

GEORGE MCGOVERN: A LETTER TO BARACK OBAMA

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# GETTING SCHOOLED

The re-education of an American teacher

By Garret Keizer

**I**n the fall of 2010, after a fourteen-year hiatus from the classroom and at the unpropitious age of fifty-seven, I began a one-year job filling in for a teacher on leave from the same rural high school, in Orleans, Vermont, that I'd entered as a rookie thirty years before. I signed on mainly because my wife and I needed health insurance. The reason I had trained to be an English teacher in the first place was my parents' insistence that I graduate from college with a trade, "poet" falling short of the mark in their eyes. It's fair to say that I have never worked in a school with what might be called purity of heart, though much of what I know about purity of heart I learned there.

That I can say so without irony probably owes at least something to the fortunate working conditions of this past year. To describe those conditions in any detail will make many a teacher green with envy if not downright incredulous. Most of the roughly 400 students enrolled at the school were

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obliging and even friendly—I mean hold-open-the-door-and-ask-how-your-day's-going friendly. At no time did I feel threatened or in danger of violence. At no time did I feel inclined to regard any of my colleagues as lazy or inept—or feel they were insinuating similar judgments about me. My principal, recently and deservedly named Vermont's high school Principal of the Year, had been a student of mine at the same school. As

he announced both to me at our first meeting and to the entire staff at its first meeting, he could not bring himself to address me by my first name. The vice principal, married to another of my former students, followed suit. My department head, though not a former student or at all disinclined to call me Garret, treated me like a peer and looked after me like a best friend. Of my five classes, none exceeded twenty students and three were sections of the same course, meaning they could usually be served with the same preparation. Not to rub it in, but I had all but one of these classes in the same room, both semesters, and a full forty minutes in which to eat my lunch. I could also eat my lunch alone in my classroom.

That said, I was nearly faint with hunger by the time lunch rolled around, for I ate my breakfast most days at 4:00 A.M. Not infrequently I would put in a twelve-hour day before heading home to work several additional hours after dinner, only to wake up the next morning feeling unprepared.

My immune system proved even rustier than my pedagogy. During the course of the school year I caught

several colds plus one case each of flu, pneumonia, and conjunctivitis. After only two months on the job, I was compelled to put in a tedious session on a treadmill because of unspecified chest pains, though the technician assured me that my heart, however impure, belonged to a man twenty years my junior. This was a good thing to know given that I was frequently awakened by my heart pounding from a nightmare, invariably set in school. The bad dreams continue, but as I know from past experience, they will have subsided in ten years.

Except for a few precious hours on Friday nights, I had little of what is generally called a life. My wife and I seldom went out. My normally robust correspondence dwindled to nothing. I was unable to file our income taxes until July. Though I took pains not to appear so to my students, I was often despondent. One morning, when my wife remonstrated with me for picking up a drunk hitchhiker by myself on a lonely road late the night before—"What if he'd pulled a gun?"—I responded, half joking, that if I could just get myself shot I might not have to correct any more papers.

My point here is that even under ideal circumstances, public-school teaching is one of the hardest jobs a person can do. Most sensible people know that. Anyone who claims not to know that is either a scoundrel or a nincompoop; or, to put it another way, a typical expert on everything that's wrong with American public education and the often damaged children that it serves.

**L**ike a war-wounded veteran unable to give his full trust to anyone who has never experienced the traumas of combat, I can find it hard to respect the opinions of anyone who has never taught school—not only in matters of education, which is reasonable enough, but also in matters of philosophy and politics. John Adams, Samuel Johnson, and Henry

David Thoreau, to name but three who make the cut, tried their hand at "school mastering." All three proved more or less dismal at it; all had greater things to do in their lives than I, whose best accomplishments have arguably taken place in a classroom. Still, I attribute the lack of illusion in their thought, their disinclination to dogma on the one hand and despair on the other, to the fact that they were tested as teachers. They had encountered humanity in all its rawness and variety, and with the dubious aim of "forming"



it in some way. In the process, they had beheld their own selves as naked as a human being can get, and may in fact have achieved greatness partly out of fear of being that naked again.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, of modern philosophers perhaps the most sainted, served time as a schoolteacher. I am not surprised. I am also not surprised that he resigned his position after hitting an eleven-year-old boy in the head. I tried to remind myself of that at least once a week through-

out this past year, and not so I could fancy myself superior to Wittgenstein. Rather, I wanted to remember that what I had undertaken was by no means as safe or as simple as redirecting the course of Western thought.

