



THESIS  
2  
2001

**LIBRARY**  
**Michigan State**  
**University**

This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

Lessons

presented by

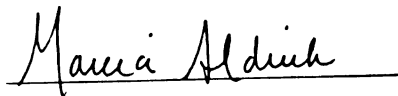
Barbara McCarty Clauer

has been accepted towards fulfillment

of the requirements for

Masters English

degree in



Major professor

Date 12/11/00

**PLACE IN RETURN BOX** to remove this checkout from your record.  
**TO AVOID FINES** return on or before date due.  
**MAY BE RECALLED** with earlier due date if requested.

DATE DUE	DATE DUE	DATE DUE

LESSONS

By

Barbara McCarty Clauer

A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

2000



ABSTRACT

LESSONS

By

Barbara McCarty Clauer

**This thesis, consisting of a series of connected creative non-fiction essays, explores the circular connection between being a student and being a teacher.**

Copyright by  
BARBARA MCCARTY CLAUER  
2000

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

THESIS SEEDS.....	1
LITERACY AUTOBIOGRAPHY I.....	8
BEGINNINGS .....	10
SPONTANEOUS BOWEL MOVEMENT .....	13
HELPEE.....	15
SMEARED .....	23
LIGHTS OUT .....	25
CONDEMNED .....	42
LITERACY AUTOBIOGRAPHY II.....	43
THOU SHALT NOT STEAL.....	45
PRACTICE .....	51
PRISON .....	53
JOURNEYS .....	74
LITERACY AUTOBIOGRAPHY III/CONCLUSION .....	102

## Thesis Seeds

There he was, staring at, or rather past, five of himself with a detached expression:  
Paul Auster's father. What was behind this fun house photo? What could Paul Auster  
have to say about that austere man on the cover of his book *The Invention of Solitude*?  
What could a son have to say about his father, his life, his unique experience that would  
keep me awake long enough to finish this book for my graduate writing workshop?  
Never mind just awake, I couldn't *sleep* until I got from page one to page one-seventy-  
two. My new addiction: creative non-fiction.

New? Maybe not. The naming of what I recognized as what I'd always been *writing*,  
and more recently reading, was *new*. Creative Non-Fiction. The class gave energy and a  
*name* to that feeling of recognizing what I already knew – the form I am most drawn to as  
both writer and audience is creative non-fiction.

For that initial graduate class in creative non-fiction we read:

*The Invention of Solitude* – Paul Auster

*Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* – D.J. Waldie

*Two or Three Things I Know for Sure, Bastard Out of Carolina* – Dorothy Allison

*Welcome to My Country, The Prozac Diary* – Lauren Slater

*The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Non-Fiction* – Robert  
Root, Michael Steinberg, eds. (especially influential was Mary Elizabeth Pope's:

"Teacher Training" and "Composing Teacher Training")

Several essays:

- “Biography of a Dress” – Jamaica Kincaid
- “Owls” – Mary Oliver
- “The Black Widow” – Gordon Grice
- “Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart” – Minnie Bruce Pratt
- “In Bed” – Joan Didion
- “Posing: Autobiography and the Subject of Photography” – Paul Jay
- “Life Writing and Light Writing; Autobiography and Photography” – Timothy Adams

I’ve since inhaled such creative non-fiction as:

*In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Non-Fiction* – Judith Kitchen, Mary Paumier Jones, eds.

*The House on Mango Street* – Sandra Cisneros

*The Eloquent Essay: An Anthology of Classic and Creative Non-Fiction* – John Loughery, ed.

*Tales Out of School* – Susan Richards Shreve, Porter Shreve, eds.

*Fourth Genre* journals and other creative non-fiction essays covering a wide range of styles

On that very first day of the workshop, however, I realized I *had* experience having already read in my career, ta-da!, many works that would fall under the expansive reach of creative non-fiction. For example:

*Woman Warrior*– Maxine Hong Kingston

*An Unquiet Mind* – Kay Redfield Jamison

*Letters to a Young Doctor, Mortal Lessons – Notes on the Art of Surgery* –

Richard Selzer

*A Street in Marakech* – Elizabeth Warnock Fernea

*Un día en la vida* – Manlio Argueta

*Usos amorosos de la postguerra española* – Carmen Martín Gaité

even *Let's Go – Spain, Portugal, Morocco 1991-1992* could squeeze into the

genre

countless essays disguised as literary criticism

My list of what to read next is currently under construction.

In my lifetime I have taken many courses in creative writing – I've studied poetry and fiction and I've written poetry and fiction. Almost all of what I have created could be considered creative non-fiction in that I was drawing from personal experience. This habit, in my writing, of continuously exploring my own experiences, used to embarrass me as if I wasn't strong enough in my poetry or fiction to find my way out of my own mind. To realize that what I was doing in my own writing had a name, other than

*regurgitation*, not only elated me but made me want to see how far I could pursue it. To the thesis!

Of the books we read in that graduate workshop, Auster's initially took the deepest root. Paul Auster was writing about his father. Much of my own writing prior to this workshop, both poetry and fiction, had been dancing around my father as the subject. In the margins of Auster's book I redundantly wrote 'sounds familiar', 'yes' and 'wow' next to passage after passage. It was simultaneously sad, illuminating and amazing. A unique strength and draw of creative non-fiction is its ability to transmogrify someone else's private experience into your own.

I decided to stop dancing around the father-subject and find a way into it through my class essays using an Auster quote from *Solitude* as my mantra: "If there is nothing, then, but silence, is it not presumptuous of me to speak? And yet: if there had been anything more than silence, would I have felt the need to speak in the first place?" (20). And I eventually used another Auster quote to justify quietly turning away from my decision to pursue the subject: "There has been a wound, and I realize now that it is very deep. Instead of healing me as I thought it would, the act of writing has kept this wound open" (32). But there's something to say of what I learned in between these two quotes.

I learned that I can make or re-make a different sort of truth through writing. I learned that I am far from 'beyond' what I see as my father's trespasses. I learned that no one is *all* good or *all* bad. I learned that some writing is laborious, joyless. I learned to break at

least one old silence. I learned that the pure guilt produced by breaking the silence did not bring release or energy but more guilt which begat guilt which begat guilt...guilt is not productive. I learned what writing yourself into quicksand feels like. I learned the need to remember the sound of both derisive *and* hearty laughter. I learned how much I adore the genre creative non-fiction. And I learned that although my first official foray did not fully bloom I didn't want to put down the pen of creative non-fiction.

Initially, pre-Auster-wound-quote, I envisioned expanding my project for the workshop class into my creative thesis for my masters degree. The first iteration of my thesis idea was a series of connected essays in different creative non-fiction sub-genre styles – personal, memoir, photograph, mosaic, lyric, etc – regarding my father. The essays connected in that they were all titled with one of the 10 Commandments and they forged ahead with the litany of creative ways my father broke each commandment (don't be alarmed, it was going to be an imaginative stretch to pull off *thou shalt not kill...*). A couple worked, because they opened up to something else, but more didn't, because they were performing guilt, propping open the wound. The writing wasn't wretched – it was evasive, protective. And I was not enjoying the writing. I may have stopped something productive. I may have some growing to do as a writer and as a daughter to see worth in returning to a project I didn't enjoy. I may have to grow into understanding the difference between writing that brings joy and writing that is enjoyable. I may now have the new guilt of *giving up* to deal with...I may not.



Thesis false starts: 1 Barb: 0 What to do now? I am *not* a morning person. One morning, early in the summer, I bolted upright in bed *before full sunrise* straining for the echo of a dream-like voice (sounding suspiciously like my own) asking “what brought me to this thesis-place?” Fumbling for a bedside notebook, I began writing down names and kinds of teachers – school teachers (good and bad), coaches, piano teachers, friends, family, pets, myself, situations. I made notes on classmates I could not forget. I made notes on major influences that moved me to this place – graduate school. I made a long list of rambling “I remember” phrases. And finally, I drew a circle with the words *teacher* and *student* inside it. I was making my morning-hazy way toward my real thesis.

A modicum of background information: Late in my senior year of college at Alma I panicked. I was convinced I should go right on to graduate school in English or perhaps in Creative Writing to pursue my dream of teaching that had blossomed at college. In a dramatically self-defeating move I sent some of my writing at the last minute to *one* MFA program at a highly regarded school...and was promptly rejected. One is all I needed to tell me what I already ‘knew’. So...I decided *that* road was closed, sat in a corner feeling very sorry for myself and added my name to an Alma-sponsored interview trip to the Detroit area. As a result of that trip I ended up getting hired at a market research firm doing qualitative research and writing business reports mostly for Ford Motor Company – *not* known for encouraging terribly creative writing. This went on for a little over four years. While I did learn quite a bit and gained valuable life experience, I think it takes exactly *five* years of working in a business office before your brain begins to leak out your ears. Just under the wire, before irreversible brain seepage commenced, I

decided it was time to get back to what I really wanted to do. It was time to go back to school.

It was time, in other words, to return to being a student to be a teacher. I wrote that phrase that odd morning burst as well: return to being a student to be a teacher. Its circularity struck me. Teachers and students. Become a student to become a teacher to remain a student to remain a teacher to become a student...

The way I now describe my thesis project is this: A series of connected creative non-fiction essays, vignettes and poems, that explore the relationship, in my life, between the idea of student and teacher, the different ways of being or understanding the words student and teacher and the circular nature of the roles of student and teacher both in and out of the classroom. Some of my father writing will still find its way into the end product because he has both wittingly and unwittingly been a teaching force in my life, but it is no longer the quicksand core.

I am excited about my project. I'm excited to see where it goes, how it grows, and I'm excited to be focused on writing creative non-fiction. I'm hoping, though, that in the future those inevitable and amazing bursts of thought and energy regarding my thesis will be polite enough to attack me *after* sunrise.

Lite

"On

"Me

"On

"On

"On

"On

"On

Lite

the

who

real

war

was

my

me

'vor

swe

## Literacy Autobiography I

"Once upon a time...Little Red Pony... The End..."

"Mom, can we read it again, please?"

"Once upon a time...Little Red Pony... The End..."

"One more time?"

"Once upon a time...Little Red Pony... The End..."

"Once more?"

"Once upon a time there was a little girl who actually went to bed when her mother told her to... The End, Goodnight."

Literacy and power. When I was four, I hadn't yet grasped the slippery connection between the two...I just obsessively loved that little red pony. At four, I wasn't just confused as to whether the complicated path to literacy meanders toward or away from power...I didn't really even understand the subtle difference between wanting to *have* a little red pony or wanting to *be* that pony. Not surprisingly, the first book I ever learned to read on my own was The Little Red Pony. Being a tiny tuft of a four-year-old person, I can understand how my Grandpa Lewy thought I had memorized it when I read to him (especially when he told me I had a good vocabulary and my answer to his compliment was "what's 'vocaboolary'?"). He knew I made mom read it to me over...and over. But she swears I could really read it...Spot and The Pokey Little Puppy too.

Reading and writing play a central role in how I understand myself. As little children, my older brother and I often sat and listened to dad read to us after dinner – *Hiawatha*, *The Brother's Grimm*, many tales from Greek Mythology and other stuffy classics. My husband jokes about parents “grooming” children from birth to be pro athletes (NFL quarterbacks, tennis stars, etc.) but with hindsight, I believe dad was grooming his children in an academic version of the same obsessive drive. He wanted us to be academically advanced, to have an advantage in school and therefore the (supposed) power that goes along with academic success...I only wanted to know what was going to happen to Hiawatha on “the shores of Gitche-Gu-Mee”. Upon entering formal schooling, I was labeled “advanced” because I arrived at their doorstep reading, spouting Greek mythology and writing my own stories about things like an ant named Jake and his life with his “aunt” (I remember thinking that was terribly clever) Judy who lived in a tulip. All through grade school I was often placed in a corner (a-lonely) to read, write, and generally do my own work while the rest of the class, as my teachers told me, “caught up”. Caught up? Are we racing? The literacy-power connection was not sinking in yet.

Beginn

She's l

Tense.

sort of

Snuff

Sesam

She's s

young

with h

Eleme

street.

stretch

Pre-sc

Mrs. V

Mr. Jo

Adams

shelve

Monste

hiding

## **Beginnings**

She's holding her elbows tight to her side for her first school picture, clenching her fists. Tense. This is what new situations like school made her look like at first. She's smiling, sort of, like the man behind the camera said to...he also said some dumb things like "say Snuffle-luffagus" and laughed by himself, thrilled with his extensive knowledge of Sesame Street.

She's 4 ...almost 4 and ½. *Very* important, that ½, it made her *less* than two years younger than her big brother. Except for that first scary day of school, when she walked with her mom, not letting go of her hand even inside the classroom, she walked to Adams Elementary for pre-school every day with her big brother and his friend from down the street. *They* were in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Maybe walking with her brother every school day is a stretch. She had just started pre-school and every other was more like it.

Pre-school was a new concept, not just for her, but for Adams Elementary in general. Mrs. Woodworth, and her assistant Mrs. Williams, were just beginning the program and Mr. Jones, Adams' principal, gave them a room right inside the door farthest from busy Adams Road. The pre-school room was long, skinny and lined with wooden book shelves full of easy reading Golden books like *The Pokey Little Puppy* and *There's a Monster at The End of This Book*. In the two back corners stood tall wooden cabinets hiding finger paints, construction paper and, on the tippy top shelf...glue. The floor was

partially covered by green carpet thin enough to allude to the hardwood underneath and both the front and back of the room had old slate blackboards running the full width.

Adams school itself is a square sturdy looking three-story red brick building, cornerstone reading *est. 1937*. It stands in the middle of a Birmingham, Michigan neighborhood that was, in the early 70's, an upwardly moving upper middle class neighborhood, called Forest Hills, laced with anglo sounding streets like Wimbledon, Abbey or Dorchester. A neighborhood elementary school. Only a handful of students arrived by bus. The majority of the pre-school through 7<sup>th</sup>-graders materialized from the surrounding neighborhood in small groups, crunching through neatly raked leaf piles, metal lunchboxes swinging. Hers had Evel Knevel on it with a Snoopy thermos...both treasured hand-me-downs.

Instead of posing stiffly for Mr. Snuffle-luffagus, she'd much rather be back in her pre-school room playing with the gerbils, Bump and Squeak. She named Bump, because she thought naming a gerbil Squeak like Mindy did was so *duh* and at least the other one should have a good name. Not that she was terribly creative with names...her pink blanket that she was already writing poems to (not *about* but *to*) she called...Pinky. Or instead of sitting wide-eyed in front of the umbrella-shaped lights for the man who was now saying "*say* Cookie Monster" she would much rather be finger painting or drawing something for Mrs. Woodworth or Mrs. Williams, both of whom she adored. Who wouldn't love a woman as old as your mother who could happily spend the entire day with fingerprint on the tip of her nose? Early in the school year she drew a picture of her



family, but neither of the pre-school teachers could tell which stick figure in the family of four was the mother because she drew everyone in pants. Mrs. Woodworth always wore long denim skirts and vests and Mrs. Williams usually had on a big flowery skirt with lots of pockets full of treats for little hands. Apparently a woman in pants, like her mother, was still generally confusing in the mid-70's. Even so, her drawing was returned framed by smiley face stickers. *Thrilling* to a 4½ year old, even if they weren't scratch n' sniff.

With each smiley face sticker on her drawings, each story circle time where she knew the ending of the book and each exhilarating finger painting session, she grew to love going to school. The 7-year-old confidently staring out from her *second* grade school picture would have rolled her eyes at the *baby* she had been beginning pre-school at Adams.

A

D

tr

"

H

sp

T

sc

H

"I

po

th

so

ev

tha

be

ab

## **A Spontaneous Bowel Movement**

Dad pulled the gray, tiny, bent mouse, its stiff pink paws curled in prayer, out from the trap under our kitchen sink and moved to try and block my view...but I *saw*.

"Why is there poop hanging from his butt, Dad?"

He sighed and then in his doctor voice said "Every animal, at the moment of death, has a spontaneous bowel movement, humans included. It's a normal process of biology."

