

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Alicia J. Kleiman for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on April 25, 2001.

Title: *The Infinite Margin: Living in Reading.*

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Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Chris Anderson

This thesis, a collection of creative non-fiction essays, explores the nature and influence of reading and school in the author's life. After a brief introduction explaining the title, part one describes the sensory dimensions of reading. Part two discusses the author's work as a student and teacher and the contradictions found in that work. Part three combines reading and school, reconsidering the place each holds in the author's life.

**The Infinite Margin: Living in Reading**

by

**Alicia J. Kleiman**

**A THESIS**

**submitted to**

**Oregon State University**

**in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**Presented April 25, 2001  
Commencement June 2001**

Master of Arts thesis of Alicia J. Kleiman presented on April 25, 2001.

APPROVED:

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Dean of Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Alicia J. Kleiman, Author

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Walking to Safeway I step  
over a child's plastic alphabet  
yellow t's, red a's, purple d's

scattered on the sidewalk,  
on the railroad tracks,  
in the parking lot of the liquor store.

I leave the letters behind,  
but in the morning outside my door  
find another blue w.

**for Mom and Dad**

## Introduction: The Infinite Margin

This work draws primarily from my educational career in Oregon's public schools and universities. I grew up in Dallas where I attended elementary, junior high, and high school. In the fall of 1994, I began college at Western Oregon University in Monmouth. After graduation in 1999, I started a Master's degree in English at Oregon State University in Corvallis which I will complete in June of 2001. While at Oregon State, I have also been a teaching assistant in the English department. My time as a graduate student has been shared with the undergraduates in my freshmen composition courses over the last two years. Intermingled with my twenty-one years in educational institutions has been my private reading life, the reading not necessarily organized by a class or teacher.

As is true of much of this work, the image of the infinite margin developed through reading and conversations. During the spring term of 2000, I took a class on the Bible and Interpretation in which I learned the Talmud is built from a collection of thought and comment on the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Torah. Huston Smith, in his book The World's Religions, tells us "The Torah is followed by the Talmud, a vast compendium of history, law, folklore, and commentary that is the basis of post-biblical Judaism. This in turn is supplemented by the *midrashim*, an almost equal collection of legend, exegesis, and homily." I loved the idea of an infinite margin immediately, of building on those who came before us, because it satisfies me both as a reader and a writer. The reader lives in the words of the text, while the writer considers what may follow as a result of the reading. In both instances, the text remains central, held in the middle of reading and writing as one gives meaning to the other.

The metaphorical texts I write around in this work are reading and school. As I looked into the thoughts of others in these areas, the margin repeatedly emerged, even widened. Anne Fadiman's Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader brings other people and their readings into the margin with me. "The immaculate first editions cherished by rare-book collectors—no notes, no signatures, no bookplates—now leave me cold. I have come to view the margins as a literary commons with grazing room for everyone—the more

the merrier,” she explains. Physically, I look to the margin, the white space surrounding columns of words, more than ever before. I often prefer a used book over a new one if another reader’s marginalia is part of the bargain.

Additionally, Fadiman’s democratic description reminds me that my reading is not the only reading of a text; when I in turn write in those used books, the margin becomes a shared space. Over the past two years, I have also had the privilege of borrowing books from many friends, professors, and fellow students. The pleasure of these books increased as I read their underlined passages, stars and explanation points, questions, disagreements, and other marginal comments along with the actual book. My reading has grown through these readers—without them the margin would be a lonely place.

Feminist writer bell hooks defines the margin as a political space as well, a space in which each person tells his or her own story rather than overtaking or co-opting the story of others. In the margin we can speak from our true selves and hear others more clearly. “For me this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge” hooks writes. “Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a ‘safe’ place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance.” Since arriving at Oregon State University, I have found a community of resistance, people who have listened carefully to my thoughts on school in the following pages. And, of course, I’ve found them in the pages of books, both those assigned in school and those I’ve read on my own. In the margins around school we are telling our stories, writing them in the white space surrounding our shared time in these institutions, learning what that time means for each of us, for all of us.

The Infinite Margin writes around what I resist about school and academia, illustrating but not definitively defining what my conflict with school is. Though looking for an answer to this question has provoked much of my current writing, I have yet to find it. The answer is more than declaring school unequivocally bad; the structure of school has introduced me to friends and subjects I may not have met otherwise. However, the pressure and restraints which I associate with school, which I partly impose on myself, is a serious concern which I can no longer ignore. Perhaps by continuing to write in the margin, I will better understand what lives deep within school, reading, and myself.

My thanks to the independent bookstores I've visited over the past two years, including Powell's City of Books in Portland, Oregon, and The Tattered Cover in Denver, Colorado. A particular thanks to Grass Roots Books and Music in downtown Corvallis, Oregon, for the community of readers the staff cultivates off-campus.

My thanks to the students in my Writing 121 classes who helped me reconsider my own education by sharing part of their freshman year with me.

My thanks to writing group members from the last two years, Susan Wood, Anna Harrell, and Michelle Abbott, for their time and thoughtful responses.

Lastly, my thanks to professors Heidi Brayman Hackel, Anita Helle, Lisa Ede, and Chris Anderson for their professional and personal generosity.

**Part One: Reading Life**

## I

Grass Roots Books and Music had a Christmas party tonight. I stepped inside the door and thought “Here are the readers!” The little store was packed with friends, strangers, the owner and staff. Here were people who love books, music, and other readers. I browsed for an hour and a half, ducking around other customers, enjoying their company. I failed to win the drawing for door prizes but had fun hoping. I ate some carrot cake, drank some cider, bought a book and was happy.