**O**n the first day of school I begin my classes with John Coltrane's "Welcome," at the closing bars of which a palpable attentiveness comes over my chattering students, proof of what I've always believed about the source of Coltrane's genius and the wellspring within even the dopiest-seeming kid. "This is nice music," one boy remarks, and no one sneers. As I will do with the other musical introductions I play throughout the year, all chosen to fit the interval between passing bells, I key in my selection on a purse-size CD player, as quaint to the iPod generation as a Victrola is to me. I write the name of each artist and piece on the blackboard, including the date of composition when I can find it, usually a year predating that of my students' birth (circa 1995).

I wear a jacket and tie almost every day, one of the few adults at school who do. To these I add a pair of well-oiled work boots, an offhand expression of solidarity with the parents of our community but mostly a concession to my falling arches. For the first time in many years I have what can be called a "look"—like me and like the white-collar trade of teaching itself, a strange amalgam. A girl passing in the hall remarks that I always look "spiffy." I reply that I would have thought I looked old. "Hey, how old are you?" she counters. "Thirty?" I take this as a compliment and beam accordingly, though on reflection I wonder if she is simply trying to agree that I am old.

In this exchange and in countless other particulars, I find confirmation of the maxim that "kids are kids." I have been warned to expect big changes between now and the old

days, but for the most part the students I meet are interchangeable with types I taught more than twenty years ago, even down to the baseball caps. I'm a bit surprised by the ubiquitous display of décolletage, the respectability of the word *sucks*, and the number of students who readily identify themselves as "attention deficit." If such a disorder exists, as I'm inclined to think it does, I'm glad there are medicines to treat it, although hearing someone say "I've got ADD" in a culture of such vast distractedness is a bit like having a fellow passenger on an ocean liner tell you that she feels afloat. Who doesn't?

As I expected, there have been a number of changes in the school itself. A sophisticated alarm system needs to be deactivated if you're the first person into the building and set again if you're the last to leave, and as I am reminded on one particularly flustered Saturday morning, it's linked to the Office of Homeland Security. In accordance with state standards, paragraphs are now called "constructed responses." A staff meeting to discuss students in academic jeopardy is called an EST (Educational Support Team). A kid out of jeopardy is making AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress). This profession-wide penchant for jargon in general and three-letter shorthand in particular, a pidgin derived from government commissions and gypsy consultants, makes the school seem forbiddingly foreign to me at first. My skepticism shrinks somewhat after attending my first morning EST and listening to my colleagues discuss how to make a more collaborative effort on behalf of the drowning students they share. Call it what you will, it can be a PIS (Pretty Impressive Sight).

By far the most noticeable and happy improvement is the number of places to which students can turn for academic assistance. What had previously been one highly stigmatized "special ed" room is now a bustling network of study areas, all staffed by unflappable, diehard tutors, most of them proficient in several subjects. Some of these areas are devoted to students with identified special needs, but there's a laudable blurring of the boundaries, at least on the

surface, that seems to make it easy for kids to feel comfortable in any given room. The word *retard* sadly persists in the hallways but is used mostly as an all-purpose, gender-neutral alternative to *peckerhead*.

Not surprisingly, many of the more salient changes are technological. The library looks like a NASA control center in which the controllers occasionally spend their break periods with a book. The proverbial dog who ate the homework is now a flash drive. Smoking in the boys' room is now texting in the boys' room, though to their lasting credit the addicts of yesteryear were usually able to survive at least an hour without a drag. I frequently hear the phrase "school of the 21st century"

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## WHAT HAS NOT CHANGED IS THE DEGREE OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL DYSFUNCTION SUFFERED BY STUDENTS IN THE REGION

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and understand it to mean the school with more wires. During one of the first staff-training days, the district superintendent tells us that 10 percent of all high school education will be computer-based by 2014 and rise to 50 percent by 2019, the implication being how close to obsolescence our methods and we ourselves have become. No one ventures to ask what would seem to be the obvious question, which is what sort of high school education Bill Gates and Steve Jobs had and what they might have failed to accomplish without it.