That sounded terribly undignified to me. "So the last thing we all do when we die is squirt out one last poop and that's it? That's the best we can do?"

He sighed again. "Yes, that's the best we can do."

"*Yuck.*" My 5-year-old wheels turned trying to make this horrible new knowledge a positive thing. I blurted in one long breath: "Fine well maybe everyone is just making themselves all empty on the inside to get ready to be filled with the Holy Spirit, or something, when they go to Heaven, you know, sorta cleaning themselves out of everything from Earth to be ready for those things from Heaven, I dunno what, but things that shouldn't mix with poop, you know, pure things, good things, things that haven't been digested and squeezed through our insides...things, maybe, we don't have any ideas about in real life except that somehow we know that for something we need to be all

clean-sorta on the inside so that it's just our souls and Heaven's stuff inside and no poop  
huh, Dad?"

He didn't sigh, but shrugged his shoulders and rolled his eyes. Wondering why I couldn't  
just be a normal 5-year-old and ask him about something like where babies come from.  
Then he let out air that I didn't know he'd inhaled. "No. We die. We empty our bowels.  
It's biology."

## **Helpee**

**In kindergarten  
I could read Spot and The Little Red Pony.  
He just played with his zipper.  
His pants always fell down  
And he had peanut butter up his nose.  
Teacher with the vests and bell bottoms and  
Bride of Frankenstein hair  
Told him he turned it gray.  
He didn't understand.  
I could read Spot and The Little Red Pony  
And he just played with his zipper.**

He was in his second year of kindergarten when I met him. His name was Sean. Even in kindergarten he was an angry boy who did not quietly absorb the abuse students hurled at him. Usually the boys who called him *stupid*, *fatso* or *stinky* could out run him, but if they stumbled, his large meaty fists left bruising evidence. He would instantly become frenzied, eyes closed, beating and flailing on his prisoner until he was yanked away by a teacher. Sean was large, round and breathed loudly through his mouth. His chin was usually on his chest, eyes on the floor, while he absent-mindedly picked his nose and squinted. His dull ashen hair stuck up in back, his underwear band was usually visible and he smelled like a combination of things a supposedly potty-trained kindergartner should not still smell like.

I could already read and write before I was in kindergarten and was confused that he could not. My heart twisted at his blank stares in response to the teacher's questions. He was struggling to recognize his written name; I was reading at a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level. He was causing a new gray hair on the teacher's head each day; I was asked to be her helper and

lead show and tell. He was constantly fighting with the other kindergartners; I organized group games at recess. And yet I felt connected to him. Every day, I was isolated in one corner doing my reading and writing exercises; he was alone in another corner ramming a Tonka truck into the wall.

Mrs. Orva was a little severe looking. Our kindergarten teacher had dark hair with two gray streaks at her temples, pale sallow skin and high arching eyebrows that were drawn in. She wasn't a mean woman. She was simply a woman who had lost her patience by eight a.m., yet was trapped in a classroom with 25 five-year-olds until noon and Sean could not (or would not I'm sure she suspected) understand what she wanted him to do: "Sean! No! Not *there*, the toys have to go back in the chest by the door. No! That *box* by the door! The *door*!" as Sean lost patience himself and violently threw and kicked toys in all directions...some rolled toward the chest. Close enough, I hoped from my non-trouble-making corner. It was amazing that this woman, who only possessed one face, could make it look so cold and angry at Sean, but would turn to me with a warm smile and kind eyes and gently ask me to help him pick up the toys.

**In first grade  
I was Teacher's little helper.  
He was my helpee.  
I knew everything  
About Spot and The Little Red Pony.  
He couldn't read.  
He couldn't write.  
I decided he must be left-handed  
And made him write that way  
Because I did.  
I was Teacher's little helper.  
He was my helpee.**

I love

sticks

straig

botto

you l

even

Early

By fr

frien

knew

moth

and v

mon

with

waiti

song

notic

We v

it, bl

savor

I loved her: Miss Page, my first-grade teacher. She gave out bubble-gum scented stickers when you did well...and even when you didn't. She had long, really long, shiny straight black, never-pulled-back hair that she parted down the middle. She wore bell-bottom pants and clogs. When she hugged you, which she did a lot, her hair fell around you like a hug too. She smiled almost constantly, had big friendly teeth and liked to sing even when it wasn't song time. I loved her. I desperately wanted to be her favorite. Early in the school year, when she asked me to be her helper, I almost cried.

By first grade, I was no longer just watching Sean's struggles at school. He was my friend. My mother and his were involved in Adams School's yearly flower sale and knew each other well. He was the last, by several years, of five children. While his mother may have recognized his need for help in school, she adopted a 'wait and wait and wait and see' attitude. In kindergarten, I often brought Sean-stories home to my mom, and she suggested, at the beginning of first grade, that I sometimes walk to school with him. We lived on the same street. On our walking together days, he would be waiting for me by himself on his front porch, often just finishing his snack meant for after song time, wearing the same tan corduroys he wore every day. His mother didn't seem to notice the smell.

We were both fascinated by dirt – crumbly dirt, earthy smelling dirt, dirt with worms in it, black dirt, but especially dirt in mud form. We would walk in contented silence, savoring the feeling of cold mud slithering through our fingers and dropping in fat



satisfying globs on our shoes and the sidewalk, leaving our own Hansel and Gretel trail. And we both loved to peel the bark off sticks to get to their smooth pale insides. If I had played with Barbies, they probably would never have been clothed. Instead, I undressed sticks. The natural knots bothered Sean. He kept the smoothest, knotless sticks in a secret stash by the school's back door. The others, mine included, he broke and tossed away when we arrived at school.

Our walks became not sometimes, but every day and grew ritualistic – pick up Sean, find some mud, leave mud trail, peel three sticks each, choose those that would live, throw away the rest, enter school, go to our respective corners. A shared fondness for mud and naked sticks constituted a deep friendship in first grade. In the short time it took us to walk from his house to Adams School, the mud would dry in small clumps on our hands, faces, hair, shoes and clothes – treasures to be picked off during the day, a favorite pastime of Sean's. In the winter, when pliable mud was scarce, Sean resorted to an indoor way to get his pick-fix. He introduced me to his meticulous habit of pouring milky white Elmer's glue all over both hands, smoothing it out into one thin layer, letting it dry until it was see-through and then satisfyingly peeling it off slowly like sunburned skin. Sean and I both loved to get dirty every day, but the next morning I would be dressed in clean clothes minus any dirt or glue while he had on the same tan cords and was happily picking very old mud out from under his nails.

We did *not* share a love of fuzzy manila paper, the kind with the solid and dotted lines to guide our letters. I loved its buttery paper smell, I loved its slightly furry texture and I

h  
i  
c  
P  
L  
E  
a  
-  
-  
C  
b  
v  
t  
s  
r  
M  
  
L  
P  
T  
a  
A  
F  
A

loved to fill it up with letters and words. Sean only liked to crumple it up in tight balls so it would go farther when he temper-tantrum threw it across the room. September, and our first grade class was supposed to be writing our names on that lovely fuzzy manila paper. This was only a warm-up. Spelling lessons were to begin in earnest soon.

*Boring...*I had already covered every inch of mine – **Barb, Barbara, BarbBarbBarb, Brab, Arabrab, BrabBrabBrab, BarbBarbBarb, BARBARA!!!** – and was bouncing and wiggling impatiently in my chair.

“What now Miss Page? What can I do now?”

“Why don’t you see if Sean needs help.”

Gladly. Most of his recognizable letters were backwards and the pages not crumpled in balls had many rips and tears from violent erasings. I decided he must be using the wrong hand and that he should probably write the way I did, with my left hand. He trusted me enough to try. That made *all* of his letters unrecognizable *and* backwards. I sat staring at his shredded paper; he picked mud out of his hair. Finally, I traced out his name several times. He could follow my traced letters just fine. Teacher’s little helper. My work there was done.

**In grade school  
He disappeared to someplace  
That would teach him  
about Spot and The Little Red Pony  
And make him wear a belt.  
His pants still fell down  
And nobody gave him peanut butter.**

In

gr

Sp

by

th

an

w

19

fin

di

th

At

m

sti

gl

an

pr

gr

-

In 2<sup>nd</sup> grade I was placed in a 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> split class so I could read and write with the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders. Sean was sent to Kensington Academy, a small private school that specialized in Special Ed., a manila paper prison where writing and reading would be pounded into him by impatient Orva-like teachers who did not appreciate the particulars of mud...at least that's what I envisioned from my corner in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade room. With some perspective and a name to apply, I now think Sean was dyslexic. The rage I remember from Sean was later echoed in a younger cousin of mine, Andy, who was diagnosed with dyslexia in 1985 when he was 8. By then I knew better than to suggest Andy's difficulties could be fixed if he would simply write with his left hand. However, Sean at age 8 was not *diagnosed* with anything specific and the general term 'special' was slathered on to plug the gaps and give the appearance of something being done.

At age 7, I harbored the self-important romantic belief that Sean didn't trust anyone but me. I liked to imagine that I alone knew how to calm him, to cool his rage with smooth sticks and mud salves and that the teachers at Kensington would never see the contented glue-peeling Sean I knew. Even though we contrasted in our success as students, Sean and I were not that different. We were two facets of isolation. To be busy with his problems and feel sorry for his isolation allowed me to ignore my own isolation. As a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader in a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom, I missed the distraction of 'taking care' of someone else – a distraction which took care of me.

Before I could begin 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, my beloved Adams was closed and I had to go to a new school, Harlan. Sean wasn't there either. At Harlan, I sharply felt the absence of not having anyone to 'take care of' anymore...

Sean reappeared in middle school with thick glasses and a much larger pair of tan corduroys. He still emanated anger. Kensington had deemed him prepared to return to public school...middle school no less. Prepared. Who, if possessed of the smallest proof of difference or non-conformity, is prepared for the pressures of cliques, exclusion, and mental torture that, having been honed in grade school, explode in middle school?

I remember sharp guilt about not feeling allowed to be his friend again. That sentence embarrasses me now. When does that exact moment occur? That exact moment when fitting in and being accepted by peers you hate is more important than anything else? More important than empathy, more important than friendship, more important than someone else's suffering. In middle school, I certainly couldn't admit that mud and sticks were still cool and I decided *not* to remember that our connection had gone beyond dirt and glue and into our shared isolation. Still reeling from my Harlan experience, I was too busy emptying out my soul in order to fill it with the right Le Sport Sac or pair of acid washed Guess jeans in an attempt to fit in socially – a feat which befriending the ultimate middle school outcast would render impossible.

I watched Sean's excruciating middle school experience just like I had watched him in kindergarten. The students came up with more creative variations on *stupid*, *fatso* and

str

pl

to

si

fr

fo

p

I

A

S

A

I

S

I

.

*stinky* and more anonymous ways to torture him. Instead of at least duking it out on the playground, Sean was left with no outlet for the rage he felt when some faceless tormentor tripped him in a crowded hall or put gum on his seat or taped *kick my fat ass* signs to his cords. And if he did retaliate, it was a random echoing of his flailing fury from kindergarten that inevitably got only *Sean* suspended as the lone identifiable culprit for the hallway disorder. Eventually though he did get his hands on *one* tormentor and punished her with all the hurt he'd felt from others.

**In middle school  
At our lockers  
Someone called him Stupid Fatso  
And he pushed her through a second story window.  
I watched from my locker.  
Spot and The Little Red Pony watched from his...**

**He disappeared again  
To another someplace.**



## **Smear**

It was a big butt. It was a big butt in beige polyester pants that over the years had spread out to fill the big wooden chair behind the big wooden desk. It was my third grade teacher Miss Price's big polyester butt and wedged behind it was the safest place on the playground of my new school, Harlan.

We were all in the somewhere between eight and nine. Half of us were two months into a new school. What else could we do but play Smear the Queer? Two teams, Harlan kids vs. Adams kids, no rules beyond tackle and pummel whoever has the ball or your hat or whatever...

I thought he was so cute with his curly black hair and big white teeth. Omar. My throat was the Sahara in summer when he was close. Hooray! when he stole my orange and yellow knit winter stocking cap with the red fluff on top. I got to Smear the Queer! I got to tackle *him*! I couldn't wait to impress him, so I grabbed his unmitten hand and threw him to the ground as hard as I could. Aha! Smear! I win, he noticed me. But he was crying...really crying and all because of an icky girl. He sat up and pulled a big sparkling piece of clear glass out from between his thumb and pointer finger and his face was whiter than his pretty round teeth.

Where was that butt? I needed to find that butt to hide behind. I was new at *his* school and a *girl*, and I had made him look stupid. I had made him *cry*. He had big nine-year-

old

we

Th

be

"G

Th

pol

cas

Sm

Rin

bot

cur

Sah

old friends who already weighed ninety pounds. The kids whose school I had infiltrated were coming to kill me. Where *was* that butt?

That butt was standing next to the door and I couldn't wedge my terrified self between the beige polyester and the rough red brick.

"Go play honey." the distracted butt said.

The *whole* school was marching under the metal monkey bars coming to kill me. The big polyester butt gently pushed me away and continued giving some other blue wool butt a casserole recipe. Neither butt cared that I was definitely going to get Smeared...permanently.

Ringling bell. Joy. Recess was over and we all went inside to the blackboard room so the bothered butt could comfortably continue to spread in its big wooden chair. The black curls hated me and I didn't see the pretty round teeth anymore. Permanent rain in the Sahara. But the ninety pound giants always picked me first for Smear the Queer.

## **Lights Out**

***♫ Hello Barbara are you there?***

***If you are we do not care... ♫***

**(To Simon and Garfunkel's**

**the "*Sound of Silence*")**

My mother told me, many years after the fact, and most importantly after they had turned on again, that 'the light went out of my eyes' at Harlan Elementary. *Harlan* is just an organized conglomeration of bricks, glass, tile and lights...*people* are the only things with the power to flip the switch on or off.

Journal entry 10.26.90

(part of a list of "things I want to remember") What it felt like to be in a new school: Elementary school was hell for me. One of the most painful times in my life. The saying "kids can be so cruel" is so true. I was teased because I had curly hair, got good grades and was a tomboy. The song they sang "Hello Barbara are you there, if you are we do not care" is the stuff psychotics are made of. When mom says the "light went out of my eyes" I think it was about then because I started believing I deserved the awful treatment I got from them. I wasn't getting much better at home.

The

So

nur

enc

my

sch

we

lo

or

fo

se

T

A

e

## **The Bus**

So Adams School closed. Going into 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, I didn't understand about dwindling numbers of kids or that our neighborhood was considered an *old* neighborhood...not enough families popping out future Adams schoolers. All I understood was that to get to my new school I had to sit on a bus. Bus #704, a modern, square, serious, flat-nosed school bus. The old buses that had pulled up to Adams looked like they had noses and were smiling between the headlights and the grill, but this new bus had more of a pained look, like it had hurt to have its nose flattened. That square, flat-nosed bus turned north on Adams road, which was at the end of my neighborhood street, Abbey, and went about four miles to Harlan Elementary School. *Every* morning I wished the bus would just turn south and go four little blocks to take me back to Adams.

## **The Schools**

*Harlan*: a cold, smooshed one-story tan brick modern-looking school with claustrophobic ceilings and exposed glass hallways connecting the pod-like classrooms.

*Adams*: a maternal, comfortably square, three-story old red brick schoolhouse with high arching ceilings and speckled marble hallways.

*Harlan*: on the scary, impersonal 45 mph busy section of Adams north of Birmingham in Troy, a city without a downtown, many children arriving by flat-nosed school buses, parents didn't know each other, had a, *gasp*, latch-key program.

*Adams:* on the 25 mph neighborhood section of Adams in Birmingham, close to downtown, most children arriving by walking from the surrounding neighborhood, active parents, no latch-key.

*Harlan:* Principal Faust – told my mom he only knew the names of the ‘bad kids’ and had tall, skinny, tight-faced, sinister, Hitler-mustached Mr. Rop do his dirty work disciplining.

*Adams:* Principal Jones – knew everyone’s name and had a secretary, Miss Fox, with big frosted 70s hair and blue eye shadow who often gave out hugs to the kids sent down to Mr. Jones’ office.

