoretical analysis in response to those experiences as shown through imagined scenes of Wendy Bishop and other theorists, will create a story that presents both problems and questions about the learning environment in American university-level creative writing departments. It is undeniable that “[f]or those who wish to maintain a clear distinction between fact and fiction, autofiction must appear defective...” (James, 2022, 41-42.) But with the acceptance that fact and fiction are blurred in the following narrative scenes, this dissertation will present new knowledge and thinking about solutions to these problems and potential future changes to creative writing curricula and program design.

1.3 For Whom is this Novel Written?

This dissertation-in-the-form-of-a-novel is written for anyone associated with the writing studies and creative writing studies field of academia. This novel will contain valuable academic and experienced-based knowledge for prospective graduate students, current graduate students, instructors and professors of creative writing, as well as Writing Program Administrators in both creative writing and composition writing programs.

I have done this research and written this work with the notion in mind that this is a text I would have wanted to read earlier in my academic, creative, and teaching career. When I read Wendy Bishop’s 1999 essay “Places to Stand: The reflective writer-teacher-writer in composition,” I had a revelation: someone had articulated the sentiments that had been churning inside of me for years. In this essay, Bishop explains that she has a divided professional identity, between that of a writer and that of a teacher. She claims she is both, and neither part of her

identity outweighs the other, which has in fact created professional tensions for her as she made her way through the world of academia. She states that being both a teacher and a writer has meant that she engages in “an ever-evolving process of finding places to stand and be counted, to matter as a writer who teaches and a teacher who writes” (1999, 24.) Like Bishop, I began my professional career in the world of creative writing, getting an MFA and writing short stories and a novel, before discovering the sub-field of composition, which I began teaching first and then pursuing a doctoral degree that focuses largely on that. But my similar background to Bishop’s is not what stimulated my revelation. Indeed, so many people that work in the field of composition studies are also coming from a creative writing background. What awed me was that Bishop was stating, loudly, clearly, logically—and in print—the tension between the two fields that many of my colleagues and I have felt over our position within academia. And I had simply never heard it stated that way before.

But how could it be that I had never heard this cry before? When I read Bishop’s essay, I was a third-year doctoral student in English Education. I began college in 2003 as an English major. In the interim, I had received a Masters of Fine Arts degree in fiction writing, taught creative writing in both public and private high schools and at a university, been a full-time faculty member of a stand-alone composition department at a university, and helped to run a graduate-level writing center at a different institution. I have been learning and working inside the field of English and English Education for half of my life. And yet, I had never read Wendy Bishop or heard similar ideas to hers articulated clearly and publicly.

As I continued to read through her work, I became more convinced that she was voicing my deeply held beliefs. In her book *Teaching Lives* (1997) she states, “I believe we should teach ‘creative’ writing in the first-year program... Students are well prepared for future academic

writing when they explore creativity, authorship, textuality, and so on, together, all at once. In fact, I suggest that they are more prepared to think about and perform the complicated act of writing when they study this way” (233.) The values she professes, that students should engage in “authorship” and “textuality,” are values that my previous colleagues from an expository writing program and I discussed frequently. But the blunt proclamation that there should be crossover between the two-subfields of composition and creative writing was not a notion that I had read in print before.

The field of Creative Writing Studies, or the scholarly study of college-level creative writing and the teaching of it, is not well understood by many people within the field of English studies, and also often not understood by those thoroughly enmeshed in the field of Creative Writing. Yes, Creative Writing Studies is still emerging— but Bishop wrote her essay in 1999. And if I had not learned about Bishop in the twenty years preceding that essay, then I am confident there are many other would-be interested teachers and writers who have never been exposed to her ideas either.

But why is the development of the field of Creative Writing Studies important? For those of us who, like Bishop, believe that it is critically important for all people to be able to expertly “perform the complicated act of writing,” and that writing creatively is one the best methods to aid in this endeavor, developing Creative Writing Studies becomes imperative (1997, 233.) The sooner the field has new theory, the sooner that theory can be put to good work. As of the current moment, “Creative writing in the United States...has often exhibited a powerful isolationist tendency: when existing normally within English departments, its courses have often been reserved for a select few students deemed worthy of such study” (Mayers, 2009, 224.) The students reaping the benefits of creative writing are the few and privileged; in our social

environment that means the wealthiest, and often the whitest, student populations. The intellectual benefits that these students are receiving are intellectual benefits that all students deserve.

1.4 Data Collection

Much of my data will be collected through the act of recalling and transcribing personal memories as a student from the “workshop” and “craft” classes I took over the course of the four semesters of a graduate program in creative writing. I will also recall and transcribe personal memories from the one semester “Intro to Creative Writing” class I taught during the graduate program, and the one semester first-year writing class I taught, as well as the pedagogical teacher-preparation course I completed for the first-year writing teaching position. Chang (2016) points out that memory can be problematic for the researcher because “[i]t often reveals partial truth and is sometimes unreliable and unpredictable. Memory selects, shapes, limits, and distorts the past” (72.) While this act of distortion is an undeniable pitfall in conducting autoethnography about past experiences, I turned to document review to reify the facts of the events that occurred during my MFA graduate school experience.

I studied and referred to two differing types of documents: printed documents from university professors and officials, and personal written documents that I had saved from that time. The printed documents from the university included: syllabi from classes I took (eight courses altogether); syllabi from courses I taught (two classes altogether); teacher training documents authored from the creative writing department and the expository writing department; emails about course requirements, thesis requirements, public readings, and social events, authored from officials in the graduate creative writing department. The personal written documents included: handwritten comments on my own writing work from professors and other

graduate students; personal emails with professors and other graduate students; my own comments/grading for my undergraduate students, personal emails written between undergraduate students and myself, my own lesson plans for both creative and expository writing classes, and journal entries about teaching and learning experiences.

In order to choose which events and teaching/learning moments to write about in my chapters, before beginning document review I followed Chang's suggestion to create an "autobiographical timeline" of events that occurred within my teaching and learning at the MFA program (2016, 73.) In my timeline, I noted significant events to chronicle, and/or events that related to my overarching research question. In order to land on a list of events, I began by writing and reflecting on what Adams et al. (2015) have named "epiphanies—transformative moments and realizations that significantly shape or alter the (perceived) course of our lives" (47.) I chose the epiphanic moments from experiences of *change* within my understanding of the teaching and learning journey of my experiences as an MFA writing student.

1.5 The Ethics of Fictionalization

The fictionalization method has much to offer qualitative researchers. It has been employed by scholars such as Ruth Vinz, imagining Jane Adams into a fictional existence (2014); Caine et al. (2016) also tout the value of it, stating that fictionalization in research could be described as "...a process of creating an other to tell more" and that "...[they] understand imagining as a form of perceptual and embodied knowing" (3;4.) Through the character of Wendy Bishop, rather than just through the disembodied words of the late scholar, my reader will be able to understand the complexity of her ideas in addition to how these ideas can be applied in real life situations.

The fictionalization method may also present risks to the validity of the document study research. The method that I employed, which involved the character of “Wendy” speaking words and ideas out-of-order, so to speak, or from different published works and time periods within the same fictional breath, is also an example of what Kuby calls the crystallization methodology. Crystallization “embraces a multigenre approach to analysis and (re)presentation that blurs the boundaries of art and science” and “enables researchers to disrupt more traditional processes of analysis and styles of (re)presentation.... Crystallization as discussed by Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) deconstructs traditional views of validity and (post)positivist notions of triangulation” (Kuby, 130.) The act of crystalizing a scholar’s words and work can offer the reader a more robust and full understanding of the breadth of one person’s theories and ideas. But crystallization could be considered unethical territory in research writing, as putting together ideas from disparate times may alter intended meanings. This is a serious risk of engaging in the act of fictionalizing a real person in an academic work, but if done with an honest commitment to the scholar’s intended meaning—which I abided by— the benefits for the reader outweigh the ethical risks.

Another potential risk in the act of writing about a real person who is fairly recently deceased, especially in light of my premise of imagining this real person looking down on earth from the afterlife, is the risk of offending the memory and reality of this person to her colleagues, friends, and family. It is, to be blunt, sort of a strange thing to do. But I have approached my work of fictionalizing Bishop with deep respect for her scholarship, her personhood, and her memory. It was my sincere intention to honor her work through my own work. Bell and Desai (2011) believe that “[r]esearchers need to engage aesthetic and sensory capabilities so as to create and experiment with alternative possibilities— imagining what could otherwise be” (287.)

Within these chapters, I followed their words by, in effect, imagining what could have happened to the writing studies world if Wendy Bishop's work was not cut short by her untimely death, and instead writing studies practitioners had the opportunity to become more familiarized with her ideas and thus could potentially put them into action.

1.6 Research Ethics and Positionality

Within my epiphanic timeline, I noted events that are significant in my own mind while consistently and rigorously engaging in “reflexivity” as defined by Adams et al. (2015) as a process used to “scrutinize [the] experiences of self/culture, to illustrate how the autoethnographer is an audience to his or her own experience...” (30.) While I wrote, I was aware that this act of reflexivity, and the subsequent act of writing about the identified significant moments, must always include my own conscious knowledge of the positionality I write from and the bias that accompanies my positionality. I am a white American woman from an upper-middle-class background, who carries with her the privilege of high levels of education— and I carried this with me in my mid-twenties, during the period of my life that I wrote about. It is important to acknowledge that I wrote about a white, economically privileged space from the point of view of a person who was welcomed into that space as an insider.

Chang (2016) suggests creating a diagram that can help a researcher visualize her own positionality, by drawing connections to some various identifications, the central being “Primary Identities,” which include categories like racial and religious background, profession, sex and gender identities; the outer ring of the diagram breaks down smaller categories, such as: “ethnicity, nationality, language, class, interests, multiple intelligences, and profession” (98.) I created this diagram before crafting my personal timeline, and I referred to the diagram as I wrote about the culture of graduate student life in MFA writing programs. I did this as a way to

hold myself accountable to the specific cultural view that may influence my own retelling of stories and analysis of social and academic interactions.

In the act of data collection and transcription, I wrote about the stories of other people—undergraduate students, graduate students peers, and MFA professors and administrators— who did not hold my same positionality. In autoethnographic work, especially if that work relies heavily on personal memory, there is the potential for extreme risk in terms of “negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives” (Chang, 2016, 54.) When writing about other people I interacted with during moments of change between 2010-2012, I also wrote about human subjects; at every juncture I aimed to consider how my work might benefit or harm them. Although I did not conduct direct interviews or surveys about our shared experiences, when recalling and retelling my interactions with other people, the three important topics discussed in the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subject’s Belmont Report, “Respect for Persons,” “Beneficence,” and “Justice,” certainly applied. Chang (2016) states that “[s]ince autoethnographers’ personal stories are often linked to the stories of others, no matter how explicit the linkage is, the principal of protecting confidentiality of people in the story is just as relevant to autoethnography” (56.) One method of protecting the confidentiality of other people in my autoethnographic chapters was to change all names and locations of people and interactions.

1.7 Site Description

Much of this autofictional story is set in the physical environment of a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing graduate program, located within a large private university in New York City, which for the purposes of this paper I will call Knickerbocker University (KU.) This program produces graduates who go on to publish fiction, poetry, and non-fiction widely.

The MFA in Creative Writing graduate program at KU is housed within a larger graduate school for liberal arts, which is then housed within a large urban research university. While this novel is not entirely committed to exploring the racial and cultural dynamics within this graduate program, part of it addresses those issues. Statistics about the racial breakdown of student and faculty for the graduate school itself are not publicly available, but it is clear from their website that the university prides itself on diversity and inclusion. It's hard to pin down exactly how many of these faculty members in the MFA program were white and how many were non-white between 2010 and 2012, but by my count, there was at a minimum eleven white-identified faculty in the "core faculty" cohort, which would mean that the faculty is at least 64.7 percent white.

1.8 MFA in Creative Writing Program Structure

The graduate program I write about accepted approximately sixty students each year and these sixty students made up three separate genre tracks: fiction writing, poetry writing, and creative non-fiction writing. If one was a full time student—which students were not obligated to be—the journey from entry into the program to graduate with a Masters of Fine Arts degree would be two academic years. During this time, students were obligated to take eight courses total, to fulfill the degree requirements. Four of these courses were required to be creative writing workshops, and the other four craft classes, or classes that dissect the process of making each genre of writing. In addition to the course requirements, all graduate students were eligible to teach one "Introductory to Creative Writing" course, if they so desired.

1.9 Contribution: Theory and the Development of the Field

This fictionalized academic work aims to contribute to building theory within the field of creative writing, and thus help to develop the field into not only a more substantial academic

stronghold, but to bolster teachers in their acts of honest teaching and learning within the field of writing studies. The development of creative writing studies has been in question in public discourse since, at least, Wendy Bishop published her seminal book *Released into Language* in 1991. But why does the field need development?

The primary people that the field is currently not working for is the students. The current status that creative writing holds within universities deprives students of the full development of their intellectual and artistic potential, particularly students who come from marginalized backgrounds. Mayers (2005) claims that creative writing courses have the ability to “promote a different kind of engagement with texts” than traditional literary criticism classes, and this engagement may “promote more active, engaged citizenship among students” (9.) But this type of engagement has been missing from many creative writing classrooms in the past half-century, due in large part to the inaccurate lore in the creative writing field that writing talent is innate and cannot be taught.

In a small seminar workshop class there may be sixteen students. If one were to follow the logic of the field’s lore that *writing can’t be taught* then the instructor’s job would be to challenge, test, and evaluate each student, in an attempt to identify if any of them carried a divinely-inspired ability to write well. How many gifted students would be in a class of sixteen? There would be no way to tell at the start of the semester. And of course, occasionally, a class would be empty of any gifted ones. In that case, what is an instructor to do? Once it was discovered that none of the students possessed the right amount of talent, why continue meeting with them, talking and reading and writing, once or twice a week?

This logic would be moot if the instructor were to adhere to the belief that she was teaching creative writing in order to follow to the theories of John Dewey and the progressivists

of the 1920s and 1930s— what Mark McGurl characterized as the “‘continuous formation’ of the individual” (2009, 86). If the instructor believes that creative writing is valuable because it develops a self, then she has a motivation to carry out class for the entirety of the semester and to work closely with each student in order to teach them the aspects of craft that can help them flourish as holistically educated and responsible individuals. Yet, I do not believe that contemporary creative writing instructors normally adhere to either of the above-stated philosophies.

Instead, most writing instructors believe that there is inherent value in the art of *practicing* creative writing. Through the act of struggling to construct a short story, a poem, a chapter of a novel, or a personal essay, a student learns about language, about connections between ideas (and sometimes texts and ideas), and about conveying an interior experience to an outside audience. Moxley echoes similar thinking: “Presumably academic training in fiction, poetry, playwriting, and screenwriting enables students to meet and discuss aesthetics, the creative process, and ambitions” (1989a, xii.) But actions like connecting texts and ideas and terms like “the creative process” are diffuse; it is hard to pin down or name one meaning for them, which is perhaps why the creative writing lore pedagogy has overshadowed these notions in public discourse. The skills that a student learns when practicing creative writing hover somewhere in the realm of using language as a tool— a tool that has a constellation of uses, for example: to create beauty, to share a nuanced experience, to persuade a reader of a complex truth. The art of using language this way, and moreover *learning* to use language this way, is what creative writing instructors usually value. But due to the stunted development of the field, they often fail to help students achieve these skills.

The commercialization of the creative writing field has also stymied the potential educational value that courses in it could offer. R.M. Barry states that “creative writing became complicit with the publishing industry in restricting the opportunities available to many writers” (as cited in Bishop and Ostrom, 1994, 67.) The publishing industry is linked to the MFA program domination within the field, which then brings the workshop model into undergraduate classes; the conformity that the workshop model can encourage, in return, promotes stories from and about students who already hold cultural hegemonic power—white, upper-middleclass, straight students. Therefore, the opportunity to even engage with texts in the active way that Moxley discusses above, is being restricted from students of diverse backgrounds.

The question to address, then, is how can the field be developed? The overwhelming consensus among writing studies scholars is that creative writing must begin to incorporate theory into its pedagogy. When discussing the problems within the creative writing field, Wendy Bishop is clear: “Put more simply, they/we need pedagogy and theory” (as cited in Bizzaro et. Al., 2011, 238). Bishop argued for this throughout her career, specifically in her 1991 book, as well as in subsequent books *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy* (2004), *Teaching Lives* (1997), and her seminal article, “Places to Stand: The reflective writer-teacher-writer in composition” (1999.) A small but loud group of others have professed strong agreement—some have included this argument as a major claim in book-length works, such as Mayers (2009), Ritter and Vandeslice (2007), and Donnelly (2011); others have published articles and chapters that focus more specifically on this assertion, such as Shelnuttt (1989), Moxley (1989), Bizarro (2003), and Mayers (2011.)

Bishop makes the case that in 1995, when there were over 200 MFA programs and at least 25 PhD programs in the United States devoted specifically to the field of creative writing

there was, "...at the same time, not a fair match in maturing scholarship on the theory and practice of creative writing" (as cited in Bizzaro et. al., 2011, 239.) By the mid-1990s, the practice of writing creatively was replicating across the country, but knowledge-based ways to enact the practice were not. Moxley comments that "...without theory for teaching writing, we have no compass to direct or evaluate our activities, no way to understand why some exercises succeed while others fail" (1989b, 42.) Lack of theory hurts the daily practice of teachers, which in turn harms students. Even if students are not going to dedicate their lives to being active members of literary studies or literary communities, Shelnutt worries about the harm they receive from being enmeshed in an educational environment of creative writing courses: "I am concerned about a growing climate of anti-intellectualism among writing students who will, at the least, be readers and job-seekers, parents, and voters" (1989, 7.) If intellectualism is encouraged in the field, if theory is developed and new pedagogical approaches are employed, a greater breadth of students will have the opportunity to benefit from the unique value that only literary classes focused on writing creatively can afford.

Chapter 2: First Semester, No Plot

2.1 September 7, 2010, *Knickerbocker University* (Maura)

He was tall and sweet and bumbling, the teacher for Maura's very first workshop as an MFA fiction student. A fit early-forties white man— Dan— standing there in proper professor clothes: khaki pants, a button down shirt, and a shlumpy cardigan sweater. He was fresh-faced and almost appeared shy, not afraid of teaching the way that Maura knew she would be but like a talented little puppy; new to it, unsure, but confident and eager. Maura sat at the back of the workshop table amidst light from the courtyard streaming into the stained-glass windows. The room smelled of bleach cleanser and carried the afterburn of a thorough vacuuming. She was so aware of the eleven other bodies around her, the students that she would become peers with— not exactly friends and not exactly colleagues, but peers. She was so focused on their serious faces, their deer-still bodies, their expensive shoes. Her mind, again and again, raced with the notion that she had no stories and nothing to write about. She heard a fellow student, a white boy—a man? he had to be her age or a bit younger— with tight mousey curls tell another similar looking boy, minus the curls, that he'd been working on a novel for the past two years in preparation to start this program, and he would be workshopping that.

“Cool man, can't wait to read it, man.”

Maura's stomach sank. She had nothing to write about.

The fact that Maura thought she was old that afternoon, going into that beautiful building in New York City's West Village, was laughable. She was twenty-five. The building was a limestone row house, ornate with arched doorways and picture windows. The street itself—the street!—breathhtaking, gorgeous; tree-lined, brick and stone, shaded and dappled. It was as if anyone who

walked down the street transformed into 19th century gentry, for a hundred yards or so. But upon pulling open the heavy oak door to the brownstone named the “Writers House,” Maura became herself again: a twenty-five-year-old complete failure. Oh to be so young that you think you are old. She had accomplished nothing in her short life; she didn’t have a real job; she had gotten into this MFA fiction writing program on a fluke, because she’d had a friend who knew the director’s administrative assistant. She was ninety percent sure of something: she wasn’t a real writer and she wasn’t any good. Perhaps the problem with the place was that nearly everyone in that building— students, faculty, and staff alike— felt the same way. Or perhaps the real problem was that a few of them didn’t.

Going into the Writers House felt a bit like going into the catholic church she had spent so much time in as a child. Then, her stomach would churn with nervousness although she wanted to be there. She wanted to enter into the stone building, to walking into the calm and quiet and dim lighting. She believed in a holy space as a child and now as a young adult she believed in literature. Books that changed her, even beautiful sentences, felt designated by a higher power. If anything was Maura’s religion, it was the written word, although she never would have admitted that to another person. And it seemed now she was entering into a temple for making art from writing— this graduate MFA program in fiction, which was, to her mind, godly.

No one had acknowledged her as she stepped into the front hallway of the beautiful brownstone. To her right was an open living room, decorated with mahogany coffee tables and upholstered arm chairs in shades of light and dark blue. The space was clean, manicured, old-fashioned. But more than anything else, it was fancy. The people walking around looked to her like writers; some were Maura’s age, but one man with long dreadlocks shuffled quickly into the elevator—a famous author named C.Z. No one made eye contact, no one introduced themselves.

She was sure that no one in here smoked the hallucinogen that she now regularly smoked, Realeyez. At least they didn't smoke it before the hour of 10 p.m. So there she stood, frozen, gripping the straps of her crappy free-gift tote bag that had once been off-white but was so dirty from the subway and the floor of her cramped Brooklyn apartment, it was now a dark beige shade.

There had been no welcome meeting for this MFA program, no meet-and-greet, and no introductions to the other students or teachers. Maura's first class was set to begin in a few minutes and she didn't know where to find it. The heat of nerves in her body lifted, dampening out the fire that reminded her of church and childhood, and replacing it with fear.

Everyone in the building was wearing leather shoes. Nearly every person that passed by her was wearing tan or dark coffee colored leather shoes. Shoes one could not buy for less than one-hundred and fifty dollars, she was sure. It was the shoes that made her understand where she was. On paper, she was a highly typical candidate of any fiction writing MFA program: a white woman in her twenties from an upper-middle class background; a childhood history of quiet anger, perceived misunderstanding with authority figures, minor depression; an Ivy League undergraduate degree in British Literature that limited her literary knowledge in ways she was entirely unaware of; a psychotic love of the written word, her connection to the truth of the human heart and an unexplored trove of knowledge that would explain the deaths and disappointments and injustices that whirled around modern life. But she was wearing old black converse shoes, low-tops. She had never had the desire to buy pretentious leather shoes. And due to that simple and seemingly unimportant fact, she stood, frozen in the front hall of the university building built for princes, wondering what the hell was wrong with her to think she deserved to be there.

As her first workshop class with Dan continued, Maura became increasingly aware that no one asked each other *So what are you going to write about?* No one brought up the question of *What's a worthwhile story to tell?*

It seemed that in this graduate school program, there was no central force, no unifying presidential body or supreme court making decisions on pedagogy and approach and ethics of storytelling. Dan, at least, did not seem to have been coached on how students should be guided through stories and what a teacher should react to or not react to. Even in the first class, sitting in the back of the workshop room, Maura got the impression that every professor in the department was their own island, muddling through a land many of them had never been through themselves, as many did not have MFA degrees. But Dan, who seemed so kind and empathetic, Dan had not only been through an MFA program— and therefore was in the same embarrassing boat as the rest of the people in the room— he'd actually been through *this* MFA program. So he was in fact, just like Maura, and like the rest of them. And that, she believed, was what he wanted to tell them on that first day.

He continued, “You know, many writers I know aren't all that smart. You don't have to be smart to be a writer. You just have to be good at certain things. And know about just a few certain things.”

What did he mean by smart? Who did he qualify as smart? Those real graduate students he used to sit next to in an ugly building?

“And the other thing I really want to say to you all is that there was a long time in my life where I felt depressed, and sort of ashamed, because I thought I had nothing to write about.”

Finally, thought Maura. She felt relieved to have Dan bring up content. The *what* of the stories.

“I mean, I’m a totally normal guy. I grew up in a middle class small town on Long Island, my parents were married, I have a sister. It was the suburbs. I felt like, geez, I have nothing special about me and therefore I have nothing to write about. But then— and I mean it took me a long time to get to this point— I realized I could just write about what I knew. Just normal, regular life. And I was so shocked, but people wanted to read it!”

Dan’s face flushed red and his eyes widened a bit, as if he were still astonished by this fact. People want to read about him and his white middle class life. Hmmm, Maura thought. People wanted to read about *him*. But of course they did. His story was the same story that they saw on sitcoms and television dramas, in remakes of *The Wonder Years* and *Boy Meets World*. She began to look around the room at her classmates. Did Dan’s words comfort the others around her, the other students sitting around the workshop table? There were two Asian women, one woman of African descent, and a handful of other white girls who resembled her. Then white boys of the same affect, most bespeckled, and one white man who was certainly older than Dan was. Maura knew, from looking around, that there was no way everyone in this room came from Dan’s background, that there was no way everyone was comforted that the greater reading population is interested in suburban white men. Fear, stress, a dash of devastation; these emotions hit her where they always did, right in the stomach. She felt nauseous. She looked down at her converse sneakers. She had nothing to say about those subjects. But moreover, she decidedly *did not* want to read stories like that. But, Maura thought, *I guess everyone else did?* She knew she wasn’t meant to be there.

The class went on to read the two pages aloud of the stories each student had been instructed to bring to class. Maura had brought the first two pages of the story that she had sent in with her application, a semi-autobiographical story about her Catholic childhood, with the

fabricated addition of her parents also being parents to a host of foster children. Maura had nothing else to offer but this one story. She read, in a mortifyingly shaky voice, these paragraphs:

Iona's idea to build the fort began a week after she'd arrived, in the paunch of a Saturday afternoon. There was a strange hush up and down Huron Avenue. Half of the neighborhood, the "new arrivals," had driven away to recline by lakes in Maine and Vermont. Me and Iona were squatting by circles of tar that had melted on the road beside our house, pushing them around with the broken ends of sticks and bursting the bubbles that had risen up from the sun's heat.

"We need a headquarters!" she said, dropping her stick and jumping onto the sidewalk embankment. "We have to make a fort."

Now, I didn't like to get involved in fort building. It was for little kids, and besides, it reminded me of the other time I made a fort with Iona, at her old house where her uncle lived. It gave me the heebies to think about that place. But Iona had let my Mom brush out her hair that morning, and last night she didn't flail like a Wildebeest when Mom pulled my old threadbare Garfield nightgown over her head.

I sighed. "It would be helpful to have an office."

We made a list of the different kind of forts one can make: Tree fort, Bush fort, Blanket fort, Swing set fort, Slide fort, Foxhole fort, Snow fort, Table fort, Trashcan fort.

We settled on the bush variety. There were low and long evergreen bushes flanking the right side of the porch, extending all the way to the back door. Before dinnertime we'd made a good start: Iona pushed up the cracked stone bird feeder that had been lying on its side for a couple years. We found a three-legged plastic chair and set it up beside the bird feeder, around a manger-hole in the bush, and Ta-daa— we had ourselves a door. Once inside, we let our

sneakers fall on the small branches, snapping them in two, and we lined the walls with sticks gathered from the rest of the yard. We were hollowing out a space.

“I want to stay in here forever,” Iona said, flinging her back down on the dirt. She spread her arms out to each side. “We can live here. I’ll be the father detective, and you be the mother detective.”

I let out a crack of laugh. If anyone was being the father detective—

“I don’t have a mother,” Iona said plainly. She was looking up at the bright sky through the overlaying green needles above us. “Siobhan is just a woman who found me on the street one day. I’m not really hers, and that’s why she’s so sad all the time.”

Everyone was silent after her reading. Her voice revealed her nerves to the crowd, her child-like prose blaring into their ears and showing had nothing to write about, nothing of interest to say, and that these two low-brow pages were the best work she had.

2.2 September 7, 2010, *The Department of Helping and Learning* (Wendy)

The palm trees in my afterlife swayed with the wind of an impending storm as I chewed the end of a Bic pen, then got up to open the picture window in my new, but supposedly forever, office in The Department of Helping and Learning. The beach lay beyond it, with an ocean calm and rhythmic; to the left was a snowcapped mountain that reminded me of Alaska, nearly a replica of Mt. Denali. The environment of the afterlife, for the blessed, is not composed by the ecosystems of the earth but rather by the memory of joy and peace particular environments had brought the being while alive on earth.

It had taken me a while to get to my afterlife. When the grieving of loved ones on earth is so strong, spirits have to be held back; it’s too risky for the blessed to witness that kind of pain, too tempting for them to intervene in ways that break the rules and boundaries of life on earth.

But now I was finally here, six years later, and able to watch over Dean and the kids and finally begin my occupation in this place that some call heaven— because, ultimately, it was a place for the very good and the very generous. “Hrmmm,” I muttered, moving back to my rolling office chair, thinking. “This is going to be tough,” I said, stretching, left arm rising and waving, swinging with the palm fronds, then right arm rising and waving, repeating the natural motion. My desired place in the afterlife was working to help others. It is what gave me joy, it’s what had fueled my daily human energy, through every book and every class and every student. So here I was, miraculously back in my old body, feeling my bones and my muscles filled with vibrancy, forever freed from treacherous cancer that had claimed my bodily freedom at the end of my time on earth. Now I was at the start of my training phase of my heavenly occupation.

My days in this new world would be filled with helping students, writing students in particular, as this was undoubtably my greatest power and talent on earth. (I’ll own up to this power; I wasn’t perfect in some other worldly aspects, but this teaching thing, I was on it.) Now in my heavenly training phase I would observe, take notes, make plans about how my charges might alter their course in the future without disturbing those careful boundaries that the old Department folks in charge called the line between “heaven and earth.” I’d been assigned a young woman named Maura because the higher-ups had their eye on her already. Like my own children, Maura had been navigating grief and death of loved ones for a few years, so I felt I already knew her a bit.

Oh dear, I thought, as my office’s picture window turned into a screen that let me see into the Masters-level writing classroom down on earth, in New York City. It was Maura’s first day of class. I could listen in on her thoughts, the inner monologue going through her head— everyone in my department could, that how the training phrase in The Department of Helping

and Learning worked. But Maura was sitting at the end of the conference table in this ornate room, looking down, and there were in fact very few thoughts running through her head. Instead, I could hear the *th-thump, th-thump, th-thump* of her heart speeding up.

I turned my attention to the teacher in Maura's classroom— Dan. "What is this guy doing?" I shook my head. Actually, I was a bit sympathetic; he wasn't malicious, Dan. He wasn't trying to harm anyone. He just didn't know how to help these students. He didn't know how to get them started.

Dan ran a hand through his hair and stated to the class, "I didn't think I had anything interesting to write about, but then I realized it was fine to write about the suburbs and my normal life..."

"Oh brother," I said aloud, standing up and picking up my black office telephone. As I dialed "1-2-3," the extension for one of my afterlife mentors, I remembered what the short story writer Francois Camoin had said about creative writing faculty members: "...[W]e can be goats and monkeys in the halls and at department parties, but in workshops the students want more from us than 'Be like me. Write,' which is not very useful advice, finally" (as cited in Bishop, 1997, 241.) The students in Dan's room, on their first day of a graduate school workshop, *did not* need to be compared to their teacher. I knew, in this new heavenly gift I now possessed, that the people in the room were from varied backgrounds, races, and countries. Two of the students were queer. The majority of these students' lives weren't like the life of the teacher to begin with; yet with the easy way that Dan implied *my life which reflects hegemonic white culture must be just like yours*, he was also revealing that he wasn't looking at his students. Although they were in front of him, he wasn't thinking about where they were from and how their stories might be different from his own. He was isolating them from the program on the first day of class.

Back in my office, I was jolted by a deep voice on the other end of the phone line.

“Hello?”

“Frankie, it’s Wendy Bishop, your new mentee.”

I had been able to choose a handful of mentors from the afterlife department and one of them was Francis James Child, the first tenured professor of English at Harvard. He was really just the kindest man, and remarkably, he tried his damndest to keep up with the theory of the field for the past one hundred and fifty years.

I cleared my throat. “I’m calling because I’m watching my first class for my training, and I’m wondering if it’s really true that I cannot intervene into the life of my charge at all, at this point? I mean, this class isn’t going well for her or the other students, already.” I thought of what I had written in an essay called “On Learning to Love Teaching Creative Writing:” “When we set up doubtful and doubting classes, we encourage students in their inwardness, their paranoia, their grievances, their narrow world view...” (Bishop, 1997, 247.) These students were already doubting themselves, five minutes into the graduate program. Their ideas of what to write, what to create as literature, were rapidly depleting with every word.

Francis Child cleared his throat. “Sorry Wendy, we went over this in the introductory sessions. Absolutely no intervening into actions on earth during your training sessions. It’s just your first day, dear, it will get easier,” Child said, coughing. I wondered why people still coughed in the afterlife, but didn’t have time to linger on that. Just as I had predicted decades ago, the students in Dan’s class *were* spiraling inward, from the seemingly innocent introduction that this teacher was giving them. They were experiencing paranoia that they should be like him, but ultimately were not like him. This mentor-mentee style of teaching isn’t right, I thought, especially not at the beginning of a course.

“OK, thanks Frankie. I’ll probably call later with more questions.”

“Anything you need, dear,” he mumbled as he hung up.

I turned towards my notes and my own books. It had been such a lovely surprise when I entered my afterlife office, to see strong bookcases lined up behind my desk and filled with all the materials I would have wanted to reference during any given day in The Department of Helping and Learning. What a blessing. I opened up, now, Peter Elbow’s essay “Ranking,” and read these words over: “‘What really happens when people get to write better is more like this: We write something. We read it over and we say, ‘This is terrible... But I like it. Damn it, I’m going to make it good enough so that others will like it too.’ And this time we don’t just put it in a drawer, we actually work hard on it, and we try it out on other people too...’” (Elbow, “Ranking,” as cited in Bishop, 1997, 246). That good guy, Peter.

If only he could say this to Dan right now— if only Dan’s class could be paused, and Dan could be given a quick lesson on the fragile psyche that is a beginning writer. He could be told that these MFA students, no matter how many courses and publications they’ve had in the past, we’re in fact beginning writers in their program, on that first day of class. Dan, I believed, would have been more than happy to tell these students real words about writing as a process and beginning with something “terrible”— words that Elbow learned from his years of teaching. How would this class look different if the students had come in and written something of their own, first? What if they had immediately opened up a laptop or a notebook and wrote about a “problem,” either fictional or real? What if they’d been shown that Peter Elbow quote and then re-written their problem, putting it in a different setting or adding in a new character? What if they hadn’t shared this with the whole class, but simply with the person next to them, and had

time to respond in writing to what the sub-texts of this short and most-likely unappealing piece of writing were?

What if this was their introduction to creative writing work, rather than their professor Dan simply telling them about himself? This white, attractive, middle-class-American-Dan was trying his best, but he just did not have the experience to know what his students needed to hear. Because he was leading the room, Maura, my charge, was unaware of Dan's lack of experience. He appeared to be in charge, but no one had ever taught Dan these things, himself.

2.3 September 7, 2010, *Manhattan, New York City* (Maura)

After that first workshop, Maura lingered in the Writers House front hallway, even though she knew that her ex-boyfriend Rory was waiting for her two blocks away, under the awning of John's Pizzeria on Sixth Avenue. She stood there awkwardly in the ornate hall because of one of the curly-haired white boys who had been in her workshop was standing there too. Max. Maura understood quickly that Max was so much of what Rory was not. He was shorter. He had broad shoulders and an athletic build and small round glasses, the physique of a twenty-seven-year old who gets up early on a Saturday morning to play pick-up soccer with other eligible young literary men with fresh haircuts and jobs at *The Paris Review*. He was unabashedly uncool in such an appealing way. He was middle class, if not more so. You could tell he had nice parents; she could picture a mother who desperately worried about him from a clean kitchen in a *funky* neighborhood in Highland Park in Chicago or St. Louis Park in Minneapolis or Coolidge Corner in Brookline, Massachusetts.

