BIO


TEACHING STATEMENT

Some of the questions I ask myself before walking into the classroom are: How can I instill in my students a passion for writing that will continue beyond the last workshop? How can I transform this class into a supportive writing community that values earnestness and risk-taking? How can I help each writer achieve his or her full potential as an artist?

I believe that my students find me to be a supportive and approachable presence. I teach with energy, and with a good sense of humor. There is plenty of laughter in my classroom, and real warmth amongst students and between the students and I. But I see the writing life as a serious endeavor, one deserving of deep respect and commitment, and I consider the decision to take writing seriously to be a decision to take one’s life seriously. I demand a lot from my students. When I assign them Letters to a Young Poet or “The Writer as Illusionist”, I do so with the hope that Rainer Maria Rilke or William Maxwell will speak directly to them, about their work, its difficulties and its values.

My intention is always to make the making of art a choice of freewill rather than an assignment. I would describe my classroom environment as warm, inclusive, inquisitive, and respectful, though I believe in a wider definition of “classroom”. I have sought to take full advantage of the resources available at the universities at which I’ve taught. It was not uncommon for me to lead a class into the Arboretum at the University of California-Davis, or to take my students to visit Edgar Allan Poe’s room on the campus of the University of Virginia, or to the art museums of both schools for ekphrastic writing prompts. I believe in throwing open the doors of the classroom and encouraging students to create work that is engaged with the world.

Indeed, my main pedagogical philosophy is centered on the idea that a work of art comes into creation through a series of decisions, from the decision to write in the first place to decisions the writer makes within the piece itself. While teaching at the University of Virginia I came up with a new way of workshopping student writing that encourages students to ask questions of the writer whose work is being considered. I believe that confronting a young writer with questions such as “Why did you decide to write this piece? What made you choose this particular metaphor? How did you know that this was the image upon which you wanted your piece to end?” returns them to the crucible of the artistic process, and teaches them in ways that direct comment or criticism cannot. The interrogative tone of this workshop model encourages openness, curiosity, and generosity. I had the experience of watching young writers reflect upon their own artistic decisions, and grow through these moments of reflection. Rather than taking umbrage and defending their work, I watched them become more conscious and considerate of their artistic process.

I have been fortunate, in my own life as a student, to have studied with many remarkable teachers (of poetry, fiction, religious studies, photography), and saw firsthand a quality that they all seemed to possess in abundance: a desire, and an ability, to impart their passion to their students. One of the ways in which I impart my passion for great literature is
by sharing the works that have moved me most in my reading life. When I teach creative writing, I often share impassioned appreciations of the lives of my favorite artists (poets, writers, painters, and musicians). By sharing a passage from *Anna Karenina*, a letter by John Keats, an anecdote from the life of Chekhov, I touch again my own obsession with writing. One of the great joys of teaching is the way it helps me to love literature anew.

**FIRST ENCOUNTERS**

My father is a poet, so my first encounters with poetry came at a young age, through him. I came to poetry by way of his poetry readings, his poems, the books on the shelves of the farmhouse I grew up in, the poets who visited us on our farm. Some nights my father would come in from milking and get dressed up, and we would go into town to hear him do a poetry reading. His poems were and are about rural life, and the audience was composed mostly of farmers. I remember my grandparents being in the audience, and finding it fitting that my father was reading poems to his father about the life they had shared together on our family farm north of town. Those nights, I would hear my father speak in a way I had never heard before: I became aware that poetry was akin to prayer and incantation, and that there was something magical about it. Sitting on the floor, listening rapt with my brothers, probably eating cookies, I was hooked.

**THREE POEMS**

**Cicadas**

We found their shells in the oldest oaks,  
backs blown open where they’d fled themselves.  
That was all that remained of them, like the clothes  
of the girl the search party finds hanging  
on a black branch, white clothes  
they bring back to her mother, folded.  
There was always a moment before  
we touched them when we’d loom  
near to stare into their amber chambers  
as once, in a museum, I stared  
into a suit of armor through the hole  
the sword had bored. But in the shells  
not a darkness but a light like that which  
I imagine seethes through the keyholes  
of treasure chests in sunken ships. No matter  
with what care we picked them they always  
left a hooked leg or two in the bark  
like the crampons of climbers who  
have fallen. Sick now in a city far  
from where I like to imagine the shells  
of the ones we never found are  
still clinging to the highest branches,
I wish I could leave my body
blown open upon this bed
for a boy to find and carry
up to a farmhouse cupped gently
in his hand so as not to crush it.

Film of the Building of a Coffin Viewed In Reverse

The little tacks that pinned the satin in fall out
like baby teeth. The satin passes back through
its fantasy of becoming a prom dress: it returns
totally to the silkworms in the mulberry.
The pillow blows apart and the down darts
back into the plucked goose. The black lab
swims backwards with the bird in his mouth:
the goose flutters up into the sky and flies
backwards with the flock into the north country
as the shell inhales the lead shot and the shell
itself returns to the oiled dark of the gun.
The hammer kisses the nails back out of the wood.
The nails pass from his white lips to his dark pockets.
The screws spin out on the roads of brass
and the boards part ways. The boards, of heavy
ash, lay stacked along the wall for a night.
The hands of the clock over the workbench
spin wildly counterclockwise. Come morning
the boards return to the mill and converge
into trees that float back into the woods
in search of their stumps like the phantom
limbs of amputees. They know which ones
are theirs by the rings, swing up onto them
and heal. The birds that were scared off
by the roar of the chainsaw come back. The dead
man gets up off the floor and his broken cup
becomes whole again. He puts it to his lips
and fills it with coffee from his mouth,
coffee that grows hotter and blacker.

Hired Hands

Hired hands of my grandfather’s
time haunt me. They come floating
through the doorframes of Meth
houses on the verge of exploding,
touching at the pale wrists
just above where they’ve been snipped
like two hyacinths. They follow me into the barn I’ve slipped into to look for something, I’ve forgotten what. Their ring fingers are ringless but the hands are married to one another. They make for my hair, tousle it, then fly up into the rafters like two doves or one owl. From down here I can just make out the harvest moons of the bones. Somewhere in the poisoned dirt of this county a man my grandfather hired in 1943 out of pity for his wife and kids waiting anxiously in the dusty jalopy lies handless in his coffin, having not yet awoken to the fact his hands are in the habit of leaving him for the day-lit world. Oh but who can blame them for wanting to go out pickpocketing? They take nothing valuable. And I for one understand their need to feel up the thin summer dresses billowing under the church pews. The young women know it is only the breath of God. When they’ve had their fun, the hands let themselves back in to the cheap motel room of the grave, opening the door quietly so as not to wake him. For if he were to learn that his hands have been leaving him, he would find a way to follow them into the world and make some real trouble.

COURSES

In the 2014-2015 school year, I will be teaching “English 90 – Fiction Writing” and “English 92 – Reading and Writing Poetry”.

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