*Harlan:* cold, colorless, unkind.

*Adams:* warm, colorful, home.

### **The Choices**

The choices for the Adams families were Harlan or Pembroke Elementary Schools. My mother decided to send my brother and me to Harlan because she had vigorously researched the two and found out that Harlan had a Gifted and Talented program as well as having a well-known art teacher, plus more kids from Adams happened to be going to Harlan. She was not thrilled to have to make the choice at all. Pembroke was actually closer to our house and I’ve sometimes wondered what would have been different if I’d gone there. Probably not much.

## **The Other Parent**

He saw me but he didn't. He held in his mind a misogynistic image of the correct and least bothersome kind of daughter – obedient, feminine, interested in cooking and sewing, not dirt and football, dressed in skirts and saddle shoes, not her brother's hand-me-downs. Whenever he happened to look at me, he automatically slid this image over his eyes like a slide. Click.

One of the first gifts I remember my father going out on his own to buy me was a sweater. New clothes for my new school. There I stood in my brother's t-shirt and ripped jeans, which showed my permanently scabby knees; dandelion smears on my nose, cheeks and forehead, topped with wild hair, leaf-accessorized from playing tackle football with the boys. Happy 8<sup>th</sup> Birthday. This gift was special to me because it was from *dad*, not mom with dad's name added to the card later. I tore open the pink (warning!) wrapping paper and forced myself to smile through the sting in my eyes. It was a sweater. It was a white frou-frou cardigan with pink flower shaped buttons and appliqued pink, blue and yellow girly-flowers all over it. I wanted to cry. I wanted to cry because I *hated* it and I was supposed to love it, I was supposed to dream of wearing frou-frou sweaters while stirring stew on the stove, I was supposed to be happy with my father's image for me, I was supposed to squeeze myself, *force* myself to fit this image, I was supposed to be grateful he remembered my birthday.

One of the first sprouts of father-guilt was planted soon after when I stuffed that sweater under a box of waiting hand-me-downs in the corner of my closet and claimed, sadly,



tragically, regrettably to have lost it at my new school. I would visit it periodically tearing off the frou-frou flower petals...he loves me, he loves me not.

## **The Teachers**

### ***3<sup>rd</sup> Grade***

In third grade Miss Price was my main teacher, Mr. Melton taught art class, Mr. Jacobs taught gym and Miss Partlow was the music teacher. Except for Mr. Melton, my third grade teachers – my first impression of Harlan – set my memory of Harlan as a place filled with an odd mix of apathy and cruelty.

*Miss Price:* A waste of beige polyester.

*Mr. Melton:* Art class. One of the rare happy places at Harlan. I loved everything about art class. I loved the backward father shirts we wore for smocks. I loved the chalky feel of construction paper. I loved paint under my nails. I loved being able to do in a classroom what I constantly did at home: *draw*. And I loved Mr. Melton's crooked glasses, his wild mustache and beard and his paint speckled denim apron. Somewhere in my mom's attic sits my big project from fourth grade: a wood frame, stuffed dummy wearing a lost and found leftover green hooded sweatshirt, plaid pants and hard bottomed white baby shoes. In fifth grade, he framed my series of three pencil drawings of a stuffed opossum – whole possum, detail of the left paw, detail of the face – and hung it in Harlan's main hall right on the way to the cafeteria. I had never been that proud.

*Mr. Jacobs:* A creepy man with a Popeye chin. I was good at everything in gym except the torturous rope climb. Trying to climb the huge, rough thick rope hanging from the gym ceiling, using the periodic knots, was one of the purest forms of torture I could imagine especially since Mr. Jacobs and the rest of the class gathered around the bottom of the rope. This was *supposedly* for safety but I remember agonizing because I was sure they could all see the childish pink and orange turtles covering my underwear...

*Miss Partlow:* She had wide open eyes and black hair with grey streaks around her face. If you chewed gum in her classroom, she made you stick it on the end of your nose for the whole class period even if you *tried* to throw it out right as you stepped in her room and even if it kept falling on the floor and losing its stickiness through the dirt. She taught us to sing *The Sound of Silence* in third grade. Not only did I have nightmares about something softly creeping to plant seeds in my brain while I slept, but my classmates learned it so well they began coming up with their own playground lyrics just for me.

There's more. Miss Partlow made us put on performances. Agony. I kept wishing she would just *please* pick partners but she never did. For the first one no one would be my partner and while the three most popular girls sang and danced to "Bring Home the Bacon" I opted to recite a poem. At least I wasn't the only one doing that. However, the other kids were smart enough to choose something like Shel Silverstein's *Lazy Jane*: "Lazy lazy lazy lazy lazy Jane, if she wants a drink of water, she waits and waits and waits and waits and waits for it to rain". I, on the other hand, was a slow learner

regarding coolness and, encouraged by my father-programming and my fervent need to please him, recited Frost's *The Road Less Traveled*. They started snickering after "diverged". To the playground!

## **Summers**

The summer between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade I spent playing with my brother, competing on the country club swim team, getting dirty and being invisible to my father. The summer between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade I spent playing with my brother, competing on the country club swim team, getting dirty and being invisible to my father.

## **The Teachers**

### ***4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Grades***

For fourth and fifth grade we had four main teachers. Mr. Cunningham: science, Ms. Fahlen: social studies, Mrs. Black: math, and Mrs. Pinnick: English. Mrs. Schraeger taught the Gifted and Talented class. Mr. Melton still taught art and Mr. Jacobs and his rope, along with Miss Partlow and her gum fun didn't disappear over the summer like I had hoped. The general apathy continued though broken up by some hiccups of good teaching, attention and kindness.

*Mr. Cunningham:* My 4<sup>th</sup> grade homeroom teacher. He had salt and pepper curly hair, sweaters with elbow patches and thick glasses which caused him to squint and look confused. While I do remember one science project concerning potential energy, a wound up rubber band and magically rolling a coffee can *up* an incline, much of my time

in

ta

at

ti

a

fo

M

h

u

h

S

tr

M

bl

B

ge

ins

to

Mr

was

in his class was spent counting ceiling tiles in the hall where I was regularly sent for talking and talking and talking... By 4<sup>th</sup> grade I'd somewhat honed my class clown skills as they deflected a bit of the inevitable playground torture. At parent-teacher conferences that year, he told my mother, after she reminded him who I was, that I could be or do anything I wanted... *if* I'd put my mind to it. I'm sure he wished to say "if she'd shut up for a minute."

*Ms. Fahlen:* The other 4<sup>th</sup> grade homeroom teacher. She was younger than my mother, had very high unnaturally red hair and wore florescent orange-pink lipstick, which usually ended up on her teeth. She was the first woman I'd ever heard use "Ms." before her name. When I repeated her name to dad, he corrected me saying, "You mean Mrs.". She 'taught' by making people read out loud from our social studies book with the tractors and aborigines on the front.

*Mrs. Black:* My 5<sup>th</sup> grade homeroom teacher. She was *old*. She had all white hair and black eyebrows that arched when she was mad. Although not a huge math fan, Mrs. Black at least made me feel like I could do it and wouldn't let me get away with "I don't get it." *And*, even though she knew exactly what I was doing, she sometimes let me stay inside at recess when I pretended there was some reading for Mrs. Pinnick that I needed to finish.

*Mrs. Pinnick:* The other 5<sup>th</sup> grade homeroom teacher; good friends with Mrs. Black. She was also *old* and had all white hair, but she was my favorite teacher of the four. She

wore pink lipstick that never got on *her* teeth. I'm not sure if I liked her because I loved the subject of English, or if I ended up loving the subject because I liked her. However, several things connected with Mrs. Pinnick ended up adding to my playground problems: I endured my mother organizing a geeky after-school Junior Great Books club with her *and* she moved me ahead in reading levels so I was again left alone in a corner with a bullseye on my forehead.

*Mrs. Schraeger:* Day after day, though, it was Mrs. Schraeger, the Gifted and Talented teacher, who made me really happy, for one hour of the day, to be at Harlan. My mother had chosen wisely if only for this one special classroom and its teacher. Mrs. Schraeger. She was tall and always smiling. She reminded me that asking *Why?* and not accepting *Because* was good and right. She would never let me look at a problem or project from just one perspective. G & T class: one consistent hiccup of happiness between 7:45, when I got on the bus, and 3:45, when I got home. In fourth grade, I was one of about ten students, identified by our teachers, to participate in Harlan's Gifted and Talented program. Luckily the "Bring Home the Bacon" girls happened to be chosen for G&T too, which made it magically less geeky. We learned about things from computer programming to making sturdy balsa wood structures, from writing plays to making papier-mache puppets to act in those plays. *Plus* we got to get out of regular classes to go to G&T. Sometimes I even got to stay in at recess...

Th

He

dr

sto

me

th

ta

of

G

lin

sc

H

T

S

In

B

g

tz

n

w

## **The Other Parent**

He was there but he wasn't. He was the scary low sound of the Mercedes pulling into the driveway late at night after being called to the hospital. He was the tight knot in my stomach if I didn't excel in every aspect of school. He was a turned back to me and my mother and a conspiratorial whisper and arm around my brother. He was the guilt I felt thinking of that crumpled, petal-less sweater in my closet. He was the insistence that we take piano lessons with an ornery, former concert pianist. He was the impenetrable cloud of cigar smoke and Wild Turkey in his leather-bound book fortress den he called The Growlery. He was family dinners where we discussed Greek mythology but never our lives. He was creating my brother, his *son*, in his own image, hoarding him, trying to soak him in his own misogyny. He was baffled by his daughter; possibly repulsed.

He ended up teaching me so much.

## **The Playground**

So much depends on a grade school playground. Metal bars, social order.

In my few years at Adams, I had achieved princess of the playground status. My friends, Bill, Jason, Tara, Ann, Lindsay and Allison would all wait until I told them what we were going to play that day – hop scotch, kick ball, smear the queer, hump-a-jump, swings, tag. Once, I threw a slight temper-tantrum when Bill suggested a more democratic method of choice, and had to spend recess standing at the fence with my back to whatever stupid game they chose without me...it sounded like tag. Tara came over to sit



with me though. Of all my friends at Adams, only Tara and Lindsey ended up going to Harlan too which might have been nice except that by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Lindsey moved to Texas and I'd ruined my friendship with Tara. Unfortunately, full of my experience as Adam's playground coordinator, I strode onto Harlan's playground unprepared.

*♫ On the goo-oo-d ship Lollipop*

*Barb was da-an-cing and her pants did drop*

*Down to her feet, so everybody saw her seat ♫*

What I was unprepared for were the rules of Harlan's playground regarding the social order. Tease or be teased. At Adams I was busy and bossy but torment was something I didn't practice. I don't think I'd been called a harsh name yet by anyone but my brother and we usually descended directly into pummeling each other rather than name-calling. Suddenly the Harlan kids were spitting things like *pubic head* at me – I didn't even understand that one at first – backed by the harmonies of songs they made up. The things about me that just *were* – good grades, tomboy, curly hair – were wrong all wrong at Harlan.

## **The Targets**

### *Hair*

What was the fascination with hair? I needed short, straight brown hair. No deviation accepted. The red headed kids like Tara got it the worst – carrot top, fire head, bozo.

Then came me with my unruly curly hair – velcro head, q-tip, brillo head. My disturbing non-conformity was on a biological level – the *most* dangerous (speaking of that, I was also too tall). Poor Rick, he had bright red, curly hair. The playground crew had so many names to pick from, their heads popped off. Plus, he walked with a crooked foot and a limp...they could hardly ask for more! The curly part made Rick and me an obvious choice to be paired together in a favorite playground song. Wouldn't our babies have been cute?

*♫ Barb and Ri-ick sitting in a tree,*

*k-i-s-s-i-n-g. First comes love, then comes*

*marriage, then comes baby in the ba-by carriage ♫*

### *Tomboy*

Going into Harlan, my clothes closet looked basically like my brother's wardrobe of one or two years earlier. I wore everything but his old underwear. This was by choice. I idolized my older brother. I loved wearing his old jeans with patches *on* the patches on the knees, button-down oxfords, striped boyish short-sleeved shirts and plaid big-collared button-downs. The boys at Harlan didn't care...they were just happy when I evened up the numbers playing soccer, football or kickball. The girls, however, cared.

The first day of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, my precious Evel Knevel lunchbox (hand-me-down) was drooled over by the boys but ridiculed by a table of 4<sup>th</sup> grade girls. After that, I begged

mom to put my lunches in brown bags like everyone else and even sometimes stomached drawing flowers and smiley faces on my lunchbag like some of the other girls. Gag.

I wanted to be just like my brother. I wanted to wear dirty jeans and play tackle football. However, I was a girl and expected to conform to the narrow, restrictive standards of girl-dom set by my peers. The ultimate irony and cosmic revenge was that I, though absolutely not interested in the trappings of femininity in grade school, was one of the first girls to *really* start looking like a girl. The horror!

### *Grades*

I made the mistake of coming into Harlan loving to learn. I quickly tried to correct *that* ridiculousness or at least fake the ideal of average. Toward the end of 5<sup>th</sup> grade is when I finally thought I'd mastered fake disappointment at my grades in order to give the impression I'd done poorly. However, the fact that when a teacher called on me I couldn't undo my father-programming enough to give wrong answers sort of undid my act.

Through Harlan and beyond I struggled between my desire to conform to the average and my desire to excel. My ingrained fear of failure regularly duked it out with my fear of not fitting in. By the end of Harlan, fear of not conforming had won some battles – boxed up my brother's clothes, tried to feel comfortable in skirts, ironed my hair, slouched – but fear of failure won the war.

One st

Mr. Ro

was no

Fourth

side o

fifth-g

playg

playg

We se

some

really

far-er

confe

gentl

admi

for t

Mon

### **One shining moment of coolness**

Mr. Rop was Harlan's disciplinarian. When a student was sent to the Principal's office, it was not to see our milk-toast Principal Mr. Faust but to see his henchman, Mr. Rop.

Fourth grade: feeling saucy, two other girls and I jumped the fence on the wooded west side of the playground to see if a crazy man really did live in a cabin back there like the fifth-graders said. Iris, the lazy-eye, blue-eyeshadowed, red-haired with white roots playground monitor caught us. Jumping the fence was a serious offense on the Harlan playground. Down to Mr. Rop the three of us were sent.

We sat in silence while he stared at us. The two other girls started crying. Suddenly some brave spirit inhabited my body for a moment and I blurted out: Mr. Rop-we're-really-sorry-but-our-kickball-bounced-over-the-fence-and-we-only-went-into-the-woods-far-enough-to-find-it. I was not known as a trouble-maker...he considered my breathless confession....then he told us to ask Iris to get it next time and sent us back to class with gentle patronizing pats on our heads. Ta da. The two other girls stared at me with admiration all the way back to class. That lie made me officially cool and teasing exempt for the rest of the week.

Monday, however, all was back to normal.

## **The Schoolmates**

### ***Kelly***

Was from Harlan and it wasn't until the end of 4<sup>th</sup> grade that we became friends. We were the only two girls who played soccer and kickball with the boys, and so bonded over our undesirable tomboy status. In 5<sup>th</sup> grade, we played on the same organized basketball and softball teams. She forever had my loyalty when she pretended to forget and didn't use against me on the playground the fact that I once enthusiastically scored a basket for the other team wondering why no one was guarding me (hooray for the days before camcorders). In middle school, as the Derby Dragons, we were also on swim team, ran track and played basketball, softball and volleyball together...our friendship was sealed in our competitiveness *and* our social marginality.

### ***Cassie***

Attended Harlan for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades only. She was from New York and moved back there before middle school – the result of her divorced parents' selfish tug-o-war. I'm sure she goes by Cassandra now with a forced accent on *san*. Now she was different. She was from New York City. She didn't seem to care one bit about getting teased. In fact, she seemed to enjoy being as different as possible – a tactic I admired but never grasped. She wore pointy cat-eye glasses, long skirts, lots of black and wrapped gypsy scarves around her head that clashed with the ones she wrapped around her waist. She fascinated me. I admired her aloofness. She was also in G&T and we immediately became friends – especially after we confiscated papier mache materials for Bring Home the Bacon voo doo dolls.