"Hey," he said to Maura with a smirk, as if he already knew her. But he wasn't blushing and silent, as she was sure he would have been in front of a twig-legged, fresh-faced girl who

made him double-over in excitement. No, he was similar to Rory perhaps in that one way, being that he didn't immediately seem drawn to Maura at all.

“Hey,” Maura replied, heart racing. “I liked your story. Or your chapter, rather. I mean. The two pages. Like, I liked it a lot.” A Groucho Marx line that Rory often repeated, with a shrieky laugh, echoed through her head: *I refuse to join any club that would accept me as one of its members*. If she herself was like anyone, she was like Rory.

Maura had learned, from Max's brief seven minutes of reading in workshop, that he was writing a novel that wasn't a typical novel but was rather a confusingly half-autobiographical story about the only monumental thing that had ever happened to him in his life: when he was fifteen his father told his sweet, adoring, earnest mother that he no longer wanted to be married to her because he was “essentially a gay man.”

His father had moved out and embraced being gay, and Max's boyhood world had turned upside-down, as of course it would. And just over a decade later Max wrote a novel starring a main character smugly named Max. Only this novel, or two pages of it at least, included the most beautiful sentences Maura had ever heard, about banal things his mother swimming laps every morning at the JCC and he and his girlfriend working as waiters at a high end restaurant where all the staff fought over working pens, of which there were never enough.

Max's mere two pages of sentences had sucked Maura in-and-over; they were waves of beauty. Instantly, embarrassingly, she not only wanted him to write about her the way that he wrote about the ex-girlfriend, but she wanted to live out those beautiful sentences. Because surely that lyrical rhythm would be translated into how he would tell her that he loved her over Dostoevsky short stories and morning coffee, caressing her hand and then her leg and then luring her back into bed but not to just sleep, with the croissants uneaten and quivering on the small

bistro table in the sun-filled one-bedroom apartment they had recently moved into. They would continue quiver, those pastries, back-and-forth, and Maura would be happy and sun-kissed and her days would be as soft as his prose and certainly as fulfilling as reading it again and again.

This was certain, she thought, as she left the graduate school building. She walked down Tenth Street and turned left in the early evening Sixth Avenue traffic, floating, buzzing, unsure if it was the class or the new beginning or Max that was making her float. She was happy, perhaps.

From a block away she could see Rory, arms crossed, leaning back on the glass façade of the pizza place. He was scowling. Rory wanted to be a writer too, or already considered himself one. The two were technically no longer dating, after everything that had happened between them, but they saw each other several times a week and he'd insisted on meeting her after her first day of the MFA program. He would "never in million years, never kicking and screaming," apply to or go to an MFA program. He was, to be perfectly clear, cooler than someone who would do that. But he wanted to know what it was like and what she had done while she was there. He loved writing; he loved books. He loved Henry Miller and Anais Nin and sexualized-debaucherously-male-gazed-books. Maura loved beautiful sentences in whatever form they took, and she thought, well sure, *I guess I love that stuff too.*

"Hey writer chic," he said as she walked up. He grabbed her and kissed her face, long and open-mouthed, which was something he had stopped doing in public months ago.

From the beginning of things with Rory, years ago when she was in the middle of college, it was largely about sex and their bodies, although his academic intelligence was shocking to everyone. He was from a poor family and the first to go to college, and could argue anyone and anythings' pants off. But it wasn't his always-alert, always-razor-like intelligence that drew Maura to him. It was that, plus his body and face that she was mesmerized by. Maura's

heart fell into deep desire. When he finally noticed her, that was when her brain turned off around him. Or he turned it off. All she knew now, after years of distraction with him, is that he was always above her. He was just always there above her, complementing, threatening, touching, belittling.

Even now, on Sixth Avenue in the beginning of the New York City evening, in the middle of public, he was. He was over six-feet tall, pale skin with freckles and short red hair. Today his eyes were rimmed with red; Maura wondered if he'd smoked Realeyez already that day or if he was still hungover from the night before. He put a hand on each of her cheeks. "Tell me all about the class. Start at the beginning. Have you thought of anything to write about yet? Wait, don't answer that. First I want to hear: Who did you meet?"

The story of Maura and Rory together is a story that happened in a specific time and place like all true stories, but it is not a unique or special story at all. Maura was nineteen and then twenty and then twenty-one, and a kind of a natural-born masochist. And he was very handsome and had whispered into her ear every day: "*I love you;*" "*I need you;*" "*Why are you so fat around your middle?*"

And then he would whisper: "*Why is there always a patch of acne on your face?*" "*Why the fuck are you looking at him?*" "*See her, in the corner? She's my type, dark and mysterious and sexy, not like you.*" "*Did you fuck him when I wasn't there?*" "*I don't know where I was yesterday, I don't know why I didn't answer my phone, I won't tell you what I thought, I don't need to tell you where I'm going.*"

And then she thought he sometimes whispered, too, "*You fucking bitch.*" And then she thought he told her, quietly and calmly, on occasion, "*I'm going to fucking kill you.*" And loudly he said— she thought— even in front of other people, "*You bitch. You, bitch. You bitch.*" But

even to this day she's confused about whether or not he really said that. After every time she thought she heard it, he told her he didn't say it. He told her she was making it up. Was she wrong? When she repeated what he said, he told her she was out of her mind. It was confusing, as it often is in this common story of a man standing over a woman and telling her that she was crazy. And the confusing part, to her and to others, is why she continued to stand there. There she was on that day after her after her first MFA class, answering his questions.

Maura shrugged. "I didn't really meet anyone and you've been totally right, I have absolutely nothing to write about for my workshop classes. I'm completely screwed."

2.4 November 17, 2010, *Manhattan, New York City (Maura)*

It was November in New York City and the brick sidewalk in the West Village was wet; brown and amber leaves stuck to it. In the air hung a kind of sadness and longing that Maura could never get enough of. Yes, soon the desolate cold would come and so would mourning memories of naked arms and legs in the sun. She would have to be cloaked behind wool and down for the next many months, wrapped up all alone again.

Maura was going to her professor's house, or apartment rather, for a one-on-one conference and her stomach was a ball of nerves. She had decided to take two workshop classes that first semester, rather than the one workshop and the one "craft class" that usually represented a full course load. She was happy she had made this choice, because her professor Dimitra's class was very different from Dan's class. Dimitra was less famous. She hadn't published a book in nearly two decades. But she seemed sincerely kind and Maura thought she was a good teacher, mostly due to the fact that she paid attention. Dimitra noticed her students: she saw them and what they were trying to do, on the page and in the world. And she had invited each of them over to her house to have in-person conferences. Her home! It was such an honor.

2.5 November 17, 2010, Manhattan, New York City (Dimitra)

It was four in the afternoon and loneliness seeped out of Dimitra's pores. The top layer of her skin felt wet. She was a solitary person to begin with, in a particular Manhattan way, and often that was fine. But now winter was on the horizon and that deep old urging to have someone beside her—to have a warm body to touch in soft places and dry places and slippery-wet places—it was all surfacing. She hadn't touched anyone in over two years. She had no one to touch.

I don't even want to be here. I don't want to be. None of it is right, she thought as she lowered herself onto the full size bed shoved into the corner of her dimly lit apartment on University Place. *I'm wasting my life. My time is worth nothing.* She could not totally remember what she had thought or learned when she had been in one of her student's places, when she was in graduate school to get an MFA. That time was another world, another place in which she had existed. Her reality now was primarily this small two-room apartment, her books, her naps. Nearly unable to keep her eyes open, she put her student Maura's printed out story down beside her on the mattress. The early evening exhaustion hit her now in a way it never had. The year of chemo had changed her cells.

As she lay back she reached into her bedside drawer—the same cornflower blue bedside drawer she'd had since the seventies, when she'd been married to Earl and lived in Little Italy. She groped around until her fingers touched the vape pen, and then took it out and did two quick hits of Realeyez. She knew she shouldn't do it; it was too much. But one of her students in last year's workshop, Isabel of the shiny long hair, had given it to her when she was going into the hospital and since then she'd found a way to refill it every few weeks.

The ghostly sound of the heart monitor from her weeks in the hospital last year rang rhythmically and manically in her head as she tried to sleep, every single day. She was imagining it, but it wouldn't go away. A steady beep measuring life that made her want to give hers up. Funny how just a year ago she had fought so hard to keep it. But she understood now she had no one and no possessions, other than her cats. She hadn't had anything in years.

Realeyez numbed her mind then spread out to her limbs. A warm kind of ecstasy. She let Maura's printed out pages fall, the paper making a *shhhhhh* noise as they collected on the floor. Dimitra's body was free now but her mind was still alone and untouched. What would writing another novel change? What would a false story change, even if she managed to make it a beautiful one? The beeping kept on, a light pounding really, reminding her that she had almost nothing to live for. She thought of her years drunk at the bar, drunk at home, drunk in a cab, on the street, in another person's bed. Why not return to them? Or, why return to anything? If she was gone, she would feel nothing. No urges, no needs, a darkness.

2.6 November 17, 2010, *Manhattan, New York City* (Wendy)

From my office in the afterlife, I had already decided to break the barrier on earth and go talk to Dimitra. Now I hurried. Something needed to break her line of thinking. Then, as I was going onto the escalator in The Department of Helping and Learning and watching Dimitra in my mirror pack, I saw her pick up the vape pen and smoke.

"Dammit," I said, as I stepped onto the escalator. Realeyez, a packaged but illegal narcotic, was getting out of control all over the United States but especially in big cities like New York. Of course then it occurred to me that this could be a benevolent set of circumstances. This sweet woman might be less petrified if she simply thought she was high, rather than actually hallucinating a ghost appearing in her bedroom. It's not kind to mess with aging writers, I

reasoned. Their imaginations have been running wild for so many years, they've basically trained themselves to believe in the unbelievable. And now what was I about to do?

At the bottom of the afterlife escalator I closed my eyes and imagined where to go, then appeared, to my surprise, I appeared not in Dimitra's apartment but at the base of the stairs of her Manhattan apartment building. I didn't yet understand the intricacies of transporting oneself to the living world and my intentions on where to land were not exact. As I huffed up the to the third floor, holding onto the metal railing and inhaling the stench of the many-times painted-over bright white hallway, I considered what I might say to Dimitra that could help Maura, and moreover could help the future-Mauras who were sure to be Dimitra's students in the coming years. There *was* so much value in teaching writing to young people in college; I knew there was in my bones, both on earth and now. And there was especially value if dedicated teachers like Dimitra were the ones doing the teaching. But how to convince her of that?

My body sifted through Dimitra's wooden apartment door without thinking about it— a lovely trick, really, as my skin felt nothing at all. There she was, lying on top of her covers, with the last shards of November afternoon light breaking through the slits in the wooden shutters.

It was romantic, this grey-haired writer's solitary life. She was the female version of the fabled genius-writer in the attic; the rare, brave, woman who had chosen art over having children. Dimitra lived alone and read and thought through her daily rhythms, whereas most women were accustomed to cooking for others, worrying about others, calling up others, even if they eventually got the reading and thinking done after all of that. Dimitra was asleep on the bed with one hand on her vape pen, her mouth open and a slight drip of drool coming from the right corner. But she still was a hero for our kind, I thought, with a chuckle but also with sincerity.

I tapped her foot, whispering, “Dimitra.” I braced myself for her to scream, to throw something at me or get a knife. But she just opened her eyes wearily. She simply whispered, “Who are you?”

“Wendy Bishop,” I answered, matter-of-factly. “I’m a writer and a researcher. I’ve read your work.” I cleared my throat.

“I haven’t read yours,” the barely awake woman said.

“Not surprising,” I nodded. “Anyways, I want to talk to you about your students. And I know that you’ve been considering quitting teaching and—” I paused. This was delicate work. “I know you’ve been thinking about quitting everything.” I paused again, hoping that she understood what I meant, why my voice got softer when I said that.

She nodded, seeming to understand. She pushed her body up against an old carved wooden headboard; perhaps she thought she was dreaming.

“I have. But how do you know...?” she looked around, mystified.

“I don’t have that much time here, so I need you to listen to me, quickly. OK?”

She nodded again and then looked from left to right. “I’m certainly hallucinating you, but I need this to stop because I have a student coming. She’s coming here, someone I feel, well. I feel close to.” She blushed around her temples.

“Listen. There’s a way to think about your work, Dimitra—the work you’ve dedicated so much of your life to—as something very important. As something almost holy. You can look at it from this perspective and think these workshops you lead every week are bringing your students into a community of practice, and helping them learn valuable things.”

“Learn!” Dimitra guffawed. She ran one hand through her heavy grey hair that puffed into frizz at the top. “These children learn nothing. As a teacher, I’m a pawn in a silly creative

writing system that exists primarily to make the university money. The set-up is a cash-cow, and the children—I will not call them adults—attempt to become apprentices, but none of them had to figure it out the way we did when we were younger writers.” She shook her head. Her hand blindly felt the bedside table for where she’d left the vape pen and she picked it up and stared at it, suspiciously.

“I hope you can think about your work, about the workshop and teaching creative writing, in a new light. It’s time to think about the positive right now, Dimitra. Ok?”

She stared at me with the eyes of a weary woman. It wasn’t just the drugs coursing through her. I too had seen divorce and disappointment, and knew a bit of what was behind her stare.

I continued: “Have you read the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, and their theories about learning? They say that the basis of learning anything is from something they call ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ and that’s what these workshops are doing—throwing the student participants into a true social world, the social world of a writer, that they can move through. They *are* learning, and you are a crucial part of that.”

Dimitra scoffed. “I truly don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Lave and Wenger say that legitimate peripheral participation ‘...concerns the process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice’ and that’s what you’re helping your students to do (29.) In your classes they may sit at the workshop table and barely speak, or they may submit poorly imagined or poorly written work... They’re still at the edges of the community. But then as they make their way through the program— take more classes, write stronger stories, give better comments and critiques to their classmates, and begin publishing themselves— they soon legitimately join the creative writing world and move closer towards the

center. After going moving through an MFA program, these students are closer to belonging and what Lave and Wenger call ‘full participation.’”

“My brain doesn’t work this way. What’s your name, uh, Wendy— I don’t care for academic theory. We teach our students by being models for them. We regale them with the crooked paths we all took to get to where we are, as published authors and professors of creative writing. But they do not, or cannot, follow it.”

“Of course your brain works that way,” I said, trying to be as gentle as possible. “What Lave and Wenger are talking about is also apprenticeship, but a more authentic form of it than just one-teacher-to-one-student acting as mentor-to-mentee.”

Dimitra scoffed.

I gave her a patient smile. “Remember when you were in Alcoholics Anonymous?”

She gasped. “How do you know I was in A.A.?”

“It’s a special thing, the knowledge I get now. Anyways, Lave and Wenger studied A.A. as a form of moving through participation. You began as a newcomer, right? And what did you do in the beginning?”

“I mostly just listened. It was at a church on Christopher Street where I usually went. Always chilly in there. In the beginning I picked up my white chip at the end of the meeting, as a vow to not drink. And occasionally I even upheld that vow.” She chuckled.

“Right. And when you sat there and listened, and picked up that chip, did you feel empowered?”

“I guess, yes. I knew that I was joining something. I was learning the patterns of the stories told at A.A., and the expectations of responsibility for the people who had been there for longer—for the leaders.”

“Yes, so as Lave and Wenger say, even for you, ‘peripherality [was] an empowering position’ (1991, 36.) And that’s what your students are learning in your classes, as they sit around the workshop table. This is authentic learning— your students are teaching themselves, which is certainly how you learned to be a writer, right? This ‘increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991, 49.) Which *does* prepare them to learn to be a writer. It *does* make your job and your work valuable.”

“Hmmm,” she said.

We were both silent for a bit. I was surprised by how much this woman was just riding out my presence. Perhaps she was used to vivid dreams? “Therefore your classes are opportunities for students to change the way they envision themselves. Engaging in physical practices, like reading unpublished work and sitting in a workshop room, that help them to identify as a writer—”

The buzzer sounded. Dimitra nearly jumped out of bed. “My student meeting, dammit!”

As she tried to straighten her thin linen bedspread I wrote a note for her on a piece of scrap paper on her desk. Something for her to consider later:

Lave and Wenger say: “Cain (n.d.) argues that the main business of A. A. is the reconstruction of identity... by ‘identity’ I mean the way a person understands and views himself, and is viewed by others, a perception of self which is fairly constant....” How does the social environment of your teaching impact the identity of your students? You are changing them, by allowing them to simply be there in your workshop classroom.

(Bishop, 1991, 80-81.)

Soon Maura was inside the apartment, and after some awkward greetings and an exchange of a gift of a Kombucha tea Maura had brought to her teacher, the two women were sitting in a corner alcove across from each other, each in an armchair.

2.7 November 17, 2010, Manhattan, New York City (Maura)

Across from Dimitra, in the studio apartment on University Place, Maura thought to herself: this is just what I wanted. This was the work that she wanted so badly to do in this graduate program. She felt both grateful and in shock that it was actually happening.

Dimitra was what Maura considered at the time an older woman, in her late fifties. She was Greek but had been living in New York City since the 1970s, when she came there for an MFA program at Sarah Lawrence. There was an air of tragicness around the older professor, but the kind of tragedy that comes with beauty and with old New York. Maura couldn't stop picturing Dimitra, thirty years and thirty pounds lighter, long hair, with the Velvet Underground constantly playing behind her— a background soundtrack to all of her moves— smoking cigarettes on corners and not smiling at men and writing novels in the latest early hours of the morning.

Dimitra discussed her childhood in Greece quite a bit, and told both Maura and her classmates frequently, "I imprinted on my father. He was my role model and I needed to be like him, because my mother did not make moves in the world. I wanted nothing more than to be nothing like her." Which is, perhaps, why she came to the United States for college, to a liberal arts school just outside of New York City, and began to define herself by her career—she was a writer, and that was everything she wanted and would want for the rest of her life.

Dimitra's current apartment was spare. As someone who'd been living in New York on and off since she was eighteen, Maura was used to visiting people in studio apartments, but there was something jarring about the intimacy of seeing your professor's bed and sitting beside it. It gave her the impression that she knew too clearly what the older woman's daily life was like; it was embarrassing to know that Dimitra slept in that bed alone every night, that she sat at the

desk beside it and read through Maura's classmates' crappy stories after dinner, red pen in hand. Maura both wanted her professor's strange New Yorker hermithood while also fearing she would have the same future—to live alone and refer to her two cats as if they were children; to be pitied by spoiled students in their twenties; to have a past that she thought of so much she nearly lived in it, as there was very little happening in her present.

Now, ten years into the twenty-first century, and Dimitra's rent stabilized studio apartment on University Place was surrounded by chain restaurants and other decidedly unhip establishments, like undergraduate dormitories. When Maura had entered it that afternoon she'd expected to discuss all three of the short stories she had handed Dimitra the week before in class. But when they'd both settled themselves in the armchairs, ready for the conference discussion, Dimitra had looked over two of the stories and stated, "These first two are not good. They're not valuable. You were trying to write about something that was not honest and it didn't work." She tossed the stapled pages to the carpet, dramatically.

She then cleared her throat and reiterated, "I'm glad we're going over this one story, though. The other two are crap."

Maura nodded, her face blooming hot from the truth of her teacher's statement. How did Dimitra know exactly what she had been trying to do with those stories? Maura had written them with the reaction of her classmates in mind. In particular, she'd written them with the image of Max hanging over her thoughts and visions. She had inadvertently focused on one question as she wrote—*What would Max want to read about?* And she found herself typing paragraphs about a suburban neighborhood filled with suburban people whom she had no connection to. This was one problem, Maura realized then, of being in this social learning setting. She couldn't help herself and her hormones and her immature brain from being influenced by the other young,

often beautiful, bodies around the workshop table. When she was in that room, she was writing for them. How could she not be?

But the one story that Dimitra still had in her hands did have at least some value. Perhaps this was because it was written before Maura came into the MFA program. This was her application story based on a real child that Maura had known when they were young, whose mother was a drug addict and whom Maura's parents forced her to play with weekly as an act of their own Catholic charity.

Dimitra went through the story line-by-line, commenting on the language and the moves of the characters. It was an act of such care, one that Maura had never received before. (She felt as though she'd never received that care from her own mother—to be looked at so thoroughly and with such respect.)

Before Maura left that evening, Dimitra said to her: "Now this is what you need to do. Turn this story into a book. It won't be hard. Turn this story into a book and then you have a career. You can get a teaching job, and begin writing something else that you might feel is bigger, you know. But do this first."

Maura nodded mechanically, confused about the truth behind her statements but hopeful that her life path was as simple as Dimitra was describing it could be. She was getting up to leave but Dimitra put a hand on Maura's knee, leaning across the worn wooden coffee table.

With her other hand, still leaning forward, the older woman ran her fingers through her own hair. "Do you think, Maura, that when two people have a connection, it's rare? Do you think that when two people have something they feel for one and other, it's something that must be, well... acted upon? It's so rare that something should be done about it?"

Maura was not disturbed by the woman's hand. Just confused.

“I suppose yes....” All of a sudden Dimitra’s hand moved off Maura’s knee with such rapid speed it was as if another person had grabbed it and whisked it away.

Maura stood up warily, saying her goodbyes, muttering repetitive and profuse *thank yous* for the comments and the attention, and did not realize until she was standing on University Place, on the now darkened sidewalk, that Dimitra had been talking about her. Maura hadn’t realized that the connection her teacher believed existed was between the two of them, who had been alone together in that apartment. Dimitra had been hitting on her, she realized, and a surprised laugh escaped from her mouth.

2.8 November 17, 2010, *The Department of Helping and Learning* (Wendy)

The final interaction between the two women was not my business and I told myself: in the future I would, in fact, stay out of it. No more pushing of hands. What was clear to me, as I walked out of the door of Dimitra’s apartment building and landed immediately back in my afterlife office, was that Maura, along with her classmates— along with her teachers!— knew very little about the history of an MFA program, and the environment of university-led creative writing classes that she was a part of.

It was late and I wanted to lie down in my afterlife bed, which was conveniently located in a room just behind my afterlife office, but I made one quick phone call on the landline.

Frances Child was always available for me.

“Frankie, it’s me, Wendy. I know, I know you’re not in the office. I just need to know— what’s the protocol around here about leaving like, some kind of printed out manual for our charges?”

“Are you trying to publish from heaven, Wendy?”

“Not publish! No, just leave my mentee something... a document really, that will help her.”

“Now do you think that’s crossing a line?”

“Right, right, I hear you. Loud and clear. Thanks Frankie. Sleep well.”

“We all sleep well here, my dear.”

“We certainly do.”

I hung up the phone and opened up the laptop on my desk, and got to writing. I would just write a little, first, then see where it went. These were facts, history, beginnings, that needed to be known. I felt a buzzing within my afterlife body.

2.9 November 19, 2010, *Brooklyn, NY* (Maura)

Two nights later Maura was inside her third floor Brooklyn apartment at two in the morning, and she’d done what she’d promised herself she would stop doing: she’d smoked Realeyez by herself. She was dizzy and the sounds of traffic on Flatbush Avenue became like a carwash, whirring. Everything around her body was white noise, but she was also somehow focused, inspired to re-read the comments that Dimitra had so generously and painstakingly marked on the one potentially redeemable story Maura had ever written. She rummaged through her tote bag that had inside it: a laptop (no case), a half-filled soft-pack of Camel Light cigarettes, two squished and creased Luna bar wrappers, and two grey plastic folders with voluminous amount of paper handouts spilling out of them—readings from class, stories with handwritten comments from classmates and professors, and a crumpled up note from Rory that said: *You’re hot, you know it?*

When they had met each other Maura felt an instant connection to Rory, as if he understood her before they’d even spoken. But he had not felt that connection. In fact, he may

not have noticed her at all at one college student activist meeting after another. These meetings were held in windowless, corporate meeting rooms in a newly build student center at KU, where Maura had begun college. Metal and plastic chairs were stacked up in corners, and kids with dreadlocks and facial piercings, studded belts and steel-toed Doc Martins sat on the floor, their hooded sweatshirts sometimes pulled over their heads. Rory was always there, usually sitting in the back of the room as a silent authority. At that point, when Maura first met him, he had a nose ring through his septum like a bull. It was just the kind of thing Maura's mother would have called "disgusting."

She had surprised herself by her long and sustained effort to get Rory's attention. It was her mission for years. Usually, Maura couldn't muster up the energy for this kind of social drive. Even now, there were cliques in the KU MFA in the program, and Maura simply didn't have the energy to attempt to join them. After the events of the past few years—with her friends Jon and Ling dying, and everything that had happened and was happening with Rory— she couldn't muster the motivation. A popular-girl group was forming quickly in the MFA, unbelievably named Jessie, Jessica, and Jess. They soon became referred to by others in the program as "the Jessicas." Jessie and Jessica were both from Manhattan; one had a mother who wrote for *The New Yorker* and one had a father who was a famous sculptor. They were very rich and very well connected; they were very thin and very educated from their years of top-schools and Ivy League colleges.

The third "Jessica," called Jess, was from the mid-west and didn't know her father. This she talked about quite a bit. She was also very thin and very smart, and had somehow gotten herself, by herself, into a private boarding school and a top college and hustled more than anyone Maura had ever witnessed. Jess hustled herself right into best friendship with the other Jessicas.

Maura liked this Jess. In Dan’s class, they had a thing where they nodded at the same parts in workshop and did some eye-rolls and glancing when they had similar feelings about a story or comments by a peer or professor. But it was clear to both of them that Jess was on a mission and if Maura was not going to join in on that mission— to become the best, to angle her way to the top, to make the right friends and post the right pictures on Instagram—Jess didn’t have time to really be her friend. And Maura respected Jess’ hustle, in some ways.

Maura’s one real friend in the program was Nadia. Nadia was six years older than Maura and very skeptical, of the MFA program and of all people. And perhaps of the world, in general. She taught essay writing at a nearby college during the day. Nadia and Maura had figured out, in the first week of the program as they both perched on bar stools at Magnolias on Barrow Street after Dimitra’s class, that Nadia knew Rory from activist work on the Ralph Nader campaign years before. And since then they’d been friends. They were aligned enough, at least in their draw towards left wing politics, to form a weak team amidst the other students.

That late-night in her Brooklyn apartment, the hazy-brained Maura continued to rummage through her bag. Where was the story with Dimitra’s comments? How could she be so dumb as to misplace something that had meant so much to her? She didn’t deserve to be a writer, she thought, grimacing. She couldn’t even organize her own papers. She couldn’t keep her possessions tidy. She couldn’t *not* get high by herself in the middle of the night. At the bottom of her bag, Maura found a printed and stapled packet that she’d never seen before. Had this been handed to her in class, and she hadn’t even noticed? She put the packet on her desk, smoothing out the cover page, and began to read.

2.10 PAMPHLET: A GUIDE TO WHERE AMERICAN CREATIVE WRITING BEGAN

2.10.1 The Founding of American “Creative Writing”

What exactly does the term “creative writing” denote? The term holds, of course, very different meanings in different contexts. For the purposes of this pamphlet, primarily discussing the teaching of the academic subject creative writing at the university level, the definition given by D.G. Myers (1996) will be used: “...it is a makeshift, omnibus term for poems, novels, novellas, short stories, and (sometimes) plays; for invented as opposed to historical; for the imaginary in contradistinction to the actual; for the concrete and the particular as distinguished from the thorny and abstract. In short, for non-fiction...” (2.) Following this definition, it is clear that the history of teaching “non-fiction” within the American academy began in two separate places, at two separate times, and was not truly established as a legitimate university subject until the late-1960s.

The seeds of university-level creative writing instruction began within composition classes at Harvard in the early 1880s. Seth Abramson (2016) reports that within these composition classes “...a cadre of professors began permitting advanced composition students to write imaginative responses to civics prompts” (234.) Courses such as Barrett Wendell’s composition class, “where he occasionally accepted verse and fiction for credit” helped to bring non-argument-based writing into student work in English departments (McGurl, 2009, 94.) A drama course that George Baker taught through the English department at Harvard, titled “Drama 47,” became a precursor for the still-dominant method of creative writing instruction—the workshop; Baker, inspired by Renaissance theater practices, had his students enact and critique Shakespeare’s plays in a collaborative manner (McGurl, 95-96.) Under the leadership of the university president Charles Eliot, the English department at Harvard in the late 1800s

began to set the stage for students experimenting with language and learning about the construction of literature through artistically-inclined methods.

Surprisingly, the other, and perhaps more powerful, location where the field of creative writing began was in elementary education. At the start of the progressive education movement in American schools, under the influence of John Dewey's ideas, a man named William Hugh Mearns became a major force in the promotion of teaching English literature through creative methods. Mearns, who most notably taught at the Shady Hill School in Cambridge, MA and then the Lincoln School, associated with Columbia University's Teachers College, was a "publicist for a wholesale 'creativist' reformation of literary study" (Myers, 1996, 103.) The term "creative writing" stems from the preface of Mearns' 1925 book entitled *Creative Youth*; the preface, written by the headmaster of The Lincoln School, questions why composition does not fully train students to become eloquent writers, and suggests that "creative writing might yet develop into the answer" (Myers, 1996, 103.) During the years when the progressive education movement spread through schools across the country, the act of writing creatively took hold in elementary classrooms, introducing a generation of children to the method of constructing imaginative responses to literature and the individual creation of verbally-based art.

Yet the creation of art was not the pedagogical goal of educators involved in the progressive education movement. Rather, these teachers taught creative writing in order to help students more fully develop themselves and their personalities. They believed that "self-expression is of vital necessity to the human being" (Myers, 1996, 105.) Mark McGurl (2009) explains that the thinking behind this progressive movement outlook was that for students, the

act of “[i]ntensifying the feedback loop that transforms actions into meaningful experiences, creative writing contributes to the ‘continuous formation’ of the individual who is the sum of these experiences” (86.) This theory went into the pedagogical basis for the 1935 report published by NCTE, titled *Experience Curriculum in English*, which helped to further promote the act of creative writing in elementary and secondary school classrooms (Applebee, 1974, 113.)

The progressive education philosophy behind teaching of creative writing in K-12 education then rose to the college-level. Norman Foerster, founder of the Iowa School of Letters— the influential precursor to the Iowa Writers Workshop— founded the School of Letters in 1930 within the University of Iowa as a way to move the English department away from its philological past and into a future that promoted a more holistic approach to literary education (Myers, 1996 126.) This holistic approach, and the future of English departments that Foerster envisioned, brought to the forefront not only creative writing but also criticism, in the vein of the increasingly popular New Critical movement; Foerster’s greater vision was to have the approach of his new School of Letters act as a force “revolutionizing” literary study in America, through changing the manner in which writing was taught (Myers, 1996, 124.) And this revolution was in fact rooted in progressive education. Myers tell us that Foerster “...agreed that ‘creation and criticism are one,’ but he meant something specific by this. Since both have their source in personality, both criticism and creation are the expression of one person” (1996, 132.) By bringing creative writing into the central requirements of literary study, it was the personality and the individual mind that Foerster aimed to educate, which fell in line with his contemporary English educator colleagues in elementary, middle, and high schools across the country.

Foerster's new school would in fact prove to revolutionize the field of English, but not in the way he intended, and only in its second incarnation which was The Iowa Writers Workshop (IWW). The workshop method had taken hold in the School of Letters and a short time later, in 1936, in order to teach all types of writing, including fiction and poetry. The IWW was founded as an evolution of Foerster's School of Letters, but one that granted master's degrees in only creative writing. It was the first program in the country to do so (The University of Iowa, n.d.). IWW was founded by Wilbur Schramm, a graduate of Foerster's School of Letters, who ran it rather quietly until 1941 when Paul Engle took leadership of the program and began to fashion the IWW into the American cultural institution that it still is today (The University of Iowa, n.d.). Under Engle's leadership, the IWW moved away from the progressive education movement ideals that Foerster had instilled in the roots of the program, and toward a more commercially-oriented pedagogy, based on building student writers into published authors who would sell books to major publishing houses. It was Engle, therefore, who *actually* revolutionized the landscape of creative writing education.

By building bridges between academia and the business world—the publishing business world—Paul Engle turned the IWW into an entity that English departments had never known before. And because the IWW then became a model for countless other independent creative writing programs at colleges and universities across the country, Engle's work did irrevocably change the nature of American English departments. Loren Glass (2016) says of Engle that "...his talent was to recognize talent, and his management of a recruitment for the Workshop was more in the style of a football coach than a department chair... Unlike so many of his peers, he saw no conflict between culture and commerce. He was, in other words, a cultural

entrepreneur..." (3-4.) Engle's entrepreneurial project was to raise the writers that graduated from IWW to celebrity status, which in turn raised the high profile nature of the school. The early independent creative writing programs were largely founded by graduates of IWW, such as the program at Stanford, founded in 1945 by Wallace Stegner, and the MA program at Johns Hopkins, founded in 1947 by Elliot Coleman (Glass, 2016, 4). Over the next 65-plus years, the prevalence of creative writing graduate programs steadily grew, stemming from the model of the one original midwestern program.

Data suggests that the popularity of creative writing programs, while rising throughout the second half of the twentieth century, skyrocketed in the first part of the twenty-first century. Glass, drawing his figures from the AWP website, states that there "were 79 creative writing programs in 1975, 319 by 1984, 535 by 1994, 719 by 2004..." (2016, 5.) Glass (2016) argues that this trend really began three-and-a-half decades before 2004; he says that as an academic field, "[c]reative writing reached a certain disciplinary maturity with the founding, by Iowa alum and instructor Verlin Cassill, of the Associated Writing Programs (AWP) in 1969" (5.) AWP, the field's singular professional organization, has certainly helped these multiple and spread-out graduate programs to have a unified identity in terms of teaching style and literary tastes. At the AWP conference every year, as well as through its publication, leaders promote the IWW-style workshop model, the genre of literary fiction, and popular poets to study. But the legitimacy of the field of creative writing within the academy is still in question. The wavering authority that the sub-field holds within English departments, and then again within greater university structures, stems from multiple sources but one of the primary origins of this

trouble is the pedagogical set up of the primary type of instruction that the field uses, which is, in fact, one the founding influences of the field itself: the classroom workshop.

2.10.2 *The Creative Writing Workshop and Its Discontents*

The creative writing workshop, on which IWW and therefore the replicated MFA programs was founded, is usually set up as follows:

Typically, the student whose work is under discussion will pass his story, play, poem, or essay out the class period before it is to be workshopped...The other students read and comment on the draft at home, and then the piece is discussed in class. In order to avoid discussions that amount to nothing more than an extended self-defense of the work, the author is normally asked to not speak while discussion of his manuscript is in progress. After the workshop, students return their marked copies to further guide the writer's revisions.

(Bishop and Starkey, 2006, 198.)