Such caveats aside, I come to appreciate the advantages of a computerized grade book, though like other old-timers on the staff I keep an antique paper ledger "just in case." The end-of-marking-period all-nighter with a roped-in spouse doing backup duty on a calculator has mercifully gone the way of the mimeograph blues. Naturally, the resulting expectation is that the emancipated teacher will gather more assessments and record them in a more "timely" fashion.

In the increased emphasis on data and the imposed emphasis on standardized jargon and tests, in-

cluding the standardized inanities that result (no student I meet seems to believe that the universe formed in six days but a disturbing number insist that an essay is always formed in five paragraphs), I sense the encroachment of the totalitarian "business model" that has destroyed family farming as a way of life, of the same itch for arcane nomenclature that has turned literary criticism into a pseudoscience. A veteran foreign-language teacher still going strong since my last stint at school says to me with a sigh, "I'm afraid the day of the teacher-as-artist is drawing to a close."

That seems to be the theme of the text we study together as a faculty. According to its authors, who shamelessly recount their exemplary and now franchised successes in a middle- to upper-middle-class high school, the day of the "lone wolf" teacher is done. We must shift from "an external focus on issues outside of the school" to a focus on what business consultant Jim Collins calls "the brutal facts" of our "organization." The notion that the very same teachers who made the greatest difference in my life need to be purged from the ranks is dispiriting enough, but the outrageous suggestion that the "brutal facts" of education have more to do with the schoolhouse than with the larger society in which my students live is enough to make me want to spit. Or teach.

What has definitely not changed since my first tenure at school is the degree of poverty and social dysfunction suffered by students in the region. Quite possibly it has gotten worse. I taught through the Reagan years and left during Clinton; I've come back during a catastrophic recession, the demon child of deregulation and its gory consort NAFTA.

The difference first comes home to me with the deceptively familiar FFA (Future Farmers of America). Back in the old days a kid who wore that gold-lettered dark-blue corduroy jacket was as often as not a kid who came to school smelling like a barn, sometimes with manure in the tread

of his boots. It takes me a while to realize that of the half dozen or so FFA members I have in my classes, only one lives on a farm; that is to say, the parents of the others have become lifetime members of the Past Farmers of America.

If you can imagine Silicon Valley running out of silicon, you have some inkling of what happens to an agricultural community when small-scale agriculture starts to die. In the early spring, when a young man's fancy turns to love, the front page of a single issue of the local newspaper headlines three stories: a twenty-eight-year-old man drowned after attempting to fly his snowmobile over the Connecticut River in a state of drunken delirium, a two-year-old boy accidentally shot to death by another child with a .22-caliber rifle, and a wretched holdout of a farmer charged with animal cruelty for housing his starving cows in a mire of their own accumulated excrement. How the farmer and his family were housed is not mentioned, but I doubt it will produce any arrests.

To teach with your eyes open in a region like this is ever to be on the verge of tears—though not always of pity or rage. By the metric of students qualifying for reduced-price hot lunch, the high school where I teach ties for the third poorest in the state. Yet its standardized-test scores are among the very highest; the year before I came its scores in writing were *the* highest. What this means is that more than a few teachers and students are joined in a heroic effort. I see it all around me; I feel it every day. Back in the Nineties I could arrive at 7:00 A.M. and be one of the first people in the building; this year I need to arrive half an hour before that merely to compete for the same distinction. And no one is cracking the whip; no merit-pay carrots are dangling in our faces. It takes one of my English-teaching colleagues two trips to get all his bulging crates and satchels of student papers to his car every day, three if his little girl has joined him after school. (And I never see that little girl without remembering what my daughter said when she was that age: "I wish I

could make two daddies, a daddy to grade the kids' papers and a daddy to play pirates with me.") One fruit of these herculean labors is an understandable and, even to a jaded heart like mine, moving pride in the school. When the principal asks the student body "Who are we?" there is an unmistakable James Brown vibe as they say it LOUD: "Lake Region!"