T

C

B

T

G

**T**

*A*

**S**

**S**

*s*

*s*

**G**

*s*

**S**

*s*

## **The Lights**

### ***Characters:***

Barb: trying to join the Teasers.

Tara: red-head, chubby, loyal friend of Barb's from Adams Elementary

Group: pack of nameless, faceless 3<sup>rd</sup> graders

### ***Time:***

A few months into 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Winter.

### ***Setting:***

*School playground. The backdrop is a small, snow-covered hill. The top of a tan brick school building is visible beyond the hill. Playground noises in the background. The stage is covered in knee deep 'snow'. Children in moon boots and snowsuits are building a snowman at the back of the stage. When the curtain rises Barb paces stage left while Tara stumbles in from stage right followed by shouts. She is pelted with several snowballs from off-stage. Children's laughter.*

**Barb** *(to herself/the audience):* Maybe they'll forget to tease *me* if I join them teasing *her*. *(looking at Tara)* But she's my friend. *(looking down at her boots)* But I'm tired of it. I'm tired of it. *(stuffing curls up under winter knit cap)* I don't want to be teased anymore. Tease or be teased...I'd do anything for them to just ignore me. *(looking at Tara)* But she's my friend.



Ti

G

G

Ba

Gr

Wt

guc

**Tara** (*yelling toward the source of the snowballs while wiping tears*): I'm telling!!

**Group** (*children's laughter, from offstage*): Go ahead, Lardo!

*(the group of laughing children enters playfully shoving and punching each other,*

*Barb watches them as Tara backs toward her and the group advances)*

**Group:** (*to Barb*) What are you looking at Pubic...

*(Barb interrupts the group by stepping toward Tara, Tara, still walking*

*backwards away from group bumps into Barb, she turns around startled and*

*then smiles with relief)*

**Barb:** (*takes a visibly deep breath and shoves Tara hard into a snow drift and says with*

*only slight vigor*) Watch where you're going Fatso Red. (*staring horrified at Tara*

*crying on the ground at her feet, soft whisper*) Ohh.

**Group:** Good job Pubic Head!! (*laughing and shoving Barb as they walk off stage left*

*humming "On the Good Ship Lollipop")*.

*Curtain*

When my mother said, many years later, that 'the light went out' of my eyes at Harlan, I guessed *that* was the exact moment.

## Condemned

19 May 83

*Dad,*

*One of the gerbils is dead. I don't want to see which one. I only got a glimpse, but what I did see is that it was all mangled. The other one is picking at it. (Mom said it's because it wants to keep a clean nest) I won't go close enough to see if their water is empty. And I fed them yesterday. We don't think they cannibalized because they've lived together this long.*

*I think it was Muffin because she wasn't looking too great. And was always in bed. Maybe they got sick of each other, or they were old. I've had them for four years. In a book I read it said they could live in captivity for 2 years, 3 at the most. I've had them 4 years.*

*I'm*

*satisfied*

*with*

*them*

*Love,*

*Barb*

## Literacy Autobiography II

Throughout grade school and middle school I became acutely aware that not everyone viewed reading, writing and learning the way my family did. My peers were not of the same mindset that those things were natural, important and not influenced by standards of coolness. In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, during a section in English class on Greek Mythology, I was the only person who knew all the myths referred to and answers to questions asked.

Remember how the know-it-all was treated in middle school? I quickly learned about blank stares, "I don't know" and the importance of fitting in for social survival. Go ahead, ask me a question about Greek Mythology...I promise that I-don't-know-never-heard-of-it-I'm-too-cool-to-care. However, at home, where I wasn't judged to be uncool, I would stay up all night like a guilty addict reading, by flashlight, Madeline L'Engle's *Wrinkle in Time* or C. S. Lewis' *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* series (I just had to look up how to make 'series' plural...disregard my claim to literacy!). I was beginning to realize literacy was not innocent. I was beginning to realize, in fact, that literacy and the attendant love of learning that often accompanies it somehow led to social powerlessness. This seemed counterintuitive to me. However, middle school being what it was...I quickly dropped out of the gifted and talented program I'd been involved with since 4th grade and learned to inhale cigarette smoke and throw tennis ball bombs off parking structures. Cool! I was still reading obsessively at home but soon plummeted into the V.C Andrews *Flowers in the Attic* series...

Toward the end of high school, with a modicum of social autonomy returning and with the influence of several amazing teachers (Ms. Aviv and Miss Angott, Creative Writing and Advanced Placement English, respectively. Kind and encouraging, insightful and demanding...respectively) I felt less shame publicly pursuing my love of reading and writing. Digression: the word “shame” is staring at me. How ridiculous was it that I felt ashamed of my literacy!? I have distinct memories all through my education of having literacy somehow connected with a sense of shame rather than pride. When I was in kindergarten, I remember bursting into tears (in my isolated corner) because I had gotten some red marks on a reading exercise. When a classmate asked me what was wrong I lied and said I was sad because my grandpa just died...I was more averse to being academically imperfect than to lying. Later, I was more chagrined to be academically advanced. I often quickly stuffed A-papers in folders to give the impression I was unhappy with a poor (cool) grade. I couldn't bring myself to actually try to do poorly in school considering my father-programming from early childhood. However, my greatest coup was when, as a junior in high school, I actually earned a B- in Calculus! To do poorly in school and to not excel at any form of literacy oddly equaled social power. Literacy and power. What an odd dance they have choreographed in my life.

## **Thou shalt not steal**

I know what you're thinking...I was thinking the same thing. Cute dog picture. Gag.

What serious person writes about dogs? And especially dogs rolling on their backs in cute poses? I tried not to write about this picture but Ingo wouldn't let me.

Teachers. There are good models and bad...can a dog, through refocusing the lens, fit in the first category?

Ingo was the most genuinely German name my mom, brother and I all liked – he was a German Shepherd/Doberman Pinscher mix after all. We just couldn't name a 4-lb. 8-week-old pitiful bony thing Adolf or even Fritz. We got the name from Tanja, the daughter of family friends from Germany, who had stayed with us the summer I was twelve. She spent much of her time moping around the house whining about how much she loved her wonderful boyfriend across the ocean: "Ich liebe Ingo zo0000." And we all liebened Ingo sooooo right away ourselves. He was my first dog and I miss him. Oddly, his influence in my life seems to ferment and grow more potent with time – a phenomenon I keep stirring with my pen in order to understand.

Why am I compelled to write this story? I feel compelled to write this because I write.

Writing keeps wounds open, open wounds must be examined with a pen.

August 2000 was the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ingo's death and the 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his emotionally layered homecoming. I was 14 when we got him. He replaced my dad.

The summer before my freshman year in high school I was volunteering at the Humane Society and my parents were divorcing. Ingo and his sister had been abandoned on the corner of a chaotic intersection in a damp cardboard box with a handful of Cheezits for sustenance. I was lining puppy and kitten cages with newspaper the day the two malnourished 7-week-old dull-furred runt puppies were brought in. When I held him, Ingo-to-be's spine poked up between my fingers while he licked my face. He came home the next day, which was about one week after my dad had dropped the divorce bomb during dessert.

My dad left a vacancy in the house mid-August 1986, and I was encouraging Ingo to scratch up dad's precious leather chair before the first day of high school. I took this picture of Ingo belly up on the former leather throne very purposefully – I inhaled his puppy obliviousness which erased the stale, lingering smell of dad's stogies and leather bound books. This picture still has power over me. So sweet. So sad. Those two hot weeks in August, right before high school began, melted and ran together just like the popsicles my brother and I hypnotically placed on the dinner table when dad made the deafening announcement he was “making a mid-flight correction”.

Mid-

worn

my r

Ingo

acidi

pupp

even

diag

lollu

day.

One

pum

and

took

cou

my

mid

han

swa



Mid-flight correction: my father's euphemism for '*leaving* all of you for another woman'. The un-flinching loyalty dogs exhibit is probably what gained Ingo a home in my mother's house that August.

Ingo was my dog – he found me at the perfect time. Throughout my parents drawn out, acidic, cancerous divorce, I distracted myself by concentrating on training and loving my puppy. Sometimes I get the sad feeling that perhaps years of sharing my broken heart eventually broke his. He was only nine when he died. A few different veterinarians had diagnosed Ingo with a heart murmur as a puppy but they had all downplayed it. Perhaps lolling in the chair for my camera was payback for a poking and prodding at the vet that day.

One afternoon, in the first month of age nine, Ingo slipped into tachycardia – heart pumping at humming-bird rate without feeding his body much blood or oxygen. Mom and I had decided we wanted to try an extensive, expensive drug therapy program and took him home from the vet's to rest and begin it the next day. He was so weak that he couldn't make it up the stairs and under the covers to the foot of my bed to sleep-drool on my toes. I decided to curl up on the floor of the den with my friend for the night. At midnight, he very slowly and deliberately crawled onto my lap, put his nose under my hand and, after a quiet moment, had a massive back-arching, eye-rolling, tongue-swallowing, heart attack, and then went limp...his tail even un-curled.

That dog is still so wrapped up in my family sadness. To think of that night still makes my chest hurt. I can't imagine when it won't. To write about it and still feel so much emotion both embarrasses me and piques my curiosity... When will sweet memories of Ingo not bring bitter memories of my parent's divorce? Can I *write* through them? Can I force the wound closed with this thread of ink?

Fall of 1999, I assigned my first classroom full of students the poetry topic of "What I've learned from..." and asked them to go below the surface, and beyond the obvious.

Thinking I should probably, in all fairness, be writing, or at least wrapping my brain around, what they were writing, I started trying to think profound thoughts about people, situations and other non-obvious things from whom/which I have learned deep lessons. I just lied. It wasn't to be *fair* that I did the exercises I assigned with my students, it was to get myself writing again, because at first, the thought of teaching scared the pen right out of my hand. During this writing exercise, Ingo in general, and this picture, specifically, kept popping into my head and I kept trying to lay him to rest again and again. I give. It seems terribly simplistic to me now that my life is immersed in daily deep thoughts academesque style to try and articulate 'what I learned from my first dog' but he just keeps insistently laying his head on my lap-top...

*What I learned from two early teachers...*

From my father I learned that his love was conditional. From Ingo I learned that some kinds of love are constant and simple. From my father I learned not to discuss problems...just leave. From Ingo I learned about loyalty. From my father I learned that

it's more important what people see, than what *is*. From Ingo I learned that what *is* is all there is. From my father I learned that things should be revered and are more valuable than people. From Ingo I learned that a leather chair is just furniture but only a person can ahh-scratch that spot he couldn't reach. From my father I learned that so many different things can be stolen.

When my father, several months into the stale-mate of my parent's 'negotiations', snuck into the house and made my brother and me help him steal that leather chair, his leather books, artwork from Europe and many other things from my parents' 21 years together, that my mother punitively would not give him, I took comfort in the thought that dad would no doubt seethe wondering *who* had defaced his throne. Later, feeling barbed guilt for my forced part in the heist, I gratefully took Ingo for a walk while my stiff-jawed mother calmly and eerily took pictures of the resultant 'crime scene' for her lawyer – empty spaces in rooms and on the walls, empty spaces everywhere.

Somehow my little oblivious puppy, wriggled into that symbolic chair, wove himself into my family story and absorbed some of the cancerous anger that dwelled there...enough to eventually burst a heart.

Teachers. Good models, bad models and both can teach. One can be hidden in a dog suit and the other in a father suit. One can be hidden behind fingerprint and the other in stretched out polyester. One can be hidden in the word 'student' and the other obscured by 'teacher'.

*What I have learned from my students...*

From my first classroom of students: I learned it's unpleasant to be surprised by a double eyelash attack in each eye when sharing *dog* stories – I don't think they believed I was losing eyelashes that quickly. I learned that sharing my own work planted seeds of trust. I learned I don't have to be perfect Day One. I learned to use humor to ease myself next to the word 'teacher'. I learned to move past performance and into teaching. I learned to see unexpected teachers where students should be sitting. I learned I made the right decision to return to being a student to be a teacher...

I know what you're thinking...I can't help thinking the same thing. Cute teaching stories. Gag. What serious person writes about dogs and students as *teachers*? I tried not to make that connection but Ingo, and the fact that I see teachers everywhere, wouldn't let me.

Pr

Ea

ke

M

co

c

b

e

e

.

## Practice

Early morning, singing the words and the note names full lung while banging on the keyboard two fingers to one key, ♪ PAPA HAYDEN'S DEAD AND GONE, BUT HIS MEMORY LINGERS ON ♪ CCEEGGE, FFDDBBG. "Papa Hayden", the first song I could play by heart. I was five when dad decided it was time to begin another phase of child grooming – piano lessons. The first man my brother and I took lessons from had been sent by the piano store. The chair creaked under his weight and he seeped over the edges. Every week in the six months he served as our teacher, he inevitably fell asleep during at least one of our lessons, snoring louder than our playing. Mrs. Martin was next. Dad researched her through acquaintances and then observed a lesson she gave. He was duly impressed. She had played with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and studied under the famous Russian pianist, Misha Kotler. She scared me. I was her youngest student. She only made an exception because Dad, who wanted my brother and me to take lessons together, assured her I had discipline beyond my years. She had half glasses chained to her, which she often placed on the end of her nose, looking down at me over them, with one eyebrow raised. This usually happened after I mumbled how long I'd practiced that week. She kept clippers in her purse; if my nails clicked on the keys during the lesson she would whip them out and give me a clipping – verbal and nail. "Barbara, stop." clip clip "And *how* many hours did we practice *this* week?" clip clip...silence, my eyes widening, trying not to cry..."Give me your practice record. Now play what you were to have memorized while I look at it." My mom decided it would be helpful for her children if she also suffered through weekly lessons. After almost two years Mrs. Martin

finally asked mom “And just *why* is it you’re doing this?” Mom: “To help keep the kids interested.” Mrs. Martin: “They’ll do just fine without you.” That was mom’s last lesson. My brother and I took lessons from Mrs. Martin every Friday evening for ten years. She retired and moved away around the same time dad left us and that was it for piano – Mrs Martin and dad were a unified front and quitting piano was not an option before their absences. In college, believing I missed the discipline piano brought to my life, I signed up for non-juried lessons, realized I’d lost my way on the keyboard, spent every free moment in the sound room practicing feverishly, imagined dad and Mrs. Martin’s severe, spectacle disappointment, then, seething with guilt, quit piano again...it was the only class I ever failed in all my years as a student.

## **Prison**

“When you start shootin’, you hardly ever hit who you want.” – Chris, Mid-Michigan Correctional Facility inmate and participant in poetry workshop.

### ***Characters:***

***Young Barb:*** 19, Alma student, bursting with, among other things, naïveté

***Older Barb:*** A thin shell around Young Barb, a little bit older, a little bit more perspective

***Matt:*** 22, Young Barb’s boyfriend and poetry workshop partner

***Chris:*** Early-20s, white inmate, participant in poetry workshop

***Smoke:*** Mid-20s, black inmate, participant in poetry workshop

***Tyrone:*** Late-20s, black inmate, participant in poetry workshop

***Dale:*** Late-30s, black inmate, participant in poetry workshop

***Dennis:*** Early-40s, black inmate, participant in poetry workshop

***Jeff:*** Mid-40s, white inmate, participant in poetry workshop

### ***Time:***

The collision between April/May 1992 and the present

### ***Settings:***

***Alma College:*** a small, private, liberal arts college consisting of around 1200 students mainly from upper middle class Michigan families. It is located in the middle of the



*mitten in the predominantly farming town of Alma, Michigan. At the time of the prison workshop, the college was both beginning to emphasize service-learning and struggling to promote diversity. Students nicknamed Alma "the bubble".*

*Mid-Michigan Correctional Facility: a mid-sized minimum-security prison consisting mainly of inmates serving out the ends of longer terms. It is situated in between cornfields in St. Louis, Michigan north of Alma and east of the leaden Pine River. The prison itself is encircled with several menacing layers of glinting razor-wire fencing. The inmates called it a 'kiddie camp'.*

***Older Barb (OB):***

My first teaching experience was in a prison. And like my recent teaching experiences it had the added layer that I was a student at the same time. In April/May of 1992 Alma College students from an advanced creative writing class I was in participated in a poetry workshop at the all male Mid-Michigan Correctional Facility. The professor of our class, Dr. Palmer, through his kind, open, creative teaching style, is the model I keep in mind when I teach. It clicks that my first teaching experience happened through him. He chose poetry as the focus of our workshop having in mind other workshops some well-known poets had put on in prisons. We were the first class of undergraduates he tried this with. Although the experience would have been interesting at any college, Dr. Palmer especially understood the value of getting students outside the bubble that was Alma. What better way to pop the bubble than with the razor-wire drama of a prison setting, kiddie camp or not?