The workshop could be viewed, simply, as a greater group discussion of an individual student's work. This discussion could also be viewed as a democratizing of power dynamics within a classroom: rather than a published author's work being held up as a model, student work is centered and appreciated and considered with a critical eye. The teacher also becomes a participant with the students in the class, thus equalizing the power that the teacher holds with that of the student commentators. Indeed, the workshop method has undeniable positive qualities to it. Bishop (1991) brings up the notion that a workshop provides a "a community, and the community also contributes to the student's developing sense of audience" (8.) In this rosy view of the workshop method, students are empowered to think of themselves as serious writers and to learn how their own writing may be received in a public setting, by greater groups of serious readers.

While this does not fall in-line with Mearns and the progressive movement's initial intentions for creative writing— the workshop does not overtly help the student develop her individual self through creative expression— it does, as Bishop suggests, allow a student “a forum for trying on the *personality* of a writer” (1991, 8.) In a sense, the workshop allows a student to engage in the practice of drafting a work and having it edited or critiqued in a public setting, similar to the environment in which a professional writer works. The workshop thus allows a student to practice a profession within the low-stakes environment of a classroom setting.

Yet it is specifically this simulated professionalization that is problematic for learning the craft of writing creatively. Creative writing classes became popular in undergraduate classes in the second-half of the twentieth century, and they were often taught by either current MFA graduate students or by instructors who held MFA degrees. These instructors had been trained, through their own schooling, to discuss and critique fiction and poetry through the workshop model, and therefore undergraduate classes were in turn taught by the workshop model. While the workshop method may be appropriate for pre-professional MFA students (although that's debatable, as well), it does not benefit students at lower levels, at least as the sole method of instruction. Joseph Moxley (1989a) points out that “...by focusing primarily on revising and editing, the workshop fails to address prewriting strategies.... [i]n short, the implied assumption of the workshop methodology is that students already know how to gather, shape, and revise material” (xiv.) Because the workshop method is pervasive at all levels of creative writing at colleges and universities, including introductory and intermediate undergraduate classes, students in workshop classes may be missing out on crucial developmental lessons of the craft.

While there are certainly some benefits to treating students as if they were serious writers nearing a professional level, the fact is that most students are not. And how could they be? Most have not been given the introductory tools and the space to practice and experiment with writing cogent storylines, well-developed characters, or metrical verse.

English and writing studies scholars have manifold other criticism of the workshop method, aside from Moxley's strong point that the method itself assumes a high level of writing and craft proficiency on the part of the student. Roskelly points out that the silence of the writer during the workshop can be highly problematic. "[B]ecause the author is effectively silenced during the discussion of her piece, the potentially dialogic nature of the workshop is muted, while the New Critical idea that the work should speak for itself is reinforced" (as cited in Bishop & Starkey, 2006, 199.) This treatment does ignore both the author's intentions as well as the cultural context of the piece. In a classroom made up of students from diverse backgrounds, when these elements of a text are side-stepped in discussion, it can allow the conversation to enter into cultural insensitivity and misunderstanding.

The unique social make up of a workshop also presents pedagogical challenges. Randy Fresinger, in 1978, presented an idealized but perhaps naïve view of what workshop can do, arguing that within a workshop students "...write and talk about their writing. The writing process is more important than the product, in that students stories and poems are never really finished..." (as cited in Bishop, 1991, 12.) But the truth is that Fresinger's dialogic workshop does not usually occur. The composition belonging to the student being workshopped is normally printed out or displayed on a screen in front of her classmates. The other students are visually presented with the finished work or final product, and would have to be directed by the

instructor, usually, to focus on the imagined writing process—which can only ever be imagined in the discussion, because the writer is not allowed to relay how the process took place.

Additionally, as Dianne Donnelly (2011) points out, instead of facilitating democratic discussion, a student’s immersion in a social setting can prompt the student writer “to create stories and/or poems that are too workshop-ready (too polished), or suited for workshop approval (too safe), or customized for a teachers preference (too similar in style)” (75.) All three of Donnelly’s potentialities for negative outcomes in student learning within the workshop are rooted in the notion that the group critique can not only hamper a student’s creativity, but deeply impede the student’s willingness to take risks. The lack of risk taking also encourages conformity within the classroom, in terms of the texts the students are working to build. The fear of risk-taking is especially dangerous to the learning and development of early writing students.

Risk-taking, huh? Maura nodded off with the pamphlet in her hand, wondering if this was what Rory thought was so deeply lame, so highly uncool, about writers writing within the walls of an expensive graduate program. Why would anyone take a risk? Why make oneself an outcast when one had finally gotten inside? But then again, Maura thought with one hand over her dropping eyes, maybe a brave person would be able to see that it was all crap, and ignore it. Maybe a bolder person would ignore Dan and she and Max and everyone else who was writing their unsurprising stories, spending their lives writing out what they already knew, for their readers to digest, safely and without disruption, and then fall asleep under the miserable sheer of Realey-induced nausea.

Chapter 3: Second Semester, Inciting Incident

3.1 January 13, 2011. *Meredith, N.H.* (Maura)

The January sunlight winked through the barren trees as they drove up to New Hampshire; it was late afternoon but the mid-winter light waned early. For nearly five hours, Maura had driven and Rory had sat beside her, reading his book silently and occasionally messing with the volume on the stereo. The snow was just beginning, delicate and light flakes as they pulled off of interstate 93 and onto the local road that would lead them to Maura's parents' lake house.

Now they were listening to an audiobook of Henry Miller's *Under the Roofs of Paris*. Jo Anderson's workshop had been canceled for the first week of the semester. The email said that Anderson's "travel plans had gone cattywampus," and she was still down south with her family. Maura's craft class was on a Monday, so she effectively got another week of vacation.

Maura's day job, three days a week in the mornings as an assistant at a "boutique literary agency" owned by an old man named Jeb Waters, was not cancelled, though, but she was not going to it. The place was called the Jeb Waters Agency, or JWA. The "boutique" label, she

learned, just meant a tiny company that represented big authors. She had been working there full-time before she entered the MFA program and instead of firing her when she told her bosses that she was going to grad school, they benevolently offered her a part time job with all her same duties as the full-time job, for the same hourly rate. She accepted it, but wondered each morning that she transferred to the 6 train at the Union Square subway station, if she should quit and find another way to generate a little cash—tutoring or babysitting or something else.

Her JWA office was the basement of a beautiful brownstone on the edge of Gramercy Park in Manhattan. There were two other employees, two women about ten years older than Maura. The boss, Jeb, and his wife, Roberta, lived and worked upstairs. The job was so easy Maura was ultimately grateful for it. She answered the phone and sent a few emails, but primarily took out the garbage, wrapped up the recycling, and refilled the printers. She also fed Jeb and Roberta's cat when they were out of town, and waited for the Time Warner Cable repair people to show up, and met their adult-daughter when she would arrive from rural Massachusetts and inevitably be locked out of the house. Plus it looked good on paper in the literary world, Maura thought, being connected to Jeb. She believed that if she paid enough attention there she would understand what literary agents were really looking for in authors, and she would have an easier time finding herself an agent, once she had a book— or even the slightest idea for a book— to pitch to them.

Although she had these little tasks to complete, it felt as if she primarily did nothing while at JWA. She browsed the internet or read the submissions that she was simply supposed to be forwarding on to Adia, the higher-level assistant. Maura's desk was in the basement and she could hear when small but solid, eighty-one-year-old Jeb was creaking and heaving his way down the stairs. She would always jump to her feet and lean in closely to her computer, as if she

were rushing to type something out. This seem to please Jeb; he would smirk at her and sometimes say something like “relax kid!”

Maura didn't have the days off from JWA to go to New Hampshire— she was supposed to return to the office right after the new year— so she had called Jeb that morning and said, in an honestly hoarse voice, “I'm so sorry, I went to urgent care last night and got diagnosed with mono. The doctor said I could be contagious for a long while.”

Jeb seemed skeptical, but of course could do nothing about it. Maura fell back asleep for a few hours, and by the early afternoon she was on her way to her parents' cabin by a lake. She and Rory would have a week together of solitary writing time. It would be a self-made writer's retreat, with her ex-boyfriend she was still sleeping with and still, of course, in love with.

The car turned off of I-93 and onto the local road. The houses that lined it were increasingly small, most with a pick up truck parked outside. Many had giant piles of wood stacked next to the trucks, covered in a blue tarp, which was in-turn covered in patchy snow. Her friend Nadia was back in class at the MFA program already, and as Maura drove her father's old Chevy Malibu on I-93 while Rory dozed beside her in the passenger seat, Nadia called to report the happenings at KU.

Nadia recounted: “It was Andy, that white guy who is good friends with Max, you know him? Well, he was writing about a black child in Detroit and one of The Jessicas said, ‘I don't know exactly the right way to articulate this, but that child. He just.... He doesn't *sound* black to me.’ And then everyone in the room started talking over each other, debating what ‘black’ might sound like, how the dialogue could be changed, and ways it could be changed... It was crazy, Maura. Anita was there, and she's black, and her face just remained completely blank the whole time. And I guess I was just shocked too, so I didn't say anything. And everyone else in the room

was white. So it was all these white people were weighing in about not only how this Black child should sound, but how the white writer could learn Black dialect.... Oof. And, then Max—your Max—said ‘Well, you know, you can go to 125th Street, and these people, they sell these little pamphlets on the street. Like, they're self-published books and pamphlets and stuff.’ And, that's when I finally stepped in. I was like, ‘You know what? There's also Black literature. If you want to understand how people do dialect, maybe you could study that, because there's not one way.’ Right? Am I crazy to have said that? I mean there have been many ways in which writers have tackled this...”

“Lord,” she responded. She could tell Rory was awake now and listening, his ears were nearly pricked as if he were a dog hearing a whistle. She hoped he hadn’t been able to hear that ‘your Max’ line.

“So did Sandy Verla step in?” Sandy Verla was the professor of that workshop, famous for her quick and dark short stories. She had been a Macarthur fellow, a Guggenheim fellow, a finalist for the National Book Award, and received over twenty other literary prizes and awards for her fiction writing. She was in her sixties and white, and judging from the tone of her stories, had to have good politics.

“Not a thing. In fact, Sandy just kept the conversation going.”

“Did she have any response to your comment about Black literature?”

“Get this, she said to the whole class, ‘I’ve always been bothered by literature being designated by race. Isn’t literature just literature?’”

“Jesus,” I said with a scoff.

“Yep,” said Nadia. Then she moved on. “How’s Rory, is he there with you?” Maura said he was, and handed the phone over to the passenger’s side.

Later that night, as Rory and Maura were making dinner at the vacation house, he asked her: “So what are you planning to work on while we’re here?”

Maura knew what Rory was writing, so she didn’t need to ask him. He’d been toiling away at a memoir about “street book selling” for a few years now, which was his chosen profession. He sold used books from a card table set up at Astor Place in Manhattan. His memoir specifically outlined all the people he called “street characters”—the homeless men that hung around his table; the woman he’d named “Russian t-shirt girl” who hailed from Coney Island and sold handmade screen printed t-shirts of Hammer and Sickles; the overweight hippie couple that lived in Queens and sold handblown glass marijuana pipes right next to him. It was going to be a great project, he’d confided in her. “But I’m not as good as you,” he had said. “I’m never going to be as good of a writer as you,” he would tell her often while holding her in his arms and stroking her hair.

“I have nothing to write about,” she admitted to him now, over a boiling pot of pasta. “I mean, I feel like I’ve done nothing in my life of interest. I always write about kids because that’s all I know. I have no, like, adult experience.”

Rory nodded. “Well you’ve basically only ever gone to school. You’ve been going to school your whole life.”

He was right. She’d worked in restaurants on-and-off since high school. The New England Soup Factory, the B&D Deli, Lulu’s. Last year she’d spent ten months as a barista at the Verb Café in Williamsburg, during her and Rory’s grief-stricken, hardest time, and before she’d gotten the job at JWA.

Now Rory popped open a bottle of red wine and poured it into two mason jars. He passed by her, bringing the glasses to the table, and kissed her on the cheek. It felt very adult, at that moment, to Maura.

After eating the pasta they sat on the porch in down parkas and winter hats. Maura recalled the inordinate amount of moths that flocked to the light pointed over the porch, towards Lake Winnepesaukee, in the summer. Those bugs were all dead now. Everyone and everything dies. It had been a year and nine months since her friend Ling had died. She needed—desperately—another year, even two, without a catastrophe. If nothing else bad happened for that long, she could get her act together, she knew it. The skin on her face was so cold it was hard to move it. She and Rory were smoking Camel Lights and had made it to their second bottle of wine.

Rory let out this fake high-pitched giggle he liked to do—it was a put-on, but it was sweet, in that he was a large man and it was so child-like. “Shall we Re-al-eyez...?” he asked.

Maura kissed him. “Why the hell not?”

They both took long hits of the drug from Rory’s glass pipe. They were silent for a while. There was no one around at all. The lake was frozen, all the motor boats and canoes and kayaks packed away into garages or boat terminals for the winter.

“I don’t know what I’m going to start working on tomorrow. I need to write a submission for Jo Anderson’s class, and seriously, I’ve got nothing.”

Rory laughed deeply. “Poor little rich girl, with no stories to tell.”

Maura’s breath caught in her chest. She wondered if she should catch this fight-bait or let it slide. She exhaled. “Exactly,” she said. “And I want so badly to write something good, but as you say, I have nothing to tell.”

“What are other people in the MFA program writing about?”

“Hrmmm. Mostly autobiographical stories I guess. This one guy, David, wrote a really funny piece about his parents’ antique furniture business and the people that come into the store on the Upper West Side. It’s going to be published in McSweeneys, he told us.”

“David?” Rory asked.

“Yeah, he’s a sweet kid, but like, so young. He just graduated from college.”

“David?” Rory rolled his eyes. “Fuck David.”

“What did David ever do to you?”

“David’s a piece of shit. And getting published just because he has rich kid stuff to write about.”

“Oh come on. You don’t know David. I mean neither do I. And really, anyone can be published in McSweeneys.” After Maura said that, she wasn’t sure if it was true or not. She certainly hadn’t been published in McSweeneys.

“ANYONE? Anyone can be published in McSweeneys?” Rory screamed. His voice seemed to carry across the porch and over the whole lake.

“Well. I mean. Yeah, anyone. It’s not that hard.” Maura was not sure why she was doubling-down on this incorrect fact.

“You fucking elitist bitch,” Rory said, much more quietly now.

Her stomach tightened. It was as if she were an empty shoe and someone yanked both laces.

She put her hand on his bare, cold neck. Sometimes he would calm down if she touched him or if they took off their clothes. “You could be published in McSweeneys too. You’re brilliant.”

He pushed her so hard off of him then she fell with a thud on her back, onto the ice-slicked planks of the porch floor.

“What the fuck Rory?” Tears were hot in her eyes. She stood up.

“You fucking bitch, I could not be published there or anywhere else. Watch what you say and think about who you are.”

“You could too,” Maura said, standing up. Why was she continuing this fight? “It’s a dumb magazine run by dumb people and you’re just as smart, if not smarter than them.”

“Do you really not understand how the world works, little girl?”

“Do you not? It’s confidence that you lack. You could be doing everything you want to do if you just had the confidence to do it.”

That was when he kicked her, hard, and she fell down again. Things went dark. Their bodies wrestled outside on the porch. Somehow they were inside after that, on the rug by the two red couches, and she was pushing him and he kept throwing her backwards, the base of her intoxicated skull hitting the soft edge of the couch cushions.

“I’m going to kill you. I could kill you,” he said. He hit her with an open hand across the cheek. “I’m going to get the butcher’s knife from the kitchen and kill you.” His face was red.

Soon Maura was outside of the house on the front lawn. She had, somehow, grabbed her cell phone. She was still in her parka but in the midst of the fight it had gotten wet; there was somehow red wine spilled all down the front of it. She knelt down in the snow on the lawn, and freezing water turned her knees hot under the wet spots of her jeans. She was out of her body, then, and could see herself from above. She heard herself crying but couldn’t feel anything. Rory was still inside the house, she thought. She wasn’t sure, though. Maybe he was outside with her in the dark.

She dialed her sister's number. It was 1:45 in the morning. Her sister answered, woken up by the ring. "Hello? What's going on?"

"He said he's going to kill me, Catherine," Maura sobbed. "I'm outside the house in New Hampshire and Rory is inside and he said he's going to take the kitchen knives and kill me."

"Jesus fucking Christ," her sister said. "I can't take this anymore." Maura could feel her sister's eyes rolling on the other side of the line. "You need to get in the car and leave. If you can't go back into the house, scream for a neighbor. Maybe someone else is up there right now. I'm sick of this Maura. Do not go back into that house with that prick."

The tone of her sister's voice was not one of alarm, but rather of disgust and annoyance. She did not seem to think that Maura was about to be murdered. Maura's family did not like Rory. It was safe to say that her two parents and her two sisters actually hated his guts. But they all acted as if it was Maura's fault, the things that Rory did to her. They all seemed to think it was her responsibility to simply stop seeing him.

Maura hung up the phone and stayed on her knees in the snow. It was totally silent. The car keys were inside. Rory was inside. There were no lights on in any neighbor's house and no cars in front. But even if there had been, Maura knew that she would not have run screaming to their front doors. This was not the first time this kind of thing had happened.

She took deep breaths for a few minutes, half expecting an apologizing Rory to come out after her. But soon enough she pulled herself together and went inside. He was passed out on the red loveseat, his long legs sticking out into the air, his parka and sneakers still on. She went to the main bedroom and pulled off the bedspread to lay over him. He was snoring slightly and a narrow thread of spittle rolled down his chin. But he was still beautiful. She returned to sleep alone in the bed, with just a sheet covering her.

3.2 January 21st, 2011, *Knickerbocker University* (Wendy)

“Who is going to pick which Master? This is the question that will be answered by the end of this class,” the professor, Richard, bellowed out. He stomped around the center of the classroom. His outfit was really something that day: a long taupe trench coat over navy athletic shorts and sneakers. (“I biked all the way here from 96th street,” he’d told the class, beaming, as he walked in ten minutes late.) The craft classes were held in a bigger room in the Writers House than the workshops; no stained glass windows, and typical conference tables arranged into a large, U-shape. It felt a more like an undergraduate college class than the workshops did; it carried a bit more of a pedestrian air than the elevated circle of workshop minds.

Richard Eli’s craft class was *the* famous craft class within the MFA program. Like all things in the creative writing world, it was famous because it had lore around it; the lore here, as it often is, surrounded the teacher himself, Richard. Six-and-a-half feet of white man who grew up in New York City and wrote one successful book amidst three or four others, which was a memoir about his troublingly-close relationship with his art collector mother. He had a shock of dark hair and eyelashes so black it appeared he was always wearing make-up. A dramatic looking man; a look he relished.

I sat on the floor in the corner. Liberation! That’s what it felt like. To make one’s self invisible and be able to observe, to listen. That is what I always wanted to be able to do on earth, and in fact, when I was placed in my afterlife job, Frankie Child had said to me: “Wendy, it is your radical ability to listen to others that has landed you this position in the afterlife. Listening is no easy feat, and throughout your whole earthly life you had your ear to ground, so to speak. You truly wanted to know what others had inside of them.”

Frankie had said this to me on my first morning sitting in my afterlife office, sun streaming in through the picture window, the peaks of Mt. Denali in the distance glinting. I cried, just a few tears, because that had been my intention and perhaps my hardest work on earth. And it was being acknowledged, then, by Child. So now here I was, no longer living yet still sitting in the corner of this graduate school classroom on the first floor of the brownstone on Tenth Street, listening in on Maura's craft class. It felt much like a class observation at Florida State, only the professor was less nervous as he had no idea I was there.

Richard continued, "The thing I want to know, in each of the masterworks that you'll each immerse yourself in, is: What are *the goods* being delivered here? What is this master giving you, on the page, that only this master can do? Is it insight into a particular place or state of mind? Is it a line written so beautifully that you weep reading it? The *goods*, people. That's what we want to know about! We're studying the master's goods!"

All the students had their eyes glued to Richard and some were nodding. The focus in the room was strong. The class was slightly larger than a workshop class, eighteen people altogether.

Maura sat at the corner of the table, a printed and bound coursebook in front of her, with twenty-one short stories to choose from. Each student would be tasked with choosing one of these masters' stories, and then deep-diving into their writing. The students needed to identify how the story was built, the seams of it and depth of it and lyrical choice of specific language and the characters' nuanced shadings.

Well, I thought. If I were evaluating Richard's teaching I would give him a 10-out-10 for student engagement. But this "masters" word. This term.... It was a symptom of hero-worship that imbued the whole field. I thought of the graduate student Frank, who I studied so many years ago. I had written, years before, that "...creative writing teachers with an unhealthy sense

of hero-worship may transmit those feelings to a student like Frank, who for a long time saw writing primarily as the act of producing a masterpiece in order to gain fame” (1994, 185.) Was this what these students were actually learning right now, in the midst of Richard’s enthralling performance—that they had to produce a masterpiece?

Richard’s whole model for the semester-long course was that he had students pick a story or a chapter from one of the great literary geniuses, and then present it to the class. But this wasn’t just any presentation. He’d call each student on the phone before their turn, and talk to them for up to three hours, first bitching about his dogs and his ten p.m. dinner burning, and then excitedly move on to the ins-and-outs of the literary work, the ups-and-downs; the “goods” indeed. Then, a week later, during the students’ presentation in class, Richard would drill the student— enacting something like the Socratic method— about the poetry of a line or the use of a plot device. It was slightly scary, challenging even, which was what gave the students a buzz in their guts. It was a competition, something to live up to, a high moment to win at a literary game.

On the board in Maura’s first craft class, there was a list of twenty-one names of authors that Richard had written in chalky chicken scratch, which had taken up a long eight minutes of class time. (This was a fact that seemed to give him some relief.)

1. Ernest Hemingway
2. George Orwell
3. Raymond Carver
4. Junot Diaz
5. Jhumpa Lahiri
6. Fyodor Dostoevsky
7. John Updike

8. Jonathan Franzen
9. Kurt Vonnegut
10. Vladimir Nabokov
11. F. Scott Fitzgerald
12. Zadie Smith
13. Jeffrey Eugenides
14. William Faulkner
15. Ralph Ellison
16. Michael Chabon
17. J.D. Salinger
18. John Steinbeck
19. John Irving
20. Herman Melville
21. Patricia Highsmith

“I call Raymond Carver!” a bespeckled young white man named Pete, sitting next to Maura’s object of fascination Max, called out.

“Pete for Carver. Done.” Richard said, then put a checkmark next to Raymond Carver’s name on the board.

“How did you choose these authors?” Max asked, with nearly no intonation in his voice.

“These are *the* masters in my mind,” Richard stated. “Masters that have made a definitive impression on me. But also to the way we all think about literature, and what literature can do. I

believe there is no one better than the names on this list—no one!” He basically yelled the final sentence. All of the students were grinning, and some chuckling too.

Let’s see. I put on my glasses and read through the list of writers one more time. Three women, out of twenty-one. OK. And... Four people of color. OK. Now I turned towards the graduate students. Was there any chance that they would be worldly enough— or simply cynical enough— to understand that Richard’s personal writing masters were a product of his personal history as a white man, living in our world made for white men? But, alas, so were these students. Twenty years before this I wrote, “For some of us, my request ‘Imagine the best writer in the whole world’ immediately evokes stereotypical images such as these. For instance, published ‘art’ writers have, for several centuries, often been men. Expatriate American writers did live in inexpensive Paris rooms in the 1920s and 1930s and haunt Parisian cafes at night...” (Bishop, 1992, 20.) But what had changed in the past twenty years? Only a handful of names, according to Richard’s list. I sighed, and turned my attention once more to the students in the room.

Directly in front of me sat Maura’s friend Nadia. They’d become close a few months before, late on a Saturday night outside of Magnolia’s, a sports bar on Barrow Street that the poets from the program frequented so often it became their impromptu-living room, leaving their skinny volumes of poetry around, along with their scarves and winter hats. The fiction writing students—there was a big social divide in the program, and the fiction writers simply did not socialize as often as the poets—were usually cajoled into joining the poets at the bar on Saturday nights, only. Nadia was South Asian with short cropped hair, and spoke softly as if always telling a secret. I had been was there at the bar too, watching and listening, with little else to do on a Saturday night in the afterlife.

Maura had seen Nadia smoking a cigarette outside and asked to borrow a lighter, and after a few minutes of talking they both blushing admitted that they smoked Realeyez. Which they then of course did together, using Nadia's vape pen. They spent the rest of the night confiding in each other from two bar stools all of their uncomfortableness and self-doubts about the MFA program.

"What if we had done a program like this elsewhere, outside of New York City?" Nadia had asked.

"It would have to be different, right? I mean, for one thing, there'd be many more Dimitras and many less Dans teaching us, right?"

Nadia agreed, sipping a cocktail with one large ice cube. "Yeah," she sighed. "Just being in New York is so market-oriented... It feels like no one in workshop is asking us 'What do you do well, and what can you do well?' But instead they're more interested in, 'What's the hottest thing going around right now?'"

"I know it. It's messing with my head, honestly. Was it Toni Morrison who said, 'Write the book you want to read...?' Well, truthfully, I feel like I've forgotten what I want to read. And I'm like flopping around writing all this crap instead. I have nothing to write about," Maura admitted. She didn't feel great. The Realeyez had given her cotton-mouth.

Nadia nodded. "And me, I know what I want to write about, but no one here wants to read it. It's not their taste, I think. Growing up, I didn't read a lot of American literature. And in college I studied Comp Lit, so I think I write in a style that's like, very inflective.... Maybe inflective of Latin American literature. Even our professors don't get it."

When I overheard Nadia say this that night, I thought of the very sharp line by Peter Ives: "It has been my experience... that we do not perceive or write about things as they are, but

rather, we perceive or write about them as we are” (as cited in Bishop, 2004, 112.) So Nadia writing from a different perspective and style from many of the rest of her MFA cohort was because of her identity, her background, and how *she* was.

Maura had shaken her head in response to her new friend’s admission, and looked over at the people playing pool in the corner of the bar. It was the Jessicas. They were wearing matching dresses with spaghetti straps. *Popular girls*, even in their mid-twenties, in a supposed art program for graduate school. The tall brunette, primary Jessica, cracked the white ball into the black eight-ball just as the door to the bar opened, letting in a gust of wintery, wet air, and there was Max, taking off his woolen cap. He surveyed the crowd then smiled at Jessica, and headed right over to her side.

A month later, in the craft classroom on Maura’s first day of Richard’s class, Richard instructed the students to take a few minutes and flip through the course readings, perusing snippets of various “masters” before settling on the one they would each work with. All the students had laptops open on their desks, too.

Allie, one of three people of color in the room, raised her hand. Nadia’s parents were South Asian, but she moved from Kolkatta to the U.S. at the age of two and grew up in North Carolina. Fatimah grew up in Ghana, but went to undergrad in rural Massachusetts and hadn’t left the States since. And Allie was Chinese-American, and had lived in Teaneck, New Jersey until beginning the program. Allie said to Richard: “I usually write a different kind of fiction. So, well, these aren’t really the masters of my genre. Am I able to choose a different master-writer to work with, that’s more applicable to my genre?”

“Genre, huh?” Richard sat on a desk now, and looked around the room, making eye-contact with each and every student. “Let’s have a discussion about genre, why don’t we,” he

scoffed. “We are not sitting in this room to learn about genres. We are sitting in this room to learn about literature. Anyone and everyone here should be on board with that program.”

The students, half nodding along with Richard, took in that statement silently. I couldn’t help but think that it is necessary “to remind ourselves that categories are *constructed* and that genres are *defined*: ‘Genre,’ Scholes reminds us, ‘refers to things regularly done and *style* to a regular *way* of doing things’” (as cited in Bishop, 2004, 126.) Genres are conventions. What Richard was calling ‘literature’ was also a genre—a hegemonic, culturally-elite, genre. I couldn’t help sighing again, although I was unsure how sound and invisibility interacted while I was down on earth. Now it felt frustrating, all of this listening with so little acting and interacting. What I wanted Richard to tell his class was this: “...literary texts are those to which we pay attention in particular ways and by community-sanctioned agreement” (Bishop, 1994, 191.) I wanted him to tell Allie that what she considered to be literature was valid.

Nadia raised her hand, and then in a low but very steady voice, said, “As a South Asian, I was actually raised with literature that would be considered a very different genre from most of these writers. Are you... well...Should I not consider those writers I was raised with to be masters?”

Richard’s eyes widened. “No,” he said confidently. “No, no. That’s not what I’m saying at all. Don’t put those words in my mouth!”

Nadia remained silent.

He continued, “I love Asian writers! And all Asian art! I mean, South Pacific is one of my favorite musicals.”

Now it was Nadia’s turn for her eyes to widen. Her jaw dropped a bit open, as if she were in a cartoon and couldn’t believe what her ears had just registered.

While this exchange between Nadia and Richard took place, Annie Peterson, a lesbian white woman, twenty-four years of age and hailing from a wealthy family in Birmingham, Alabama, hit send on an email that the whole class received instantly.

From: Annie Peterson
To: Creative Writing Listserv Email
Re: Non-PC Party This Weekend!

We're having this party this Saturday! Apartment 101-C in Stuyvesant's D-tower. Encouraging any and all costumes that are non-PC. Do with that what you will, friends. 9pm until the last person drops....

In two minutes, another email went out, and the whole class received it. Richard had moved on to discussing the value in Updike's details and symbolizing around pickled herring, and Nadia had returned to her computer screen.

From: Fatimah Badour
To: Creative Writing Listserv Email
Re: Non-PC Party This Weekend!

Hey Annie.

So, there have been these kinds of parties at other universities I've been to. You might want to think again about using an academic listserv to have racial Cosplay parties. They can be hurtful and actually could potentially get you kicked out of the university.

--Fatimah

From: Nadia Sharma
To: Fatima Badour
Re: Thank you

Fatima,

OH how I agree with you! Thanks for sending that email out to the list. Glad to not be alone out here.

Nadia

From: Fatima Badour
To: Nadia Sharma
Re: Thank you

Nadia, Thank you so much for having my back. It makes me feel less crazy.

FB

From: Annie Peterson
To: Creative Writing Listserv Email
Re: Non-PC Party This Weekend!

Dear Fatima,
There are three things I want to tell you.

1. If you want to respond to these emails, maybe respond privately, so not to congest everyone's inboxes.
 2. This party is meant to be funny. You are invited, but I guess if you don't get the humor of it, you don't need to come to the party. But it's just about being funny. Apparently you don't like jokes.
 3. If you grew up gay in the deep south like me, you might need some humor in your life!
- Annie

From: Fatimah Badour
To: Creative Writing Listserv Email
Re: Non-PC Party This Weekend!

Annie,
OK so the party might be funny, I don't know. But I am responding to the public email, because it showed public addresses. This is not a private matter, but about the use of an academic Listserv. I don't want to be bombarded by this and I'm telling you that, publicly.
FB

From: Nadia Sharma
To: Fatima Badour
Re: Thank you

Fatima,
So regardless of the fact that there are a couple of non-white faculty and Black faculty, I still walk around this place every day like it's a museum of whiteness. My tactic now is to be like an anthropologist; I'm just watching and taking notes. This is what they do. This is how this culture works...
Nadia

From: Fatima Badour
To: Nadia Sharma
Re: Thank you

Nadia,
I'm about to pee in my pants from trying not to laugh. Me too, me too. Let's do this anthropological study together.
FB

The ability to move from one student's computer to another was a revelation. This invisibility power, this consequence-free snooping, it was of course a writer's dream. But as I read the back-and-forth, the content of these emails was making me more and more distraught.

I was furious at Annie, the student who wrote the first email. How could I still be so angry about exchanges like this, though, after so many years of teaching?

Richard Eli continued on with his assignment instructions to the class. "So while you're getting into *the goods* on the page, I also want you to research these writers' lives, too. Tell us how they did it, what influenced them into writing the way they did."

This was, I thought, something I agreed with Richard about. Giving the study of writers' some context and getting away from the New Critical notions of a text standing alone in isolation.

Soon the rest of the students were going around and announcing each author they chose.

"Chabon for me."

"Dammit, that's who I wanted!"

"Everyone make sure to have a second or third choice," Richard interjected. They're all masters, so every choice will be a good one."

"Eugenidies."

"John Irving."

"OK, well. Nabokov for me then."

When they had gone through all the names, to my surprise, Maura spoke up. I heard the timbre of her voice and my heart jumped—she so rarely spoke up in class.

“Wow. We all chose men,” she said. “I mean, even me. I chose Updike. Just interesting that there were a few women on there and no one chose to work with them.”

Richard squinted his eyes. “Hmmm,” he said. “Anyone want to respond to that?”

The whole class was silent. Maura’s face burned with hot blood, visible.

My anger doubled, then. How infuriating that *this* was still happening, too. I recalled my former fury: ‘Why hadn’t we been let in before (women, minorities, lower-classes)? Why was I given and asked to give out so many rules? Why was I supposed to read books that signified nothing to me but a world that excluded me, folded me down, hid me away?’ (Bishop, 1997, 242.) How many students in this room were thinking those exact thoughts at that moment? I took a deep breath and realized that, with enough concentration, I might be able to hear inside their heads and know the answer to my question. But Maura, for one, was not thinking those thoughts. She was simply embarrassed for speaking up and for not pleasing the authority figure who was captivating the class.

Richard continued, “I don’t necessarily feel like it’s that important to read women, just so you know. I didn’t put those three writers on the list *because* they are women.”

Maura shrugged. “I just thought it was something to note is all, something interesting.”

Richard seemed perturbed. “But it’s not something that’s super interesting to me, so I’m not going to have a whole lot to say on that.”

3.3 January 22, 2011. Gymnasium of P.S. 15, New York City (Wendy)

“Hello,” I said sidling up to Dimitra in a cold folding chair.

“What are you doing here?” Dimitra said loudly. She did not scream, though, and barely seemed surprised to see me again. The middle school gymnasium was largely empty—the AA meeting was crowded into one corner of it, with rows of white folding chairs facing one man who

had been talking for over twenty minutes, occasionally covering his face with his right hand in mock-embarrassment at a memory he was describing. I was, in fact, unsure of whether or not the other people in the room could see me, and worried about Dimitra looking like she was talking to herself. But, I figured, that was her problem, for now.

“Listen I just went to a class in your program. A craft class. My form of, uh, observing,” I chuckled.

“Ah, Richard’s class?” Dimitra asked, looking straight ahead.

“Yes. And it was problematic, as I’m sure you know. I’ve made a list of some ideas for your program and I want—no I need—you to take them to the director.”

“No,” Dimitra said. “No, no, no. My job is hanging on by a thread there, and I know it. I’m not trendy enough for my position anymore.”

“This guy Richard is having the students repeat the masters. He’s making all the students in that room study who *he* considers to be a master, without any regard for themselves and their own backgrounds, their own tastes, or who they *want* to write like. This is what has happened in all of English education. You know it’s Edward Said’s concept of hegemony ‘...certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others...’ (1978, 7.)”

“Oh you with these theories. Of course your right, but isn’t this just how the western world has evolved? Who are we, in one fancy little graduate school program, to try to change that?”

“One of the students in class with Maura— Nadia, do you know her?— her primary experience in this MFA program is that of her creative work being ignored, misunderstood, or

derided by her peers in workshop, because she writes in way that does not emulate the literary norms of the western canon.”

“And what do you suppose we do about this? I actually love Nadia. I’d very much like to help her.”