I try not to think of the poisonous fruit growing on the same tree, especially as I am also laboring to make it grow (and shouting "Lake Region" with the best of them). If a kid from a poor school can do so well on a standardized test, then

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THE "CULTURE WARS"—THAT  
PRECIOUS BOURGEOIS SQUABBLE—  
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MAKING WAR ON CHILDREN

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obviously it does not matter so much that she spent last winter living in an unheated trailer behind her grandmother's house or that he missed a week of school because of all the flea bites he picked up at his father's house. Hey, a baby sleeping in a stable might grow up to be the next Jesus Christ. Public education's commendable aim of creating "equal opportunity for all" is too easily subverted by the egregious aim of creating a clean conscience for the few. If everybody can "read at grade level," then we need not be overly concerned if some people get to read fabulous dividend statements and other people, who may be working twice as hard, get to read pink slips. All we need hope is that the latter sort never get to read Marx.

**A**long with poverty—I want to say arising from it, though I know the causal connection goes only so far—is widespread household turmoil. This was true in the past but feels nothing less than pandemic now. Day after day, "constructed response" after constructed response, I read unsolicited expressions of abandonment, bewilderment, and

self-laceration. *If I wasn't so fat and was getting better grades maybe my dad wouldn't have left us.* A common complaint among students, I notice, is "all the drama." Ostensibly they are talking about school, the typical cliques and dustups of teenage life, but essentially they may be talking about home, where adolescence never dies.

Given my empirically based conviction that a stable home life is the single most reliable predictor of a student's success in school, I am surprised that the Republican Party, self-appointed champion of "family values," takes no pains to press the point. Of course, to do so would undermine its agenda of dismantling public education, hamstringing teachers' unions, denying same-sex couples the rights of marriage, preventing working mothers from achieving income parity, curtailing reproductive rights, outsourcing manufacturing jobs, and filling the coffers of the various charlatans who sell education in the form of standardized tests.

And of course the Republican Party is not the only faction holding a ten-foot pole against the question of what it means to be a responsible adult. That precious bourgeois squabble we referred to as the "Culture Wars"—all it means to me is two different ways of making war on children, two rival sects in the ancient religion of child-devouring Moloch: one that sacrificed and continues to sacrifice working-class children on the altar of American exceptionalism, and the other that sacrifices them to the frivolous exceptionalism of the "transgressive" lifestyle or the political escapism of the catchall canon. Shall we bomb the Taliban or put their writings on the syllabus? "It has been vivid to me for many years that what we call a race problem here is not a race problem at all," James Baldwin wrote many years ago. "The problem is rooted in the question of how one treats one's flesh and blood, especially one's children." The race problem, and just about every other problem that crosses a teacher's desk.

A child of our common flesh and blood bends over my desk examining

one of the framed postcards I keep there to cheer me. “Wow, what is that place?” he asks. I tell him it is the great Reading Room of the New York Public Library, sent to me by a woman I used to teach. He’s a bit of an operator, this one, the kind who can make you feel good even when you know you’re being had, but I detect a heartfelt quality in the wistfulness with which he asks, “And you’ve been there?” I make a mental note to give him the picture at the end of the year. That never happens, though, because he is shunted to a new guardian and a new school before I can recall my intention. That’s how it seems to go with many of the students I worry about most: they are whisked away, though few have enjoyed this kid’s peculiar privilege of being referred to by a former foster parent—all in fun, I’m sure—as “my nigger slave.”

I suppose I am willing to bet more money on this young man making it to the New York Public Library someday than I am on the likelihood of his taking a book off the shelves if he does. The same holds true for many of his classmates. I can’t be sure if the resistance to reading that I encounter nearly every day marks a new development, because fourteen years is too long an interval for my memory to be trusted and because the sections I now teach are not the “honors” levels I taught in the past. Mine are “average” kids, but they are by no means stupid kids. Still, I do not remember feeling as frustrated then as I often feel now that so few of them want to read.

It’s nothing new that some kids find reading a chore. What strikes me is the frequent lack of correlation between the ability to read and any inclination to do it. That, and the number of times I hear someone say, “I hate to read.” A girl tells me so in private and sobs so preposterously that I worry I might laugh. After she calms down, I gently suggest that she read a passage aloud. Her fluency is impeccable; she could work for the BBC.