Before the workshop sessions began, we were visited in our Alma classroom by a representative from the prison sent to deliver a strict set of rules regarding interaction with the inmates: Do not give any inmates your full name. Do not give any inmates your phone number or address. Do not discuss their convictions or sentences. Women: Do not wear shorts or short skirts or any tight or revealing tops. Do not fraternize with inmates on a personal level. Do not forget these men are convicted felons.

The number of Alma students from our Creative Writing class willing to submit to the prison's background check and participate in the workshop was ten and I, as a sophomore, was among them. That meant five tables of two Alma students for the twenty-five inmates who had volunteered for the workshop. We squeezed jig-saw puzzle-like into the trailer, plunked down in the middle of the exercise grounds, that served as the one classroom facility for the entire prison. Dr. Palmer drove us to the prison in his enormous blue van Tuesdays and Thursdays for 2-hour sessions five weeks in a row in April/May of 1992. The van ride was usually full of chatter between the students picking each other's brains for workshop ideas to add to the ones we discussed in our class on non-workshop days: What poems are you going over today? Did you bring any of your own? Do you have any new writing exercise ideas? The ride back was often quiet.

Upon arrival, the Alma students were frisked and sent through metal detectors prior to entering the prison to teach. The women usually had an audience of the male students

from our class watching us get frisked. There were plenty of male security guards to frisk the male Alma College students but only one female guard to frisk the women.

We chose our workshop partners. Mine was an easy choice, Matt, who also happened to be my boyfriend at the time. We both played college sports – football, volleyball – and I was giddy with the word-parallel of student-athletes teaching student-inmates. We had five inmates in our group – Chris, Dale, Dennis, Tyrone and Jeff. None of them ever missed a workshop session. I used to cling to the idea that we were the only bright spot in their day never once considering that attendance wasn't optional.

***Young Barb (YB):***

Journal assignment for class: Tuesday 5.12.92

Is it flattering? No. By the end of the day, Tuesday, which started with the prison workshop, I felt like bits and pieces of a person. The first half jigsawed my outsides and the second half scrambled my insides.

I would not say everything that went on at the prison was unexpected or traumatic, it's just that I was not prepared for such a barrage of attention...unsolicited. It started with a very sweet poem addressed to me from Jeff that he called 'Beauty and the Beast'. These men are *lonely*. Fine. I took it as a kind gesture because it was not lewd or suggestive but made me know I had somehow left something of myself on someone's mind. Anything to generate poetry.

**Jeff:**

**Beauty and the Beast**

As I gaze beyond the silence of the moonlight  
I'm thinking of a beautiful woman tonight,  
it's your beauty I'm truly thinking of, my  
gracious and beautiful cooing dove.  
I can picture the breeze teasing your soft gold hair  
and the warm sun tanning the flesh that's bare,  
also I see the softness of your gray blue eyes,  
they look so gentle and they don't tell lies.

I'm not judging you like the cover of a book,  
it was just your beauty that made me look,  
and I believe that beauty runs deep inside,  
just as sure as the rising of the high tide.  
Barbara don't be embarrassed by this poem  
I'm just trying to make you feel at home,  
'cause in four weeks our class will cease,  
the final parting of "Beauty and the Beast. ☺

Au revoir mon frer,  
Jeffery A. S-----

**OB:**

When I re-read that poem, it still brings a rush of self-consciousness and then I have to laugh. For public consumption – Jeff, Matt, my journal for class – I forced a reaction of patient acceptance. *Anything to generate poetry.* Gag. One of my first earnest forays into martyrdom. Despite my outward indignation I copied his poem word for word, with the goofy smiley face and all, into my own journal and then admitted, though only in my journal, how pleased I was. I was so young and so pliable and so *flattered*. Would I be so flattered now? I fear I would be. Jeff had surreptitiously slipped me the poem right before we began our third workshop session and watched closely as I read it. One more

teeth-grinding layer to all this is that while I was struggling in my first experience teaching to feel like a *teacher* the inmates were insistent that I should mostly remember I was a woman...and that somehow thrilled me too.

**YB:**

Personal journal entry Tuesday, 5.12.92:

When I first read [Jeff's poem] I was really uncomfortable and just smiled politely and put it away, but reading it again and writing it now, it makes me happy.

**OB:**

Is one body capable of simultaneously feeling: empathetic, hypocritical, flattered, indignant, teacherly, taught, naïve, cynical, manipulated, manipulative, lustful, self-conscious, observed, observant, earnest, embarrassed? I feel all these things when those weeks in April and May of '92 collide with the present.

I turned 20 during the course of the workshop. A young 20. A young, sheltered 20 from an all-white affluent neighborhood, who was only becoming slightly less sheltered away at college. I neatly, naively, blindly, blithely compartmentalized the whole experience. I still do. So what that we walked past razor-wire, metal detectors and a gauntlet of leering inmates as we made our way to the trailer. We were teaching poetry. So what that our group of inmates intimated they were in this kiddie camp for things like murder and assault. I decided they must be overgrown, angry, misunderstood Seans and together we would write beautiful mud-salve poetry. So what that several of them visibly looked me

up and down front and back to begin each session, wrote me inappropriate notes and included references to my body in their poems. They were writing poetry and I was teaching them. So what that, as the workshop went on, I chose baggier and baggier clothes to wear or that I self-consciously held my workshop folder over my chest, like a newly budding middle-schooler, when walking from the trailer to the prison exit or that I read sexism into every word coming out of my boyfriend's mouth. He was male and sat at our table in the trailer...therefore I sometimes cast him as just like 'them'. He said: "Forget about it." I heard: "Calm down you hyper-sensitive, chick." He said: "Humor them." I heard: "Prostitute yourself." He said: "Let me hold you." I heard: "Let me hold you down." The prisoners weren't affecting me. My life would not intersect theirs in any significant, lasting way. I was just there to teach them life-altering poetry. I just didn't realize whose life would be so altered.

**YB:**

Journal assignment for class: Tuesday, 5.12.92 (continued)

Just to explain why I felt so cut up though by the end of the day...I left the prison feeling very conscious of being a female. Lou, in the van, after I told him about our session, jokingly suggested that I shave my head so no one would bug me. Grr. It was an innocent comment and most of the things said to me through the course of this particularly strange in that way day were innocent but I just found myself getting more and more flustered and then angry. For some reason, after getting back to campus, it seemed like every single male I came across, either playing softball or walking out of the dorm had some comment, gesture, connotation something or maybe I was just hyper-

sensitive. Anyway, by the end of the day I felt like so many pieces put together walking on legs. Tits and ass as that one Chorus Line song goes. It was not *me* walking around but parts someone could enjoy. As one of the guys said at the prison about me or at least the compiled me sitting at the table, "yeah I could handle some of *that*." So at that moment I was *That*. And so on. I learned more Tuesday than I think I would have liked given a choice but what a valuable, aggravating, teeth-grinding, hate every male, bite off my innocent boyfriend's head, door-kicking day.

**OB:**

Poor me. Those nasty prisoners were looking at my body. I didn't like that at all...not one bit...no siree...I was appalled. Appalled into practically bursting with covert pride in this new power I'd just discovered. Sex. My personal journal entries from this time are all jumbled together, bouncing frenetically between the collision with my own sexuality both at the prison and in my relationship with Matt and the great, often, new-to-me, sex we were having. I romanticized the prisoners and I romanticized Matt. I imagined that Matt would have willingly 'defended my honor' but was bound by our agreement that the prisoner's not know we were a couple. The sexual tension at the prison pulled me taut, and he, as my heroic, quiet, strong boyfriend was there to absorb my potential energy. The enduring picture I have of us as a couple is this: We're posing, dressed for a formal dance. Matt, quiet and strong in his tight-end football playing size and strength dwarfs me; arm around my shoulder protectively. I lean into him, looking athletic but slightly awkward in heels and a black, strapless, serve-up-the-cleavage sheath. We skip the dance entirely.

With perspective, I'm beginning to understand the connections between the very new and physical nature of my relationship with Matt and my reactions to the attention of the inmates more completely. It was like a chemistry experiment gone bad: in a small beaker mix five lonely inmates, a raging hormone boyfriend, one 19-year-old girl just beginning to exercise her sexuality, add in a dash of poetry, teacher-idealism and naiveté...now *shake*. I must have been walking around in my tits and ass indignation like a taught, twanged tuning fork with my frequency set on titillate. And both Matt and the inmates tuned in. Gracious-me-how-dare-you-look-at-my-body-don't-stop-why-didn't-I-discover-this-earlier-you-pigs!

**YB:**

Personal journal entry: Tuesday, 5.12.92 (continued)

Wow. I learned a lot today. The rest of the visit after Jeff's poem to me was a little unnerving b/c for some reason we saw other sides of these guys. We read a good number of poems with them and somehow these poems connected with these men because different people came out of their mouths than the week before. Dennis, after we read Clifton's "White Lady", talked of his brother's son getting shot in the head over a bad heroin deal. And Chris, after Watt's "Mother" and Dennis' story said something to the effect of having at least 15 more years to serve paused, and then added, "yeah when ya start shootin' ya hardly ever hit who ya want". And Dale was talking about prejudice after Jeff read one of his own poems about Rodney King saying that in the prison cafeteria when whites and blacks automatically tend to split up and sit on opposite sides



he goes, "where there's the least hostility" and Dennis (who is a very big man) said he just goes where the line is shorter. Also Dennis, who has been transferred from lots of different places talked about seeing a guy in Jackson killed with some wood spike thing jabbed right in his jugular and how your life can be worth a pack of cigarettes in prison. Tyrone said he never wants to remember his past and the way he deals with it all is to just forget it. Wow. And how many pages in my journal have I spent bitching and whining about my dad and the divorce? They call the Mid-Michigan Correctional Facility a "kiddie camp." Chris also wrote about feeling like property because everything they touch, just about, has Property of Mid-Mich Correctional blah blah blah stamped onto it. Wow.

**Chris:**

Caged

If I was a bird  
I would fly away.  
I would fly out of this cage  
that they have me in  
to feel so free  
no longer like someone's  
property

**OB:**

At the prison, Chris and I both felt like a piece...of property and ass respectively. His poem forged a connection. Damn, that wasn't supposed to happen! Despite my attempts to compartmentalize, the workshop has endured in my memory as an amazingly fruitful experience. Not only did it generate pages of my own journals, poems and fiction, it also

planted seeds that turned into tiny fruits of confidence, seeds that turned into a more complete picture of myself and my background, and the most virulent of all, seeds that turned into a desire to teach. After I closed my agape mouth and absorbed their stories, by association at least, my thick, shiny shellac of naïveté began to melt the tiniest bit. Although some of the inmates were earnestly trying to get laid on paper, some produced strong poetry in our time together and that was amazing to witness.

We read poetry with them, we wrote poetry with them, we practiced brain-storming techniques and devised writing exercises, they shared their work with us, we shared our work with them. The first time Matt and I brought in poetry of our own, I believed that I was simply bringing in what was my most polished poem at that time. I must not have been able to hear my more deeply layered thoughts over the whine of the tuning fork.

clean White teeth

you with your clean White teeth and  
you with your shiny straight soft hair.  
you with your smooth, pale, thin  
White skin.

you loved to turn my rough  
Black hands over  
and hold them next to yours  
so White  
to show how our skin was  
Almost  
the same color  
on the soft pink side.

and you loved those soft pink palms  
on your pale White face  
behind closed doors,  
closed eyes.

you loved my White smile  
framed by pink lips.  
and you loved my pink palms and soles.  
but you could not love my  
Black face and Blackest elbows  
and you could not be brave  
enough to see past  
what was alike.

you loved my White teeth  
because they were White  
like yours.  
but you would not see  
that next to your White skin  
your own clean teeth  
turn a frightened yellow.  
~Barb

**YB:**

Personal journal entry: Tuesday, 5.12.92 (continued)

Wow. I read my poem "clean White teeth" and each guy had a copy and when I finished Chris asked what it was about and Jeff answered "interracial relationships" and I said yes and then Chris asked where I got it "if I didn't mind" and I said partly from my own experience and partly from imagination. And as those words left my mouth I could just see Tyrone and Dennis (both black) look at me totally different. Tyrone kept saying, "this is all-right, yeah this is all-right. *You're* all-right" and asked me to sign it! To Tyrone from Barb. And then Chris asked me to "autograph it" too so I did the same way but then he goes "No, you have to put your last name on it for when you get famous". **Totally** unprepared. Stutter. And he slid it across the table back to me and I knew I shouldn't have but I felt so flustered and I did put my last name on it and then instantly got really nervous. Matt was mad and thought I should tell Dr. Palmer, but I'm not going

to. It was an interesting experience because I *want* to trust these men. I just do. But I felt nervous about it all...and kind of manipulated. The 'rules' the guards had given us 'for your own safety' were ringing in my head. Not bad just forced learning. Appreciated learning though.

**OB:**

Ok. Now what on *earth* was I thinking sharing "clean White teeth"? I didn't, at least I hope I didn't have in the back of my mind as I went to make copies of that poem... 'I just want them to like me, to accept me, to see me as not just a rich white kid from the college'. But what was I really thinking? I remember that experience every time I choose to share work with a class I'm teaching. In a Creative Non-fiction class I taught I shared a piece I'd written about my parents' divorce. As I handed it out my stomach churned wondering how the students would react to my essay. Would they be embarrassed? Would they turn away from my vulnerability? Or would they feel connected? In a poetry course I taught, my first college teaching experience, I actually shared both Clean White Teeth and parts of the prison workshop story behind it. A wonderful excavation. Not only did it help me air out my conflicting memories but the story also impressed the students with the simple fact that I'd taught poetry to prisoners when I was about their age. They thought I was cool and I realized that almost every action in the classroom is fueled by ulterior motives. I do believe sharing work also has the more innocent effect of building trust, and the courses I've taught and shared work in have confirmed my belief. However, I have to dissect my motivations each time I share my own work with students. In the case of the prison workshop, I did not yet have any

motivation-dissecting tools. I had neither perspective nor any prior teaching experience. I sallied forth anyway. Clean White Teeth was a poem I'd written for an earlier creative writing class. I believed it just happened to be my most polished piece at that time. I believed I had no ulterior motives. None whatsoever. Matt shared a poem on alcoholism. I thought it was a wonderful choice. I wonder now if we looked pathetically transparent to the inmates in our group.

**YB:**

Personal journal entry: Tuesday, 5.12.92 (continued)

After the clean White teeth incident, I was talking to Jeff about one of his poems and Dennis and Matt started talking and when I looked his way, Dennis looked all guilty and they were kinda laughing but wouldn't tell me why. Matt told me later that Dennis was asking him if he had a girlfriend and Matt said no (we agreed it would be better if they didn't know we were dating). Then Dennis talked about being lonely and asked Matt which one of us Matt would date "Blondie or Red" (Steph) and Matt pointed to me and Dennis nodded. Then after the session was over, Smoke from Steph's group came over to me and asked if I had a pen pal. I said no and he asked if we could be pen pals "cause I wouldn't mind getting to know *you* better". Steph told me later that he had told her I was "cute" and she also said another guy said "Yeah, I wouldn't mind getting some of that" about me. Creepy *and* grr. So I left the prison real tense, said something in the form of snapping at Matt when we got out of the van and he walked off without one word to me! Then I got back to my room even more tense and Dr. Palmer called to see if everything was ok b/c he'd heard I'd had "sort of a difficult time at the prison today."