“Well what was the education you got before going in to teach at this MFA program, or before teaching the undergrad classes in the same department? Did you have any discussions of difference in tastes and backgrounds, cultural or racial awareness?”

“We didn’t have any pedagogical learning at all. I think... I think the other professors in the program, well, they would be nothing short of offended to sit in a meeting and be asked to read theory or something else that was not only below them, but didn’t directly relate to the creative projects their minds would be consumed with at that moment. That kind of distraction, that’s not something you can ask a famous writer to engage in. And I wouldn’t be so naïve, Wendy. These white people think they live in a post-race world.”

“Aren’t you white?”

“I’m Greek!”

I paused on this fact for a moment, but also realized that Dimitra was my closest insider, my only real opportunity, to discuss change in this program. I continued, “So Richard made a ridiculous comment to Nadia, that he must like Asians because he loved the musical South Pacific. I mean, is that not an act of racial violence? Not just towards not just her, but all of the students of color in the room? A comment like that centers racist rhetoric into hegemonic culture, and makes it acceptable to bring that rhetoric into public.”

Dimitra was silent for a bit, maybe soaking in all of the information from my outburst.

So I continued, “And then to make matters worse, all of the students—including Nadia! Including Maura!— chose the men on the list of ‘masters.’ Eighteen men; every student in the class, focusing on and emulating their craft.”

“Oh. Oh, how I hate men.” Dimitra seemed serious.

I answered, “Well then, when Maura brought that up— I mean at least she brought it up— Richard told the class that he didn’t care about men upholding the place of master. He just didn’t care, Dimitra! He said, and I quote, Maura’s point was ‘...*not something that's super interesting*’ to him.”

“I mean, yes. Richard implying that race or gender should not be a concern in text selection, teaching, and writing; this is a notion that aligns with the belief that we live in a post-race society, no? And then here we are, reaffirming racist politics within the program. But what is the solution here? Faculty training and development? You think that will help anything, Wendy?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure what will help. But I know that the students of color in Richard’s room were covertly emailing each other about the exclusions and racisms they were experiencing in real time, in the classroom.”

“Hrmm...” Dimitra was still staring straight ahead at the AA speaker. But she continued, “The secret emails, I suppose, do make it seem like the students feel they cannot speak up. It’s as if their voices are not being valued and they know it.”

“Exactly. The theorist Nick Couldry states that valuing voice is also valuing ‘the process of giving an account of one’s life and its conditions: what philosopher Judith Butler calls ‘giving an account of oneself’ (2010, 7.) It’s reinforced in the set-up of the MFA program. The voices of people of color, specifically women of color, are being devalued.”

Dimitra sighed, quietly. “And this will trickle down into the literature we create and publish. Of course it already has.”

“Of course it already has!” I nearly yelled. “Listen, can you go into the MFA director’s office and bring these issues up?” It had taken some courage for me to ask Dimitra this question so directly, and I paused, breathless, after my request.

“I will literally never be able to tell Rebecca any of this. She’s not the type that laughs so she will not laugh in my face. But she will nod apathetically, let me leave the room, and then fire me without looking back or thinking twice.”

I frowned. I wasn’t being quiet, but I was now fairly sure that Dimitra just looked to the other AA members as if she were muttering aloud to herself. “Please try, Dimitra,” I said. “What is your life’s work for, if you don’t try to help this situation?”

3.4 March 21, 2011, *Knickerbocker University* (Maura)

Two months after returning from the trip to New Hampshire, nine weeks after Richard’s first craft class, Maura was back in the white-painted workshop room in the Writers House. The room was the same: calm, quiet, and clean, with light streaming yet again through the stained-glass windows that looked out onto the Writers’ House courtyard. But now Maura was not in workshop with Dan or Dimitra. She was in the same room with the very famous Jo Anderson. Anderson, a woman about a decade Maura’s senior, was one of the youngest professors in the MFA program and the only person in the building with tenure, other than the director of the program. And she was perhaps the smartest person Maura had ever been in close physical proximity to.

Anderson was smart in a way that Maura respected, because her intelligence had also made her nothing short of unbearably cool. A woman who grew up working class in New

Orleans and who had written her first novel at an absurdly young age, and made it an absurdly good novel. The book held not only brilliance on the page and poetry in the lines, but the characters and set up were original and diverse and full of life in a way that contemporary literature in English lacked and needed so badly, especially when it was published in the early 2000s. With all of Maura's ability to find fault with writers, teachers, professors, and authority figures throughout her whole life, this was a person that Maura respected in the deepest of ways. Which is of course why Maura had been utterly terrified being in her presence, in the small classroom.

And now Professor Anderson sat, back stick-straight at the helm of the workshop table, her thin and sharp face showing no emotion. Each student was to be workshopped twice in the semester, as with all of the workshops in the program. And as with all workshops, the students submitted their ten-to-twenty page stories the week beforehand; the older professors insisted on printed-out hard-copies of the manuscripts, but Anderson accepted emailed versions. Then when the day arrived for it to be someone's turn— "workshop day!"— each student began their session by reading aloud a designated section of a page or two, chosen by the professor. Then the student under review would be silent, and the comments and evaluation would begin.

Maura had been coming to this class for over a month now and had been through one workshop already. Oh, she had been sincerely terrified her first go-around, so she chose to be as safe as possible. While in New Hampshire with Rory, she had written an extension to the story that Dimitra had liked, called "Motherless," her only good piece of writing. This extension was not exactly a stand-alone story, but more of a scene really. It was based on the semi-autobiographical little girl main character, named Annemarie, at an old woman's wake in Boston. Professor Anderson had chosen this section for Maura to read aloud to the class:

Father Deveaney's belly orbed out toward the floor and his nose curved over it, looking, per usual, like Penguin from Batman. The tallest of the priests—still wrinkled but younger and fitter than Deveaney—was one I didn't recognize. His hair tufted in bristles of unrelenting white, the same color of the sky as when we went to see my Maimeó in Bantry Bay in November. His skin was weather-whipped monochrome and he had a bulbous and pulsing cold-sore at the seam of his lips. The next priest I knew, Father Keith. Svelte and compact; all of his limbs fit together with a dancer's ease. Father Keith had one of those rubber band faces, with the type of thin skin that can stretch out eternally out from whatever is holding it down. Father Keith was the son of Boston's own Kojak, and grew up on the streets of Dirty-Dot Dorchester, my father told me. My mother said he was a Jesuit, which just meant he was smart. Then she'd whispered that he was openly gay, to certain people.

"Well how open is that then?" I had asked. She considered the question, then answered, "Sure he's married to God anyways, so it doesn't really matter."

The pages of this scene continued in a similar manner: there were priests, there was whiskey, there were old people warbling out the words to "Danny Boy" while the funeral director played a baby grand piano.

During this first workshop class, as the winter sun set through those ornate windows in the classroom, Maura's voice had shaken as she read aloud. But, to her relief, she sounded a bit more steady than she had in Dan's workshop, in September. And when she had finished reading, Professor Anderson had made a pronouncement: "So of course this is realist fiction, but the believable sort. I mean you really feel like you're in the room with those priests."

This statement was mind-blowing. Maura knew this was one of the highest compliments she had ever received in her life. The comment skewed slightly positive, and it came from the mouth of Jo Anderson.

Maura had been so flattered that she spent every night for the next several weeks sitting at her desk in Brooklyn in the wee-hours, above the traffic lights on Flatbush Avenue, listening to her roommates' rhythmic snoring through the accordion doors and typing out a brand new, original, story. This was her first attempt at making something really new since she'd joined the MFA program. Perhaps she did have something to write about. Perhaps she could write about her life, fictionalizing it of course, and it would be some kind of story worthy of other people's eyes and ears. Perhaps she could in fact be a writer after all. All was not lost.

This new story that Maura typed out was about some poor decisions she'd made as a college student with a lascivious professor. But as older, twenty-five-year-old Maura smoked the Realeyez given to her by Rory, taking hits into the night— her fingers flying on the keyboard— she got more and more bold. The narrator of this story took on the voice of Vladimir Nabokov. Maura borrowed verbatim lines from *Lolita*.

The story was set at Harvard, the school Maura had transferred to in college, and where pretentiousness is so blatant it was obviously a joke to write about it. The story was supposed to be joke. The whole piece was *supposed* to make fun of pretentious student writing. But then her narrator took on the persona of Austin Dell, a real person she'd known in college, who was the youngest successful novelist in modern times. And very pretentious. Then after some drafts, the narrator was a dead Austin Dell. With each growing paragraph, the work became more absurd. But surely this absurdity would be readily visible on the page? Maura was going to impress her workshop peers, and Anderson herself, with this boldness, this mimicry. She would be brave and

put herself out there. And she would hold her breath until she was told she had done the right thing.

The day arrived for the new story to be workshopped. (“Workshop day!” Maura had told her roommate Sahar over coffee that afternoon, when they had both woken up.) Another student went first in the workshop that day. It was Jen, a white girl who hailed from Rhode Island and had gone to an Ivy League college and was sardonic and grim faced and a talented cartoonist. A very typical MFA candidate indeed.

Anderson had Jen read a section out loud, a section that contained this small and nauseating moment:

Lorie, a grim-faced cartoonist, twenty-five and broke and new to New York City, walks down Broadway in the slush and the rain. “Get out of my way!” yelled a homeless man as she tried to cross his path. “I’m busy here!” He was wearing a 1980s kahki-colored trench coat. Lorie tried to swerve but the man cut in front of her, finding a bush beside the metal railing to Madison Square park, pulled down his tattered pants, and squatting, defecated into the prickly green branches of a chokeberry bush.

As she read, Jen smirked a bit, proud of herself for this grotesque description— this uncommonly bold topic to put on paper.

But when Jen was done reading, Anderson cleared her throat to announce she would talk first, which she did not often do.

Professor Anderson said: “What the hell kind of humor is that zeroing in on? Laughing at other people’s misfortune? This is sad event—this is an instance of a person needing help. Needing help! Writing is a moral activity and this is immoral writing. This is not a person to be laughed at.”

She was not wrong. Anderson was not wrong at all. Jen's smirk was ripped from her face in a nano-second. She frowned; it seemed this thought, or possibility, hadn't occurred to her earlier.

Anderson continued, her voice low in volume but coming off as if she were yelling, "I cannot really discuss the rest of this piece of art because I was too distracted by this obscene moment. Everyone else can talk about it for a few minutes, but this is all I will say about this work."

Everyone in the room was silent. All faces looked at the tabletop or at Anderson in shock. Maura wondered briefly if she was contractually allowed to do that. What was her job as a professor, exactly? Did Anderson owe her thoughts to the students? And absurd idea but perhaps a true one.

Soon the class moved on to Maura's story. Jen's face showed zero emotion. She was pale and thin-lipped and blank. Maura noted that she would never be able to contain herself that way.

"Now we move on to the next... *piece of art*," Anderson said. She had a printed out version of Maura's story in front of her and Maura could see even from across the table that there was very little written on; no pen marks on the first page at all.

Anderson announced, "This story is titled 'Between the Bedsheets and/or Playing Dead.' Hmmm. Alright then. Maura, please begin with reading a section aloud that starts on the top of page three."

Maura did not like this introduction. She did not like what had just happened to Jen. She did not like that Anderson seemed to be in a bad mood that day, especially appalled at the people around her, especially disgusted by the idiocy of other people. She seemed insulted to be honestly more intelligent than many people in the world. And yet, Maura thought, her own first

workshop day in Anderson's class had gone well. Maybe Anderson was just still reeling from Jen's faux-pas, and will be proud of Maura's boldness on the page. Yet Maura's voice cracked like a teenage boy as she began reading part of her story, written from the point-of-view of a self-important, uber-privileged male Harvard student, Austin Dell.

When this sorry display of street-side affection occurred I had already retired to my Adams House abode, and was tugging the chain on my bedside green-glass banker's lamp. Nicolette and I were Seniors at that little college on the Charles, and Frank was my tutor in the History of Science department. Despite his advancing age, he held only a lecturer position. He specialized in the psychological sciences of the 1960s and led me in a seminar entitled "Ram Daas and the University Setting." Of course, we became fast mates: two lads rascal-ing in the evenings, downing pints at Shays, beguiling local chickens at The Kong into the wee hours. I'm a renowned chronicler of the licentious, and no doubt, Frank hoped to make it into one of my books in the future. (How else do I say this? I am what one could call famous. At the age of seventeen I penned a brief best seller about the drug-addled underbelly of Upper East Side child-gentry, amongst whom I was raised. Its publication coincided with my voice falling to a rich yellow baritone and my sandy hair growing long enough to flop into my eyes just-so.)

When I was first getting to know my dear Nic, she followed me on a river jaunt or two, and soon enough I became accustomed to her presence; a friendship entrenched through insistence on one of our parts. But I'll admit I was amused. Nicolette Noyse Chase Lader; Nico in the nighttime, Ni-coco in the sun. She was peckish, puckish, flaccid and raw. She was Flemmish, fiendish, and wan of the mind. Her lithe dancer's body lusted after me night after night, as she slept alone in her extra-long collegiate cot. It went on for years, so that by the time

we were both living on the ground floor of Adams House (singles, again) I was fairly sure I heard her whimper for me in the depths of her of Adderall-fueled Harvard nights.

Maura stopped reading. There was a long pause and all of the other students in the room turned towards Professor Anderson. They awaited her reaction, her reading of this work, this attempt at *something* that Maura had created on the page.

Anderson laughed actually. And she shook her head. She was so beautiful, so cool. She said her next phrase with less vitriol than she had hurled at Jen, but she said it carefully and sharply: “This is the most elitist piece of exclusionist writing I have ever read.”

The MFA students were silent, and several people looked down at the table as they had ten minutes before, during Jen’s brief and mortifying workshop.

Anderson said, “I mean I was *there*—I was actually at Harvard for a fellowship year recently— and even I found this story to be isolating and well... Atrocious. Even I, who have been to Harvard!” Then she muttered under her breath in a particularly southern manner, “Swill.”

Maura’s eyes widened involuntarily. Of course. Of course, of course, of course. Professor Anderson was right.

The inner contents of Maura’s throat sunk into her stomach then churned back up. She thought she was going to throw up. How could she have been so stupid?

“Does anyone else want to comment on this... piece of work?” asked Anderson.

It took several excruciating minutes for someone else to speak up. Finally, of all people, it was Max who spoke.

“I agree,” he said. “I mean the way the buildings were named in the story without any identifiers, it was as Mau— I mean the writer— just assumed everyone should know what these

buildings look like, or what they mean, just because they're famous and at Harvard. It was..." he trailed off.

"Presumptuous," Anderson said, completing his thought. "Let's look at page six. Someone read the hogwash that begins in the first full paragraph."

Anita, who Maura knew had strangely gone to law school at Harvard before coming to the MFA program, read the paragraph. Then she commented: "I mean, I couldn't get interested in the characters, exactly, because the sort of, um, exposition, of the whole thing taking place on the Harvard campus. It was so jarring."

Anderson nodded and scoffed at the same time. Nadia was across the table from Maura, with urgent, sympathetic eyes—she was attempting to catch her gaze, show her that she knew what was happening.

Then Professor Anderson continued. She began to monologue. She listed out the faults with the story: "*What is this, a Nabokov rip-off?*" "*Who is the narrator supposed to be, real life Austin Dell?*" "*What would inspire someone, even an idiot child, to sleep with a professor that was that unattractive, that corny?*" "*Why does this story need to be told and whose life would be improved by reading it? No ones.*"

It was at this point that Maura's ears stopped working. Everything became a veritable hum; a whirring overtook her. She couldn't digest the comments; she just heard Professor Anderson's beautiful, sharp, lilting voice criticizing and criticizing. The professor was on a roll, working herself up and letting it rip. Several of the students' mouths dropped open in shock. This was a workshop bashing to the likes of nothing they'd ever seen before.

"Does this main character, Nic, have no confidence at all? Aren't people who attend Harvard supposed to be smart? What kind of false crud is this, on the page....?"

She was right. Everything that Anderson said was right. The other students occasionally chimed in. “Yeah,” “I notice that too,” “The professor boyfriend didn’t have a lot of depth,” “I didn’t understand the motivation,” “At the University of Virginia, this professor would have been reported.”

“The tone of these sentences, the idea that it’s OK to write about a place like this with such with such bravado...” Anderson continued. Tears stung Maura’s eyes and one leaked out, embarrassingly so. No, mortifyingly so. Anderson noticed and turned her head away, and kept talking. Maura wondered if she should stand up and leave the room, but wasn’t sure her legs would hold her up. This was her worst nightmare. She thought to herself: if her friends hadn’t died in the past few years, this would probably be the worst moment of her life.

Soon the workshop ended. Maura wasn’t sure exactly how it ended, as all of the professor’s words had blended together and no one else’s comments were registering. At a certain point, everyone stood up from their chairs and packed up their laptops and bags and left and Maura kept sitting in the workshop room. Professor Anderson left without saying a word to Maura, without looking at her. It had been a different type of hour than any of the students had experienced so far in their MFA program.

Maura did not know this, but everyone was shell-shocked during the workshop-lashing, not just her. Yet the other students let it roll off of them as they lingered in the front hallway and a few made plans to walk together to Magnolia’s Bar where the poets had already been gathered, drinking and talking, for the past two hours. Maura sat alone in the workshop classroom for thirty-six minutes after everyone left. Then she managed to don and zip her coat, and wobbled out of the building door and down the pristine sidewalk of Tenth Street, on her way to the subway.

3.5 March 4, 2011, 11:35 am, Brooklyn, NY (Maura)

Maura took a hit of Realeyez before drinking a glass of water. She pulled her laptop into her bed and squinted, her eyes swollen from crying, and was deeply surprised to see two emails from Professor Anderson that she had received overnight.

3.6 March 4, 2011, 4:48 am, Brooklyn, NY (Maura)

From: Jo Anderson
To: Maura Roosevelt
Re: Dear Maura

I woke up in the middle of the night guilt-stricken that I had written too cruelly on your story. It was only out of a kind of frustration, because I know that a clear river of prose runs true under the dam of influence you'd built on it. It was also perhaps out of a kind of self-recognition. I wanted to show you this story, attached to this email, which I published in a college magazine, and which some asshole has dug up and put on the internet. It's that 'Nabokovian' story I mentioned.
I just tried to read it but it's so fucking dreadful I had to stop. I hope it cheers you up.

Best,
Jo

3.7 March 4, 2011, 4:49 am, Brooklyn, NY (Maura)

From: Jo Anderson
To: Maura Roosevelt
Re: P.S.

Just spotted the identical phrase! "but i am getting ahead of myself"!

Maura took another hit of the drugs and laughed, and then sobbed. She closed her laptop. Was professor Anderson afraid she was going to get fired because of that workshop? Or was there the slight chance that she'd actually felt empathy for Maura?

Maura's own stupidity overwhelmed her. She picked up the vape pen again. She knew she should respond to Professor Anderson with a "thank you." She should write, "What a kind email to send, thank you, professor." And yet she was also fairly sure she would never be able to

open up her laptop and write anything again. An email would be too much of a risk on the page. She had ruined everything, and did not think she even held her thus far life-long dream of being a real writer, anymore. Why, oh why, had she been so dumb?

3.8 March 22, 2011, *The Department of Helping and Learning* (Wendy)

“Louise, I need advice,” I said into the receiver of my old wall rotary phone. How I loved it that I got to choose this heavy, solid piece of machinery in my afterlife office.

“Come on over Wendy, I’ll make tea.”

The office of Louise Rosenblatt, a major and vocal figure in our Department of Teaching and Helping, was nothing short of delightful. She had two old golden loveseats facing each other, covered in soft and beat up velvet. The coffee table always appeared to have a plate of cookies on it. Today there were toffee-speckled sugar cookies, on a white plate with scalloped edges and fine floral pattern.

“So, spill,” she said as I sat down. A real New Yorker, Louise.

“My first charge, my training charge, just had a creative writing workshop that was.... Well, it was horrid. My charge, Maura, her story was also quite frankly horrid. But her teacher then destroyed her, and I believe taught the class a dangerous lesson about whether or not one should take a risk in a creative piece.”

“The teacher?” Louise asked.

“Jo Anderson.”

“Utterly brilliant woman. One of the best living writers down on earth, don’t you agree?”

“I do. And smarter than I could ever dream to be. But... perhaps she just doesn’t want to be a teacher, really.”

“Do you think, somehow, even that brilliant woman is threatened by her students, and doesn’t want them to succeed?” she asked.

“No, not Anderson. Other writing professors, of course the answer is yes. And as I said in that essay, ‘Truly [the students] are not going to displace us before our time’ (Bishop, 1997, 247.) But I think that with Anderson, she believes that her students are so unlike her both as people and as writers, and perhaps that they’re taking her away from precious hours she could spend writing her own work.”

“Oh dear.” Rosenblatt sighed. Then, surprisingly cheerily, she jumped her to her feet and said, “Come on, we have a visit to make.”

“A visit? Down to earth?”

She was nimbly putting on her blue peacoat, which had been hanging on a coat tree by her office door. “No, no, I only go down now when it’s totally necessary. Let’s pop by and see Richards’. The old grump might have some valuable thoughts about Maura and her very bad Anderson workshop.” She looped her arm through mine and began ushering me out of the door. “We’ll take the stairs.” We careened into the hallway, down the grey industrial stairway, and into another bare hallway with a low tufted carpet.

“Yes, this is the door,” Louise said, groping the front of her coat to ensure that all the buttons were closed. It was a frosted glass and metal door, one that looked as if it belonged in a mid-range corporate building—a downtown doctor’s office bathroom.

She knocked briefly then opened the door without waiting for someone to respond on the other side. Behind it were rolling hills; suddenly we were outside in a wet and green natural landscape, vast with mist rising from grass.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“I believe this is a replica of the British countryside near Devon. Old, grumpy, Igor loved it during his time on earth. He’s usually wandering around here somewhere.” She hooked her small arm through mine once again, nearly pulling me into this new world. I was flabbergasted. A man in a tweed flat cap was walking with a skinny white hound about thirty yards to our left.

“Yoo-hoo,” Louise called out, “I.A.!”

The man looked to be in his late seventies, tall and thin with tousled greying brown hair. He gave a wave and a tight smile, and began heading our way. When he reached us he nodded gallantly at Louise, but didn’t touch her. “If it isn’t my false nemesis. So glad to see you, Madame Rosenblatt. And who is this friend you’ve brought to my modest garden?”

“This is Wendy Bishop, renowned scholar. I’m sure you’ve kept up with her published works?”

“Ah yes! Mrs. Bishop! I heard you were joining us in The Department. Nice to make your acquaintance.”

Louise gave I.A. Richards a rundown of what had happened in Maura’s classroom. She finished with, “Wendy needs some help figuring out the best intervention in this situation. She’s in her training phase still, but she’ll certainly encounter these MFA teachers and their take-downs, their poor faith in students and their reading style, in the future.”

I thought about the typical MFA teacher; the history of take-downs; the history of disdain. I thought of my own experience as an MFA student, which I had had committed to print: “We spent our time waiting for our Master Poet to say: ‘This is good.’ We read his books and liked his work. He was a poet. He did not teach us, we assumed, because we were not ready, worthy, or worth it” (Bishop, 1997, 240.) The workshop leader can hold so much power over the psyches

of their students, and even then, I knew that I would be able to learn from my teacher if and when he decided to simply *like me*.

Louise continued to talk to I.A.: “This student’s story submission in her workshop class was, well, trying too hard. It was very... shall we said, put-on, in voice and tone. But I’m wondering how the reader’s response—in this case Jo Anderson’s response—got swept into an aesthetic reading that actually impacted her teaching practices. Anderson was ‘...[w]elcomed into... sense, the sensations, images, feelings, and ideas that are the residue of past psychological events involving those words and their referents,’ particularly a psychological event that involved a short story she’d written herself in her youth that embarrassed her (Rosenblatt, 1988, 6.) Of course I’m a proponent of teachers doing aesthetic readings of their student’s work, but I’m also ready to admit that in this instance, Anderson’s connection with an event in her past also encouraged an “alien” misreading of Maura’s work: as she assumed Maura’s intentions were just the same as her previous intentions had been—to craft a *sincere* imitation of Nabokov” (Rosenblatt, 1966, 1003.)

I.A. responded with a long *Hrmmmm*. “Yes, it seems that Anderson’s bad feelings towards this work are based largely on ‘mnemonic irrelevances’ or ‘...misleading effects of the reader being reminded of some personal scene or adventure, erratic associations, the interference of emotional from a past...’ (15.) In this case, Anderson was reminded of her own perceived blunder in emulating Nabokov, which made her then feel shame. So at the very least, Anderson misread Maura’s work slightly. The question we need to deal with now is: When a teacher misreads a student’s text, how does that affect her teaching around that student’s text?”

Rosenblatt nodded, still walking a quite a clip. “In the case of a typical workshop class, a student often waits for a teacher to tell him or her exactly what to keep and what to change in a

creative text he or she is writing. Therefore a teacher's judicious reading of the student's work is paramount to fair and beneficial guidance."

"Yes," I added. "But what is a teacher to do if she believes she's done a judicious reading, and the work is still... let's say *atrocious*— either from the content of the work or the style in which it's written?"

I.A. stopped walking and pulled a pipe out of his pocket, tapping the top of it with his other hand. "The temptation, I suppose, would be for the teacher to simply tell the student what would make it no longer atrocious. But I suppose you wouldn't like that type of control, now would you, Louise?"

Louise smiled. "You know I would not."

I added, "The temptation to fix a student's work with the teacher's own good thinking and ideas reminds me of what Katherine Haake calls an "incursion;" although it's common practice, she learned from her own actions to stop doing it. Haake says: 'Even as I began to recognize these incursions into other peoples' texts/stories/lives as colonizations, I kept it up, not knowing what to replace it with... [Now] I am not saying to not 'advise' students; I am saying to respect who they are, and also to trust their decisions'" (as cited in Bishop, 1997, 233.)

I.A. asked, "Yet, in a workshop, what is another option for a teacher than to offer a replacement idea to the student? For example, in response to her 'alien misreading' of Maura's story, Anderson could have suggested to change the setting to a different school or alter the tone of the narrator. But you're telling me, and Haake is telling me, that this would not have been an appropriate move, either?"

Louise said, "Unfortunately, it seems that even these suggestions from the authority of a workshop leader could be seen as "colonizations," because teachers' and students' backgrounds

are inevitably different: '[c]ommunication undoubtedly is easiest to achieve when both writer and reader share not only the same native language system but also similar cultural, social, and educational contexts. But even in these circumstances, individual differences persist (as we see among even members of the same family)'" (Rosenblatt, 1981, 20.)

I.A. squinted his eyes. "I see your point, but I'm unsure, then of where this leaves a student in who falls into this situation in workshop." He was being very kind, in reality, to take this walk with me and talk this problem out.

"Perhaps teaching from something other than the workshop model is a possible answer?" Louise suggested.

"Perhaps," I said. "But I also wonder if a workshop leader can be effective if she can convince herself to genuinely and honestly find the good or desirable aspects of in each piece of student writing? [Peter Elbow] suggests... 'If [teachers] like a student's work, they can be more demanding. If they're more demanding, the work improves. Liking creates a positive chain reaction' (as cited in Bishop, 1997, 247.) What if Anderson had said, 'I like this tone you're using for the narrator, but how could it become more clear to the reader that you're also making fun of this tone?'"

Louise looked at her watch. "It's time for us to go in now, dear Wendy. But let's think more about the specific problem at your hands: your advisee's situation. If Jo Anderson hasn't cultivated a love for her students yet, fine. Where does that leave Maura and others like her?"

"Well, it seems that Maura is now dealing with what she would name 'Writers' Block' but is in fact debilitating low confidence and anxiety about being daring and taking risks on the page. She's telling herself she has nothing to write about, and she'll never write again."

Louise and I.A. shook their heads in unison. It was clear they both cared about the students, and they both cared about the trade.

3.9 March 30th, 2011, Brooklyn, NY (Maura)

Maura lay in her bed, her small bed which had been shoved into a very large closet at the back of her side of the apartment she shared with Sahar, where she had been all day long. She had called in sick to work at JWA. I have nothing to write about, she thought. “I have nothing *good* to write about,” she said aloud, to no one.

It was slushy and windy outside, and the sun was about to set over Sixth Avenue and the traffic coming down Flatbush. She had nothing to write about and she needed to drop out of the MFA program. She needed to find another worthwhile direction in her life— something else she could care about, anything else she could even begin to care about. Maura took yet another hit of Realeyez. She was out; dreaming, or thinking, remembering, or imagining. She wasn’t sure which.

Potential Story #1

They were on vacation with Maura’s friend Liz in California. They did not usually do things like that, take a vacation. It was her and Rory and Liz, the three of them. They were at Liz’s parents’ house by the beach in Orange County, inside a gated development. The houses were made of tan brick and were all variations on a theme, making it very hard to distinguish one from another. Rory’s phone rang. He greeted his old friend Brendan with a happy and silly hello, then his tone got serious and he said a solemn voice: “Uhuh.” And then he ran outside. After a few minutes Maura heard a weird sound through the ornate and tacky gold front door. It was like a squawking sound. She opened the door to see Rory on his knees in the curved brick driveway,

sobbing, phone still in his hand, and Brendan still presumably talking. Their childhood best friend Jon had died. It was unclear why. He'd returned to their hometown and done a serious amount of Realeyez with Brendan two nights earlier. Then Jon, in their run-down semi-rural ex-urb in the Hudson Valley, and had dinner with his parents. The only report from his parents was that he was "agitated."

Jon took pills that night. It was unclear how much, and how many had been prescribed to him for depression or for unexplained stomach pain that he'd been experiencing on and off for five years. He took pills and when his mother went to wake up her twenty-four-year old child at 10:30 am the next morning, she found his body cold and lifeless in his childhood twin bed.

Potential Story #2

Maura had attended KU, the very university where she was now attending the MFA program, for the beginning of college. The first two undergraduate years were nothing at all like going there as a graduate student—in quality, daily rhythm, texture, class size, peer attitudes, assignments, everything was different. As an eighteen-year-old college student it felt like she was going to a regular, big, college, albeit one filled with some very wealthy students. Maura had met Ling on the second day of freshman orientation and they became fast friends. Ling was a short boy who wore a studded belt and converse sneakers, which was enough, in the early 2000s, to mark someone as a "punk." And his outfit was enough for Maura to think: we listen to the same kind of music, so it's appropriate that I approach him and try to become his friend. Which is just what she did.

Maura and Ling were goofy friends, the kind that when they were together they were just happy, making jokes and jumping off things and remembering embarrassing bands that each of them listened to in high school, and sharing cigarettes and talking about their parents' strict

expectations. She was used to being friends with boys in this easy manner; it was easier, in many ways, than being friends with girls because boys had the tendency to not try to get too serious, to not be competitive or talk about crushes or real emotions or struggles. And Maura, minorly depressed and angry as hell at her parents, was not really in the mood every day to be that honest with her friends.

After Maura transferred colleges, after spending nearly two years at Harvard which was four hours away, Maura and Ling were still in close touch, talking at least once a week on the phone, albeit briefly. Plus Maura was always visiting New York to spend time with Rory, and inevitably would force Ling to come over to Rory's collective house in Brooklyn and eat pancakes with her or just sit around the backyard and do nothing. But Maura's cell phone ran out of batteries one December night after her final year of college, and when she woke up the next morning she had twenty-seven missed calls and six voice messages from her friends from KU. Ling had been hit by a car riding his bicycle down the West Side Highway at nine the previous evening. He was on the bike path, and the driver, leaving a party at Chelsea Piers, drunk and with high levels of Realeyez in his blood, had driven his car full of three other people down the bike path instead of the street.

The car hit Ling and he propelled through the air. Ling had been listening to music on his headphones. He had not been wearing a helmet. He had been on his way to a punk show, where he was going to meet a girl named Sara he'd been in love with for three years, in an unrequited fashion. He was a New York City Teaching Fellow for elementary math education, but still a virgin. When the car struck him at the intersection of the West Side Highway and Clarkson Street his body flew through the air and lost life upon impact of hitting the concrete. One of his sneakers—only the left one of his Converse sneakers—also pitched through the air, landing in

the middle of the lane on the West Side Highway, forcing drivers to swerve their cars around it without braking for the twenty-three-year-old body that lay lifeless, twelve feet away.

Potential Story #3

Rory grew up on a narrow road in the Hudson Valley that only got paved when he was fourteen years old. His parents' house was a pre-fab one, a one-story box-like structure that appeared to have been plopped down randomly onto a parcel of land. His mother was a petite woman with a beautiful face and a dark brown bob. She was an assistant in the computer classes at the high school, part time. She was also a fantastic cook and they didn't have dishwasher, so she seemed to spend the majority of time that she was not at the high school washing and drying dishes.

Rory's father was a lean man with stern face. He worked as a technician for Con Edison, driving to the Bronx for long shifts four days a week, then parking his car and driving again around various neighborhoods in a utility truck. Rory had a younger sister named, Maura's age, who he almost never spoke to. His childhood bedroom contained posters of punk bands that had surely been up there for years— pictures of white men with mohawks, Rancid and the Bounding Souls. There were books in stacks on the floor, just as there had been when he was fourteen. At fourteen, it wasn't the first time that he'd heard the sound of smacking, of hitting, of things crashing to the floor. But just past ten one winter night, Rory heard the common sound of his parents yelling, the common crash and clap of skin-against-skin. Then he heard the double-thud of a middle-aged body falling to the floor. His mother yelled, "NO! No. I will not let you do this to me. I will not let you beat me just because my first husband beat me." That was when Rory found out his mother had been married before.

3.10 May 15th, 2011, Knickerbocker University (Maura)

It was the final cocktail party of the semester at the Writers House; a celebration after the MFA Graduation Thesis Reading event for the fiction writers in the year ahead of Maura. A year from now, Maura would be in the same place as these graduates. That is, if she managed to get anything down on paper, in order to write a thesis.

While Maura hadn't written a word since her terrible Jo Anderson workshop, she'd spent more and more time hanging around the Writers House. She was often on the look-out for Max, as she had been throughout the whole event that evening.

Finally, after three plastic cups of white wine, after her watching him from the corner of her eye for hours, as people slowly exited the house in groups of two or three, Max approached Maura.

"Hey Anarchist," he said to her as he stepped forward, effectively walking her into a corner of the reception room. Of course, Maura enjoyed this corralling.

After months, she couldn't get handle on Max. It was as if she couldn't put him into focus, couldn't place him in her map of understanding of the social world. Who was he in high school? What job would he have when they were all finished with this adult, urban, summer camp that they called grad school? She knew he wasn't perfect and she didn't really like his politics. She also knew he was guarded. But this guardedness, this blurry picture, became a challenge to her, piquing her interest more. She had decided months earlier to imprint upon his slightly short and slightly stocky build, imagine herself cradled by his overly hairy arms, gazed upon from his bespeckled eyes and curly mop.

"Anarchist?" she said, skeptically.

"I know about your past, Ms. Roosevelt. Your arrests and fighting against the man."

She had, in fact, been arrested twice for activist protests in college—once for a demonstration against the war in Iraq and once for standing up at a speech by the FBI director and yelling about arrests made on environmental activists in the Pacific Northwest, who the government was calling “eco-terrorists.” Five of her friends and she had placed themselves in different locations in the audience, and when Robert Mueller started talking they had stood up one-by-one, raised a sign, and started yelling like lunatics. Maura had hollered, “Stop the Greenscare! Free Daniel McGowan!” before being promptly dragged away by campus police.