I realize that in some cases the reluctance to read has its basis in the lack of a suitable place to do it. I ask students to write a paragraph on “Where I Read,” and get more than one account of how hard it is to concentrate in a house “where people are always yelling.” Even at school, though, and even when the time and quiet are provided, the book is not always read. I can’t resist tipping off two of my favorite rascals, who often visit with me before our first-period class, that there might be a quiz on last



night’s reading assignment and that any young man less prepared than they undoubtedly are would do well to use the next twenty minutes to read it. The passage is short enough to finish in that time. Quicker than I can wink, they pull out their books and turn to the assigned pages, bending over them like monks in a scriptorium, doughnuts in hand. In three minutes they put the books aside—enough of that for one day—and go back to chatting. They flunk their quizzes.

Where the resistance to reading seems the strongest and proves the

most maddening is with major, long-term assignments, for which I scrupulously supply written instructions, reading them aloud and slowly to the entire class. I make extra handouts for students who tend to lose things. But there is little else I can do beyond repeating the mantra *What does the sheet say?* in response to every bogus question, though often that takes the form of *Why didn’t you consult the sheet?* after the assignment has been handed in.

I try to give the matter a political slant. When a rule is written down, I tell the students, then the writer is bound by it no less than the reader. That is why we have a Constitution. In an autocratic state the king’s whim is the law. Maybe one day he feels like reading a six-hundred-word essay; the next day he feels like a six-line poem. But in this case, I can’t hold you accountable for any requirement that isn’t spelled out on the sheet. You can wave that sheet in my face as evidence, and I can’t win the argument simply by saying “I wrote the sheet.” I have to win by pointing out to your satisfaction what the words actually say. I seem to be getting through—somebody’s raising his hand.

“Do you want us to hand in our rough draft, too?”

A local pediatrician once told me, when I asked how he managed to keep his sanity in the face of so much needless grief, “I try to remember that except for a very few psychopaths, most people on most days are doing the best they can.” I take that for my working motto, though I remain haunted by the thought that if “a kid is just a kid,” then a sixteen-year-old kid is a kid just two years away from voting.

On the morning after Osama bin Laden is killed, I’m expecting a barrage of comments, in anticipation of which I decide to let Homer speak my piece. From top to bottom on my blackboard I write a dozen lines from the *Odyssey*, what Odysseus says after he has slain the suitors and his faithful servant Eurykleia is about to rejoice. “No crowing aloud,” he tells her, though he’s willing to add that

the suitors got what they deserved. "To glory over slain men is no piety." I leave the lines up for three days. No one asks me what they mean or what they are doing on my blackboard. As nearly as I can tell, no one reads them. For that matter, no one mentions Osama bin Laden. At the close of the third day there is nothing left for me to do but erase the lines and go for a haircut, which in my case involves reducing a half inch of salt-and-pepper thatch to a maintenance-free quarter and which I know will infallibly arouse keen interest and lively comment (all of it sweet) the next day.

I never missed the school musical in my earlier years of teaching, and I'm sure to be on hand for the one this year: a spirited vaudeville revue. Like all its precursors, it is performed in the town's old auditorium, the school having no such place. There is that same magic I remember from previous shows—and some of the same teachers, still playing in the orchestra and doing makeup backstage, most of them gray-headed now—the magic of kids stepping out of their daytime roles and into new ones, the latter sometimes closer to their most authentic selves. Not always recognizable in their costumes, still less so when they sing, they seem charmed and immortal, happily lost in that thin place that is both school and not-school because it exists outside the scheduled day. As the audience files out of the theater, mothers of actresses identifiable by the bouquets in their hands, the vice principal calls me aside and says that the principal wants to speak to all the faculty in the basement under the stage. When we gather, the principal announces that a thirty-nine-year-old teacher on our staff, not at the play this evening, has died suddenly from heart failure. Obviously shaken, he wants us to be prepared. There is no mourning like mourning in a school.