We talked for a bit and I didn't want him to worry or get any of the inmates in trouble so I assured him it was no big deal and everything was ok.

**OB:**

Did I think I was at the middle school boy girl dance? *Will you go out with me? Check* yes *or* no. Some of my personal journal entries on the prison workshop are almost indistinguishable from my sophomoric, now stomach churning Sunday night wrap-up-the-weekend entries – “I can't believe Matt's stupid friend asked if he was 'off to play with Barbie dolls again' when we were leaving the party!!!” I was inhaling the attention and exhaling forced indignation at my objectification – a new word to me compliments of my English courses. During high school I had been curled in a ball, socially, while I licked the wounds caused by my parents' divorce. I was underdeveloped, even fetal, in the area of dating and the opposite sex. I'd never dated anyone until after high school...I'd never been asked. Suddenly in college, uncurled, happier, away from home, men were noticing me, hearing a faint hum. By my sophomore year and this workshop my hum and twang had been ratcheted up a few notches and was ricocheting off of their hums and twangs and confusing me like a crazed strobe light. I was incapable of perspective regarding that type of attention. All I knew was that it was attention.

**YB:**

Journal assignment for class: Thursday, 5.14.92

I really do believe these are decent men. They were ridiculously grateful when I told them just that. I was sorry they had to be so grateful.

**OB:**

I was so young. The above excerpt makes me cringe. I turned that blather in! What practiced compartmentalizers we all were. The language I used to describe their response – *grateful* – and the fact that I had the gall to actually tell them I thought they were *decent*...ugh. I'm holding my age out like a shield: I was 19, it's not my fault!

**YB:**

Journal entry for class: Thursday, 5.14.92 continued:

Today we talked about racism, slang, homosexuality...and so on. Tyrone talked about a mixed race child playing with a black child and the black mother snatching her black child away from the mixed race child like she was taking it away from germs. We all agreed that's where prejudice all starts. Dennis and *Jeff* were saying how those kids could be friends and who is telling them not to...

**Tyrone:**

Ivory-G- Butterfly-B-

She has caught a yellow butterfly  
That was once free.

She takes it with her where  
ever she may be

Her friends say she is a fool.

To be seen with her yellow  
butterfly in school

Her mother don't know it yet

but this pretty Ivory girl  
has her mind set.

That the yellow butterfly is  
better than others. And she  
won't settle for less for another.

The pretty Ivory girl is coming  
of age. Not to let friends, or  
society keep her in a Daze.

She has opened her eye's, and closed  
her ears, and learned not to  
let others think her out of how her  
heart feels.

**OB:**

I read that journal entry and Tyrone's poem and cynically think: Now who's transparent?

Then I think: Not a bad poem, look what I helped create. When I remember my  
experience teaching at the prison I am incapable of being consistent or even clear.

Cynical, idealistic, cynalistic, idealytical. So much of my idealism, and probably not a  
little of the naïveté, is still very much with me when I teach. I expect to be able to trust  
the students. I believe there are life-changing opportunities in the classroom everyday. I  
want to help. I'm tempted to give out my home number. How can a person go forward  
and teach without the shield of idealism? What happens when it's gone?

**YB:**

Personal journal entry: Thursday, 5.14.92 continued:

Smoke, from Steph's group, when we were all on break, called me over and handed me a  
note and asked me again to be his pen pal. I did not get flustered, but put it in my pocket



and said thanks. He called across the room asking me to read it because he said he wanted to see my reaction. It was a sweet note, surprising in that he had decided I was the "little lady" for him, but harmless enough. Of course I blushed. Grr. But thanked him and said I'd write him a letter knowing I never would. He put his address on the bottom so the awkward situation of refusing to give out my own never came up. Tyrone had a lot of poems about inter-racial relationships. Matt and I had sort of a running bet as to whether or not that would be a topic today because of my clean White teeth poem and their reaction to it. I was surprised at his work, the bulk and the quality. He was a little sheepish about one about two pillows and asked me if I understood what the two pillows he wanted to "hug and not bruise" were. I just told him it was a clever poem. Period. Dennis asked me if he could have my pen when I left cause then he'd be, "inspired." That was flattering and surprising, but not insulting. Again, another very interesting day. I was so happy when mom called so that I had a fresh set of ears to tell everything that's been going on and hear it again to think it over again.

***Smoke:*** -

Barb a poam for you

A profound and beautiful person with great knowledge of insight of being a poet of noble thought in an imaginative way. That I will like to associate with you beyond this class!

A poam

On that first school day I  
knew right away you were that  
little lady for me! I could see  
that you are! All I want  
All I need is a profound queene  
like yourself. It took me some

time to realize what I've been  
missing. But now its clear in my  
mind without any doubt you  
are that special lady for me

~poet Tim B-----  
write back soon! ☺

**OB:**

And we thought we were there to teach. I'm grateful I have these journal entries, just like I was grateful then to have my mom's fresh set of ears. These entries along with my other memories of the workshop allow me to revisit that time and take a hit off my 19-year-old perspective. They also allow me to forgive myself not only for being so young and naive but also for documenting it. It's a valuable thing to drag out dusty memories and journals and remind myself of the conflicting circumstances surrounding my first teaching experience. Repeating the same scenario now would not work as well. I'm afraid I wouldn't be as wide-open, wide-eyed and sponge-like as I was then. I needed to be all those things to be open to learning from the inmates and not so absolutely sure they had nothing to teach me. An openness to learning from students of any circumstance is necessary to teach.

**YB:**

Personal journal entry: Thursday, 5.14.92 continued:

Another interesting exchange was when Dennis asked Tyrone how old he was and then he asked me. I was interested to see their reaction: "I'll be twenty tommorow." Quiet. I think they'd thought I was older. Then Jeff goes, "Geez, I'm old enough to be your father." Quiet. Then Dennis said, "I'm sorry, I know that's something you're not

supposed to ask a lady." and I said, "It's alright, I'm not old enough to worry about it yet."

He nodded and said, "No. No you're not." Interesting. I had to smile.

**Jeff:**

**"Parting Moment"**

Like a kite in the wind away you blew  
I'm so sad this class is now through  
it was fun sharing poetry with you  
and very heartfelt, honest and true.

Maybe we can share our poems someday  
and there's so much more I have to say,  
so I hope we can correspond by mail,  
would you? could you? Be my "poetry pen pal?" ☺

Jeffery A. S-----

It would be very special if we could share one another's poems and thoughts Barb "if" you would like to write me. I don't bite and I'm "definatly" not dangerous. And please Barb don't tell the staff I wrote this, I could get in trouble I think?

Bye for now my poetry friend

JAS

**OB:**

The last day of the workshop we held a poetry reading in the prison cafeteria. We sat in easy, casual groups that paralleled our workshop groups. Alma students did not huddle on one side of the dance floor while inmates leaned surly against the opposite wall. We danced together while one by one the inmates went to the podium and read. Almost all

the inmates chose to read what they thought was their best poem. Dale read one called "Limits" that began "True love has/no limits/but lots of dirty laundry..." Tyrone read "Ivory-G- Butterfly-B-" never looking up, Chris read "Caged" avoiding eye contact with the guard, Jeff read one about Rodney King and Dennis chose to just watch. There was lots of clapping and whistling from both students and inmates. As the Alma students left for the last time we gave each of the inmates we'd worked with a poetry anthology of the whole class' work, including a collaborative poem our group wrote called "Bedspins". We called the anthology "Out With It". Centered small and alone on the first page is written something that, to me, has a constantly metastasizing meaning:

***"To serve the memory  
of our meeting".***

## **Scenes From a Travelling Classroom**

**“Spain is your classroom” – Oscar, instructor at Tandem Escuela Internacional, calle Luis Vélez de Guevara, Madrid, Spain**

## **Journeys**

### ***To Spain***

I journeyed from the Alma bubble to Madrid, Spain to spend second semester of my junior year enlarging my world at Tandem Escuela Internacional. Madrid popped the bubble as soon as I stepped off the plane with the explosion of language spoken much faster than in my Alma classroom, the labyrinth-like metro – no subways in Alma!, and the looming buildings – I wouldn’t see the stars again until I escaped the city.

I traveled with another Alma student, Kelly, and we knew at luggage checkout that we had very vain-Americána-like packed many pounds too much. On the bus from the airport to La Plaza Colón, Kelly’s big duffel got wedged in the aisle. The passengers stepped on and over it without pause while I considered pretending I wasn’t with Kelly who was by then sitting on the floor of the bus first pushing then pulling her fat bag to no avail. On our first metro ride from La Plaza Colón to our hostel, the train car was so full that Kelly and I had to back in with our luggage to a chorus of then-unrecognizable gritas (expletives) from the other passengers. Someone paid us back by pick-pocketing everything I had in my I’m-a-stupid-American-traveler fanny pack. Gone were \$50 American emergency dollars, my Swiss Army knife and some lipstick that I only hoped was not the perpetrator’s color. The metro took us to Hostal Jósafina, where we would

spend two nights before meeting our host families, in what used to be a nice part of the city. *Used to* is the key. Carlos, our Alma professor, had recommended it based on a lovely stay several years ago. We had to maneuver our way through a throng of prostitutes in front of the hostel door who found two American students loaded down with an extraordinary amount of luggage dragging themselves into their hostel to be hysterical. Jósafina herself looked us up and down and then announced she charges extra to use the shower that was in our room – a bathtub with a curtain around it next to the sink and toilet. In our first of many Spainglish linguistic licenses Kelly and I dubbed it and her together Hostelfinaputa. That showed her.

Journal entry 1.10.93: I guess I'm a little homesick right now. Besides being in a different country w/a different language and different customs, I'm in a big city, which is peculiar in itself. Everything is moving so fast. Blur! And for so many people there isn't much human contact. Especially as a foreigner I'm not making much eye contact and I'm constantly worried that someone will strike up a conversation with me. The city is an interesting creature...I feel so isolated by it.

Madrid was a New World to me and I alternated between being la conquistadora y la conquistarada. For the first month or so I believed it was me vs. Madrid. Days when I jumped the metro turnstile and wrested 25 pesetas from the city's grip, I won. Days when I jumped the metro turnstile and leapt onto to wrong train, ending up on the south end instead of north, Madrid won. Days when I remembered my metro cara dura (hard face), taught to me by my host family, and not one person talked to me on the way to

school, I won. Days when I remembered my tunnel-visioned cara dura so well that I actually shoved an older babushka clad woman out of my way while focusing on getting to an escalator, Madrid won by arming that woman with a deftly swung 50-lb. purse to knock me on my impudent Americana behind. Days when men hiding under stairs disfrutando themselves scared me out of the metro and I walked many blocks to school, Madrid won. Days when a man walking backward, while making lewd gestures at me, ran into a lamppost, I won. Days when I stopped a pick-pocket in the metro by yelling to Kelly "There's a pickpocket right in front of me!", I won. Days when the lady I saved from the pick-pocket didn't thank me and then the pick-pocket himself jumped on my foot before running out the closing metro doors, Madrid won. Days when looking up through street lights and skyscrapers I could no longer remember what the Seven Sisters looked like, Madrid won. Days when I escaped the city and could reintroduce myself to all seven in the darkness of the countryside, I won. Days when the city, with its thick unfeeling skin absent-mindedly swatted me away like a pesky bug, Madrid won...over and over. We had an interesting relationship Madrid and I...rhinoceros and fly.

We also had an interesting connection. I had kicked and fidgeted my way through Spain along with Portugal, Greece and most of Europe once before. I did not make the connection then, but while the plane taking me from the U.S. to Spain may have seemed to be traveling a straight line, it was actually not only beginning a circle of my own but completing one my parents began as well. While stationed in Germany during the Vietnam War, my mother and father traveled by car through Madrid and the rest of Spain when my mom was 7 months pregnant with me. They felt confident driving the back,

bumpy, twisting, baby jolting roads of Spain because my dad was a doctor and they had packed, with amazing self-assured forethought, an emergency delivery kit in the car – a basin, umbilical clamp, suction tools and a blood-flow-stopping hemostat – all wrapped in scrubs stamped property of Stuttgart Army Base. I wanted out out out! after the trip because immediately upon returning to Germany, I arrived almost one month early.

I remember my mom telling a story about being very pregnant with me, clambering up on the base of a lamppost, lost in a crowd, trying to watch the elaborate Semana Santa processions that take place at Easter. I had always thought the story had taken place in Italy. They were in Madrid. That's her, the only one looking at the camera, in the telling 70's clunky sunglasses and mini-maternity-skirt. Dad was far back in the crowd when he snapped this and so could only watch as right after the shutter clicked a man snuck up behind mom and pinched her very pregnant behind. Happy Semana Santa. I lost hours looking through these old slides from my parent's time in Europe grateful for my dad's meticulous labeling habits. This slide, dated April 1972 is labeled 'Plaza Mayor, Holy Week'. Almost exactly twenty-one years later I sat sipping café con leche in La Plaza Mayor unknowingly looking toward the very same lamppost.

*To a new 'family'*

Casa de Mateus. That semester, I was peripherally folded into the lives of the Mateus family, calle Doctor Esquerdo #163, 8<sup>th</sup> floor, Madrid, Spain, the apartment of Señora Olga Mateus and her two grown sons, Mauricio and Enrique, a.k.a. Qui-que. The apartment, large by Madrid standards, felt like a box to me. The 'front' door and the



'back' door were side by side in the hallway. The front door, which opened into the dining area, was never opened except for company. After the first day – ringing the streetside bell terrified to meet my host family, worried about how poor my accent would sound saying “Hola, soy Bárbara, la estudiante americana”, dragging my vainly overpacked luggage to the elevator, standing on one of my bags in the telephone booth size elevator, knocking on their door, surprising them with my exhausted, grateful hugs – I was no longer company. I was only given a key to the back door, which opened into the kitchen. If I stretched out both arms I could almost touch the opposite walls. Olga walked into the kitchen while I was doing this once. I instantly began touching my toes and told her I was going for a run. She looked at my boots, pants and sweater, and shrugged her oft repeated ‘odd Americana’ shrug. In the beginning of my stay, Olga enjoyed showing me off around the neighborhood for attempted gain. Early one morning she roused me bed-headed and puffy-eyed to go to the market with her. At the fish stand she grabbed my shoulders and shoved me forward saying “¿Bonita, no?” to the fishmonger hoping for a discount. She didn’t get one.

Qui-que mostly shuffled, a little hunched over, between his bedroom, the t.v. room, the dining table and the bathroom. The only conversation we ever had was when he asked to look at the pictures I’d brought from home. He politely commented on all the pictures, then pulled out a thin brown album sparsely filled with black and white pictures of himself or his father, who, divorced from Olga, lived in Columbia. I pointed to one picture of Qui-que playing tennis, barely disguising my surprise at his athletic pose. He

said he used to play a lot before he hurt his back, closed the album, and shuffled back to his room.

Mauricio treated me like a little sister, made littler initially by my infantile grasp of the language. I seemed to inspire something paternalistic in him. He loved to have long conversations over cena, lasting long past dessert, instructing me in my Spanish.

However, I can track throughout my journal how our conversations became less and less infantile and less and less Mauricio-dominated the older in the language I became. Some of our first conversations were about American customs. Mauricio bombarded me with sí o no questions and was fascinated to learn that, sí, women often drink beer in the U.S., or that no, I didn't have to ask my father's permission to date. In much later conversations we discussed different forms of racism in the U.S. vs. Spain. These discussions were spurred by a national debate about whether a gítano (gypsy) baby boy should receive a kidney transplant. Despite my impassioned argument over the ridiculousness of the debate, the little boy died. Mauricio's response was that it takes a long time for old attitudes to change.

I eventually realized my battle with Madrid was pointless, so I shifted focus to Casa de Mateus. Initially I believed I could be the daughter/sister the house was lacking.

However, it eventually became obvious that Olga was running a business. After one month of being an only child, Fabienne, another student from the U.S., moved into Mauricio's room and he moved into the hall closet! One month after that, my friend Kelly also from Alma, who was barely surviving her host family, doubled up in my room.