“Uh. Yeah, I guess I have fought against the man.” A poker of shame rose inside of her. Max was not a guy who wanted to deal with difficult woman, that much was clear.

In one hand he held a plastic cup filled to the brim with wine, and with the other he touched the inside of her wrist. She was wearing a v-neck black t-shirt, her arms exposed. Her back was in a corner of the panel room, and there were small groups of students still talking to each other, squawks of laughter shooting out over the din. She could see over Max’s shoulder that no one was looking at them, that no one cared. She let him take a step closer to her, assuming he was going to kiss her. She stayed perfectly still. His breath was warm and fruity like the cheap wine. He took his pointer finger and this time ran it along her boney clavicle, exposed from her worn-out t-shirt.

“Writer-Anarchist-extraordinaire” he said quietly, and without showing any kind of judgment about this assertion. Maura blushed, but was also full of shame that she wasn’t just the feminine small writer-girl of his dreams. His finger paused on the end of her clavicle bone, lingering towards the vulnerable part of her neck. The line of bone where he touched her tingled, and he turned around and walked out of the room.

Later that night— much later, after they had gone to Magnolia’s bar and smoked cigarettes on the corner, and gone back to Magnolia bar and then left again for french fries on Bleeker Street— they rode together in a taxi across the Manhattan Bridge. The window was open. Max threw something out of it. “What was that?” Maura asked. He laughed and showed her a handful of raw broccoli. They giggled, both of them, and the lights from the city on either side of the East River blurred in Maura’s eyes. The broccoli appeared to have ended up in Max’s jean’s pockets after the reception at the Writers House that evening.

“Free yourself! Be free, cruciferous vegetables!” he said, slurring his words. He turned to Maura and kissed her. She knew it was coming. It was actually more of a shock that it hadn’t come earlier, hadn’t come weeks or even months before.

His mouth was cooler than she’d expected, and sort of slid off of hers; a wet fish. There was no pull, no invisible strings from her guts, when she’d felt his touch. But then again, she’d had three glasses white wine, one glass of red wine, a sour beer, an IPA, and a vodka tonic. It had been hours, yes, that she’d consumed these drinks over. But they’d numbed her body by this point, well-past midnight, which was exactly what she’d wanted as she’d had the typical headache and nausea forming from not having any Realeyez in her system at all. She was addicted to it, severely. And for some reason, she said it out loud right there in the cab, in the middle of their post-kiss giggling.

“I’m addicted to Realeyez, Max.”

“Hrmmm,” he’d said with a smirk. “And I enjoy smoking opium, it helps me imagine. You know, being etherized upon a table and everything.”

Maura hit his chest playfully. “I’m serious,” she said. “I have an addiction.”

Max's eyes slivered behind his glasses. She could tell he didn't know what to think. He wasn't the type of person who could imagine anyone he knew having real problems. That was the difficulty with sheltered people, Maura thought. Or maybe he was just scared of her even more now. She put one hand on each of her temples. Why would she have told him that?

"Well should we go get some?" he asked.

Excitement rushed her body. Maura laughed. He wasn't serious, but even the joke of being able to get a hit of Realeyez into her bloodstream right then excited her. It felt like a breath of oxygen.

"Are you coming to my house?" he asked her.

He'd told her before that his apartment was in Crown Heights, right next to the elevated S-line, the shuttle that brought people cross-wise through Brooklyn. He'd told her that his bedroom shook every time the shuttle passed it, day or night. And he'd told her that he'd chosen this apartment because his grandfather was born in the building across the street—once a hospital for the births of Jewish babies, then a retirement home for African Americans, and now under construction to become a condo for people like Max, only with slightly more disposable income. Maura very much wanted to see all of this. But she touched her own lips. She wasn't allowed. Her whole body told her that this wasn't allowed; Rory would never allow this.

"Two stops, please," she told the cab driver. "The first on St. Marks Ave., right off of Flatbush."

3.11 May 20th, 2011, Knickerbocker University (Dimitra)

Rebecca, just one name. *Rebecca!* The Director of the MFA program, with a capital-D. Both students and professors in the program hailed her as if she were a queen. And she was, really, sitting in her office on the top floor of that unmoving, white stone townhouse. Her office

was filled with bright but silent air and crisp new books of poetry and careful, delicate movements. She was beautiful, of course, which was where so much of her mystique came from. A waif of a white woman always in jeans and a silken, expensive top. Long blonde shards of straight hair, a face as sullen as it was apparently intelligent; the eyes never breaking from the drill-through stare, the mouth rarely opening to reveal an opinion or an emotion. Certainly never a need. But when she did speak, her svelte arms crossed, her elegant hands resting on her chin or cheek, the shape of pondering yet always restrained, held back, controlled pondering.

Dimitra climbed up to Rebecca's office, huffing by the time she reached the fourth, top floor. There was a large desk in the open lobby, with a frowning effeminate male administrative assistant staring at a computer screen. His eyes did not avert when Dimitra walked in front of him, so she continued to Rebecca's cracked office door.

"Rebecca, may I have a word?"

Rebecca put her slim white book down. She cleared her throat with such a dainty sound.

"How can I help, Dimitra?" There was no warmth in her voice, but Dimitra knew that the other woman did in fact have an affinity towards her. Rebecca was a woman of the written word; the only faculty member in the building that held a PhD, but one she had gotten with disdain because in her bones she was a poet. Language made her blood pump and her lungs fill and therefore of course she loved Dimitra, who was an elder member of the same team, formed into the same species, living and breathing literary writer air that only a select few women in the world have the privilege of breathing.

Dimitra sat down in a linen armchair—lavender—and Rebecca continued with that stare; no emotion behind it at all. How long had it taken her to perfect this performance? Had she practiced as a child? Mastered it in her twenties?

Dimitra said, “Listen dear, I just want to say some things about the program. I want to, well, I want to talk with you about what I’ve seen happening around here, because it seems to me that the farce is just growing greater these days, and nearly no learning is taking pla—”

“Oh Dimitra. Are you having a hard time again? I thought after the semester off last year for your treatments you’d be well-rested and ready to—”

“No!” Dimitra took a deep breath than spoke more quietly. “No.” She didn’t want to sound angry or desperate. Why on earth had she decided to come talk with Rebecca? Her job already had an expiration date, she was sure, and why was she trying to move it up, now?

Rebecca waited.

“It’s just,” Dimitra continued, “It’s just I do think that one of our students, Nadia, I’ve noticed that she’s experienced some issues here, from faculty members and students...”

“She’s already come and spoken with me, this very same student that you’re talking about. I know just what this is about, so really there’s no need to worry yourself Dimitra. Don’t you have more important things to—”

“She’s talked to you? By herself? And what did she say?”

“Was it a month ago? Two? She came up here just the way you just did, and complained to me that there weren’t enough faculty who were Black. Or Asian or Latino or whatever. You know what she was complaining about. And she had some ideas to bring in more diverse writers into the house for readings and such.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“Well I told her I couldn’t agree with her more, and what wonderful ideas she had. What else do you expect I’d tell her?”

“Well, if you can’t agree more, aren’t you the one who would change something?”

“Oh,” she chuckled, “easier said than done of course. But I asked her make a list for me, a long list, with at least twenty names on it, of various writers of color that she knows who might be interested in coming in and reading at our little house here. And I asked them to be local, because you know what our budget situation is like right now, I’m sure...”

With this, Dimitra thought of Audre Lorde (1984) warning that “This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concern” (106.) It seemed it was Rebecca’s concern that the complaint be met with an appropriate response, a response that would uphold status quo mantra that diversity was a positive attribute, without actually disrupting social arrangements or taking away money and proverbial air time from white writers.

“So, did she give you the list?” Dimitra asked.

“Oh yes, she must have given it to me. She gave it late because she told me she’d worked so hard to curate just the right names and backgrounds of poets and fiction writers.”

“May I see the list?”

“Oh goodness, where would it be now? I couldn’t find it if you paid me.” Rebecca then stopped making eye contact with Dimitra, and turned toward her open laptop. It was clear she was done with this conversation.

Chapter 4: Third Semester, Action on the Page

4.1 September 2, 2011, *Brooklyn, NY* (Maura)

It was a truly bizarre thing, sitting in the middle of Maura's desk, in the big room of her side of her apartment. A half-sheet of white paper lay there, with the following phrase printed on it:

Focus down in order to expand out...
Instead of years, cover weeks; instead of days, consider one day.

(Bishop 2004, 20)

What was this? It sounded like a writing prompt. How had it gotten there? Had her roommate's scraps from her ridiculous performance studies classes somehow ended up on in her desk? Had Sahar been using her room while she'd been asleep?

Maura wiped tears from her eyes. She'd just been crying, but this note snapped her out of it. She re-read the words written on the scrap of paper again and wondered if she could use this misplaced message to her own advantage. She had spent the summer trying to write the story about the little girl in Boston with all the foster siblings and the Catholic parents, now she was thinking of turning it into a novel— a novel she would use as her MFA thesis, the completion of which would let her graduate with a master's degree. But *trying* was the key word. Trying desperately and then failing. She had barely written a page, for the whole summer.

She considered the words on the paper again. What if she honed in on one specific day or time in the little girl protagonist, Annemarie's, summer? Eh, she wouldn't even know where to begin that process. Plus, she didn't have time. Maura crumpled up the paper and threw what she assumed was Sahar's trash into her metal bin in the corner. She had to go to her last day of work at JWA, and she was already running late.

She'd woken up at eight that morning in her small bedroom that was once a closet, sweaty in a pair of boxer shorts and a ripped Ramones t-shirt. She had to be at work at nine-thirty, and the commute took forever. Rory was lying beside her, one long pale leg sticking out from underneath the twisted cable knit blanket. His sleeping body, so big and peaceful, reminded Maura of a giraffe. But what kind of docile animal would act the way that he did, she wondered.

She wandered into her shared kitchen and began the electric kettle for coffee. She had a pounding headache. She and Rory had finished off two bottles of red wine the night before, after returning from a dance party at a bicycle shop and education center in Williamsburg. That— in addition to the Realeyez that they'd smoked after they'd fought, after they'd made up, after they were entangled in one and others limbs, before both of their sets of eyes rolled back in their heads and they'd both passed out with their mouths hanging open— had made her feel awful, six hours later.

Today was not only her last day working at the JWA the literary agency, it was also the day that she was slated to see Max again, who had been away for the summer. He had traveled back to Minnesota to live with his father and “do research for his book,” although he had been in touch every week or so with a short email or text message. Maura had no idea what Max wanted from her, but he was, at least, paying her occasional attention.

When she returned to her bedroom with her coffee cup, Rory was awake and her phone was in his hand. He leaned his bare back against the wall the bed touched. His face, his symmetrical and lightly freckled face, was tense. “I see the dork you're fucking is back.”

“Give me my phone,” Maura said. “You're not allowed to look through my phone.”

“I'm allowed to do anything I want!” he answered, still calm, his voice still measured. “That's the whole thing about being an adult. I can do anything I want, whenever I want.”

Maura jumped onto the bottom of the bed and scrambled up to pull the phone from his hands. She was not sleeping with Max. She hadn't done anything physical with Max since the awkward kiss at the end of the previous school year. But of course she wanted to, so to be accused of actions she didn't get to fulfil was doubly hurtful.

She tried to snatch the black flip-phone out of Rory's hands but he pulled it away, dropped it, then caught both of her cheeks in his palms.

"Just admit it," he growled. "Just admit that you're fucking that loser writer and then we can be done with this insane bullshit between us that never ends."

"I'm not doing that, Rory," Maura said, and pushed her body away from his with two hands to his chest. "And it wouldn't be any of your business if I was, anyways. Plus being an adult means just the opposite. You have to do everything you don't want to do."

He held her down with his left hand, then, pinning her to the bed, and punched her in the right thigh. "Liar." He punched her again then, harder, and she screamed. "You're a liar and a slut and a terrible writer."

Tears involuntarily leaked from her eyes. She was crying like a little kid. She was a little kid. "I wish I could kill you," she whispered to him, as he stood up from the bed, bare naked, and slammed the door to the tiny room behind him.

After a few minutes she followed him into the bigger room. That was when she noticed the note in the middle of her desk, with the mysterious message printed on the middle of it.

4.2 August 15, 2011, *Brooklyn, NY* (Maura)

Maura was riding behind Rory, both on bicycles, down Vanderbilt Avenue in Brooklyn in the dark. They were on their way to a house party in Bed-Stuy where their friends from college and several others they'd collected since would all be, drinking large beers and listening

to loud music. It was a mid-August night, and the air was so humid it felt like light rain was coming up from the pavement below them.

Maura hadn't wanted to get on her bicycle again for months after Ling had been killed, but Rory had convinced her to try. She had to live her life, she had to keep doing what she loved. And she did love riding her bike, particularly in this situation; Rory's broad t-shirt covered shoulders were hunched over his white, aerodynamic, road bike in front of her, as he weaved in-and-out of cars. He made his way quickly down the hill in Fort Greene. Headlights streamed by, a spectacle bouncing against the shadowy sidewalks and trees and warm orange glow from the stately brownstones above. A late-night regal spectacle. Rory's red hair bobbed up and down and her eyes followed it, forging a path. He insisted that neither of them wear helmets, even after what happened with Ling. They needed to feel completely unencumbered, totally free. And she did, that night.

Two months earlier, in June, Maura had returned to her parents' house in Boston. While she was there it had rained all day, every day. She had rediscovered television late at night, slept in until it was nearly the afternoon, then began eating on the couch and stayed there—with nachos, with turkey sandwiches, with frozen pizza, with salads her mother brought home from restaurants for her—for nearly twelve hours stretches. She waited until her parents' went to sleep before pulling out her vape pen and smoking Realeyez. She was proud of herself that she was able to make it that many hours without a hit.

Her place of work, JWA, was closed for three weeks every June, during which time her boss and his wife and his two adult children rented a house in the South of France, in the town of Antibes. For these weeks in June, Maura would also not be paid; this was in the contract she'd

signed when she started. She hadn't written a word since the bad workshop with Jo Anderson, and her plan had been to leave the city behind and try to regroup her focus and her creative juices at her parents' house, and get back to writing work. But that was not what occurred.

What occurred was instead like a dream. Her body was heavy and she was in a bad situation in her life. A bad, dangerous, situation with Rory. And although she could get herself to open her laptop, she just stared at the screen. She could not write even one sentence. Maura's mother never explicitly told her to avoid Rory, but a few times had muttered, "I'm so glad you're here with us and not away with that guy. That's not love, Maura." And then she'd walked out of the room, leaving the Cobb salad in its take-out container behind her.

One night in June, far after midnight, Maura had also responded to an email from a university administrator asking for applications from MFA students to become graduate student instructors of Expository Writing at KU. It seemed like something the university, or at least the Expository Writing Program, took seriously, as the job paid enough that if she got it she'd be able to quit her assistant work at JWA. She'd even start getting paid a semester before she began teaching, because according to the email, the preparatory training class was part of the job and it started half-way through the fall semester. She was already slated to teach an Intro to Creative Writing class in the fall as well, as all MFA students were automatically assigned to teach it. But that was a one-semester, underpaid gig. Perhaps this other teaching job was what she needed. Perhaps a change in her daily schedule would allow her to have more headspace to think clearly, to write something down on the page.

If she continued with the non-writing, then she wouldn't graduate from the MFA program. Now she did not, she knew, really need to graduate from the MFA program. That degree was most-likely not going to get her a job or any kind of instant gratification. But she

wanted to finish it for herself, so that she would achieve a fraction of the goals that she'd been aiming for in the past many years. If she graduated from the MFA program, she wouldn't be an entire failure in her own mind and moreover in the minds of people who were already sure she was a failure— her parents, her sisters, Rory, Max, her best childhood friend who had been doing quite well in her 1L summer law school fellowship.

When Maura returned to New York in July, she also returned to full time work at JWA. Those last two months of summer had been measured out by interminable subway rides. The strangers, the coffee cups, the actual sweat and the smell of that sweat. The ads posted up right below the ceiling announced the dentist that was like no other, the food delivery company that was the fastest, the storage space with its corny jokes about how crappy it is to live in New York. She preferred the slow R train because she could get on it and space out, not have to move again until 23rd street, when she'd slog her hungover and sometimes still-Realeyez-high mind out of the train car, up the concrete, urine-soaked subway stairs, down Third avenue, and into her basement office at the Grammercy Park brownstone. She had bruises from Rory on her legs and on arms, so she always wore long sleeves and long pants and sweated through her clothes by the time she reached work. The work was still monotonous: answer the email; take out the trash; fix the coffee machine; answer the email; print out the manuscript. Monotonous, occasionally torturous, but it kept her days in a rhythm.

During work she sometimes opened up the file of her novel-in-progress, *Motherless*. She remembered what her professor Dan had said about how he'd finished his first novel at work. But she never wrote anything. She didn't even delete any sentences. She'd just read and re-read the three separate stories that were all based around the same little girl character. She didn't alter a word.

By mid-August, she'd admitted to herself that she'd been having an awful summer. Working at the JWA every day— exhausted, hungover, depressed— then walking right to Astor Place after work, where Rory would be sitting behind his card table with his bookselling partner, Aaron, selling used books and chatting with passers-by. She'd pull up a milk crate and sit beside him, behind the table, so that people would know she was with him. She technically wasn't his girlfriend and hadn't been for over a year. But that felt like a lie, at least to her.

Rory's used book business, right there on the street, had been doing very well. He and Aaron were getting a reputation for having great stock. They carried used copies of *On the Road* for the college kids to pick up, but the table also carried literary hard hitters like Robert Bolaño and everything Patricia Highsmith wrote. And the two of them read everything on their table, so could give solid recommendations to anyone who wanted to start up a conversation. Rory and Aaron, along with two other guys they were friends with, Josh and Benjamin, were looking around Brooklyn for a storefront in order to keep this success going and move the store into a real, indoor location. Because of this new plan, Rory had been very busy and had begun asking Maura to help him with work-related tasks.

"Could you go pick up a donation on 21st? An old woman in an elevator building."

"I need you to push this cart back to the storage space on First Ave. I don't have time."

Maura always said yes. They were like family, she figured, and she needed to be there for him. Plus, the more time Maura spent either at work at the literary agency or helping Rory with his work, the more time she *didn't* have to think about writing anything herself.

On her bike that night in the middle of August, Maura finally caught up with Rory at the end of Vanderbilt Avenue, under the BQE. "Hey, you're going too fast for me."

He just looked at her and rolled his eyes. “I was thinking,” he said, “because I always have my best thoughts while I’m riding. So, I was thinking about your problem with writing, or writer’s block, or whatever is going on with you not being able to write a book or your homework assignments for grad school or whatever—”

“They are not homework assignments! Jesus, Rory.”

He rolled his eyes again. “Well I’m willing to do you a favor. I’m willing to read everything you write, comment on it, and help you with it. That way you won’t embarrass yourself again, like you did in Jo Anderson’s class. I mean, you embarrassed yourself so badly you haven’t been able to write a word since then. You’re good, you know, sometimes. You just don’t know what you’re doing. If I vet everything, I can help you. I don’t really have time in my life to do this, but I think you really need it.”

The light changed again and Rory shot off into the intersection. Maura followed him on her bike, her mind confused about what his offer was implying. She looked up at the intersection of Kent Ave and Flushing Ave to see silver Toyota Camry driving right towards her. The cars’ headlights were on and shined into her eyes but it just kept coming at her, almost in slow-motion. The driver didn’t see her at all. She watched the car, freezing her body on her Cannondale for a moment, and then dove off of it, leaving the bike in the street. Her body hit the pavement hard and she felt herself do a roll, shoulder-over-shoulder. She was fine, she realized, as she took a deep breath. The car didn’t hit her, she was fine. Her face felt wet. She touched her cheek and saw blood on her hand, as the clatter of the car tires hit the metal of her bicycle wheel, slowing down and then speeding up again and driving, quickly, away.

4.3 August 16, 2011, *The Department of Helping and Learning* (Wendy)

I had to go for a hike. I was frustrated. It was summer on earth, but in the afterlife I was able to don a purple parka that went to my knees, nylon gloves, a neck gator, and thick hiking boots. I made my way through the Savage River Loop trail at the base of Mt. Denali. All I had done was make one wish to be on Mt. Denali, go through a glass and metal door in the hallway of my floor in The Department, and there I was, at the base of the most majestic mountain in Alaska.

There was no one around. It was just me crunching through the semi-frozen leaves, and I wasn't sure if I was on the actual mountain or if it was a mirage in the afterlife. Once I had calmed down enough to return to my afterlife office, I would have to call up and ask Louise that question. But for now, I needed to hike off my anger.

I had gained some other mentees over the summer as Maura wasn't in school full-time, but I'd been watching her every day, and every day she'd been falling into habits as a writer—and I'll admit it, as a person—that I just did not want to see happening. What this young woman was involved with concerning the ex-boyfriend was repugnant. Unacceptable. And I knew I wasn't supposed to get involved in their personal lives, but there I was watching it. What else was I supposed to care about? Plus I didn't have anyone to complain to about it. The thing about being in the afterlife is that you are actually very alone.

Don't get me wrong, you can go and spend time with others in the afterlife whenever you want, and I'd found that nearly everyone is friendly and receptive to a visit, especially in The Department of Helping and Learning. But being without your loved ones—for me being away from my husband and my children and their problems and their needs for food and care and a clean living room to watch television in or a tidy Tallahassee porch to eat lunch on—gave me an emptiness that was wrenching. I'd been told by Frances Child that oftentimes, when someone is

lucky enough to be a solid member of The Department, they're also lucky enough to have their partner from earth come join them there, as a companion, when that person's days on earth were over. So I watched Dean day-in and day-out, saying my little poetry-prayers, my agnostic wishes, that he'd both stay healthy for as long as possible, and then come join me in my afterlife bed, sleeping beside me comfortably, forever.

As I stomped through the wet snow and the low green shrubbery, I couldn't help thinking about my charge. Her situation was unfair. It was unfair for her, for Maura, to be dealing with this man who was interfering with her writing career. A writer's life cannot help but affect her writing. Only a handful of years before this I wrote, that I "...believe that who we are and the communities we align ourselves with can't help but influence and color our interpretations of fact and influence our representations of reality" (Bishop, 2004, 110.) This Rory jerk was making Maura feel unworthy to put her words on the page— any page.

But I wasn't just angry for this one young woman. I was angry for all the young women this was happening to, had happened to. And I was angry at women that we raised men to be violent like this, physically and emotionally. I had to do something; I had the capacity to do something, and I had to. It was completely silent around me on the mountain: the sound of snow melting into ice; a few drips of water falling off frozen branches. Everything else was vast and still. And I was dead. It would be like this forever if I wanted it to be, I was betting.

"IT'S NOT FAIR!" I yelled into the distance, into the nothing-ness. "IT'S NOT FUCKING FAIR!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

Just then, stepping out of a cluster of Sitka spruce trees, a giant and silent moose appeared. He stepped towards me, gently, as if he was answering my cry.

The moose had a long face and snout, horse-like. He looked melancholic and wise. His antlers were bigger than my eyes could reckon with his body, and they reached finger-like up towards the clouds. He wasn't even ten feet away from me. Now that I focused on his body, it was so large it also looked fake. Was he real? Had I conjured him up somehow, from my afterlife imagination? Tears sprung to the corners of my eyes. I shouldn't be afraid. If he mauled me, I would still be dead. Nothing would change.

"Are you dead too?" I asked the moose. It occurred to me for a brief moment that perhaps he actually would answer me, speaking clearly in English. Who knew what would happen in this otherworld I'd been placed into. But he didn't. I was fairly sure I was really in the Denali Borough, really in real life, human-world, Alaska. But the moose also didn't move; he didn't charge at me, he didn't seem upset by my screaming. "I need to do something," I whispered to the animal.

He moved his head slightly to the right. He was a gentle animal, and a male, I could somehow tell. It was as if he were agreeing with me, with the head tilt. It was as if he had walked out of the woods to give me a sign that I could act, that I should act, to help my charge and other women like her, somehow.

4.4 September 2nd, 2011, *Manhattan, NY* (Maura)

On her last day of work at the JWA literary agency, Maura's boss had gotten her a slice of carrot cake from the upscale deli on the corner, and her two colleagues had chipped in for a bottle of prosecco. "Now go write the great American novel!" Jeb said. "If you're not going to be with us here, you better be there making real literature. None of this chic lit stuff!"

Three weeks beforehand, Maura had gotten the job teaching Expository Writing at KU, and promptly written Jeb an email, quitting. It was all amicable, though, and on her last day she

had nodded and given her three colleagues weak hugs and then gone outside and to her surprise, there was Max, smiling, in long shorts and a grey hooded sweatshirt.

“I made it on time,” he’d said, coolly. He looked different than he’d looked a few months before. Lighter and stronger at the same time. Tan in a way that surprised Maura.

“Hey!” She was genuinely happy to see him.

“I heard you don’t have a job anymore! I’m here to congratulate you!”

“Unemployment, fun-employment,” she said with a grin.

The street was bright and the air was autumnal and Max did the strangest thing, then. He grabbed her hand. He walked her, holding her hand, all the way down to the high-end deli and then inside the store he was silent but bought a wrapped up bouquet of small sunflowers and over-dyed purple daisies.

“For the unemployed writer,” he said after paying. “Who also happens to be a revolutionary anarchist.”

Maura couldn’t help blushing. She was also entirely confused. This daytime, outward affection was a new thing.

“I supposed I could say the same to you? Should I be giving you flowers, eh, sir?”

“Eh, no madame. It’s customary for me to give them to the lady only.”

They both smiled. They said nothing; they didn’t move. Maura opened her tote bag to place the bouquet inside. She’d acquired a brown leather bag sometime last spring, in addition to square-toed brown leather lace-up shoes. She now had many of the same accessories as the other students in the MFA program.

When she put the bunch of stems wrapped in clear plastic into her bag, her hand brushed against the edge of a sheet of paper. She pulled it out. A half-sheet, with printed words, just like the one on her desk that morning. This one read:

Reorganize your story into “Photographic time” — Provide a set of ten verbal photos; arrange them in order and/or shuffle the deck.

(Bishop, 2004, 120).

What on earth was going on? Was Sahar harassing her? She paused to imagine what a verbal photograph of her *Motherless* draft might be.

“Everything OK?” Max asked.

“Yeah. I just... Well I’m thinking about my writing for workshop, to be honest.”

“I want to hear about it,” he said, with the slightest of smiles. “Wanna go for a walk?”

“I do,” she answered.

4.5 September 9, 2011, *Knickerbocker University* (Maura)

Maura’s classroom for the first college class she was teaching, ever, was on the basement floor of the giant university library. She descended the crowded wide staircase then wandered down a window-less, grey hallway, ostentatiously lacking in sunlight and fresh air, and reached room 501-B on the right: a door with two square glass and wire windows. By the time she arrived at the door, her students were already sitting at the conference table, each of them looking down at an individual phone screen.

There were twelve KU students assigned to “Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction and Poetry.” That meant twelve people who were either taking out loans from a bank or letting their parents take out loans, or letting their parents pay cold-hard-cash, to be taught the basics of creative writing by Maura, of all people. What qualified her to do this, she did not know. She was technically an adjunct instructor, so of course she was only seeing a minute fraction of the

money that these people and their families paid to the university. But the knowledge was there, as she walked into the room, that these people expected something out of her that she wasn't qualified to give them.

Five minutes earlier Maura had been on the third floor of the library, in a small two-person women's bathroom that smelled rancid, whispering to her mother through her cellphone. "I can't do it, Mom," she had said. "I think I'm going to throw up. I cannot go teach a class to college students. I have no idea what I'm doing... I-can't-leave-this-bathroom-is-it-OK-if-I-run-out-of-the-library-right-now-and-never-show-my-face-at-this-university-ever-again?"

Maura's mother had told her to suck it up, as Maura knew she would. So she had made her way to the library's crowded elevator and down four flights. She was shaking and nauseous, but she would do it. She would walk in and do this thing called teaching, although she knew in her own bones that she had no idea what she was doing.

The students sat in the scattered desk-chairs. Four were eighteen-years-old, and in their first semester of college and this behemoth university. Two were twenty-three, just two years younger than Maura was, trying to finish up their final semester of a what had seemed like endless years of undergraduate classes. The other six students were somewhere in between those ages. Seven of the students appeared to be white, two appeared to be black, and three appeared to be Asian. They all looked like typical KU students: trendy clothes and smirks of too-cool-ness and city-hardened shoes and bags and Metro Cards.

Maura stood in front of them with chin length light brown hair, slightly curly, wearing a blazer and dark blue jeans and fancy squared-toed light-brown leather shoes. She had perfected the professor uniform, she thought. But really, how would any of them be impressed by their teacher?

A student named Setti Abbar, from a Evanston, Illinois, aged twenty-two, thought to herself: “This professor looks young. I hope that means she’s an easy grader.”

Caroline Rothstein from Maplewood, New Jersey, glanced up and her shoulders deflated. Caroline, who truly loved literature, thought: “She doesn’t look like the kind of person who would write a story I want to read.”

Thomas Sibley, from Huntington, Long Island, aged twenty-one, grimaced, “Oh shit. I need to check my class schedule. I could have sworn I registered for a class with a man.”

Maura moved to the front of the room, cleared her throat, and put her bag down on a combination desk-chair. “Hey everyone,” she said, a slight quiver in her voice. “Hey, I’m Maura, your, um, teach—uh, professor.”

“Should we call you Professor Roosevelt?” Thomas asked in a deadpan tone.

“Yes!” she said. Then quickly followed up with, “Uh, no. I mean—call me whatever makes you feel comfortable. Maura is fine. That’s a fine thing.”

A few of the students laughed nervously as she took the stack of printed out syllabi and began distributing them into waiting hands. Then Maura read every word of her syllabus aloud, slowly.

Creative Writing: Introduction to Fiction and Poetry
CRWRI.UA.815
TR 4:55-6:10

*Instructor: Maura Roosevelt

*Office Hours:

3 pm- 4:30 pm Thursdays

Required Texts:

- Course reader
- *A Poetry Handbook*, Mary Oliver
- *Some Ether*, Nick Flynn

Course Overview:

This is essentially an art class. We will work together to make it both adventurous and fun. We will sample from the smorgasbord of modern (and a few not-so-modern) stories and poems, in order to discover our own personal aesthetic tastes, while also collecting tools and strategies that will enable us to write in those styles. We will read as writers rather than as English majors (asking ourselves *How?* rather than *Why?*)

At the end of the semester students can expect to leave with a deepened understanding of the writing process, and several edited pieces of work that will display each person's individual talents.

Structure of Class:

The first half of the semester will be devoted to **fiction**, and the second half to **poetry**. Generally Tuesdays will be craft days, and Thursdays will be workshop days.

Craft: Through textual analysis of the assigned materials, we will figure out how the writer is accomplishing his or her goals within the story or poem. *Reading responses* will be required for every craft class. These responses are creative or critical reaction papers to the assigned texts (approx 1 page). These do not need to be formal papers, but rather a rough response that shows you have thought about the reading.

Workshop: A writing workshop is basically a group effort to improve a writer's poem or story. You will read your peers' writing, write response letters, and share your ideas orally during workshop. Over the course of the semester, each student will submit and workshop one story (6-18 pages), one short-short story (1-2 pages), and 3 poems of any length. **You must bring 12 copies of your submission to class one week before your workshop. Emails and late submissions will not be accepted. Fiction should be double-spaced, and all work should have numbered pages, standard margins, and Times New Roman font.** You will turn in a copy of your response letter to me at the end of every workshop.

When she finished reading the syllabus, Maura asked: "Any questions?" Again, her voice wavered. A few students raised their hands and asked about the grading procedures. Thomas, Thomas who was going to be trouble, cleared his throat and said, "My question, Maura, is how do you justify giving us a grade at all on creative work? I mean, it's all up to one's taste? What one person thinks is good isn't what another does?"

She narrowed her eyes and tried to imagine Thomas sitting at his parents' dinner table, a child, infantilized by his mother scooping him more green beans in what her anger declared for him a suburban, white-washed, unaware life.

“That’s a good point,” she muttered. “But this is a college class and you have to get a grade in this college class. So do the work, and nothing terrible will happen.” She had said it with too much edge, then turned around abruptly to write on the board, not wanting to register Thomas or any of the other students’ reactions.

Maura finished off class that day forty minutes early. As her final act, she simply wrote on the board: “Workshop Schedule,” and then handed out a form for the students to fill in their names and proposed dates. She explained what the workshop was and how it would look. It began next class. She would just follow the models she’d been through herself. She had never been in a creative writing class that didn’t simply consist of a workshop.

4.6 September 10, 2011, *Knickerbocker University* (Wendy)

Tenth Street was picturesque that morning; the leaves still green on the honey locust trees, although a cool fall breeze blew amongst them. Dimitra, though, was not looking her best. She wore grey sweatpants with a drawstring waistband, and her hair—now a similar shade of grey, except for the very tips which still carried a harsh stripe of brown dye—was disheveled from sleep. She had lost a fair amount of weight over the summer, and the dark circles under her eyes were so pronounced it appeared she was wearing a kind of stage make up.

I sidled up beside her and whispered, “Dimitra, you can see me, right?”

She turned to me and grimaced. There was not an ounce of fear or shock in her face, though.

“You again,” she growled. “I’m on my way to what will surely be bad news. I don’t need you, Ms. Bishop, bothering me at the moment.”

“Just let me walk with you for a minute,” I implored her. We’d just crossed Sixth Avenue, and she would be at the Writers House soon.

Dimitra continued her focused walk, turning away from me. I tried to speak quickly. “Maura taught her first college-level class, a creative writing class. And what happened in that classroom was a shame, at best, because it was a missed opportunity: the students were not given the chance to do anything. They barely moved for the entire class. They did not use their thinking capabilities, they did not stretch their bodies. They did nothing. Maura read through the syllabus aloud. Each of the twelve sets of hands turned one stapled photocopied page.”

I knew that at least once a day for the entire summer, for each of the summer months—June, July, and August—Maura had opened her laptop and stared at the Word document that held a half-finished syllabus on it. She was panicked. Her primary concern had been *what to teach* the students, meaning what stories and poems to put on the syllabus and what assignments to type out and give them, and how on earth she could figure out a grade on any of the assignments. But it had only been a matter of days, really, that she had been considering *how to teach* them.

I also knew Maura had asked herself, honestly from the privacy of her closet bedroom in Brooklyn: What do I want these people to learn and remember after the semester is over? But as the days inched toward the end of the summer, she buried this earnestness in short panicked breaths and occasionally literal cold sweat. No one had given her instructions or techniques on leading a class. Maura had come to the conclusion that at the most basic level, her job to keep the students occupied in a room for seventy-five minutes; that was, at the minimum, what was being asked of her. So that was just what she would do. What could fill the airspace for those long minutes? That was her most pressing and practical task.

Dimitra said to me, as we walked together in the early fall sunlight, “Well. She needs to play. Maura needs to get her class to play, and if you ask me, she needs to remember to play herself in order for her to get anything decent down on the page, for her own writing.”

“Play! Oh you’re more than right, Dimitra. How could I have forgotten such an important element, here?”