And there is nothing like a school to make one aware of mortality. You may be thinking of other professions where this is more the case, medicine or ministry for example, but I

buried the dead and visited the dying for many years and do not recall ever leaving a hospital or a grave with a heightened awareness of my death; mostly what I felt was relief at being alive. But the relentless experience of finitude that is teaching, the angelus that rings—not three times a day, as in a monastery, but every forty-five minutes—remorselessly drives home one's sense of limited time on the earth, of diminishing chances to do the work and get it right. The kids are probably too young to feel it this way, and one hopes so, but they know what a deadline is and they can hear the word *dead*.

If the bell schedule and the calendar are the body of a school, transcendence often comes as an out-of-body experience. When a classroom teacher can somehow manage to get kids "out of school," either physically or psychologically, then school can begin. Sometimes that happens simply by inviting students to stay after school, which can be difficult, though it helps if you have refreshments and a few students with nothing better to do at home. I have both. Sometimes it happens through a special project, the more hands-on the better—paradoxically, "out of body" often translates in practice to contact with the physical world, to running, drawing, making something *real*.

I hand out magic markers and invite students to deface enlarged photographs of my face, one blacked-out tooth or booger per part of speech accurately identified, and everybody wants to find a verb. I have them make a museum of projects based on the literature we have studied, and though I encourage the use of technology, their overwhelming preference is for projects made with tangible stuff, perhaps because more than one person can touch it at a time. Two boys team up and build a full-scale replica of the raft in *Huckleberry Finn*, using hand axes for authenticity, and cart it on a trailer to school. It seems the perfect symbol of our object: to get away from the prim Widow Douglas and float free for a while. Even so, we are no farther from the riverbank and its cru-

elties than Huck and Jim are, because not all the students have adults to help them with their projects or money to pay for materials; because one of the boys who builds the raft tells me he plans to join the Marines after he graduates, and so mortality is still able to smirk at me over his tattooed shoulder.

Not surprisingly, the literature brings its own transcendence, especially when we get to drama and poetry, which I have injudiciously put off until the spring. I discover how much the students enjoy reading aloud; girls vie for the part of Emily in *Our Town*; the unlikeliest boys take a shot at Whitman's *Song of Myself*. I come to suspect that it is not reading they hate so much as reading in isolation. The same radical privacy that I seek in books, my mind's way of eating its lunch alone, is what turns their stomachs. I learn of two girls in my class who got through *Ethan Frome* by reading aloud to each other over Skype, not unlike George Gibbs and Emily Webb chatting between their upstairs bedroom windows, just with different kinds of windows. They are acutely *social* creatures, these kids, and it is a slow learner indeed who fails to grasp that fact even as he rattles on about building a more social democracy.

Spring break marks the first school vacation when I have not been ill, and I celebrate with a free-for-all of physical work. I stack firewood. I burn brush. I prune trees, including the crabapple tree my expository-writing students gave to me in 1985 as a housewarming gift. It was about twenty inches high then and now stands a good twelve feet, with a span of branches almost as wide. It will be awash with white blossoms by the time of final exams. "Time to plant trees is when you're young," wrote the Vermont poet James Hayford, "So, aging, you can walk in shade/ That you and time together made." Several years ago I realized I had heard from no fewer than seven of my former students in a single month: a gay anarchist agitator, a hairdresser, a college professor, a guidance counselor, a dairy farmer, a Web designer, and a felon, three

women and four men, all very different but all contributors to the shade that I and time together made. Sometimes I wonder how much richer my life might have been had I never left teaching. I wonder but I never ache with regret.

One of the more remarkable and, I think, telling things about the teaching trade is the number of people who need to believe that you love it. Ever since leaving the classroom in the mid-Nineties and throughout the past year I found people asking if I missed teaching or had plans to take it up again. They didn't want to know; they wanted to hear me say yes. Some didn't bother to ask. "I know the pay is not the greatest, but you're doing what you love"—a sentiment that puts me in mind of the trope of the happy slave. In fact, our word *pedagogue* derives from a Greek word for a type of slave who led children to school. Jim is Huck Finn's teacher not only in spirit but in accordance with an ancient tradition. This is not to suggest that contemporary teachers are slaves or that I was ever treated like one, only that I am inclined to distrust people who expect me to work for love, or who need a sentimental mythology to gloss over the impossibilities of my job and the daily injustices it lays bare.