Cha-ching! Either Olga was cruel or she really didn't understand about girls. Fabienne, Kelly and I shared one tiny bathroom and Olga refused to ever supply it with more than one roll of toilet paper at a time keeping the stash under lock and key. She stingily doled out toilet paper like it was spun gold. For breakfast, all we were given was one tiny muffin con mermelada y te. Kelly and I took to ladróning muffins from the pantry under dark of night to pad the next mornings' breakfast feeling justified in our thievery over the growl of our stomachs. The box-like apartment became cell-like through over-crowding and stinginess, which forced Kelly and me out onto the streets of our classroom for as many hours a day as possible. Not a bad thing.

### *To a new language*

For the two days before we met our host families, Kelly and I were too afraid to try out our Spanish and so ate at Burger King or McDonald's. Then we moved to trying deserted restaurants – deserted because we were still trying to eat on an American schedule, i.e. dinner around 6:00 p.m. – and just pointing to the menu while using as little of the language as we could. One of my greatest accomplishments in the language was when I felt confident enough in the communication skills to argue with Mauricio.

Journal entry 2.9.93: Tonight was so cool! Fabienne, Mauricio and I had a very heated discussion all through cena about women and marriage. It was very interesting! I was also so excited that I actually could get my point across and even basically argue en español!

Another of my greatest language accomplishments during the semester I spent in Spain? Telling a joke. Telling a joke to my Spanish friends, Maga and Alberto, and having them laugh at the punch line (I've convinced myself) and not at any lingual botching. I cannot remember the joke; I can't even begin to reconstruct it. All I remember is that the punch line was "tomatos planchados", smooshed tomatos. Sidesplitting.

The same night I told my historic joke, Maga and Alberto took me to a dark tapas bar to listen to a band popular for their earnest covers of Rolling Stones songs:

*Covering "Beast of Burden":*

*I'll never be your bestial virgin,  
don't make me carry your pizza burden... ♪*

Shoulder to shoulder, the young Spanish bar patrons faithfully and enthusiastically sang the same words the popular cover band did. The fact that confusion went both ways was comforting.

Except for the indication of how much Spanish I've lost since that semester, I love that I need my dog-eared Spanish dictionary to read some parts of my Spain journal now. By the end of the semester my journal was a jumbled mix of English, Spanish and Spainglish. And when I'd talk to my mom in the last month my English sentences would come out organized by Spanish sentence construction: "Mom, yesterday we went to La Plaza Mayor for to drink a bunch of coffee with milk." What? Kelly told me I even

spoke in my sleep en español once or twice. In spite of myself – my fear of sounding like a two-year-old, my apprehension about strangers striking up conversation, my lack of confidence in my language abilities – the language sank in. Deeply.

### *Beyond Madrid*

Not just Madrid, but Spain was our classroom. Not just Spain but anywhere we could get to! Kelly and I decided early in our semester to save our pesetas for trips. Together we went to Segovia, Avila, Cuenca, Granada, Toledo, Alicante, Salobreña (twice), Cordoba and Morocco. I also went to El Escorial and la Valle de los Caidos with Alberto and traveled alone from Madrid to Munich. I discovered later that my parents, twenty-one years earlier, had been to almost all those places as well. Life in Madrid, after several weeks, somehow found a way to become normal, routine. Life beyond Madrid thankfully never got there.

### *Segovia and Avila*

Our day trip to Segovia and Avila was our first trip out of Madrid.

Journal entry 1.23.93: Segovia was wonderful, beautiful, fun...I'm so happy I went! It did me such good to get out of this city. Maybe there is (definitely) *esperanza* that I will fall en amor con España and maybe just not love Madrid.

Segovia was another point of connection with my earlier, fetal trip to Spain. The photo of the city is from slides my dad took. I walked under that very aquaducto in the photo

flabbergasted that I was touching stones manipulated into place in Roman times. I would have been equally amazed had I known my parents along with me as their freeloading passenger had walked under the very same arches.

Also, when mom was looking through my thick album of journey pictures for the first time, she stopped silent at a photo of me standing in front of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella's Segovian castle El Alcázan.

She had once stood in that exact spot, gratefully leaning, pregnancy-tired, against the sturdy stone wall. In searching feverishly through the slides for that exact picture, I found one my dad had taken from the same angle as mine but absent my mother.

#### *El Escorial and la Valle de los Caidos*

Another place mom, dad and I all visited was El Escorial. The photo is again, compliments of my father who made a point to get the big picture type shots that I forgot.

Alberto, my language partner that Tandem had arranged, took me to El Escorial. Alberto and I met often throughout the semester and each time we got together we alternated speaking either all in Spanish or all in English. He was a bit of a history buff and full of interesting facts, which was great for me. History por Alberto: El Escorial was Felipe II's palace which he had built more or less in the shape of a grill to honor the fact that San Augustine was martyred by being burnt on a grill. Fun.

Journal entry 1.31.93: From El Escorial we went to La Valle de los Caidos, (the valley of the fallen). Franco built it in the 70's to commemorate the dead from the Spanish civil war. It was pretty amazing. Part of it is this huge cross at the very top of a mountain. One finger of one of the figures is the size of a man (Mauricio fact). The other part is a cathedral under the cross and therefore built right into the mountains. It was built by the blood and sweat of prisoners.

Alberto made me pose for this picture. He was very pleased with himself for positioning me so it looked like the cross was coming out of my head.

### *Beyond Spain*

By our Easter break, Kelly and I were feeling rather cocky about our travel savvy. We decided it was time to get out of Spain altogether for our vacation. We decided Morocco, specifically a little town called El-Jadida on the Atlantic coast, should be our destination...sandy beaches, cheap hotels. We decided we knew better than our Tandem teacher who told us that women, American women in particular, should not go to Morocco. Ha! ¡Pollo! We were travelers. We knew what we were doing! We took along two friends from Tandem, Darius and Peter, and called ourselves prepared.

### *Morocco – Tangier, El-Jadida*

Journal entry 3.30.93 Hôtel de Provence, El-Jadida, Morocco:

O.K., so we got off the boat at Tangier and we were instantly “chosen” by, we’ll just call him, Jaime (we kept forgetting his name, but it sounded like Why Me?) Anyway, we

were already paranoid about being hustled and this guy was so persistent. In rehearsed English: "I am talking to you seriously. I am working here 20 years at the port. I am a decent fellow. I am having a family. Ask the police, see you can go ahead and ask them, you see? No problems with me they will tell you I am a good guy. See? You understand? They are chasing away the hustlers. I am a guide. You are scared, right? You have heard about Tangier and you are scared, right? Well, I am talking to you seriously when I say to you I am not out to hustle. 20 years here at the port I am working..." and on and on. The four of us were getting way stressed out and he would not leave us be. Every time we turned around he was standing in front of us blocking our way and talking to us seriously. We did finally ask several different police-jerks and they kept saying "Yeah, he's fine" so we caved because we had 5 hours to wait for our train to Casablanca and he wanted to give us a tour. We agreed on 1000 pesetas. As we were walking away from the port I whispered to Peter that I felt a lot better that the police knew Whyme and told us he was o.k. and he just turned to me and said very matter-of-factly: "he pays them."

### *Tangier at 20*

Dirhams exchanged, he guides  
us, four American students,  
through the maze-like medina  
toward Tangier's Kasbah.  
Under the Moroccan noon,  
layered clothing is heavy and I curse  
this sweaty concession to modesty.

We twist and slither in single file  
toward the market, passing  
dripping Gibraltar monkeys, skinned  
anonymous creatures and twitching



rabbits, hung by their heels  
next to figs and blood-red berries.

Around each bend, eyes within shadowed  
doorless doorways emit envy we're sure,  
ignorant that they actually sneer  
and mock us as we labor  
under our excessively overstuffed,  
name-brand hiking packs.

Savvy student adventurers, we blindly  
follow our guide through narrow,  
unnamed passages, strutting  
behind him into the Kasbah to suffer  
snakes his partners gleefully drape  
around our brazenly exposed necks.

As the four living nooses tighten theatrically,  
one proud mouth screams, one loses all breath,  
one offers up lunch and the last can  
only stiffly giggle hysterically. The cohorts  
snicker and calmly wait for deep-  
pocketed money to be frantically waved.

Dirhams snatched; they slowly uncoil four snakes.  
We stare expectantly at our guide...  
He exaggerates a shrug and sneer...  
Conceded money slapped into his palm, he finally  
moves to undo us from this adventure. Behind him,  
we drag ourselves out of Tangier's labyrinth, pockets  
empty, unable to meet the laughing eyes.

Outside the kasbah, after our tour left us dirham-less, Peter wanted to just sit at the train station, so Darius, Kelly and I made our way to a hotel to exchange travelers checks, ignoring trailing Why-me Juniors shouting "Hotel? Tour? Guide? Take your picture?" in practiced German, French, English or Italian, sure we had to be from one of those countries. No go on the travelers checks. Bad luck was a common theme in our journey to Morocco. We ended up exchanging a hodge-podge of cash: pesetas, deutchmarks, francs into a measly amount of dirhams. I think the man at the counter, somehow

foreseeing that the rest of our journey to El-Jadida would continue to be bumpy, took pity on us and asked about the rest of our schedule – arriving in Casablanca around midnight and then trying to hail a cab for the hour plus trip south to El-Jadida. We were so stupid in our ‘planning’. He called our hotel, the Hôtel de Provence in El-Jadida, confirmed our room, and most importantly, he arranged for them to send a taxi to pick us up in Casablanca. To the train station to await our train to Casablanca!

My journal relates the whole messy train-ride to Casablanca in an odd mix of wide-eyed breathlessness, naïveté and chin-jutting, none-of-this-*really*-scared-me sarcasm. I relate everything as one seamless story without acknowledging the confusion of language that pervaded every adventure. Between the four of us we knew Spanish and English along with a few phrases in French. The Moroccans spoke French and Arabic along with a few broken phrases in English. Communication was chaos – mostly done with hand gestures with one or two word phrases interjected sporadically. Complete chaos.

Journal entry 3.30.93 Hôtel de Provence, El-Jadida, Morocco:

So...Darius, Kelly and I walked back to the train station thinking we're pretty cool and patting ourselves on the back for getting the hang of Morocco and there is Peter talking to some guy and sharing a bag of pistachios. He was going to Casablanca too, imagine that! At first, with our back-patting still fresh, it seemed innocent enough and we were soon joined by his “brother” (a small guy wearing a peach shirt) and another friend (big guy with dark glasses and a black leather jacket). They were teaching us phrases in Arabic, sharing their pistachios and I must admit it was a nice change from Whyme. With my

perfect hindsight, I know we should have realized they were latching on to us as hopefully easy targets and we also should have paid attention to how many times they double-checked that we were going to Casablanca too. We also met two girls from Brazil who were taking the train to Asilah (the stop before Casablanca) and we should have stayed close to them, but I know now that our new “friends” were trying to make sure they had us all to themselves.

We started lining up along the platform getting ready for the train to arrive. A sea of people materialized crowding the area and suddenly we were way down the platform from our Casablanca “friends” and close to the girls from Brazil. But just before the train pulled up and the crush of people started, the three Casablanca guys came running up to the four of us. Also, some old man latched on to us and told us he’d find us seats “when the crazy starts”. People everywhere, mass confusion, and Brazil girls nowhere in sight as the train stopped and the crowd crushed toward the doors. Peter, Darius, Kelly and I were trying desperately just to stay together in the confusion. The old man jumped on to the train and yelled at us to board there. I was losing Peter, Darius and Kelly because my huge backpack with me attached to it was getting stuck in the crowd and I started to panic as the river of people began to carry me past the door they all had jumped into. Suddenly the biggest of our three “friends” (sunglasses man) basically picked me up by my huge backpack and threw me in the door, luggage and all, and jumped in behind me. Deep breath. So the four of us with the old man’s help found an 8 person compartment. He put our bags overhead and waited for one of us to give him money...and then the BIG fun started.

There were only 8 spaces in the compartments and there were 2 guys already in ours when we got there. Our 3 “friends” tried to get in the compartment but I guess they didn’t ask nice because all of a sudden there was a huge brawl. The old man wisely took off tip-less. Now gritas were flying everywhere in Arabic. From what we’ve pieced together our 3 “friends” wanted to sit with us in a big way. (I know we’re all charming, but this was freaky) They told the guys that were already in there that they knew us from California (it seemed like everyone in Morocco assumed that all Americans live in California) and we’d all been friends for 2 years. What!? The new guys turned to the four of us and asked us if that was true and our shocked faces were enough of an answer. Then, I guess it turned religious because our peach shirt friend had apparently had some beers (not allowed by Muslim religion) and in the continuing gritas cursed Allah somehow and really flared the tempers. During the tiff, Kelly and I were closest to the action. Peach-shirt dove over Kelly and I and basically was sitting on the floor near the window at Peter and Darius’ feet pretending to “protect” all of us but really trying to avoid getting popped in the face. Heaven forbid anyone would reach across two American girls to belt him. Then, some new character showed up at the door of the compartment, pulled out a huge Crocodile-Dundee looking knife and proceeded to wave it in the faces of our 3 “friends”. Great. Right after that, I was inadvertently nailed in the right eye with an elbow as one of the original guys sitting in the compartment yanked Peach-shirt from his haven and punched him in the face. I was fighting a very strong urge to both burst into tears and laugh insanely while I was thinking very clearly about whether a stab wound from such an impressive knife would be too unbearably painful.

Finally the bumbling train police showed up and removed our 3 original “friends”. We were left with new wonderful friends: the guy who punched Peach-shirt (and me) in the face, the guy who yelled the loudest, and the knife-waving lunatic, who sat down right next to me. Whee. The knife-toter looked exactly like the drunken scrawny, red-eyed loony-tunes cat with a whistle-lisp who is always competing with Sylvester for Tweety.

So our new set of friends start right in telling us how our other “friends” were bad people who cursed religion and swore in the presence of ladies and they just couldn’t have that (but punching is o.k.?). What gentlemen. One of them told us that his wife was in California (of course) and pulled out a handy letter from her so old and smeared it was illegible, and another told us his wife was in Denmark and he was moving there soon. What a crock, and we’ve known our other “friends” in California for 2 years. They also told us that our other “friends” were hustlers and that they were probably going to “fuck you over in Casablanca” (so much for not swearing around the ladies) and “steal your wife” they said directly to Peter while pointing at me. Grand. I was relatively prepared for horror stories about getting robbed, etc., but I was far from prepared for the notion of me (“for her light hair”) being “stolen.” Bizarre. Then they tell us they are going to Asilah and we should definitely go there with them. (Now who’s hustling?) The Asilah guys were really pushing it and I was starting to (in my hours of sleeplessness daze) agree “...yeah, Asilah...let’s just stop this hell ride....” They kept telling us we’d basically die, or worse for Kelly and me, if we arrived in Casablanca at midnight like we were supposed to. Then all of a sudden the train was at Asilah and Kelly and I got up to get off and Peter and Darius were saying no and I was truly wishing we would get off there

because that's where the girls from Brazil were going. The four of us almost split up, which would have been a very bad thing for Kelly and me. In the midst of the Asilah guys trying to herd Kelly and me out the door with them, one of the girls from Brazil shoved her head in the compartment and grabbed the four of us and took us to the compartment they had been in. They had been sitting with a man and his two young daughters and she said he knew we were in trouble and he would "take care of us." So we piled into his compartment, lost the Asilah guys, and had our lives saved by strangers – a red-headed woman from Brazil, and a Moroccan father travelling with his young daughters.

We were all still very traumatized because our original 3 "friends" moved to the compartment next to our new one and were continuing to keep very close tabs on us. The four of us have figured out that the big brawl to start the train ride was solely about who would get to sit with the fresh meat for hustling purposes. What joy. Family-man spoke no English and only a very little Spanish. He was so sweet with his two little girls – one was 5 and the other, who had crazy curls and was asleep in his lap – was almost 2. He told us everything would be o.k. and he was the first man in Morocco that I actually, really felt like we could actually, really, trust. I remember, while I was trying not to cry during WWII in the first compartment, briefly looking out the window and seeing people working the hillsides, plowing with donkeys and thinking how very beautiful this country was and wishing I could just stare out the window for the rest of the trip. And now that we were finally safe for a few moments with Family-man, it was dark outside. Not fair.