I quickly went over the prompts I had collected to leave for Maura. Did any of them incorporate play? Were any of them lighthearted enough to get this poor, pathetic girl to lighten up again?

- Take advantage of titles (and images and metaphors). Write four solid titles for the text you have in hand (often these can be found for by looking for a crucial word, phrase, or sentence in the text.) ...Revise the opening and closing paragraphs in each version in a way that helps make sense of the title...

(Bishop 2004, 22-23.)

- Borrow a structure to help you (re)organize your narrative. Use the diary form or letter to allow you to retell the story.

(Bishop, 2004, 117.)

- Reorganize your story into “Collage time” – Juxtapose elements by random arrangement or synchronous themes: organize in five sections using flower names, four sections using seasons, six sections, each named for a family member or two; explore a metaphor use color to write a section or an entire text, for example, blue-wash a paragraph with blue-related words, and so on.

(Bishop 2004, 120.)

I liked these ideas, but they didn’t, perhaps, have enough levity or excitement contained within them. What could kickstart Maura to generate text for unfinished pieces and new ideas, ones that were not related to this current project she was stuck on about Boston and it’s ethnically Irish people? How could I help someone engaged in her type of social life, engaged in the misery with Rory and the daily bodily beating with drugs and alcohol, to step aside from all of this, and *play* on the page?

Dimitra stood on the front stoop of the Writers House now, and spoke in a low whisper. She certainly appeared, to passersby, as if she was talking to herself. She said, “It’s a lighthearted thing, writing. Even when writing about the hardest of subjects and creating the most devastating of scenes. The writer herself has to be lighthearted and carefree, in her own way, or those words won’t have the chance to come to fruition, won’t have the ability to birth themselves, foolishly and boldly, on the page.”

“You cannot play on the page under a great anxiety of audience,” I answered, nodding. It was a delight to keep learning, keep talking, even as a member of the afterlife.

“Yes, audience... I suppose that’s what I’m saying. And these workshops aren’t helping many students push aside their audience, at least in their first drafts.”

“Well, this terrible boyfriend that Maura has is asking to read everything she writes before anyone else. He’s her primary audience. So she’s in a double-bind, I think.”

Dimitra shrugged then mumbled something about being late for an unwanted meeting. I wished myself invisible, and then went in right beside her. Inside, she ascended the carpeted stairs so slowly I wondered if she needed a push from me. After quite a while, though, we’d made it to the top floor and into the only large office on it.

Rebecca, the Director of the MFA program, sat straight up behind her desk with her impeccable posture. Her blond hair was as straight as her back, her whole torso unmoving. She appeared to be the calmest woman on earth.

The fact that Dimitra did not look well was stark, sitting on the other side of the desk from Rebecca.

“We have had very low enrollment for your class, Dimitra,” Rebecca began.

Dimitra’s shoulders’ shifted as if she were readying herself for a fight.

“We’re going to have to cancel it for this semester, I’m so sorry.”

“But I’ve signed a contract!” Dimitra huffed. “I have my renewable one-year contract, so you can’t just fire me.”

Rebecca’s voice was low in tone and steady. “No, no. You’re going to get paid for this semester. But you don’t have to teach.”

“That’s what’s happening?” Dimitra’s eyes squinted. “And then what about next semester?”

“Well, yes. That’s the problem here. We’ve had low enrollment for your class for the past few years, and unfortunately, I wish it wasn’t the case, but unfortunately we won’t be able to renew your contract anymore.”

“What? You’re firing me? After how many years that I have given to this university?”

“You’re not being fired, Dimitra.” Rebecca stood up now, firmly, and went to her door. She put one hand on the edge of it, although it was already open. “I wish it wasn’t the case, but things have just run their course. We would never fire someone of your talent. We simply can’t afford to renew your contract again. It’s the facts.”

Dimitra did not stand up. There was an empty lavender office chair next to her, and I was standing beside it, although invisibly so.

Dimitra sat there, and then growled, just barely opening her mouth, “How dare you.” She paused. “How dare you fire the most senior person in this department and one of the few who is actually invested in teaching. How. Dare. You.”

“It’s not me,” Rebecca said, sighing. “It’s the students. They are running the market here and I think you know that.” I noticed that her chest was in fact heaving up and down, visible

above the cowl-neck of her sleeveless forest green blouse. Maybe she was more nervous than she was letting on.

“How can I compete with these other professors, these young superstars? They are famous for being beautiful, not for being writers! How can I compete with that?”

Rebecca opened the door further, clearly gesturing for Dimitra to stand up and walk through it. “How can any of us?” Rebecca answered. But she was beautiful—stunning. And she had tenure.

It made me so angry. This MFA director acting as if she didn’t have any power, acting as if she couldn’t have kept Dimitra’s job if she had tried. I wanted to scream! I wanted to make them see me, and tell her a piece of my mind. Instead, I took two hands and, holding the bar at the top of the empty chair beside Dimitra, and pushed. Over the it fell, with force. It made a clank-clank noise when it hit the hardwood on the edge of the small Persian rug.

Screams arose from both Rebecca and Dimitra.

“What on earth just happened?” Rebecca said, adding a theatrical gasp.

Dimitra looked around the room, as if she were looking for me. A smile took over her face. “Well,” she said, standing up and smoothing out the front of her grey sweatpants. “Well I’ll have you know that I am not going down without a fight. This is not the last conversation we’re having about this, Rebecca.”

And Rebecca, holding open the door, staring in shock at the overturned chair on the floor, nodded ever-so slightly but didn’t say a word.

4.7 September 16, 2011, *Knickerbocker University* (Wendy)

By the third class of Intro to Creative Writing, Maura had received workshop stories from a handful of students, and had learned more about a few of them from their basic demeanor in the classroom. I listened to her thoughts to understand her estimation of these students.

Conor

Conor Murphy was small in stature and unsmiling. He was the only film student in the room, and a senior. He wore Carhart work pants and beanie hats and mumbled and looked down quite a bit. He'd told the class he was from Portland, Oregon, and he looked the part.

After the first week, after reading her first batch of a student homework assignments, Maura found herself entering the lines from Conor's prose poem into the blank box of a Google search engine. This was too good for a college student to really have written, she told herself. This was a kid who was plagiarizing, already.

His lines were terse, lyrical, and sardonic. He wrote about eating a dinner of boiled potatoes with his family and being disgusted at how unsophisticated his parents were, but loving them desperately through all of his embarrassment. Maura's search engine turned up zero matches. It appeared Conor had indeed written those lines himself. She had made an assumption she shouldn't have made. Then she asked herself: How did she feel about having this talent in her classroom? It made her excited, uncomfortable, jealous, and moreover, entirely unsure of what and how to teach him. He was already a better writer than her.

Thomas

Thomas was a tall and slim and slightly effeminate kid, a junior, with pale skin and a poof of blonde hair. He was focused in class, always staring at Maura with deep attention. But he had a skeptical look on his face, too: a mouth drawn into a tight line and questioning eyes.

On the second day of their class meeting, it was Thomas who asked, at the end of their time together in the basement room: “Why are all of the writers on the syllabus women? Should we have a more diverse group of writers here? Or is this actually a women’s literature class?”

Maura looked down at her syllabus, panicking for a moment that she had made a mistake and copied the wrong names on it. But she had made no mistake; there was a male writer assigned nearly every week for one of the reading portions. But there were women writers’ names beside the male one, too.

Kelsey

Kelsey was one of the older students. She had long brown hair, smooth and straight and carefully highlighted with streaks of blonde. She didn’t dress like a rebel but carried herself like one. Her posture was erect. Maura couldn’t tell at first, but when she talked to her face-to-face she noticed a fleck of silver inside the girl’s mouth— a tongue ring.

Kelsey wrote a short story about a week she spent working as a busser at an Italian restaurant in the West Village. Her friend was a server there and had gotten her the position, but she’d been on a trial, trailing two other people who delivered hot steaming plates of pasta and melting parmigiana and then collected scraped clean plates, and forks that had found their way to the carpet.

He brought me into the large walk-in refrigerator. There were black plastic crates stacked up with arugula and mushrooms in them, the kind of crates that are large rectangles, open at the top. I liked him, I wanted to be in there with him. But then he pushed me against the silver door to the freezer section. He turned my neck and he shoved my face against the metal, so that he was behind me. My friend Sal was outside watching the door. She was giggling when he and I had walked in. But now my face was on the metal and he was ripping my pants down,

standing behind me. I started crying. I asked him to stop but I did it so softly. I'm not sure that he knew I was serious. Maybe he couldn't even hear me. And I walked out of the walk-in afterwards. Sal was no longer outside the door. I just kept walking through the restaurant, until I was standing on Mercer Street. And that was it. That was the end of my job there.

Maura had pulled Kelsey aside after reading that submission, asked her if she was OK. Kelsey defensively said “of course.” And Maura nodded. That was all she did. She was unsure if she was even sanctioned to ask a student that. She was aware this student deserved better help, better advice, but Maura didn't know what to do. She'd had zero guidance on any kind of teacher-student conduct.

Another unfortunate thing that was happening in this classroom of Maura's— I could say with certainty now that I had seen three classes, sitting from my invisible perch in the corner of the room— was that she was not giving the students anything to begin with, writing-wise. There was nothing to respond to, which is so often the case in creative writing classrooms. The students were reading stories to look at the elements of craft in them. Maura handed out a printed out version of a paragraph from Wells Towers' short story, “The Brown Coast;” a beautiful story about Florida, my earthly home.

Thomas read it aloud to the class:

He crossed the cockeyed patio. Tiny lizards scattered from his path. He followed the sound of waves to the end of the yard, through the stand of pine trees, limbless and spectral. He stepped from the pines onto a road paved with oyster shells whose brightness in the morning light made his eyes clench up.

The house was at the northern tip of a small island, and it had given Bob a little jolt of hope and excitement when Randall had described the place to him. He liked beaches, how each

day the tide scoured the sand and left it clean, how people generally came to the coast because they wanted to have a good time. But when Bob reached the access path up by the bridge, he was crestfallen to see that this island did not seem to have any beach at all. The land here met the water in a steeply sloping apron of mud that sang with mosquitos and smelled terribly of fart gas.

(Tower, 2010, 4.)

“Choose a location that you know well,” Maura told her students. “Now write a description of it, similar to the way that Wells Tower describes this Florida landscape... What do you notice is being described in this paragraph?”

“The landscape.”

“Yes, but I mean. More specifically... I guess,” Maura said.

“The trees.”

“The animals—lizards.”

“OK,” Maura said. “So go write your version of that.”

After ten minutes she asked the students to share. No one raised a hand, at first, and then Kelsey offered to read:

The street didn't have sidewalks. The house was brown, with shingles, and it had a grey path winding in an s-shape from the carport, across the lawn, to the front door. The bushes on either side of the house had been pruned into big blob-like shapes, because for some reason the bushes were something her parents cared about. The street was long and wide and quiet. In most seasons, there was no one on it. It was suburbia; house after house of slightly different split-levels, slightly different compact SUVs and sedans, and no animals at all except for the sound of a dog barking, locked inside a house, but she couldn't tell which one.

Everyone clapped.

“Thanks for sharing, Kelsey.” No one made any more comments.

Everyone was silent. “Can I get one more person to share at least? Anyone?”

After a silent long thirty seconds, Conor mumbled, then waved his hand in the air.

“Thank you, Conor,” Maura said.

This is what he read aloud:

Avenue A at six in the morning on a Monday had wet concrete. The roll gates were coming up with roars like yawns on the bodegas, but all the restaurant doors were padlocked shut. Pigeons were prancing around in a circle on the corner of 7th Street. Just a few of them; perhaps they were the children of the family that liked to get up early and mosey around, waiting for their parents to arise.

Edward had done that when he was a kid. Wander around the living room of his house waiting for this mother to wake up from her booze-induced sleep. It would take hours. By the time she was up he would have made himself French toast, the smell of burned plastic from the spatula filling the four rooms they lived in. He took a deep breath now and pulled the hood of his sweatshirt over his head, watching the steam rise from the wet concrete around those baby East Village pigeons. He didn't mind getting to his job as a line cook this early; he only minded it around noon, when his four-and-half hours of sleep began to make him woozy over the griddle. He'd come to New York to be in a punk band, to live with his friends, to not wake up his mother in the morning and never have to see those four rooms again. What time was it in Oregon right now? The steam on the concrete looked like little breaths coming out of a huge concrete body. Something caught in his throat. He couldn't help but wonder if she was breathing right now, his mother.

Now the students really clapped, harder. Sounds of “wow” and a “holy crap” echoed through the room.

Holy Crap is right, thought Maura. *Why was Conor’s so much better? What was he just doing, that I didn’t teach?* she wondered. He had created a character and a conflict. He’d written with more specificity of sensory detail. Did she have to say something about all of this? And if she did, would it make Kelsey feel bad? Kelsey had adequately completed the assignment that Maura had given. Conor had just gone beyond the assignment, because he’d apparently possessed prior knowledge, either explicitly given in a classroom or implicitly given from his own independent reading, that conflict and character are needed in a story.

Maura sighed, but kept her mouth shut. She wasn’t sure what to do in this exact teaching moment, so she didn’t do anything at all. And she was aware, of course, that there would be no repercussions from not doing anything. That was the way a creative writing college classroom—and perhaps other types of college classrooms—worked. If you kept quiet, you didn’t upset the students. And if you didn’t upset the students, you didn’t get in trouble with your department, with the deans, or the greater university. So she just said to the whole class: “Good work, all. See you on Tuesday.”

4.8 October 20th, 2011, Brooklyn, NY (Maura)

There it was, another mysterious booklet, sitting on Maura’s desk when she got home from workshop with Dan, her second class with him in two years. Now accustomed to this process of someone leaving typed messages, she grabbed the printed and stapled pages, and flopped down on her bed to read through it.

4.9 Pamphlet: Anxiety of Audience in the Writing Process

Who are you writing for? Who should a student write for? The anxiety that writing for a specific audience causes can also cause what is commonly referred to as *Writers Block*, or the inability to get words down on the page. Carol Jago, a past president of the National Council of English Teachers, discusses a phenomenon she's come across with her own students: "middle school students, like most adults, are insecure about their writing. In order to mask their fear of inadequacy, some choose to turn in nothing at all..." (2014, 10.)

Is it possible to write for no audience at all, and only for one's self? Linda Flower, in 1979, tells us that the composing process of an "effective" writer entails the ability to "transform [thoughts] in certain complex but describable ways for the needs of a reader;" she names this type of writing "Reader-based prose" (RBP) (19.) Effective writing, in Flower's mind, correlates to clarity of intention received by the reader. The ineffective writer, conversely, engages in "Writer-based prose" (WBP), which she defines as "the record and the working of [a writer's] own verbal thought" (1979, 19.) Flower argues that WBP is often a necessary step in a developing writer's learning process, and cites Vygotsky when explaining the usefulness in this type of writing: "the inner speech of the adult represents his 'thinking for himself' rather than social adaptation [communication to others]" (1979, 26.) Therefore, she believes a vital step towards becoming an effective writer is actually being an ineffective writer, for some time. Writing studies theorist Peter Elbow (1987) agrees, and states that "...by doing this exploratory 'swamp work' in conditions of safety, we can often coax our thinking through a process of new discovery and development" (53.) This "'swamp work'" of WBP leads to creative and critical thinking that can then translate into eloquent and engaging text and compositions.

But what if it is not possible to write for no audience at all; what if a writer in her swamp work phase cannot get the notion of an audience out of her head? The topic of audience awareness in the composing process has been an issue in the field of composition since its early days. Moving from Wayne Booth's 1963 definition of "rhetorical stance" as the relationship between the author and the audience (141), to the mid-1980s where Bartholomae took up the term "Discourse Community" and Joseph Harris' contested the use of "community" within the term in 1989, to Rosa Eberly (1999) proposing that the term "audience" is an oversimplified and politically limiting term because an audience is usually not one unified mass— the meaning of the term has been in flux. Eberly suggests that the term "public" is a more inclusive and useful concept than the two other terms, and encourages teachers to view classrooms at "protopublic spaces," where diverse groups of non-disparate publics can exist (1999, 167.) But what "publics" is an undergraduate student writing for? Or even an MFA student? Is she writing for a potential literary agent? For the other members of her workshop, for her professors? For her bad boyfriend?

Perhaps the answer is to encourage students, and all writers in the earlier stage of a project, to push an actual audience away. What if these living and breathing people were ignored, but the writer was able *to play* with a made up audience. The notion of a fictional audience is not a new one—Walter Ong proposed in 1975 that a writer must imagine a fictional audience and that an audience must in return construct an imagined author. And indeed, this notion is the part of the rhetorical stance that Ede and Lunsford argued for in their seminal 1984 paper "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked." The authors cite Douglas Park's explanation that audiences have two poles: "...one toward actual people external to a text...

the other toward... a set of attitudes, interests, reactions, conditions of knowledge which may or may not fit with the qualities of actual readers or listeners” (167.) For them, the imagined audience is disembodied—it not a group of unknown people, but rather a group of qualities that unknown people display. If a beginning writer composes for a fictional audience rather than a real one, and therefore is given the opportunity to engage in Elbow’s “swamp work” without judgement— in other words in “conditions of safety”— then that writer will be able to generate text on a page, whether it be fiction, non-fiction, or poetry (Elbow, 1987, 53.)

4.10 October 28, 2011, Brooklyn, NY (Maura)

Maura and Max sat on the floor of his apartment. They felt very alone; Maura was aware of how close she was to this person, this body that was not Rory. She could hear his breath going in and out of his mouth. She felt as if she were doing something illegal, something that she was surely going to pay for in the future, just sitting alone in someone else’s apartment without Rory. But there she was, and she wasn’t leaving.

She pulled a printed piece of paper out of her leather bag. It read:

Try out different performances of the single word, ‘Hello...’ The goal is to see how many different messages you can send by just pronouncing the single word... As each person says ‘Hello’ listeners discuss the messages they hear in it. Other words you could try: ‘OK,’ ‘Yes,’ ‘Now.’

(Elbow and Belanoff, 2002, 172)

“I’m going to tell you this, and I know it sounds hard to believe, but I swear it’s true. Someone has been leaving me mysterious notes inside my apartment. Like notes about writing, almost like prompts.” She laughed nervously.

Max had almost no emotion in his face. How could he stay so composed?

“So says the girl who admittedly is addicted to hallucinogenic drugs.” His delivery was so wry. Maura couldn’t help smiling.

“Look at this sheet. It has to be my roommate, right? Or maybe it’s uh, you know, that guy I told you about, Rory.”

“Your ex-boyfriend is in your house enough to leave you mysterious notes?”

She had not meant to reveal that fact. “I don’t know, maybe he has a key or something? I swear I think I’m going crazy!” She tried to laugh it off, but the laugh came out too loud and too high-pitched.

Max read over the note. “Want to try it?” he asked. They were sitting cross-legged on the carpet, facing each other. They each had their drafts for workshop beside them, his good, hers bad.

“Hello,” he said in a deep and mysterious, Batman-esque tone.

“Hello?” she answered in a British accent, as if she were wearing a large grey brimmed hat, sitting in the high seat of a carriage.

“Oh, oh. Hello,” he said, softly and with his own voice, but imbued with more gentleness than usual. He scootched forward on the rug.

“Hello,” Maura said dumbly, without any intonation. She immediately turned bright red.

Max was staring at her. His glasses were off and his eyes looked naked and vulnerable. He picked up his draft without losing eye contact. He turned to a page in the middle of the stapled pages. He began to read a line out loud, in an even, natural voice. “Max had returned from soccer practice and was still wearing his cleats and shin guards. He was standing in the doorway to the kitchen when he his father said the words, ‘I am, at my core, essentially a gay

man.” Then Max cleared his throat. “Essentially a GAY man,” he said cheerfully, goofily, putting the emphasis on “gay.”

Maura smiled. “Ess-en-tially,” she articulated every syllable in word, carefully. “Ess-en-tially a gay MAN,” she said with overblown seriousness.

Max cracked up. “Essentially A gay man?” he questioned. Then, laughing, he announced, “Ok, your turn. Choose a line from your draft.”

Maura picked up her three chapters of her novel *Motherless*, but as she flipped through the pages she couldn’t find even one line that she wanted to read aloud to him. After a long minute of page shuffling, she put the draft back down on the ground. She looked at Max and said to him, “My friends died. They were really young and they died, two of them, and they shouldn’t have.”

Max stared at her, again unmoving. Again, an unreadable expression. How did he have this ability? Had she just totally embarrassed herself? Tears in her eyes, she began to stand up. Max put a hand on each of her shoulders, and gently pushed, gently asking her to stay seated. He looked at her and said, “My FRIENDS died,” in a serious but somehow hilarious voice, as if it were a revelation to just have friends, and the fact that they died was a secondary fact.

Maura could have cried in gratefulness. “MY friends died,” she answered him softly.

“They died,” he said, in response, again so softly.

Then he said, “OK?” with more power.

“OK,” Maura answered dumbly. She was unsure if they were returning to the writing prompt or if he was asking her: Is she OK? Is it OK to talk about this? Or even, this is what she should be writing about, OK?

“OK,” he said authoritatively, more like Clark Kent this time than Batman. “Now!” he said, again like Clark Kent, and Maura understood they were back to the prompt.

“Now,” she smiled. And he kissed her, on the carpet. Their second kiss. His body weight pressed down on her and they fell backwards, together. It felt illegal, this different body on hers. It felt wrong, how gentle it felt. How he had asked her, in his own guarded way, in his incredibly nerdy manner, if it was OK to do this. And it had been.

He didn’t say anything else for a long time and they were on the floor for a long time. She kept waiting for him to suggest moving to the bedroom, to suggest taking off their clothes, to move his hand under her shirt. But he did nothing but kiss her and hold the outside of her clothed body and she did the same. Neither of them could make another move, neither of them could get another word out.

Her stomach hurt and she thought about Realeyez and got up very abruptly and picked up her bag and jacket.

“Is it because of him?” Max asked.

She wasn’t quite sure what he meant, but basically knew. She was leaving because of the drugs, because of her body, but at the end it was of course because of him, because of Rory.

“I don’t know,” she muttered.

He gave her a sad smile. “I think you should go work on a new draft.”

“That I know.”

She almost said, “Thank you,” to him before leaving his apartment, but decided to stop embarrassing herself further.

4.11 November 3, 2011. *The Department of Helping and Learning (Wendy)*

It wasn't as punitive as it could have been, my afterlife job warning. But it was serious, nonetheless.

Louise had called me up on my rotary telephone and been very clear with me: "We have to bring you in, Wendy. You haven't been following the rules of The Department of Helping and Learning, and we have to have a talk with you."

"What do you mean?" I said, although I knew very well that I had been interfering on earth in ways that I should have been.

"Oh, my dear. The notes. The appearances in New York. We see it all here, Wendy, everyone does."

"Hurmph." Of course they did.

"Listen, go to the third door on the left in your hallway, in twenty minutes. We'll all meet you there."

The third glass and metal door in my hallway, it turned out, brought me into a beautiful and roomy theater space, with rows of maroon seats sloping down to a large, empty stage. In the first row sat Frances Child and I.A. Richards, both leaning back, sort of slouching; relaxed. And the row behind them, leaning over an empty chair with both arms folded, was Louise Rosenblatt. They were chatting quietly.

As I walked down the sloped aisle, I called out, "Where are we?"

Child answered, "The Loeb Drama Center at Harvard. Isn't it lovely?"

The whole place smelled of fresh paint, as if a set had just been constructed. My three mentors looked quite pleased with themselves for choosing this location. I sidled into the second row and took a seat beside Louise.

“So I guess I know why I’m here,” I said, looking each of them in the eye. What would happen to me if I got fired from my afterlife position? I was clearly in a type of world for people who had been good on earth, for the virtuous. A flash of fear ran through me. Why had I not considered this before... Would I be sent to hell if I got fired?

“Nobody’s going to hell,” Louise said, holding my hand with her wrinkled but uncannily soft one. I gasped. Could she read my mind? She made no more indication that she knew what I was thinking or feeling, though. Perhaps it was a coincidence?

Child, turning in his rumpled brown three-piece suit, also gave me a kind look. He took his wire-framed glasses off his face. “Now Wendy. Excessive empathy is something we deal with quite a bit, especially with new trainees in The Department. But there is a line between empathy and action. We cannot have you taking these bold actions on earth. It’s the consensus amongst all the long-time members of The Department that we can try to help students and teachers on earth, try to facilitate earthly learning and progress, without sending terror into the human race.”

I.A. was also in a suit, but his looked as though it had been pressed recently. I saw him trying to smile, trying to be as soft and kind as my other two advisors, but I could tell it was harder for him. He cleared his throat, “You can’t appear to this woman, uh, Dimitra, anymore. And we’ll have to take away your position watching over the student, Maura, if you intervene with her more at the moment, too.”

“So is this a warning or a threat?” I asked. “This student, she’s—well. What is our moral duty, from up here? That’s my question, I guess. If I see this student about to do harm, either to herself or to her students or to her peers or her teachers... She... She’s not in a good place and I’m foreseeing something bad about to occur. Isn’t it our moral duty to step in and stop it?”

With that question, Louise, IA, and Frances all dropped their heads, looking down. It was as if they were all recalling unfortunate memories. The theater was silent and felt even larger than it had when I walked in.

Louise looked up and spoke, first. “We can’t stop it. We can’t stop humans from what their wills really are. We can silently try to arrange their lives for them to be benevolent, for people to learn, but that’s all we can do.”

I.A. added, “You are not becoming a member of The Department of Fixing and Changing, remember. All we can do is *try* to help!”

Child sighed. He turned away from me and stared at the empty stage. There was a giant projection screen at the top of it, rolled up. Perhaps he was wondering what would appear on it. “Yes this is what we have to do, Wendy. So this is your official warning. If you keep showing yourself on earth, thus violating the guidelines of The Department of Helping and Learning, you unfortunately will no longer be invited to be a part of this department.”

4.12 November 5, 2011. *Knickerbocker University (Maura)*

The lights were dim. On the screen an old film played. A red racecar drove through the streets of Paris, screeching and zooming, from the point-of-view of the driver. It was jarring. Upsetting, almost. No dialogue, just car sounds. Nearly colliding with a Fiat. Almost driving into the Arc de Triomphe, then taking a sharp left. It was a spectacle, and an overt one. Why were we watching this? What on earth could this have to do with writing, particularly academic, expository, writing? That was clearly the collective question on the mind of everyone in the room. Everyone except the director of the Expository Writing Program, Charles Ryan, who was running the training “Practicum” class for Maura and the nine other new teacher trainees.

It was a cold November day, and it was raining and raining outside. Maura sat in a basement classroom at KU, large and windowless but updated, with a new projector screen. Somehow, even without windows, she could feel the wet weather outside; a calmness pervaded the air of the room.

Charles Ryan was a short man with a gravelly voice. His voice was so low and scratchy it appeared to be the effects of a disorder. He was fit and stocky, with broad shoulders, and not only introduced himself as an Army man but carried himself like one in every step he took in the world. Proud, upright, serious. But Charles was also a dreamer, and it became clear to the classroom of prospective teachers that he had the soul of an artist. He was a strange make-up, and it appeared as if all of the other new hires and the Assistant Director of the Expository Writing Program— a queer man who wore a silk kimono over his khakis— regarded him with equal parts amazement and fear.

Eleven minutes of bewildering film, in a room, in the dark. Afterwards, Charles turned on the lights. He asked the ten soon-to-be college teachers in the room: “Now what did that make you think? Turn to the two people beside you and discuss it.”

The volume of the room rose with chatter. Words Maura had never heard before bounced from the linoleum floor to the concrete walls— *metonymy*, *ontological*, *eschatological*. She appeared to have entered a world with its own dialect, and she did not speak it. In her group of three was a woman with long brown hair and a nose ring, in her last year of her PhD program in Comparative Literature at Columbia. “My fellowship money ran out, so... Here I am!” she said with an eye roll. The other member of the group was a bald white man named Eoin, tall and in his late-thirties, Maura guessed. Eoin had been teaching college writing for years at CUNY, but was new to KU. Both of the other people knew the name of the film, and pronounced it with

perfect French accents. They barely looked at Maura as they chatted on about pathways of discovery in the writing process, about following and building an idea, about landmarks in Paris. Maura was, for better or worse, breathless. She had never been in an environment like this before in her life.

Soon enough Charles Ryan handed out an excerpt from an essay by Mathew Ghoulish, “The Case of Windows.”

“With your triangulated group, I want you to make a diagram of this section of essay. Then come and put it up on the white board.”

Again, this was game and a challenge. There were no other directions, and the fearless leader—Charles—refused anyone’s hand in the air. (“What type of diagram?” “Are we mapping the ideas here? The turns in thinking?”) He just shook his head and put the work in the hands of the doers.

To be thrown into the unknown was the real gift. Maura had no idea what to expect when entering this training class where she would ostensibly learn to become a graduate student instructor of Expository Writing. At the very least, she imagined she would learn some methods with which to use in the classroom. She knew that the new hires, ten altogether, were a mix of graduate students and full-time lecturers. The previous week, she’d received an email with everyone’s name, title, and degree on it. Five of the names had the marking of “PhD” at the end of them, three of them stated “MFA,” and only one other name was followed by “graduate student.”

To say she was intimidated was an understatement. Nerves took over her whole body, and she smoked three cigarettes on the walk to KU from the subway. It was just a class, she told herself. She shouldn’t have felt the same kind of nerves that she felt when going into teach her

first Creative Writing course. That was a physical reaction: a repulsion to the true knowledge that she had no idea what she was doing, that she was about to rip a group of students off. But on the walk to the Practicum she was indeed intimidated. She had applied and interviewed for the position, but it seemed like a sheer mistake that she'd been chosen. Maybe the administration had mixed her name up with somebody else's. They would be sorely disappointed.

4.13 November 12, 2011, *Knickerbocker University* (Wendy)

By the second Practicum class, when Maura entered the dark room, she was less surprised. This time there was a picture of a medieval scholar on the screen. Charles Ryan waited for everyone to settle into their seats, and then, theatrically, commanded: "Tell me what you see."

Someone raised their hand and said, "A medieval painting."

"No," Charles shook his head. "Not correct. And no need to raise hands."

Someone else attempted: "A projected copy of a medieval painting."

"Wrong."

"A depiction of a man."

Charles: "How do you know it's a man?"

"A hat, a robe, a quill pen."

Charles: "Closer, yes. But still not correct. Keep going."

"A line."

"The shade of red."

"An object that appears to be made out of a bird's feather."

Charles: "Thank you. Now we are headed in the right direction. What are you doing here, to this image—to this text—in front of you?"

Maura raised her hand. Her voice was a peep, barely. “We’re closely reading?”

Charles nodded. And then winked at her. “We are,” he said. She was so relieved.

Eoin sat next to Maura again, and I sat next to Eoin, although no one knew I was there. Eoin—sweet Eoin—seemed like the most likely candidate for what I was planning, as he was very well read and very mild mannered, and might not even realize that a possession was happening to him while it happened. I knew it was risky, considering what my afterlife mentors had threatened me with. But I didn’t believe that they would do anything. I wanted so badly to directly talk with Maura, as I knew she was at a precipice in her development as both a teacher and a writer. I would be quick with it; it had been rumored at picnics and the summer carnival for The Department that we have the ability to speak through human beings on earth. I had to try.

In the front of the classroom, Charles fiddled with his laptop, preparing to play another one of his games with the class. He projected a photograph onto the screen, in black and white, of an empty theater. The theater was ornate, large, with an arched and tiled ceiling. More grand than the Harvard theater I’d just sat in. In the photograph, the rows of empty seats converged upon an empty stage, with a blank white rectangle at the front. It was surprising, to see a space one’s eyes were used to registering with action, people, bodies, and voices. But in this photograph was only stillness. Was it before or after a great production? Was it the morning, the evening, the end of the world? It was hard to say.

Charles raised the lights in the classroom and said, “This is a photograph by Hiroshi Sugimoto, taken in 1978.” He was silent for a few beats. “What does this make you think?”

It was such a simple question. And yet, it was a personal one. There was not one correct answer to what this image sparked in a person’s mind, but rather endless correct answers. A few people shifted in their seats, and three or four timid hands raised.

“Now write about that for seven minutes,” Charles bellowed.

And Maura did. She realized, after a flurry of her pen-on-paper, of ideas and free associations connecting on the page in a messy manner, that this was exactly what she should be doing with her creative writing students. She should be asking them to *respond* to a text, just like this, in a personal way. It was this combination of text and response that, Maura believed, created literature. But it was important she realized, that pronoun of “you”—Charles had asked, “What does this make *you* think?” The response had to be personal and authentic for the writing to be valuable.

“Now turn to the person next to you, and discuss what you’ve written,” Charles commanded.

It was my time. I had to jump on it. I took a deep breath and pictured myself merging with Eoin’s body. I happened to know that he dabbled in RealEyez himself, so perhaps a psychedelic experience would not be unfamiliar to him.

I was inside of his body before I knew it. His joints tensed up, as I turned him to face Maura, crossing his legs. His eyes—my eyes—bulged as I spoke.

“I was thinking about non-fiction writing,” I said through Eoin’s voice. This was a miracle. This was a gift! I could speak freely on earth, again. “I mean, what we’re doing in responding to this text is non-fiction writing, right? And the definition of “creative nonfiction”... [is a capacious, open definition...] “...to explore and reflect, to allow readers to resonate to your particular way of seeing the wide world, to share your angle of vision, to compose literary essays...” (Bishop, 2004, 108.) And, “Scott Russell Sanders feels that ‘the essay is distinguished from the short story not by the presence or absence of literary devices, not by tone or theme or

subject, but by the writer's stance toward the material' (Bishop, 2004, 111.) This prompt is a way to really get at your own stance."

Maura nodded. "That's so funny, I was actually thinking about if I might be able to transfer this exercise to a creative writing class that I'm teaching at the moment. But this kind of thing is, well, not really done in creative writing."

I heard Maura thinking: But why did it seem so wrong to ask a student in a creative writing class to write from their own, genuine, perspective? To write what would be called "creative non-fiction" was, at least in Maura's own educational experience—the only preparation she'd had for teaching creative writing—certainly not approved. It would be sacrilegious to ask the students to do so. Even more, she had the feeling that it would embarrass the students. The honesty and vulnerability, perhaps even the earnestness, that came from responding to a low-stakes text in a personal manner was, Maura acknowledged, not the stuff of creative writing classrooms. It wasn't the fodder on which the culture fed. But what if it could be? How would it change the value of what was being written about? How would it change the meaning and topics the students grappled with?

Eoin nodded too. I said through him, "I think Ryan wants us to read what's actually written on our pages. But I have to say first, this whole exercise made me think about *who* I write for, and then of course, who my students write for. A friend of mine, another professor, had this graduate student named Frank who felt very liberated by writing in a personal style like this. Frank said, '[Now,] instead of pondering over ideas and waiting for the perfect one, the one to make me famous, I take small ideas and make them good ones' (Bishop, 1994, 183.) Frank insisted that once he started doing personal writing, he still pictured his 'audience while [he

wrote,] [but] now [he writes] with much less apprehension and [tries] not to make [the audience his] cornerstone” (Bishop, 1994, 183.)