My principal, Mr. Messier, or Mr. Mess as the kids call him, never asks me if I love my job. He does say he hopes I am enjoying my year at Lake Region. He tells me that I was important to him when he was a high school student and that I am having a similar impact on students this year. He says that he thinks of me as the school's "artist in residence"; apparently he does not think the artisan teacher needs to die. He never hovers, yet I often feel him beside me, sometimes because he actually is, strolling nearby in the bustling halls until one of us notices the other and says hello, an effect that on certain days and in certain fragile states of mind can feel almost numinous. Well over six feet, with a halogen smile and the broadest shoulders I have ever seen on a human being, he is deferential, resolute, and charismatic to such a

degree that he trumps my usual suspicions of charisma. At the close of every day, he walks the students to the buses, his figure unmistakable even with the hood of his windbreaker up. He walks back into the building when the last bus is gone and I feel that I know exactly what he is thinking, that he has seen his kids off for another day, only wishing he could see every one of them safely home, especially the ones who dread going.

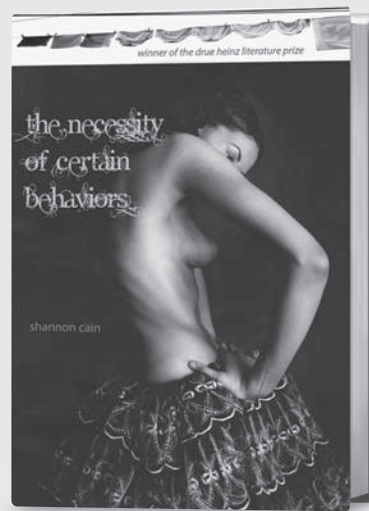
Though my role in his formation is hypothetical at best—I first knew him as a fifteen-year-old farm boy and he would have made a fine principal then—I am unabashedly proud of him. I can't say with any conviction that I love teaching. But I do love him, and others I have taught who are very different from him. And I know I am not suited to be a teacher because even with that love and its incomparable satisfactions, I am counting off the days until I can go home for good.

**S**cores of days and hundreds of "teachable moments" remain before that can happen, however; every week something new. Babies in car seats begin to appear in the hallways, life-size baby dolls as it turns out, a project for a class in parenting. I recall a similar assignment from my previous teaching stint, though then it was done with a swaddled egg in a cigar box. The symbolism was obvious, emphasizing the fragility of a newborn. In the updated, higher-tech version, the students, all girls as far as I can tell, are expected to attend to the artificial infant's simulated needs, responding promptly whenever it cries and keeping close watch over it, though the dolls don't break as easily as the eggs did.

The parenting class is offered only to juniors and seniors, but lo and behold a sophomore girl shows up in my last-period class with baby and bucket in hand. It seems the "mother" has absented herself from school for a day or two in order to handle her prodigious prom arrangements and has left the baby with a round-the-clock sitter, teasing out the simulation, to say nothing of the irony,

Winner of the 2011

## Drue Heinz Literature Prize



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"The power in this sparkling collection becomes more apparent as one reads: you notice right away that the stories are funny and surprising; it takes a while to see how heartbreaking they can be. Some characters are joyfully bisexual—and finally, perhaps, alone and lonely. Others defy convention differently. Shannon Cain tells their stories with wit, insight, elegant plotting, and compassion. I loved reading about these vibrant, lovable, irrepressible women."

—Selected by ALICE MATTISON

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more than she probably knows. But I have to say, her choice of a sitter is impeccable, a girl I'd surely have chosen were I needing one for any child of mine. Meredith already has the experience for one thing, routinely caring for her little niece, who lives with her on the family farm. She also works part-time at McDonald's, competes as an amateur wrestler (a pursuit I find hard to reconcile with her diminutive height and demure behavior, though I've been told she can "beat the shit out of any boy in this school"), reads her drowsy big brother's English assignments aloud to him as he drives her to school in his truck (he's up at 2:00 A.M. doing barn chores and occasionally nods off in my first-period class), and can always be counted on to bring a pan of home-baked cookies for after-school study sessions (even when she herself can't stay) and to deliver A+ speaking assignments, like the one on historical infatuation entitled "How I Stalked J.F.K." A pearl of a girl, in other words, so I'm glad she has charge of the "baby," not only because she'll see it gets the right care but also because I hope she'll see, if she hasn't already, that this is a burden she doesn't need for a good long time.