Our “friends” Dark-glasses and Peach-shirt in the next compartment eventually came to visit us. Dark-glasses squeezed in between Peter and Kelly right across from me, and Peach-shirt blocked the door. Dark-glasses was still munching pistachios and rudely tossing them at my feet; apparently this had become personal. Family-man was visibly shaken up after this visit. Kelly and I kept saying emphatically “¡No! ¿Comprende? ¡No!” while they ignored us and spoke directly to Family-man. Dark-glasses was trying to bargain with Family-man to get him to abandon us to them! He offered him money (easily read universal finger rubbing sign for money) for the four of us and when Family-man said no Dark-glasses pointed to Kelly and me and offered him money for just us! (Later, when we could sort of laugh about it we kept doing impressions of Belushi from “Blues Brothers”: “Ze women! How much for ze women?”) Just imagine what they were thinking! Where would Kelly and I be if Family-man had just said “screw it, can’t handle the pressure and I don’t care about these people anyway...” After we physically shoved Peach-shirt and Dark-glasses out of the compartment, and latched the door, Family-man actually tried to find and tell the keystone train cops with no success.

About 20 minutes before we were supposed to arrive in welcoming Casablanca at the witching hour, Family-man started planning our escape from the “friends.” In broken Spanish he planned to have us run off the train in formation: Family-man in front carrying the 2 year old, Kelly behind him carrying his bag, then me with my little backpack, huge backpack and holding the hand of the 5 year old, then Peter and Darius bringing up the rear with the rest of the luggage. As the train slowed down we rushed to the door and jumped off before it stopped. Our “friends” were right behind us, still

sticking close and watching carefully. I saw them join up with a waiting group. Scared. We all ran toward the gate and the parking lot beyond. As soon as we squeezed through, we spotted another lifesaver. Standing next to a big white Mercedes taxi (don't get all excited, it was a beat up semi-clunker) was a man holding a bright yellow plaque that read Hôtel de Provence! We thanked Family-man as much as we could while he hurried us into the taxi, grabbed his 5-year-old's hand and rushed toward his car. As we drove away, I was hoping he and his daughters wouldn't be made to pay for his kindness...

Compared to the asphyxiating anxiety of our journey from Madrid, El-Jadida was like a long, deep breath. The owner of Hôtel de Provence himself, Mohammed, at 1:30 a.m. held open the door for his newest, weariest guests. He actually took my hand as he led us to our room. It was cavernous – all the better to echo Darius and Peter's snoring – the bowed bed Kelly and I shared usually rolled us both into the middle by morning, the bathroom had no warm water and the floor slanted...it was perfect. We slept for 12 hours. The next afternoon, the four of us could only muster the bravery to visit the restaurant three doors down from the hotel. Everyone who passed us dining at our sidewalk table stared at us, mouths agape. Foreigners, American women especially, were not a common site in the tiny town of El-Jadida. Mohammed quietly suggested, when we returned from dinner, that we – he nodded sheepishly at Kelly and me, then tugged my hair – stay in after dark. We did not protest and that night the four of us began a marathon game of hearts. We ended up with a lot of lame pictures of the four of us in the room – playing cards, trying on hats, sitting on our beds, on our way to the shower. I only took pictures of El-Jadida, and the people we met there, during the day. And we did



meet some wonderful people. I learned that not all Moroccans were like our brawling train friends.

Journal entry 3.31.93 – El Jadida: We found a beach called Sidi Bouzid. Mohammed drove us there and it is gorgeous. It's clean, goes on forever, the waves are huge and make that incredible, beautiful big wave crashing noise. I can't get over how much beach there is! The waves break way out and come sliding way in so we have to put our towels about 50 or 60 feet in from where the waves break b/c they come up so far on the flat sand. Kelly and I walked down the beach and when we came back, there was a guy sitting w/ Darius and Peter. It was Rachid.

At first Kelly and I stood about 100 feet away from them watching. Did we think they couldn't see us? All three started waving us over and still we stood there. I kept seeing Dark Glasses and Peach Shirt remembering the friendly way that mess began. Rachid stood up and Kelly and I started looking for pretend shells in the fine sand hoping he was leaving. He poked me in the shoulder and then said, each word articulated, "I am Rachid" and laughed. Then he handed me his brightly woven red, green and yellow Rasta cap and wrapped my hand around it. This was a promising start. I took my Cat Stevens tape out of my walkman and handed it to him wrapping his hand around it. Friends. He waved down the beach to several other young men and suddenly we were surrounded with a flurry of introductions to Rachid's friends: Lahrsen, Nebil, Breen and Imad. All nine of us squeezed onto our towels, facing West toward the Atlantic, trading

disconnected phrases. Nebil: “NBA Action, It’s Fan-Tas-Tic” Barb: Shoukron (thank you).

That afternoon, helped by our new friends, we found the bus back to El-Jadida. By the time we reached our destination the bus was so full that people were standing on the front and back bumpers and I was sardine pinned against a window haplessly sitting on my hands. I was therefore defenseless against the sticky orifice-probing fingers of a little boy sitting on the lap of the woman next to me. My ‘patience’ was apparently endearing because even though I was the last of our group to struggle off the bus, every passenger helped pass me stadium-like toward the door depositing me head-first onto the street. I lost a flip-flop in the process, which, with lots of hearty laughter, was flung out after me as the bus moved off.

Rachid and Lahrsen alternated picking the four of us up at Hôtel de Provence to meet the rest of the group for the late a.m. bus ride to Sidi Bouzid. After hours at the beach followed by a stinky ride back, we’d wash up and get dressed for dinner at one of their houses. They easily and open-heartedly invited us into their homes. This intricate social planning was accomplished by gestures and the wonderful fact that Lahrsen could tell time in English.

Journal entry 4.01.93 El-Jadida: We ate cous-cous at Lahrsen’s house! We watched his sister, Latifah, make it while drinking mint tea she had made by stuffing mint leaves and sugar in a pot of boiling water. It tasted like warm toothpaste. The kitchen was a

kerosene tank that they put one pot over and the water was from a well in the house by the door! We ate with our hands from one big bowl set in the middle of the low table and learned to roll it in balls and flip it into our mouths with our thumbs like they do. I wasn't very good at it, since I was using my right hand. Latifah had us try on her djellabas, the hooded, long sleeve outer garment women must wear outside the home. We actually ate real Moroccan cous-cous in a real Moroccan home with real Moroccan friends! I still can't believe how lucky we are to have met them.

We ate at Lahrsen's again the next night, but it was Rachid who caught and cooked our dinner of fried fish – eyeballs, fins and all. One of the fish Rachid served with an exaggerated flourish was an eel...coiled in a circle, biting its own tail. Despite the fact that I don't usually like my food staring at me or baring its teeth, it was a delicious break from cous-cous. Our lessons for that night were drinking toasts. They taught us 'misa-hecha', pronounced "miss I hate ya". We taught them 'cheers', 'chin-chin' (español), 'down the hatch', 'bottoms up', and then Peter descended into teaching them to swear.

Our last night in El-Jadida was a huge, several course, send-off. We ate dinner at Rachid's house with Lahrsen, Imad, Nebil, and Breen. Rachid's extended family which consisted of his mother, seven sisters, two younger brothers, grandparents and aunts, greeted us and socialized afterwards but did not join us for dinner. Instantly upon entering his house, Rachid showed Kelly and I to the kitchen where his mother and seven sisters were. We watched his mother making cous-cous, expert hands a blur. One of his sisters kept touching my hair and twirling the curls around her finger. Although the night

ended with many four cheek kisses (means good friend) and hugs, there were two moments of bumbling awkwardness on our parts.

*Awkward moment #1*

Journal entry 4.3.93 El-Jadida: After the first course of raybi (yogurt drink) the women served soup. That was interesting. I was sitting in between Peter and Lahrsen and I whispered to Peter (joking) that none of the soup was going to get to my mouth b/c I had to eat with my right hand. So then idiot-Peter feels compelled to say something to Lahrsen. Grr. He asked if it was ok to eat with your left hand but Lahrsen didn't understand the question and said one could drink the soup or use a spoon but not to eat it with your fingers. Then Dunderhead cleared up the question and Lahrsen said/gestured that "no, Muslims do not use their left hand for anything". Fine, we all knew that and the conversation could have been over but then Super-dunder just had to say "Because Barbara eats and writes with her left hand." Silence. Great. Then Lahrsen got embarrassed b/c he'd also said something about how using the left hand is bad and I got embarrassed b/c I was afraid they'd all think I was dirty or something. I laughed it off and tried to look natural feeding myself with my uncoordinated, jerky right hand. Lots of soup and cous-cous ended up on my socks until Lahrsen and the rest decided it would be helpful to form the cous-cous balls for me, smooshing it into perfect spheres with their bare hands (gross) then placing it on my right thumb for fumbled flipping into my mouth. Thanks. My stomach was lurching by bedtime.

*Awkward moment #2*

Journal entry 4.3.93 El-Jadida: The sister who was twirling my hair had a thing for Darius that she did not hide. Eventually as a joke (we thought) they got 'married' complete with plastic rings and tzaghreets – celebration yells – from the other women. At one point though, at the very end of the night none of us dumb Americans (especially Darius) were quite sure whether it really was a joke! The sister had her arm hooked in his and would not let Darius leave with us! Peter, Kelly and I were nervous giggling walking down the alley from Rachid's door, wondering if Darius was coming or not. When we were half-way down the alley, we heard a loud bye! and he came shooting out of the house after us. We continued to nervous-giggle until Rachid and Lahrsen dropped us off at the hotel with many hugs and kisses and bslamas (good-bye, peace go with you).

Good-bye to El-Jadida, good-bye to our new Moroccan friends whose kindnesses overshadowed our first Moroccan 'friends', good-bye Mohammed and Hôtel de Provence, good-bye warm toothpaste drink, good-bye cous-cous, good-bye Morocco. Not so fast. Morocco stayed with me for at least a month in the form of a mysterious intestinal disorder, which visited me for the first time on the train ride from Casablanca to Tangier. I suspected my very hands-on dinner of the night before as partial culprit. Using my angry, twisted, green, if-you-talk-to-me-I'll-puke-on-you face as a shield, the four of us sailed through Tangier and onto the boat to cross the Straits of Gibraltar unmolested. Glad to be of service.

Spain had somehow undergone a sea-change while we were across the straits in Morocco. It was home! We could speak the language, Kelly and I could walk the streets unescorted, and no one was trying to feed me cous-cous! I barely refrained from cartoon kissing the ground upon disembarking.

### *Madrid to Munich*

After Morocco I still had two major journeys ahead of me. I was to travel alone from Madrid to Munich where my mother was going to meet me and then after two weeks in Germany, we'd make the trip home. At the end of my long, lonely trip to Munich would be waiting, my mother, Tanja, and her mother, Tanti ('aunt') Barbara, for whom I am named.

I had honed my I'm-not-embarrassed-to-ask-for-help skills in my four months as a foreign student. They came in handy. If I thought I had overpacked to begin with, I'd done nothing but accumulate for four months – gifts, books, letters even two large blankets from Morocco. I ended up carrying on my person a large hiking backpack, a regular sized backpack like a pregnancy (not terribly becoming...but the weight balance at least kept me standing upright), a body-sized duffel and two overstuffed pink and white striped plastic grocery bags. Everything on the floor and couch of this homecoming picture, except for Ingo, I carried on my body!

In this pathetic state I met a woman from Switzerland, named Lisle who was also travelling alone. We learned each other's names after an awkward and by now familiar

pointing, gesturing, “You Tarzan, Me Jane” type conversation when I asked her which number train was on its way. She took pity on me and the one-zillion pounds of baggage I was lugging, pushing, squeezing and very nearly weeping over in the extremely narrow train aisles. Without pause, at the end of our shared trip from Toulouse, France to Geneva, Switzerland she insisted on giving me two Swiss francs to rent a heavenly cart for hauling my ridiculous load many landings away to await my last connecting train in a dignified, back-saving manner. Between her French, German and Swiss and my Spanish and English we could not find a common language except for kindness.

In Germany and Austria, with my mother this time, we visited many places my mother and father had been twenty-one years before. It was good to close that circle together. It was always my impression growing up that the years mom and dad spent in Europe were their happiest together. Walking the same route to the fortress in Salzberg that they had walked, or spending time in Heilbronn with Tanja and Tanti Barbara I hoped we could re-write some of her memories and make them sweet again, not just bittersweet.

We visited Neuschwanstein Castle on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday – more than just miles away from the drunken Alma birthday I would have had.

### *Back home*

I travelled among unknown men,  
In lands beyond the sea;  
Nor, England! did I know till then  
What love I bore to thee.

~ William Wordsworth

Just as Madrid had undergone a transformation when I was in Morocco, the U.S. was almost unrecognizable to me upon my return. Curbs and the resources used to create and maintain them baffled me as did garbage and recycling trucks. Mail arriving only two days after it was sent confused me. And the language. Now English seemed to be spoken too quickly for comprehension. But it was home and I had an almost painful urge to travel and embrace every inch of the U.S.

My best friend, Teri, also studying Spanish at Alma, met mom and me at the airport in Detroit. She would be living at Casa de Mateus next semester. We spoke together excitedly in Spanish and English about my journeys and hers to come and began yet another circle....



### **Literacy Autobiography III – Conclusion**

During my undergraduate years at Alma College majoring in English and Spanish I fully rediscovered the geek inside and embraced her. Away from home, away from my grade school, middle school and high school classmates and surrounded by fellow geeks, I could publicly be myself academically *and* be happy! I found myself staring agape at professors I admired who did this literacy thing for a living. I had found what I wanted to pursue...without shame without giving up power.

After graduating from Alma, I spent several years as a writer for a market research firm still somehow finding a way to deny continuing the path toward my personal version of literacy which was connected to teaching. Forsaking the business world just under the five-year brain seepage limit and returning to school I happily feel as if I have *finally, publicly, proudly* stated, without intending to ever attempt recovery: “Hi, I’m Barb, and I’m a literacy-aholic.”

Now every aspect of literacy that I encounter excites me – How will the tangential nature of the Internet affect ways of learning/literacy? How can I expand my own literacy world? What will I, how will I and just plain, *will* I contribute to future students’ literacy autobiographies?

I spent one year of my graduate experience remembering what it was to be a student instead of a corporate drone. The second year of graduate school exploded with my first experience

teaching my own course. Poetry no less. I fibrillated between ecstasy and terror at the specter of standing in front of a class. Who was I to believe I could *teach*? I contacted Dr. Palmer at Alma, who will forever be connected to teaching in my life, easily falling back into the role of advisee. Help! He sent me a measurable stack of examples, ideas and encouragement. The only way I could walk into that first class with any modicum of confidence was in the feeling that I would be channeling Dr. Palmer – his patient and creative teaching ideals and style. With every experience since that first class, I have foraged more and more of my ideas for teaching from my own life, experience, idealism and enthusiasm.

In an earlier essay, **Prison**, I rhetorically posed the questions: How can a person go forward and teach without the shield of idealism? What happens when it's gone? I don't think the shield should block out all else. I don't think idealism is enough to arm yourself with before entering a classroom. I do believe it is a way to nourish my enthusiasm and a salve to prevent me from curling up to lick any teacher-wounds. When the shield is gone, then your skin must become hard as your defense. Once your skin becomes too hard, you are immovable and no teaching or learning can happen.

Some of my idealism as a human and not just as a teacher was constructed in response to my father's cynicism. I thank him for that as well as for the early programming and all the painful pricks and prods that nudged me closer to the decisions that have brought joy. One of the most hurtful and disdainful things my father ever said to me growing up was: "I can read you like a book." I hated him for that statement because it oozed with self-

ascribed power. Power over me. Power to somehow write me and therefore to read me.

Literacy and power – they continue to dance.

Now, I am writing myself.

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES



3 1293 02092 8861