“Yes,” Maura said. She covered her eyes and gave a short laugh in acknowledgement of how much she’d been leading her students down dead-end roads. “Yes my poor creative writing students. Who are they writing for? For each other? For me?”

I listened again to Maura’s thoughts, as they traveled to her own writing in light of this personal response. The Anxiety of Audience pamphlet she had read kept ringing through her mind. She hadn’t been trying to write for herself. She’d been trying to write for others: for the workshop, for Max, and most destructively, for Rory. But a personal response, she realized, meant that her imagined audience would shift. It would turn inward, at first, and let her write down Linda Flower’s Writer-based Prose, do that Swamp Work for herself, and, as embarrassing and messy as it might be, work out something more valuable on the page.

Eoin was shifting in his chair, and his blood pressure was rising—I could feel it. Although this was the single greatest pleasure I’d had since joining the afterlife, I did in fact know this act of possession was completely forbidden. And it was my first time; I was afraid of hurting Eoin’s body by occupying it any further. I, and Eoin, added one final point: “‘Student writing is literature, that is, free and disinterested, a product of imagination and thought. In our experience and the experience of those we know, there is no essential difference between writing a poem and writing an essay, except, as we must often say, that writing a poem is easier, its conventions being so much clearer and more plentiful’ (Bishop, 1994, 190.) What if we let our students blur these lines? Would it let them get to greater meaning? Better content?”

Charles Ryan made his way to the front of Maura and Eoin’s desks. From Eoin’s eyes I looked up and made eye contact with Charles, a man I had known for years at conferences and in

working groups, in conference calls and through his published works. I wanted so badly to tell him it was me, I was there. I was in his class. But I would certainly be fired from The Department, then. Eoin's breath caught in his throat and I wondered if I would make him cry. I pictured leaving his body, exorcising myself, and soon, we were separate.

4.14 November 28, 2011, *The Department of Helping and Learning* (Wendy)

The hurricane started with these pin-point raindrops that fell faster than other raindrops did, creating a sort of tinkling music on the New York City streets. The precursor to the destruction, the opening of the opera. A late-fall hurricane was surprising to weathermen and politicians and college teachers alike. No one was ready for this.

In my afterlife office, I looked from a bird's eye view on several streets in New York—Fifth Avenue downtown, Lexington Uptown, Prospect Park West in Brooklyn. No one was on them. It seemed that something even more strange than a hurricane was brewing. I was scrambling to collect my notes, in order to leave Maura some kind message yet again. She was at a new precipice, and I needed to encourage her desire to jump into the unknown, writing-wise and teaching-wise.

4.15 November 27, 2011, *Knickerbocker University* (Maura)

In the quiet on the day before the hurricane, Maura started writing again. She felt inspired, occasionally possessed, potentially manic. But putting words down on a page—typing, writing by hand, moving around blocks of texts as if she were a sculptor creating a 3-D object—made her feel alive and happy; it made her want to wake up to see another day.

She walked into the large university library at eleven o'clock at night. Her body felt itchy. It had been eighteen hours since she'd had a hit of RealEyez. In the huge, cool, canyon of the lobby atrium of the library, the black-and-white tiled floors echoed with the sound of people

thinking, pages turning, silence, concentration. Maura took a deep breath. She headed to the elevator. She knew that what she was writing would take some research, so she would go to the floor where the literature-based academic journals were kept.

Up on the eighth floor, she found a seat in a brown leather armchair with square, flat armrests. In front of her, huge glass picture windows showed the Manhattan skyline, lit up with glowing orange squares and the occasional red beacon and one blue outline of a rectangular sign. The air inside the library was still. Undergraduates whispered behind her that classes would surely be canceled for the hurricane. They wondered aloud: *Did they need to really finish the paper?*

She went back into the stacks, next, and found the strangest thing. A desk right next to where the volumes of *English Journal* were kept lay four books. It was as if someone had left them there, just for her. She picked up the first volume, Arthur Applebees' *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English*; the copy was bookmarked with mini post-it notes; there were underlines, highlighted sections, margin notes. It was as if someone had known exactly what she wanted to learn, and left the materials out—and already prepared—for her. The other three books were marked up in the same manner: *The Rise and Fall of English by Robert Scholes*, *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* by James Berlin, *Changing Our Minds: Negotiating English and Literacy* by Myles Myers. Through her throbbing headache, Maura began to read. She wanted to start at the beginning. She wanted to know the history and lineage of the acts she was currently performing. Wouldn't surely she would be a better teacher of writing if she understood how the pedagogy of the act had developed and transformed in America, leading to where it was today, to what she would be taught in Charles Ryan's Practicum class?

At eight in the morning she awoke in a library chair after what must have been a couple of hours of dozing. The sky was dark in a way it shouldn't be. She had, on her laptop, several pages of writing. But not the type of writing she was supposed to be doing.

4.16 The Beginnings of Composition Teaching in American Colleges: Maura's Swamp Work

1600-1900 Facts:

- In 1803, Harvard instituted a professorship in Rhetoric and Oratory, and in 1817 Yale also instituted one (Scholes, 1999.)
- In 1873, the entering freshman at Harvard were required to write a composition in response to a piece of literature, which simultaneously proved literature necessary and useful, as a subject of compositions (Applebee, 1974.)
- In 1876, Johns Hopkins University was founded, and attempted to poach a prominent English professor from Harvard, Francis James Child. In order to persuade Child to stay at Harvard, the school offered him a teaching position in only literature, thus removing his obligation to also teach composition. Child became the first English professor to *not* have to teach composition as part of his duties (Berlin, 1987.)

My Thinking About Those Facts:

Why does it feel important to note the first instances of teaching writing in American universities? Creative writing had not begun yet; this is the precursor to any kind of creativity or construction on the page in a university setting. One has to guess that the reaction to the literature composition at Harvard was, at that point, a bit personal, and gave the student's own tastes and opinions. But reading this personal work was already viewed as tedious—Child did not want to do it!

1900-1939 Facts:

Composition instruction became prevalent at American colleges during these decades, and these were the three most popular pedagogical methods for teaching it:

- Current-Traditional Rhetoric: The emphasis here is on superficial correctness and argumentation; this approach is seen as a “process of empirical science,” as it aims to have an essay replicate an experimental report, in so much as it tests hypotheses and eliminates the authorial voice from the page (Myers, 1996, 94.)
- Liberal Culture: The philosophy behind this approach was that writing should be taught to the few and the gifted, and should be about creating art from the students’ intellectual talents and life (Berlin, 1987.) The practitioners encouraged Liberal Culture writing classes to be taught to students in their senior years, when they were learned and mature enough to actually create this art. It was especially popular at Yale and Princeton, and a few other elite places. It paved the way for Expressionist Rhetoric—the first explicit movement of personal writing—to become popularized in the 1920s and 1930s (Berlin, 1987).
 - Expressionist teaching methods grew out of Liberal Culture methods, in the post-World War I, arising when Freudian ideas were gaining acclaim (Berlin, 1987.) Teachers were interested in pushing their students to unlock their unconscious thoughts within the writing classroom, and they were doing so through the act of personal writing exercises. Allan Gilbert from Trinity College began doing that laboratory work, known today as writing workshops, within his classrooms, setting the stage for later creative writing pedagogy (Berlin, 1987.)

- Transactional Rhetoric for Democracy: This was founded on the notion that all writing is a social activity, and that a writing classroom can and should provide a space for public discourse (Berlin, 1987.) It was heralded by Fred Newton Scott, of the University of Michigan; he was inspired by—and a former student of—John Dewey and his progressive education ideas (Berlin, 1987.) He argued against over-teaching grammar and correctness, but rather focusing on teaching students to create meaning on the page and craft sincere communication (Berlin, 1987.)

My Thinking About Those Facts:

In these years before WWII, colleges in the country had taken up the teaching of writing with fervor, but was different universities were using different avenues for teaching it. One writing movement, The Michigan Program, Transitional Rhetoric for Democracy, appears to me to be most decent and valuable, as its tenets include focusing on meaningfulness and sincerity. It also comes out of a state university, implying that this is a pedagogy that can apply to all students, not just those at elite institutions, where the liberal culture and the early expressionist pedagogy was flourishing. And yet, Scott’s pedagogical movement doesn’t focus on creativity at all. I know from the pamphlet about creative writing history that Scott’s predecessor, Dewey, had supported creative writing teaching in K-12 education, in order for students to develop their “whole personalities.” So why does Scott’s movement ignore creative writing? Perhaps because Scott was a fairly traditional rhetorician and saw composition as a social and communicative act, and therefore governed by the social rules of conversation used for practical purposes, in which creativity might seem out of place.

1939-1960 Facts:

- In 1946 and later, student enrollment in higher education institutions mushroomed due to veterans returning home and attending school; there was a much greater population of middle class students to attend to in colleges (Berlin, 1987.)
- The U.S. Army helped to set up Communications courses on college campuses for recruits that focused on clear and effecting reading, writing, and speaking—these Communications courses also occasionally focused on the skill of listening; these basic skills that were to be taught in these new courses were deemed necessary skills to participate in military activity, as well as in the modern world (Applebee, 1975.)
- At the 1948 NCTE conference, George Wykoff delivered a paper about issues Composition and Communication, and the discussion that followed was so energetic and long, others called for a separate meeting that spring to discuss composition alone (Berlin, 1987.) In the spring on 1949, the Conference on College Composition and Communication came into being.
- In 1957, a major cultural event paved the way for national dollars to affect the course of English research and study: Sputnik’s space launch and failure. After Sputnik, the progressive education movement was criticized for being anti-intellectual and now the national attitude changed to from fostering Life Adjustment ideals to helping the most academically talented students succeed. Federal funding moved to the sciences, greatly, and away from the field of English and writing (Berlin, 1987.)

My Thinking About Those Facts:

The CCCC was created because teaching composition at colleges became pervasive. In these decades composition is again seen as an act that universally *helps students*, but it’s also pitted against creativity and for practical communication. Veteran students deserve the chance to

learn to read and write in effective and clear manners in order to help them succeed in late-capitalist culture, but they do not need to be exposed to art and literature. Communications courses are far removed from literature—both the act of responding to it and the act of creating it. The creative writing pamphlet recounts that in these years, the Iowa Writers Workshop is growing in scope and popularity, and the workshop itself is becoming a tool that helped to spread creative writing to copy-cat masters programs, such as the one at Johns Hopkins. Perhaps because there was elite-centered “art making” happening in graduate programs (which trickled down to a few undergraduate classes) universities believed that the need for making literature-based art was filled, and communications courses existed to fill what was seen as a disparate need. It was clear that universities held the belief that creative writing did not help students in an essential manner.

Now that Maura had these notes, what was she going to do with them? It occurred to her that maybe she had been failing at writing fiction because she was attempting to engage in the wrong kind of writing. Maybe she was actually meant to do academic writing, and make some kind of sense or argument out of the reading and thinking she just spent the whole night engaged in. And yet, although she was happy to have learned the information she wrote down and was engaged in thinking about the meaning of it, she didn’t know what to do next. She had a *drive* to tell stories— she wanted to bring a reader through the mystery of their moments. But she just didn’t know what to do with all of this thinking about real life occurrences.

4.17 November 28, 2011, Brooklyn, NY (Maura and Rory)

By the time Maura had entered the subway station on Broadway that morning, the musical rain had started. And then the winds, they began. The winds were so strong they were

churning up the water from the East River and the Hudson River by noon, flooding the West Side Highway, flooding FDR drive.

Later that afternoon, Max had texted Maura: “Come over.” She sat bundled in blankets in her closet bedroom, in the afternoon. A second text arrived: “Come over before there’s no turning back!” She had been doing a reading assignment for the Expository Writing Practicum course. It was an essay by Walker Percy called “Loss of the Creature.” She was engrossed.

Outside the wind snapped the thinner branches off of trees. She could hear it through the walls of her room: *crack-crack*, and then *bruuuuuush* and a *thud*, as they fell to the pavement. Walker Percy asks: “The sightseer may be aware that something is wrong... The harder he looks, the less he can see it... It eludes everybody.... How can the sightseer recover the Grand Canyon?” (1975, 122.) The text said: “It may be recovered by leaving the beaten track” (1975, 122.)

She took Percy’s words as a sign to do something bold. She bundled herself up in tall red rainboots and a waterproof winter jacket. A scarf and an umbrella and a balaclava too. Then she made her way, walking, toward Max’s apartment, with her laptop in her bag in case she might want to write while she was there.

One hour after Maura left her own apartment, Rory walked to her street from the subway, which was on its last run before it closed down for the storm. He had been the only person in his train car. Rain water rushed down the stairwell at Atlantic Avenue as he ascended it. He had with him a copy of Maura’s manuscript—her three chapters of the novel-in-stories she’d given him, *Motherless*, which she hadn’t added to or updated in months. But he had it printed out and tri-folded in the pocket of his old down jacket, the one he’d had for years, on which the zipper was

separating from the cloth. He wore New Balance sneakers and they were soaked through after one block. Maura wasn't answering his calls. She wasn't answering him via text message or email either. She had never done this to him before. She had always been more than available to him, whenever he'd wanted or needed her.

Rory was filled with rage as he walked through the rain and the wind, and he kept grabbing Maura's story in his pocket and crunching it. He would tell her it was useless. He would tell her everything she did was useless, including writing meaningless drivel, and she should stop wasting her life. Or—maybe he would do the opposite. He could tell her she was brilliant and needed to keep working on her gift. He wasn't sure, truly, which he believed, and therefore had no clear vision of what he would say when he got to her apartment.

Maura had been sitting on Max's couch, typing, for an hour before he began the actions that were on both of their minds. But they'd both wanted it. It was about time, really. His skin on her skin felt strange. His body shape felt animal and his smell unappealing. They walked together to his bedroom then awkwardly tussled under the thin blanket, the storm clattering and clanging the trees and flying debris outside on Crown Street.

It wasn't right, she thought. It didn't feel right. And yet, this was what she had pictured. So they continued to try; moving and bobbing and kissing and touching. But after this rubbing and wiggling had gone on for some time, Maura realized that the thing that was supposed to be happening with him—the thing that she just assumed would be happening with him—was not. There was no way they could have sex because his body wasn't ready for it. The parts were not, well, in the right shape. She looked at Max to see if he would have a reaction, but his face was expression-less, emotion-less. Did he know what was going on?

Rory had been ringing Maura's doorbell for twenty-minutes. If she wasn't home, then where the hell was she? And where was her spaced-out roommate, Sahar? He sat on the top step of the stoop and put one hand over each ear. It was wildly loud, this natural disaster. The wind whipped the raindrops into his face. "Maura!" he tried yelling out, his head and torso turned towards her third floor window. Nothing. The lights were off. Ok fine, he had to, now. He pulled the old fashioned glass pipe out of his pocket with a lighter, then pulled his arms out of the jacket armholes. Moving the whole jacket over his face, he light the glass pipe and took a hit. RealEyez hit his nervous system like a warm and welcome pillow. Thank God. He turned back to the street. No one was on it. He was the only soul outside. The American elm tree across the street swayed dramatically, and then when a gust of wind blew it leaned over in an unreal movement, as if bending from the waist. It was completed crooked, and L-shape. It wasn't right. Where the hell was she?

An hour-and-a-half later two other Elm trees had fallen on St. Marks Avenue, and Rory's face was beaten red by wind and rain. Maura wasn't home. This meant that she had found somewhere else to shelter from this hurricane, and someone else to do it with. He screamed at the top of his lungs but he couldn't even hear it himself from the sounds of air rushing around him and debris flying through it.

He stood up and rang the doorbell to apartment three one more time. When no one answered yet again, he took a deep breath and balled up his frozen, now chapped right hand, pulled it back and pounded it directly through the square glass window at the top of the brownstone's door. The glass cracked. He could hear a small tinkling sound, shards falling to the ground, both inside the hallway and onto the stoop. There was blood, everywhere. Why was

there so much blood, so quickly? It was as if red water had spilled out of him, covering the doormat and the brass door knob, streaking and splashing down the brown wood below it. This is what Maura would find, an hour later. Her building's door would be locked against the hurricane but covered in blood, as if some kind of warning, an omen that she would be punished for all she had done.

Chapter 5: Fourth Semester, Denouement

5.1 January 30th, 2012, *Knickerbocker University* (Maura)

Maura walked in to her first day of teaching expository writing determined that the class go differently than the Intro to Creative Writing class she had taught last semester. This new class was in the same library building, but this time her classroom was on the eighth floor. There was light and movement up there that didn't exist in a basement classroom. Maura took this as a good omen. Plus she was on the same floor of the library as the English journals, the same place where she had pulled the all-nighter and read about composition history and began to create a pamphlet for herself that taught her the basics of what she wanted to know, the history of this act she was engaged in— of teaching writing in colleges.

Now, as she entered her classroom full of fifteen freshman, she entered it with a stable head on her shoulders. She was in a much better place in her personal life than she had been at the start of the previous semester. It had been four-and-a-half weeks, thirty-one days to be exact, since she had smoked Realez. The first week off of it was total hell. She sweat through her sheets at night and although she closed her eyes for hours on end, she was sure she had never slept. She threw up for two days, taking over the tiny shared bathroom in her apartment, her roommate Sahar knocking on the door asking, “Are you OK?” and then hours later, “Oh my god, do you think you're pregnant?” Maura only moaned in response. Sahar had no idea that Maura had gotten into such a bad situation with the drugs. Almost no one did, except for Rory.

5.2 January 30th, 2012, *Knickerbocker University* (Wendy)

Oh I was proud of Maura as I watched her walk into her classroom on her first day teaching expository writing. I learned that day that being a mentor in The Department is much like being a teacher on earth—when your students succeed, it's difficult to tell how much of your

hand, your influence, your teacherly presence, helped to get them there. But one has to believe, in order to keep on teaching, that it was a combination of your own hard work and the students' character and abilities. It has to be.

It was late morning when the class began. I sat in her classroom, in an empty chair with a desk attached to it, and decided I would act as her student that day. Whenever I did this as an alive person on earth, when observing graduate students teaching in Tallahassee or elsewhere, I found myself exhausted after the class. It was so easy to forget what we ask students to do, and the energy we ask them to put forth. But now in the afterlife, I had the ability to rest for as long as I wished. So why not take my mentees' classes?

Maura began by projecting one of the images that Charles Ryan had projected in his Practicum class—the photo of the empty theater by Hiroshi Sujimoto in 1978. She, like Charles Ryan, asked the students: “What does this make you think?” She then had them write for seven minutes. Next, Maura added on to Charles' exercise. She showed the class a second photo from another Sujimoto series, this time from 1993, depicting a barren and empty playground in front of a blank drive-in movie theater screen. She asked the same question, “What does this make you think?” Again, the students wrote privately, in a new paragraph, for five minutes now. Finally, she posed a third question, and asked the students to write out their response in a third paragraph: “How does viewing the second text, the playground photograph, make you think *differently* about the first text?”

The students set down to work, scribbling. Yes, one boy with cropped brown hair stared straight ahead with his mouth agape, an animal in the headlights of a crossing car. He did not write. And one girl with long braids kept sighing, as if she were being asked to do hard physical

labor. But the majority of the class was there with their teacher, playing the game— engaged, heads down and brains agile, while they wrote.

The students shared their three paragraph essays with the person sitting beside them. Then Maura asked if anyone wanted to read a piece out to the whole class.

“I have a comment,” said a girl with jet black looping curls, her face heavy with make-up. “I dunno, I just feel like saying, that, I dunno... The playground photo made me feel really sad!” She let out a little laugh.

Another boy, quite slim and small, raised his hand. “Yeah, it made me feel that way too! Like homesick or something. Homesick for elementary school.”

The students in the room laughed, almost all of them, in a knowing manner. Sweet babies. Maura beamed. I closed my eyes and listened to her thoughts. She knew she had given them a text that touched them, and the personal connection they could make with the text inspired them to write. Four students raised their hands to share the entirety of their mini-essays.

Maura leaned down to her leather satchel bag next and pulled out a stack of paper. I sighed now. The syllabus, I assumed. But to my surprise the young man next to me, who I learned was named Benny, picked up a photocopied section of an essay as it was handed around the room. The top of the text on the page read: “On Lateral Thinking” by Edward de Bono.

Maura asked for volunteers to read the first few excerpted paragraphs:

Culture is concerned with establishing ideas. Education is concerned with communicating those established ideas. Both are concerned with improving ideas by bringing them up to date. The only available method for changing ideas is conflict which works in two ways. In the first way there is a head on confrontation between opposing ideas. One or the other of the ideas achieves a practical dominance over the other idea which is suppressed but not changed. In the second way there is a conflict between new information and the old idea... This is... the method of human knowledge...

The conflict method for changing ideas works well where the information can be evaluated in some objective manner. But the method does not work well at all when the new information can

only be evaluated through the old idea. Instead of being changed, the old idea is strengthened and made ever more rigid. The most effective way of changing an idea is not from the outside by conflict but from within by the insight rearrangement of available information. Insight is the only effective way of changing ideas in a myth situation—when information cannot be evaluated objectively (as cited in DiYanni and Hoy, 2009, 544).

Maura began asking the students to circle concepts they noticed in these paragraphs written by de Bono. I was proud of this move, too, having her students dig into the meaning of a potentially denser text than they were used to, before asking them to do something with the ideas behind it. But after reading de Bono's paragraphs, I paused. I wanted to write notes out in my trusted moleskin notebook. I had to write things down before I forgot them, so that I might use them with a future mentee:

Composition was—at different points in its history— seen as the fundamentals. And of course “fundamentals preceded art and art writing is for the elite (endlessly, the white, literate, at least middle-class kind,) and composition writing is for those who need nothing more than basic literacy (although what that is no group has yet been able to agree upon)...” (Bishop, 1994, 186.) But perhaps now, with a composition class that is able to use texts and theories to support all students to become honest and authentic writers, these composition methods can and should be turned back onto the “elite” students who opt to take creative writing courses.

If the old idea in the creative writing classroom is the myth that “good writing can't be taught,” and the that workshop method is the only way of testing out of evaluating the good writing that some students innately know how to do, then we need insight to change this myth. Our “new information,” as de Bono says, from the previous four decades or longer of research into composition studies and the writing process suggests that writing— including fiction and poetry— certainly can be taught. Elbow's “swamp work” process; ignoring your audience;

playing on the page; responding to texts from a personal stance... these are all minor steps in the evolution of a person learning to write, whether that writing is deemed creative or academic.

But with the old idea of the workshop method as the only way to “test” the value of a creative writer, then a student’s swamp work in the workshop will show up as unpolished, seams-out, bad work. And then as de Bono predicts, nothing will change: showing one’s process in a workshop is a head-on conflict with the new idea (ie. ‘swamp work’) and the old idea (ie. using the workshop method.) When this conflict occurs, the student who is showing ‘swamp work,’ and thus writing badly, will be discouraged from continuing to learn to write. As de Bono predicts, the “old idea” of the workshop’s value will be reified and “made more rigid” because it worked yet again—weeding out a ‘bad’ young writer, who didn’t have the divinely given talent of polished and sophisticated writing existing within him his whole life. But “insight” as de Bono calls it— or in this case the knowledge the field of writing studies has collected— when applied to creative writing classrooms, can help to “rearrange” the curriculum. Minor pedagogical and curricular changes that involve stepping away from the strict workshop-based/ master-apprentice model, would allow for the growth of knowledge in both the field of creative writing and in each individual student’s educational experience.

As I finished my paragraph, I looked at the whiteboard to see that the students in Maura’s class had identified a handful of keyword concepts in de Bono’s text. Maura had written them up:

Change

Old idea

Conflict

Rigid

Insight

Maura put her hands in her jacket pockets and asked the class, “Please choose one of these concepts, and write a new paragraph where you make a connection to the third paragraph you wrote about Sujimoto. You’re adding on to your mini-essay, now, and expanding your thinking. For example, you could ask yourself: How does the concept of “change” fit in to your thinking about the photograph of the empty theater? Or the concept of “insight?”

She was taking off, and doing it— teaching in such a way that the students in the room were using the warp of their own minds to create unique thoughts on the page.

I couldn’t help but think that Maura’s implementation of lessons from her Practicum class also displayed how playful exercises in composition writing, like all other types of writing, can be engaging, enlightening, and even mysterious. Her freshman students had been taught throughout their English classes in high school that literature is a puzzle. And either consciously or subconsciously, they would then believe that in creative writing classes, one learns to construct puzzles. Then “...the roles as apportioned leave nothing to composition classes except the predictably drudgery of delivering unpuzzling texts to uncomplicated readers” (Bishop, 1993, 127.) But with the act of asking students to respond to challenging texts, with this slow build-up of connections and ideas forming a mini-essay in this lesson, Maura was showing her students that there can be mystery and un-puzzling in composition classes, as well.

I thought of my old student, Fran, who said that “...in her view, students in creative writing classes seemed launched on a teacherless field-trip and students in composition classes entered into a kind of academic prison” (Bishop, 1993, 117.) How I hoped that this opened-ended approach Maura was taking would change Fran’s idea. In the Practicum class, she wrote personally but in response to texts; had this helped her more in her overall writerly development

than the MFA workshops had? Her own development as a writer certainly helped her students, because I knew that "...composition teachers tend to perpetuate the conservative writing class... students writing only on teacher-specified topics of restricted length and form. This will be particularly likely if teachers have underdeveloped writers identities... (Bishop, 1993, 122.) So Maura's currently developing, and more rich, identity as a writer was also giving her the confidence and resources to allow her students to write in a more open-ended fashion, which made her a better teacher of writing.

As I watched Maura's growing writerly confidence play out in front of her students, I recalled that "[n]on-fiction has long held the promise for improving our thinking about composition—first year [college students] through graduate levels—yet viewing these areas [scholarship and creative non-fiction] of reading and writing productively *together* has been a hard sell in composition circles" (Bishop, 2003, 259.) Writing non-fiction, for Maura, such as her guide to the history of personal writing in composition classes, helped her to develop across all genres of writing. So why wouldn't expanding the use of non-fiction help Maura's students, across all of her classes? "[W]e have assumed, due to our English studies institutional hierarchy, that comparing non-fiction to *non-non-fiction* is like comparing apples to oranges" (Bishop, 1993, 130.) But what if it wasn't? How would that quite unfortunate Intro to Creative Writing class Maura taught last semester have gone differently, if she had brought in personal writing to the class? How much would it have improved if she had asked her students to build fiction out of personal reflective responses?

Writing non-fiction well, with rigorous attention and attuned eye for the shape of sentences, had in turned helped Maura to get over her anxiety and begin to write fiction again. For years, I've believed that "[u]nderstanding writing as a subject... aids the development of

written products. And... a well-developed meta-cognitive and metalinguistic understanding of the demands of writing and reading enables a student to develop flexible responses to class-assigned or self-assigned writing tasks” (Bishop, 1993, 130.) The construction of words on a page coming from the personal stance of a singular person was opening up new lanes of creativity for Maura. Her own flexibility and understanding of the writing process was leaping ahead by practicing writing in different genres, from her personal perspective. Shouldn’t she then replicate that act for her students, in writing classes that carried all labels, whether those labels were composition or creative writing?

5.3 February 15th, 2012, Knickerbocker University (Maura)

Maura was back at the library now, in the middle in the afternoon on a crisp winter day, in the English literature and writing studies journals section up on the eighth floor. She felt the need to keep learning about the history of composition instruction; she was on the precipice of discovering just what had happened between the sub-fields of creative writing and composition, and why composition—in the form she was learning from Charles Ryan— felt like a more intellectually valuable and creatively engaged course to both take and teach. No one had left out books for her this time, so she had to do the digging and the research herself.

5.4 The Heart of Composition Teaching in American Colleges: Maura’s Swamp Work

1960-1980 Facts

- The roots of the Process Writing movement began in the field of cognitive psychology, with the Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner. He is the “largely unacknowledged source of the process models of composing that are now a commonplace of our intellectual environment” (Berlin, 1987, 122.) Bruner’s major tenet was that students learn by doing,

and that it is the teacher's job to create an environment in which the student can go through the learning independently of the teacher.

- A group of scholars and professors with like-minded philosophies working in the late 1960s and early 1970s also did a great deal to promote the Process Movement—the group that came to be labeled the Expressionists. A central notion in the Expressionist approach is that truth and reality are subjective and lie within the self, and therefore self-expression is the manner in which a writer can access this truth (Berlin, 1987.) In Expressionist Ken Macrorie's chapter "The Helping Circle," he describes how sharing work is crucial, and recounts how group circle discussions or workshops take place in his classroom "helping circle;" the circle's non-hierarchical dynamic strengthens the notion that writing begins with an individual and is developed through revisions and edits, both with the self and with others (1970.)

My Thinking About Those Facts:

The rise of process methods of writing instruction, and the beginning of the Expressionist compositionist movement, was a strange moment in the tensions between the sub-fields of creative writing and composition. The Expressionists pushed students to explore the sub-conscious, which was also done when student's write creative-non-fiction. And the three-steps to process writing (pre-writing, writing, and re-writing) feels like what creative writing students are expected to do in fiction and poetry classes— but the students are usually asked to do this work before coming in to a workshop class (and then re-write again, after the workshop.) It appears these early process writing creators were borrowing from the creative writing world, but used more explicitly didactic techniques to spread this pedagogy for the common man (or woman) who did not view himself already as a writer.

The sharing of knowledge was going from creative writing to composition, clearly, but not in the other direction—no research done in the field of composition was then being used in creative writing courses. Courses at MFA programs, and their copycat courses in undergraduate divisions under those MFA programs, continued to use the strict IWW-based workshop model and didn't look across sub-fields for any changes or developments.

1980-2000 Facts

- Linda Flower had already been working on her exploration of cognition in the writing process in her 1979 article “Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing.” Writer-Based Prose (WBP) is a stage for a beginning writer, where the writer's inner language is put down on the page—it is often the type of writing done in freewriting exercises, or done by children and/or new writers. These notions fall in line with the Expressionists, specifically with Peter Elbow's 1987 notion of “swamp work.” Then, in 1980 Linda Flower and John Hayes, a psychologist, asked several writers of varying ability levels to do a think-aloud protocol when composing an essay in response to a specific question. Flower and Hayes viewed writing as a “problem solving” activity and their purpose in this study was to make visible the inner workings of the minds of “good” and “poor” writers when faced with the same rhetorical situation (1980, 468.) The major way that good writers accomplish this goal is through “problem finding,” or the act of setting one's own goals and defining one's individual and unique writing problems to solve within a particular rhetorical situation (1980, 476.) Sondra Perl was also engaged in Protocol Analysis with students at CUNY and other colleges, investigating the relationship between cognition and writing (1980, 364.) Flower, Hayes, and Perl were a

few members of a larger group of scholars known as Cognitivists, as they studied the relationship between writing and cognition.

- In the mid-eighties, the “outer-directed theorists” in the field were gaining notoriety, as was a public critique of the Cognitivists for ignoring the social factors of the writing process; scholars engaged with this new concern formed the Social Epistemic movement in writing studies (Bizzell, 1982.) David Bartholomae’s 1985 essay “Inventing the University,” argued that new college students need to pretend to write as if they were already part of the academic establishment of the specific “discourse community” they are attempting to join—for example, if the student is studying sociology, they must put on the performance of a sociologist on the page, in order to learn the style and conventions of sociological writing (1985, 137.) He stated that encouraging students to write in this falsified manner is actually bestowing upon them the “power” and “wisdom” that a university, or a specific discourse community holds (1985, 161.)
- In 1989, Joseph Harris published “The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing,” which suggests that aligning the term community with the university creates a divide between “insiders” and “outsiders;” this divide asks students to cross over in a clear cut manner from one discourse to another, which he believes not only does not happen, but if it were to happen it would also be asking students to leave their home discourse community behind them (752.) The concern for respecting and protecting students’ home cultures and identity then opened up the Social Epistemic movement in to include an aspect of cultural studies.
- By 1992, scholars such as Min-Zahn Lu pushed for pedagogical changes in the field to include students’ writing about the racial and cultural self. She ultimately posits that

allowing space for conflict, specifically cultural conflict, within the classroom is a way to help students engage fully in the negotiations around their own relationship to language and culture (1992.) By arguing for conflict in the classroom, Lu also pushed for the act of persona reflection and personal writing to come into the classroom in a clear and explicit manner.

- Maxine Hairston’s article, “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” railed against a new trend of cultural studies, progressive politics, and feminist pedagogy entering into composition classrooms. She states that the “[n]ew model envisions required writing courses as vehicles for social reform rather than as student-centered workshops...” and that the instructors of these classes are pushing their own ideology onto students rather than promoting the student’s own thoughts and ideas (1992, 180.) Hairston’s views, although certainly not held by her alone, provoked a multitude of pushback from other compositionists, pointing out holes in her argument and illuminating the racist and classist undertones in her text.

My Thinking About Those Facts:

From the Cognitivist movement, to the Social Epistemic movement, to the act of bringing cultural studies into the Social Epistemic movement and the push-back on that act—there was quite a bit of movement and disagreement about the best way to teach composition in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The Cognitivists work aided the work of the Expressionists and the Process Movement; the Cognitivists showed the seams, so the speak, of the actual process.

In these years, fiction classes in creative writing departments carried on the same business as usual—the same IWW-inspired workshop model from the 1950s— while

composition is engaged in research, hot-debate, and change. In certain departments across the country, composition courses had become both personal and creative, using creative non-fiction to dive into student identity and other thorny issues. Has creative writing been effectively left behind in these years, as it's neither investigating rich student stories and lives nor tied theoretical discussions about the most effective way to teach writing?

2000-2010 Facts

- The act of transfer, and the issue of improving writing in other disciplines across the university—through university-based WID (writing in the disciplines) or WAC (writing across curriculums) programs—has become one of the most pressing problems that composition scholars have been wrestling with in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Yancy, Robertson, and Taczak's *Writing Across Contexts* addresses this major issue through examining the transfer effects from three different approaches to composition courses: one course the authors' deem as "Expressivist," another course based around Media Studies, and finally a course they designed collaboratively, called "Teaching for Transfer" (TFT) in which the pedagogy and curriculum was specifically planned to cultivate the transfer of skills (2014.) The study showed that the TFT course is effective, in certain circumstances, at allowing students to retain composition skills from one context to another.

My Thinking About Those Facts:

What's happening in Charles Ryan's expository writing class, and therefore in the courses at KU, does not represent Current-Traditional Rhetoric or a more empirically-based pedagogy but rather aligned with the Expressionists; in the past decade, there must be many

departments across the country engaged in using creative non-fiction in expository writing classrooms. But the composition scholarship being published now is largely focused on effectiveness of skills, as is seen through the great interest in the act of transfer of skills from composition classes to courses that call for specialized writing styles, such as chemistry. Perhaps the focus on utility and positivistic skill transfer is due to recent economic changes within higher education institutions, as well as an increased focus on STEM curriculum in K-12 education? As in the past, has the field of composition responded to the political and cultural climate of the country by hoping that data-driven and quantitative figures will justify the qualitative, humanistic work college teachers of writing do?

Interestingly, creative writing pedagogy has not been affected by this change. Because the pedagogy of college-level creative writing courses has not been studied or investigated by scholars since its development, it has been insulated from change. It is certainly the case that research on the writing process has always, in one way or another, confirmed the basic pattern of composing as involving pre-writing, writing and re-writing. And this “discovery” by composition researchers was known to creative writers even before compositionists took it up and confirmed it through empirical cognitive research. So, if the best practices developed from composition research can serve to help students become competent writers across the curriculum, why shouldn't it be the case that the best practices known to teachers of creative writing would also apply to learning to write not only in English classes but across the curriculum. Surely creativity, imagination, detailed description, a concern for the right words, and a story that keeps readers interested would be no less valuable for a writer of a sociology paper than for the author of a short story or novel.