Midway through the period the doll erupts in a fit of wailing. My first thought is to ask who has their blasted cell phone on and whatever possessed them to chose such a perverse ringtone. Then I notice Meredith, clearly mortified by the outburst—this is a kid who waits patiently by the electric pencil sharpener until everyone has finished speaking. Smiling, I offer to rock the doll for her while I teach. "No," she says, "I'll take care of it" and hurries from the room.

Five minutes later I am still doing my teach-on-the-*Titanic* routine and the baby is still screaming out in the hall. Finally, one of the students says, "Mr. Keizer, I think maybe you better go out there."

When I do, I find Meredith frantically trying to turn a black plastic key into the control box at the back of the doll. She is visibly distressed. I feel a bit rattled myself at this point—the cry is "fake" but up close it arouses a very real and even pri-

mal response. I also try the key to no avail, noticing that there are written directions (and we know how much good they do) to turn the key clockwise. What I also discover is that the lady wrestler or some caretaker before her has succeeded in twisting the key into a worthless corkscrew of plastic. It turns only on itself. Can you get in touch with the student who gave this to you? I ask, raising my voice to be heard. She can't. She adds that if the crying is deactivated without turning the key it could compromise the other student's grade. I couldn't give a fig, I want to say, but instead ask if she knows the teacher in charge of the parenting class. No, she's somebody up at the career center ten miles to the north. The doll keeps wailing, louder it seems. I am indignant on behalf of Meredith and on my own behalf as well. We have been handed "a situation" for which we have not been prepared. Somewhat beyond what the assignment intends, we are feeling what every parent feels at one time or another: overwhelmed, clueless, and (needlessly) alone.

I tell Meredith what I think we should do and reluctantly she nods her head. I pop the voice box from the doll's plastic back. Like an image out of Poe, the box continues wailing in my hand as I stare at it dumbfounded. Wanting to stomp the thing under my boot, I pull the ribbon that expels the batteries and the noise finally stops.

But the simulation continues, at least for one deathly moment. In real life, in a predicament not too far removed from the experience of many of my students, I would not have been this girl's teacher. I would have been her boyfriend, perhaps the baby's father, perhaps not. I couldn't have pulled out the batteries, because there wouldn't have been any batteries to pull out. Instead, I would have taken up the infant in a fit of frustration and shaken it until it either died or became permanently eligible for special services. I, in turn, would have become eligible to have my deer-in-the-headlights mug shot appear in the police blotter of the local paper. Another stupid redneck

bastard gets his. Or, if you prefer, another shaken, stunned, and stunted baby boy comes of age in the richest nation in the world.

I do not have to wonder if any of my students are thinking these same thoughts. I do not have to wonder because, when I step back into the classroom, I tell them exactly what I think.

Usually I was not so moralistic, believing as I still do that it was my duty to teach the curriculum and not to pontificate, to inspire debates, not to weigh in with verdicts. I did on one or two occasions tell my students they were living in a society that valued people of their age, region, and class primarily as cannon fodder, cheap labor, and gullible consumers, and that education could give them some of the weapons necessary to fight back. That I did say. I wish, though, that I had had a simple refrain, some terse slogan I could have repeated day after day, like the Roman senator Cato, who is supposed to have ended every speech by saying, "Carthage must be destroyed."

In fact, Cato's refrain would have done nicely. As it happens, the people of Carthage worshipped the same god their Phoenician ancestors had, a god they called Moloch. When the Romans eventually took Cato's advice, they found within the walls of the doomed city a multitude of clay urns containing the tiny charred bones of children. The Romans worshipped their own version of Moloch, needless to say, as do we if our poets are to be believed. "Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks!" A man named Allen Ginsberg wrote those lines decades before you were born, when your English teacher was a mere three years old. You see, my loves, I am still talking to you in my head, and though I rather hope you're reading something else these days, reading anything actually, here is what I wish I'd said before I said goodbye: *Carthage must be destroyed*—and you, for your part, must learn everything you can about Carthage. ■