As Maura read, she wrote and wrote and wrote. She was, she knew, unblocked from the past many months of non-writing. But these were all notes. This was all writer-based prose, not formed yet into a cohesive narrative, ready for a reader's eyes.

As she read over her messy research, her factual notes and her thinking, she wondered how on earth she could connect this kind of work—learning from other texts and historical moments, and thinking critically about them— to the work of storytelling, the way in which her mind was inclined to write. Why had these elements of the writing process been separated in her mind and in her schooling? Why couldn't researching, thinking, and storytelling all be part of the same act of literary creation?

5.5 March 31, 2012, *Brooklyn, NY* (Maura)

Every year the first day of warm weather, the spring teaser that arrives in New York City without warning, is a revelation. Every single year it seems that cold and sleet and wind will never end; the parkas and boots are permanent, the air frigid forever. It's sleeting the night before and then in the morning the air warm and birds are chirping over the traffic, and everyone sighs. Poof. They are back.

That is how Maura felt that morning, walking down Fifth Avenue in Park Slope on her way to meet her MFA thesis advisor, Dan. She'd chosen Dan as her advisor because he was nice, and because she'd taken two workshops with him. And moreover she didn't have a better option. She would have loved to have had a woman advising her, but now that Dimitra was gone, the only other female full-time professor was Jo Anderson, and Maura hadn't been able to make eye-contact with her for nearly a year at this point. Alas, what she had feared would not happen finally did: Maura *did* have a thesis, or part of one. She had been writing. And the weather was getting better and the sun was out and somehow, although it felt as if she had just began the

MFA program, it was about to end. The whole MFA experience was quick. For months she felt as if she were at the beginning of it, warming up her writing faculties, stretching out her fingers and brain and trying to figure out if she could cultivate an artistic daily practice. And then, suddenly, it was the second year of the program and she was asked to focus on her final thesis project. There was no middle-time in this graduate program; it was starting, then it was ending.

Maura opened the heavy red door to the Black Blok coffee shop in Park Slope. It was nearly noon on a Saturday and the front room was buzzing with twenty-somethings alone and thirty-somethings with small kids beside them. Dan had told Maura he would be in the back room, and after Maura opened a screen door, there he was by himself, sitting at a white-painted table. He had his laptop open and stacks of paper all over the table, as if it were his own private office.

“Hi,” Maura said meekly.

“Oh! Hi...” He looked up, slightly bewildered. “Hello...?” Then recognition set in. “Oh I was supposed to meet you here! Hello, Maura,” he said.

She understood quickly what was happening. He had completely forgotten about their meeting. She had already tried to meet with him twice at the KU Writers House. He hadn’t responded to her first email, and then after the second email when they’d set a date to meet in his office at 4:30 pm the previous Thursday, he just hadn’t been there. Maura had waited for him until 5:20, then emailed him to ask if there was a chance he’d forgotten to meet her. In response, Dan—sweet and good intentioned Dan—suggested they have a meeting on the weekend in Brooklyn, where they both lived, so that she could get this thesis draft approved and plan to graduate in a month-and-a-half. A Saturday coffee shop meeting! It felt personal, like they were friends, and Maura was touched that he’d suggested it.

She had hopes now that she was going to actually finish her thesis. Her stories about the little girl in Boston with the foster siblings, that she was expanding into one overarching novel, were fine. They weren't mind-blowing, she knew that. But she was building them. She went into the Word documents every day and moved the characters around. It felt a bit like playing house with dolls, only intangible dolls. She explored what would happen when different combinations of the imagined figures were in the same room, when they encountered a problem, when they yelled at each other or kissed each other or tripped and fell down the stairs. It was all experiments. She was playing around. Something had changed in her writing process. There was a lightness now when she was writing, and a deeper understanding (even if she was tricking herself) that everything she wrote at first was just for her, for her own fun. The body of words within her computer grew and grew.

In the white backroom of the Brooklyn coffee shop, Dan ran his fingers through his smooth yet poofy salt-and-pepper hair. "Uh, let's open up your draft, shall we?"

"Sure thing," Maura nodded. She didn't want to embarrass him by overtly stating that he clearly hadn't read it yet. The fact that he wasn't invested in her as either a writer or a student became real at that moment, but Maura had already suspected it. It didn't matter. Dan was the key to her graduating from the masters program; he just needed to sign off on her work, and then she could push it through to the next step of thesis completion. Now that she could physically bring herself to write, she realized that it was decidedly *un-hard* to complete this MFA program. By just playing the game and jumping through the hoops, everything about going through the MFA program sequence was, truthfully, wildly easy.

Dan pulled her printed-out draft out of his bag and bashfully began reading the first page silently to himself. Maura was supposed to meet Max after the meeting with Dan, which she had

assumed would only take half-an-hour. It was taking longer now that Dan was reading in front of her, pausing every few pages to comment, “Hrmm, great sentence here!” or “I think there’s a confusion in point-of-view on page six.”

After about forty-five minutes, Max peeked his head in to the back room. “Oh sorry, sorry. I didn’t know you were still busy. I’ll wait in front.”

“Max!” Dan said. They were friends. Like, legitimate friends, Maura thought.

The previous week Dan had taken Max and David and another sweet-and-schlumpy white literary boy in his late twenties, Jono, out for dinner. Max had recounted to Maura the next day, as they chatted on the stoop of the Writers House, that over burritos and beers Dan had asked them if they were dating anyone in the program. Max was blushy when he told her this.

“Did you tell him about you and I?” Maura asked, although they both acknowledged the “you-and-I” was a thing of the past.

“I did not,” Max said, matter-of-factly. “But Dan told us that he thought Reghan was super hot, and that one of us should date her.” He laughed.

This news didn’t make Maura feel mad, but certainly made her disappointed. It wasn’t that egregious. The buzz among the other graduate students was that one of the other professors—the short, thin, and much more famous one than Dan—had just divorced his brilliant writer wife, and had immediately started sleeping with one of the Jessicas. It was the tiny one called Jessie, with her Manhattan sculptor father and faux-naïve big eyes. That was sad, Maura thought, on the part of the professor. She wanted him to be a more stand-up character. But Dan’s thoughts about her fellow-student Reghan were fine. Reghan *was* fine. A tall, thin and comically preppy woman about Maura’s age, who had grown up in Princeton, New Jersey and then gone to Princeton, and said something to Maura once about how she was “sure Maura also

didn't like vulgar literature—she could just tell.” Maura had been taken aback. If there was one thing she loved it, it was vulgar, weird literature. In any case, Dan thought Reghan was attractive and wanted to bond with his male students— his protégés, his mentees— over this fact. Maura could never be invited to that club and she had no equal and opposing option. The thought of her having a margarita and discussing the date-ability of Max with Jo Anderson was a hilarious thought. Jo certainly did not want to do that, but perhaps most women professors wouldn't have the desire to do that either.

Back at the Black Blok coffee shop, Dan and Max were chatting about a reading that was happening at the Writers House the following week—a Ukrainian writer who wrote primarily in English, and had been teaching at Brown for the past year.

“I know Rebecca wants to nab him for our program! We have to try to impress him with life at KU,” Dan said.

“Agh, you think you're going to get Petrov the year after I graduate. Knife-meet-heart!” Max said in his typical dry tone.

Max and Dan continued to chat for a while until Dan suggested that he finish reading the rest of Maura's thesis at home, and then email her with the news that she was approved to move forward with the final draft. Maura nodded. There was that disappointment again. She expected it. But she had, she realized, harbored a small and unrealistic hope that Dan was going to change course and take her seriously.

Oh well, she thought, walking back out onto Brooklyn's Fifth Avenue with Max. I will have an MFA soon, and I will have done the MFA program, and that is some kind of accomplishment, at least. Maura and Max were in the process of cultivating a kind of special friendship. It seemed that rather than being awkward because they had seen each other naked,

they just knew each other more intimately now. Perhaps that's because they both knew there was no real love tearing at their heart and their guts, and no chance of it developing.

On the street, Max straightened his glasses and asked, "Now shall we proceed to yet another coffee shop where we'll sit around and talk about writing we've done, for little to no purpose other than enjoyment?"

"Well yes, we shall," Maura answered.

Things were basically the same with Rory, but Maura had made a point of seeing him less. She told herself the more she saw him, the more tempted she was to smoke Realeyez. And her writing career, if she were to ever dream of having one, could potentially be destroyed by that. She had been writing and writing and writing. It was like a switch had flipped. Maybe it *was* because her brain had cleared from Realeyez. She'd put a hard stop to it, through grit and taking herself out of situations where it would be tempting to smoke it, like late night warehouse parties with Rory. Or maybe she was writing so much because the distraction of Max was now over. Whatever the change, it was making her—dare she admit it— feel happy.

She was working on three different projects simultaneously, one of which was *Motherless*. The other two projects were less traditional MFA program writing; one was totally academic and still in note-form, about the history of composition and it's connection to creative writing; she couldn't seem to figure out the form in which to write this piece into existence, but she still tried. The second project she was working on was just strange, as it was half-academic and half-autobiographical. She kept these two projects private, but continued to tinker with them. The act of typing the words out into a document on her computer every afternoon, with her set schedule of two hours long writing blocks— one at the library and one back at home, when she didn't have class— organized her days, and thus her brain, in a satisfying manner. After she had

written, in the evening when she made herself a late-dinner alone and wondered if Rory would come over or not, she felt lighter. She felt, she thought, fulfilled, which was a new feeling for her and slightly uncomfortable to accept.

5.6 May 2, 2012, *Knickerbocker University* (Wendy)

On the last day of Maura's expository writing class, her students all showed up with their portfolios prepared. Maura had somehow gotten the short-straw from the draw, and the head of the department— Charles Ryan— was doing her teaching observation on her very last class of the semester. (Always an extra challenge, to have a show-worthy class at the end of the term. I felt for my mentee.)

The work in Maura's classroom on the eighth floor of the library was chugging along, though. The students had bonded, and Maura had a congenial relationship with them. I sat at the back of the room, still invisible, and watched with the same pride I'd felt when my ten-year-old son—previously afraid to join any team sports— scored three goals in a soccer game one Saturday morning. I knew I was a bit responsible for his newfound confidence on the field, but my pride and amazement at him taking what was given to him and literally running with it, was outsized. Maura was doing the same; she'd taught a decent, although not perfect, semester of writing. She was writing again, herself. She was growing as a thinker and as a person, and I had seen her do it.

Not all of the students in the room loved the class, of course. But on that last day, most were reading sections of their essays to their partners in groups of three, happily, then loudly chatting about how that section made a conceptual connection to their primary text.

About fifteen minutes before the end of class, Maura stood up and said, “OK everyone, turn towards me.” The chatter continued. “Everyone, I need to give you some important housekeeping details!” The students all stopped talking.

“So although we have the portfolios in front of us, and although blood, sweat, and tears most-likely went into these works of art, I’m going to give everyone one more surprise chance to revise your final essay, if you think you could use the time and it would improve your grade.”

“AHHHHHHGH,” came a yell from a boy sitting at the back of the class. It was Stephen, a student who was not the most struggling writer in the class, but certainly the most unhappy member of the class for the whole semester. “WHY!” he yelled again. “*Why, why, why* can’t this just be over! I can’t take it. Aghhhhhhhhhhh!” Then Stephen took his pencil and broke it into two pieces. He stood up and threw it at the wall, screaming again.

All of the other students were silent.

“Dammit,” I thought. “We almost got out of this class with such finesse.” Charles Ryan, head of the department, looked at Maura, and Maura looked back at him with eyes wide and terrified. He said nothing to her, but nodded, indicating that this outburst was her responsibility and that she would need to figure out a way to handle it. I closed my own eyes and said a short agnostic prayer that this student wouldn’t do anything drastic.

“OK,” Maura said rather gently. “OK everyone. Stephen, can you go out into the hallway and wait for me. We need to have a little chat.”

Stephen was red-faced and let out an unhinged “Arghhh!” again. But he also began shoving his laptop and papers into his Jansport backpack. He stomped out of the classroom.

All of the students looked at Maura while seeming to hold their breath. They didn't even acknowledge Charles Ryan. They needed assurance from the adult in the room they were familiar with, the one who they assumed was actually in charge.

And, to my delight, Maura did act like she was in charge. "What a final note to end on!" she said. "OK, let's take a deep breath. Close your eyes and envision how far you've come in your writing in these past few months." She then had the students write a reflection in their notebooks on their own writing process, and how the skills and fluency they learned this semester might carry over into the classes in their majors, in future semesters.

I could see the student, Stephen, pacing outside of the small window in the classroom's door. I wasn't sure he was going to wait, but it seemed he was doing just as he'd been asked to do.

While the students reflected on the page, I closed my own eyes and tried to imagine what this course would mean to these students—if it meant anything at all—in their futures. One thing that beings in the afterlife cannot do, unfortunately, is see into the future. I had been told that we are not oracles or soothsayers in any way, although I had at various times tested that knowledge. When I asked my picture window in my afterlife office to show me my husband Dean's final years of life, nothing happened. When I had tried to see what would occur in Maura's teaching career in the future, if she would still be standing in classroom in ten years, I just got blackness back. There was a limit to the powers of the dead.

So for now, as Maura's students wrote with their heads hung down, I simply imagined several of them hovering around the age of forty—a true adult age, I figured, without being too far from college—in 2033.

Luis was an emergency room doctor in Spokane, Washington, and remembered nothing from the course except reading an essay by George Orwell, which had prompted him to read all of Orwell's works years later, when he was applying to medical school.

Sharon was a performance artist and public radio personality who lived in Brooklyn, and remembered Maura's assignments and her black converse sneakers, and the way that she had complained on Valentine's Day that the holiday should not exist. Sharon, age thirty-nine, could recall the titles of every essay she wrote for the class, including an essay that connected a Richard Schechner text with the art of Bebopping, called "You Racehorse Tempos and Oriental Keys, Oh How You Make Me Want to Bebop Tap."

Nathan was a mid-level official in the New York City Mayor's Office and thought about the class every once in a while from his apartment in the Bronx. Maura had used the term "System of Meaning" and asked the class to apply it to an art object, but had never given the class a true definition of her term. He couldn't figure it out all semester, and had felt angry, like Maura was keeping vital information from him. Yet it was one of his courses that made the biggest impression on him; it challenged him in a way that high school never had, and prepared him for the level of thinking that was required in the rest of college. But at age forty, he was still mad at his old professor, Maura, for that dumb and frustrating term.

Lauren was a social worker in the LGBT center at Mt. Holyoke College, and she occasionally remembered the class too, when a student would come in complaining about their own writing classes. Lauren would chuckle to herself, recalling how her roommate Heather had been in the same course, and had interspersed her final essay with quotations from the movie *Mallrats*. The two had read each other's drafts for feedback and Lauren had been horrified. "You cannot put these quotes into a college essay!" she'd warned. But alas, Heather didn't listen. And

in the end Heather got an A and Maura had remarked in the paper's margins on her creative use of texts.

After a round of applause for themselves, a few students placed their portfolios on Maura's desk but most took them with them for another round of revisions. They all left the room, done with their one compulsory writing class of their undergraduate years. Maura went into the hallway and I heard her say calmly to Stephen: "I'd like to walk with you to University Health Services, where you might be able to talk to a counselor. Does that sound like a good plan?"

I sat there, alone in the room, and wondered what would become of Maura as a teacher in the years to come. What had this trial-by-fire year of teaching both creative writing and this creative form of expository writing taught her, that she might carry with her into future classrooms? It seems she had learned to fill a writing classroom with texts and ideas and questions—things to *respond to*, rather than just imitate, as is often done in creative writing courses. I sincerely hoped that this tenet of response, of intellectual activation and personal interest, would be the central force around which her creative writing classes were taught. This is how students, working through their swamp work, would begin to write meaningful work for both themselves and their readers. And perhaps Maura-as-teacher would then pass on this act of responding personally, with feeling and intellectual tenacity, with rapt and rigorous attention, to other teachers of creative writing. Perhaps the emptiness of the Iowa-esque workshop would fall by the wayside, becoming an occasional lesson rather than the lion's share of pedagogy in a writing classroom.

I envisioned a whole course that Maura might teach, ten years from now. It would be a course I would have loved to teach, when I was on earth. And a course I would have loved to

take, back when I was just a child, on earth. This is how I would describe it, for the university powers:

Knickerbocker University Course Catalogue, Fall 2024

Course Title: *Introduction to Fiction: Life-Writing and the Curation of Imagined Truth*

Instructor: M. Roosevelt

*Please note this course fulfils the requirement for the first of the two-semester sequence of freshman writing *and* an introductory course towards the creative writing minor.*

In this course students will learn both the fundamental craft elements of fictional composition, as well as the practice of mining their own lives, thoughts, reactions, and experiences to build meaningful and captivating imagined compositions. The course meets twice weekly. One course meeting a week will be dedicated to reading texts provided by both the instructor and the students and responding to these texts with personal, non-fiction writing. One course meeting a week will be dedicated to studying craft elements such as character and point of view, and engaging in the practice of creating fiction. Students will be expected to share their work openly with the class, but there will be no traditional class-wide creative writing workshops given. By the end of the semester, students will have created a portfolio that contains both early and edited drafts of both personal writing and flash fiction, short stories, novellas, or novels.

Various sections of this course will address the following disparate themes: Change; Home; Family; Rebels. Please register for one of the thematic options. This is an introductory course, but not limited to freshman students.

After dreaming and imagining in my corner of the classroom for some time, I finally looked up. Strangely, Charles Ryan had not left the room, but instead had been pacing around it. I tracked him closely; he had a wistful look in his eyes. Soon Charles leaned up against the wall at the back of the classroom, and crossed his arms. He appeared to be waiting for something.

After a very long and silent four minutes, I could no longer help myself. I said it aloud, so that the human realm could hear me: “Can you see me, Charles?”

“I can,” he nodded without looking my way.

I gasped. “How can you see me?”

“I can see things that I assume others can’t. Sometimes I wish I couldn’t. It started happening to me when I got back from Vietnam.”

We were both silent again for a few minutes. I wondered if talking to him more would put my afterlife job in greater danger than it already was in, what with my not-too-distant possession of Eoin, and the warning I’d received a few months earlier.

“I thought that was a decent class,” I said quietly.

“Indeed,” Charles said, nodding. Then, kindly, he looked in my direction and said, “It’s so nice to have you back, Wendy.”

5.7 May 14, 2012, Brooklyn, NY (Maura)

It was eight in the evening, but the sun had not totally set yet over the traffic on Flatbush Avenue. From the desk in her apartment, looking out her third story window, Maura opened up her laptop to do one final edit of the piece she would read during her Graduate Thesis Reading at the Writers House, the very next afternoon. She had done it; over the past twenty-one months she had taken four workshop courses and four craft courses, and now that she had completed a full-length thesis, she had dutifully checked off every requirement needed for her to rightfully earn an MFA from KU. She sighed. It hadn’t been academically hard, yet these past years were trying in other ways. But they were ending, now. She sighed again, unsure of her feelings about what were, on paper, accomplishments.

Opening her laptop, Maura clicked on her email before she diving into editing. Two new emails only. One from *Poets and Writers* inviting her to donate money, and another from someone named Rachael Connors. The subject line read: Important.

Hey Maura,

I've been wanting to write to you for months and now I need to finally do it. You don't know me, but I know a lot about you. I know you're a writer and although I'm a school librarian, maybe my writing skills aren't up to your level. So take this blunt email for what it is.

I've been dating Rory for over a year now. He says he loves me, and I know I love him. He's told me all about the complicated relationship you had with him in the past, and all the pressures and expectations you put on him when you were dating. I'm going to be very clear here: I'm still on his side, even with the reason I'm writing to you. He's dealt with so much more in his life that anyone his age should have to deal with.

The reason I'm writing is that something weird happened yesterday. I'm moving from an apartment in East Williamsburg to a place by myself in Bed-Stuy, that Rory is planning to move into in a few months. Yesterday, I rented a U-Haul and Rory came over to help move and he was in a foul mood. I'm sure you remember the moods he can get into, sometimes. I figured he just didn't want to be asked to move furniture, but I feel like that's a boyfriend's duty ha-ha. But as he was helping me carry my mattress down the stairs he started crying. Like really, sobbing crying— out of nowhere. I have neighbors on the different floors of my old building, and they all must have heard his howl.

I asked if we should put down the mattress. He wouldn't answer me and just kept crying and walking down the stairways. He was carrying the top of the mattress and I was at the bottom, for some stupid reason, although I'm half his size. I guess I yelled at him to stop and that's when the thing happened. Rory called me a "fucking bitch" and then he pushed the mattress, with me at the end of it, really hard. I fell backwards on the stairs, then skidded down like a whole flight. I hit the back of my head and was bleeding. The mattress bumped down the stairs beside me and flopped over at the wall.

Rory seemed even more upset after this. He stood over me while saying nothing. Then he ran down the stairs and out of the building door. I haven't heard from him since.

It's been about thirty hours since this happened. My old roommate took me to Urgent Care and they said I didn't have a concussion. Now I'm just sitting in my new apartment with no furniture wondering what the hell happened.

Truthfully, I don't want anything to do with you. I wish you had never been in Rory's life. But I need to know if something like this ever happened between you and him? His aggression surprised me and basically-- it scared me. I'm really in love with him and thought we were going to be together forever.

Rachel Connors

Maura was filled with shocked. There was no other word for it. She read the email in a state of numbed disbelief. Then she closed her laptop and sat at her desk for thirteen minutes,

eyes closed, breathing in-and-out through her mouth. It couldn't be true, could it? Could she really be so dumb, so oblivious and wrapped up in her own self-absorption? She opened the computer and email again, and now barely breathing, re-read it. *Rachel*. She had never heard Rory mutter the name.

How could he? *How could he?* The phrase just kept running through her mind. She was furious. But it truthfully wasn't rage at him that she felt, it was directed towards herself.

5.8 May 15th, 2011, Brooklyn, NY (Maura)

The air was balmy when Maura left her building at four am. It would be a long wait for the subway, she knew, as she had to take the G train and transfer over to the L through the long underground tunnel at the Metropolitan stop, and then take the L southwards again in Brooklyn to get to Rory's shared apartment at the Montrose stop. He lived with two roommates. She had been calling him non-stop since eleven-thirty pm, and he had not answered his phone. By one in the morning she'd tried each of his roommates, and neither Emile nor Yoshi had answered. By the time she stepped down the empty stairwell at the G train stop on Fulton Street, she was aware that she was not as safe as she could be. She was completely alone there and shaking with rage and liable to do untoward things.

She was so angry. When she arrived at Rory's apartment she rang the doorbell twice, then waited. What would she say when she saw him? She would hit him the way that he hit her. She would hit him across the face. She would push him down and tell him, "You are never going to ruin my life again. You are a socio-path and a liar and I know about you now and I'm done."

But no one answered the door. She kept ringing the doorbell. Emile and Yoshi would certainly think she was insane—they would never think about her in the same light—but she didn't care. She called Rory's phone repeatedly. She called the two roommates repeatedly. No

one answered. A handful of people trudged down Montrose Avenue on their way to jobs that started at this ungodly hour, two holding hard hats, one carrying a full cleaning kit including a bucket and a mop.

Maura kicked the bottom of the building door. She banged with her hands on the upper part of it. After an hour it was nearly six-thirty in the morning. The KU Graduate Student Thesis Reading started at two, and she hadn't slept at all. Both of her parents and one of her sisters were taking the train in from Boston, to celebrate her finishing the MFA program. Her other sister was taking a plane from Washington, DC. That was the kind of supportive family she had. They would all meet at the Writers House, ready to hear her and the other fiction and poetry graduates read from their theses—the final act before being totally done, before being diploma-carrying American-MFA-holders. She had done it; she'd completed this potentially silly program, and written a fictional thesis that had been approved, although most likely not read in its entirety, by Dan. Even with what was happening, Maura knew she would go to the thesis reading and smile nicely, as she always did. She knew she would not let her parents or her sisters down, but instead be gracious and grateful that they'd come to celebrate her. She would hug her family and Nadia and Max and probably even all of the Jessicas, and pretend to be happy and sad that this little semi-adult-dinner-party-game was over. But she also knew, as the sun broke through the Brooklyn night into pink and orange and the clouds parted to reveal a new spring day, that she was going to walk six blocks to Flyrite Tattoo, and she knew what she was going to buy there.

The store was locked and closed but when she knocked a tall white man with large black plugs in his earlobes opened the door a crack. “Here for Real?” he asked, barely looking at her.

Maura nodded. “I've got fifty. But I need a vape pen too.”

The man closed the door without acknowledging her then came back and stuck one hand out of the crack. She had almost never bought Realeyez before; she had always just paid Rory for getting it for her, so it took her a minute to understand what the hand was asking for. Oh, she thought. She put two twenty dollar bills and one ten dollar bill in it.

Without a sound he snatched his hand back then shoved out a small brown paper bag. She took it wearily.

Back in front of Rory's apartment, higher than she'd maybe ever been before, Maura's eyes stung and burned and she felt as if she were going to throw up. The rage was there but now it was buried under a swath of what felt like gauze. Everything in the world was covered in gauze, and she was looking through it, angrily.

5.9 May 15th, 2011, Brooklyn, NY (Wendy)

A young woman came out of the door to Rory's apartment building at about seven in the morning, in trousers and a short trench-coat, obviously on her way to some professional job. What if this was Rachel? Maura looked up and down the street—a few young women, close to her age, were heading towards the subway. Rachel could be any of them. She could be anywhere, Maura thought. I watched her stick her converse low-top sneaker into the apartment door to hold it open. Then she barked after the woman walking away: "Are you Rachel?"

The woman startled and turned around. "What?"

"Rachel? Is that your name?" It seemed Maura truly did not care how she sounded.

The woman grimaced. "My name is Beth. Is there something I can help you with?"

Maura didn't wait for the end of the conversation. She left Beth standing confused on the sidewalk, and ran into the apartment building, going up to the second floor. I read her thoughts; she had no plans. She had no idea what she was going to do or say to Rory when she saw him.

In front of apartment 2C, Maura didn't knock—she tried the handle first. It was locked. She banged on the door. “Rory? Are you there? Yoshi? Emile?” No one answered her.

Standing behind Maura, I made the decision to go inside. I had a sinking feeling that something was very wrong, and going inside felt like a moral imperative. I left Maura in the hallway and stepped right through the metal door. Inside the two-bedroom apartment, the walls were covered with screen-printed activist posters. The place was under-furnished in the way of students and twenty-somethings: just a few pieces of second-hand furniture in various shades of brown. One of the bedrooms had its door open, revealing a full sized unmade bed.

It seemed no one was in the whole place. But then I opened the door to the second bedroom, in which there were two twin beds. One was made, with a thin burgundy blanket and one pillow, and the other had a human-shaped bump under a blue duvet. What should I do now? I knew this could potentially be a pivotal moment. I closed my eyes. I could see that it was Rory under the blanket.

“Rory?” I said, gently. “Rory, are you awake?”

There was no response. Something was not right. I had to help this situation, no matter what it did to my status and reputation in The Department. I understood that the threats from Frances Child were real, but certainly anyone in The Department has a moral code that is redeemable. Certainly they would understand.

I made myself visible and pulled back the blanket. Rory wore tan Carhardt jeans but no shirt. His thin, pale, and freckled chest was bare. His arms were up like a little bird and his mouth was agape as he breathed heavily through it.

Then his eyes opened. He did not scream. His body did not move. He was not entirely within the human world, already. “Rory my name is Wendy. Are you OK?”

Now, the young man cleared his throat but didn't sit up. The bedroom was trashed: broken beer bottles on the floor, and CDs and magazines strewn beside a tipped over bookcase.

He simply said, "Yesterday was Jon's birthday. He would have been twenty-seven. No one came to see me on Jon's birthday."

I wondered if he thought he was in a dream, and I was imagined. I knew he was very intoxicated.

"You need to get up," I said, again as gently as possible. "Everything is going to be fine."

In an instant, in one solid move, he sat up and lunged at me, apparently trying to knock me down. I dodged him, catching myself on an oak bedside table.

It took me a moment to regain my balance and when I looked back at the young man still in his twin bed with his navy blue children's duvet balled up at his feet, his left arm was covered with blood.

Now I screamed.

He had a straight razor in his right hand—where did it come from? Had he had it under the bed's blankets with him?

He brought the razor up to his elbow again and then in one smooth move he sliced it through the inside of his arm as if it were a fish he was filleting.

"Stop!" I shrieked. I couldn't help myself. "Rory, please stop! Stop this now."

"I don't deserve anything," he said. His eyes were bloodshot.

"Take out your cell phone and call 9-1-1. You need to get an ambulance here right now."

But he didn't stop. And I had no idea what to do. I didn't know where his cell phone was. I ran frantically around the apartment, looking for a house phone hung on a wall, and couldn't find one. "Rory, stop!" I yelled again from the living room.

Maura was banging on the other side of the door, still in the hallway. “Hello? Is someone there?”

I knew what I had to do. I opened the apartment door the regular way, as if I were a human being, using the handle.

“Who are you?” Maura said with a gasp.

“Maura. Hello—”

Her eyes seemed to pop with surprise. “How do you know my name?”

“Something bad is happening Maura. Rory is in trouble. You need to call 9-1-1 right now.”

“Who are you?” she said again, face nearly frozen. There was no noise from the apartment behind me. Rory wasn’t making a sound.

Maura was shaking. I tuned into her mind and understood that although she was exhausted, and although she was numbed from so much RealEyez pumping through her system, she was also scared. She was scared of Rory and scared of what had happened, how he’d been lying to her, how he’d physically hurt her, and what he might do now. And yet— she unfortunately loved him.

“You have to help immediately. Call an ambulance.”

“Are you related to someone named Rachel?” Maura asked.

“What?” I questioned. “No. Call an ambulance, Maura.”

She then did something that I knew she would think about for the rest of her life. She made the move then that would haunt her forever, a clear and definitive choice: she turned around and ran down the stairs.

Maura was gone.

I paused in the doorway, but just for a moment. I was alone with a human man, a human boy really, who was trying to end his own life. What had he done? What had Maura done? And what would I do now, I wondered, as I stood there on earth breaking all of the rules that I had been told to keep.

5.10 May 15th, 2011, Knickerbocker University (Maura)

The Graduate Student Thesis Reading had been going on for over an hour when Maura arrived. She was un-showered, her face was puffy and streaked, and her hair was matted. But she was there. She'd taken a cab from Williamsburg back to St. Marks Ave. early that morning. She'd thrown up on the stoop of her building, gone upstairs and collapsed into bed the second she'd touched the sheets, and slept in a wakeful, twisting dream-state for a few hours. Her phone alarm, that she'd somehow had the wherewithal to set, went off at noon and she'd dragged herself out of bed an hour later. When she'd arrived at the Writers House, the event had already been in full-swing; she'd had to enter through the basement and go up the backstairs to get to the lobby where the events were held. She saw the backs of her two parents and two sisters crammed into folding chairs in the second row of the crowd, occasionally looking around the room, obviously hoping to spot her.

Maura wore a second-hand yellow dress and her converse sneakers, the same ones she wore on the first day of the program. In her bag were two options for what to read when it was her turn. She had a few pages from the thesis version of *Motherless* printed out. But she also had her laptop, which contained the draft of the other thing she'd been writing, the thing that defied genre and hadn't been workshopped—hadn't been shown—to anyone at all.

A blonde poet named Veronica who had been a porn star only a few years earlier, and often wrote about it, was reading at the front of the room. The crowd leaned in, ears pricked for

what Maura guessed was the first time since they'd all sat down. The air conditioning didn't seem to be working and the lack of oxygen in the room was miserable.

She saw an empty space near a corner in the back, and began to make her way through the knees of the last row of people. "Sorry, excuse me!" she whispered over Veronica's deep and alluring voice. From one row in front of her, Max leaned back and winked. "Hey, you," he mouthed. Beside him sat his father—his father, famous in Maura's eyes!—trim with impeccable posture, wearing a matching off-white fedora and suit.

Maura was in disbelief. Was this reality? She could see her parents many rows ahead of her. They were real, they were alive, and they had come to see her. What had happened this morning? Where was Rory? Who was that strange woman in his apartment? Maura had dreamed of living for two years tragedy-free. She had begged God or whoever was in control of the lives of the living to let her have peace for just two years, with no friends dying and no grief falling upon her or her loved ones. But then this morning, she hadn't gone inside the apartment. Why had she not gone inside? Something terrible may have happened to Rory. And if it had, she would be responsible. She would have made the tragedy happen.

Another poet got up to read to the crowd, Muriel. She had big eyebrows and a knowing sense of humor; Maura had admired her for the whole program and Muriel had, perhaps rightfully so, always looked at Maura with a sense of mild disdain. Muriel began to read poems about her mother, broke with three children in rural Pennsylvania. The poems were so bold and touching that tears sprung into the eyes of at least half the crowd. Maura couldn't focus on them, though. Running through her brain was that scene from Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, where Tom kills Freddy with a glass ashtray to the head in a Rome apartment, and then gets drunk and carries Freddy's lifeless body down the stairs and out to his small European car,

as if Freddy were drunk too— as if it were a regular day and Tom hadn't just coldly and psychopathically committed murder. Is that what Maura had done this morning? What if Rory was dead? She would be responsible, if he was dead at this moment. She guiltily wondered what this meant for her as a writer. If she ran away from any real-life experience, would she ever have anything of value to write about? But, she wondered, was what happened that morning even real? Was she losing her mind?

After another forty-five minutes Dan called out, "Maura Roosevelt" and it was her turn to read. She made her way through the line of knees again, taking far too long and bringing her whole leather satchel with her. She sat in the folding chair in front of the room, the stained-glass window behind her, framing her in florals and light streaming in from Tenth Street, in this moment of unreality.

Her family all waved from the second row, relieved that she was actually there. Maura opened her laptop. She took a deep breath and pulled the microphone stand a bit closer to her chair. Before she began to read, though, she saw that someone in the back archway—the door that connected the event space room to the workshop room—was waving at her slowly and quite sadly. Maura paused. She squinted and blinked three times. It had to be the woman who was in Rory's apartment that morning. This woman wore beige pants and her brown straight hair, a bit stringy, was tucked behind her ears. She waved to Maura with her right hand, as if saying goodbye, and then she was gone. Maura blinked again. No one was in the doorway now. The woman had disappeared.

Maura finally took a breath. "Sorry for the delay. I'm going to read the beginning of a project that's actually not my graduate thesis, but something that I've somehow been working on even harder than my thesis, in the past few months."

The crowd gave a polite little chuckle, unsure of what to make of this introduction. Maura read, “The professor began: ‘Call me Dan. I was in your spot a little under a decade ago. I’m a graduate of this program, too. But back then we didn’t have this fancy building, we were put into gen pop with the real graduate students in English Lit.’”

The crowd leaned in and Maura looked up to notice Dan, eyebrows knitting together, leaning in to hear her better. She continued reading: “*Gen Pop*. The phrase echoed through Maura’s mind and made her wince...”

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