As I walked home, I realized my happiness was unusual. I don’t often feel this way when I leave campus and walk home from school. School is full of books, full of readers, but I only get a hint of this happiness for an hour or two, maybe, in a whole long week. In a sense, I received more from this party than I did from the past ten weeks of school. I don’t often get the sense of school as a good place, a place of health and worth like Grassroots was a good place tonight.

## II

One of the singers in the Buena Vista Social Club drifts off the screen. I love the man singing duets with the ensemble’s only woman, his small bright eyes under the brim of his hat, his loose flowered shirt, his shuffling steps. I feel my own eyes sparkle as he walks through Havana with his wife.

The man shows us a statue in the corner of his dark living room, flowers, metal trinkets, and a shot of brandy placed around the statue’s feet. As he picks up the shot glass, I can smell him. It’s a musky, perfumed sweat, a mixing of the heat and his music. His scent is inseparable from the film until I take a deep breath and slip back into the dark movie theater. Pausing in mid-breath, I press back into my seat as the film continues.

Reading—films, books, plays, museums, and other people—involuntarily fills my senses. Part of taking a story into myself is letting the scents, voices, and visions come. These are as much a part of my reading as deciphering the words on the page or watching actors move across the stage or screen.

Sometimes the page and the screen echo each other. In a Star Trek novel, voices can, for a moment, jump out of the book. The two dimensional words solidify into the actors from the television shows for a sentence or two. I hear Spock's voice arch as he bickers with Dr. McCoy or Data's winsome tenor skip off the page and into my ear like a stone jumping across the water. It doesn't last long, though; the stone sinks. I see the words, but I cannot make them ring; they soon lose the sighs and inflections of an embodied voice.

Only recently have words flourished into color. In the midst of part two of Marjorie Sandor's The Night Gardener, I see jewel tones: jade, blood-red, sunflower yellow, royal purple, cerulean blue, and bittersweet, a dark orange I've only seen in an old Crayola marker. As I read "Nothing breaks the glassy surface; Slough Creek has taken its secrets back" the line dividing each color from the others in my mind's eye becomes clear and distinct. Separate patches bump together, not with straight lines and right angles, but with curves that fit into one another like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

The colors last all evening, expanding and twirling like bits of glass at the bottom of a kaleidoscope.

I first sold my books at a summer garage sale. I'd never throw my books away; they should have a chance at finding a good home, like taking unwanted kittens to the Humane Society rather than dumping them on the side of the road or drowning them in a nearby creek. I piled stacks of Sweet Valley Twins and Sweet Valley High paperbacks on our rickety card table in the front yard. Because I marked them a quarter each, they didn't sit on the table long. A middle school girl bought them all. I watched her carry the books to her mother's car, just as eight or nine years earlier I'd watched another little girl ride my pink and blue Power Wheels down the sidewalk from my house.

For my first three years of college, I didn't sell a single book back to the campus bookstore. However, I had to weed my shelves as the boxes I had to haul with each move grew. I took two overfilled grocery bags, the paper kind with handles, to Second Chance Books on Highway 99 in Monmouth. I walked to the bookstore, not realizing how hot

it was and how heavy those books were until I had seven blocks to go with no shade between me and the bookstore. I had to stop and shift my load at every intersection. Months later, while browsing, I'd sometimes find one of my books with my name in it on their shelves—a ghost, gone but not gone.

Other books I've doled out here and there. My friend Michelle took the biography of Walt Disney I bought in Disneyland—both she and the book I've lost track of. I don't remember some of the books I've given away; if asked, I might not even remember owning some of them. I might pick one up in a used bookstore sometime and never know the difference.

A common task for student workers at Western's library was the stacks project. When the library catalog was automated, the paper checkout card in the back of each book became obsolete. Each book had to be flipped open and the card removed. At the beginning of my shift, I would pick up the project's notebook as I headed for the stacks, finding the place where the last student worker left off. As I worked from section to section, the dust turned my fingers gray to match the metal shelving.

Sometimes I stopped to read a card, starting with the book title and call number typed across the top. Manila yellow or a faded sea-green, the cards were divided into impossibly small sections for a student to write her name, address, and social security number. Most of the writing was illegible. Lori, one of our supervisors, kept the cards with the oldest dates—1930, 1931—in her desk. The rest we threw away.

Now, most libraries have a small machine that prints receipts like the checkstand at a grocery store. The receipt lists the patron's name, the items checked out, and their due dates. No mark or stamp is made in the book as it cycles through the system from one reader to the next.

One afternoon when I was about eight, the Gilliams—Nikki, Bekki, and Todd—and my brother Jon and I found dozens of broken dishes half buried in the bank of Rickreall Creek behind the Gilliam's boat shed. Cups, saucers, dinner and salad plates, even the

remains of larger pieces like water pitchers and gravy boats, poked out of the dirt. Some silverware was mixed in too—forks, butter knives, slotted spoons. The dishes looked to be a mix of several complete sets, a pink and yellow floral pattern mixed with a leafy design and a few solid blue pieces.

With some trowels and our fingernails we dug up as many dishes as we could. A few plates and teacups were still whole; these we washed with the garden hose and lined up on a shelf in the old chicken coop we played in. Nicking a finger on a broken edge was dangerous. We had to hide the blood in a coat pocket as we snuck into the house for a band-aid. If our moms knew what we were doing they would make us come inside; a cut finger could get infected, and the creek bank was steep.

The longer I dug the more I knew about the dishes we found. They didn't get stuck in the bank by accident. I imagined some men, too lazy to take the dishes to the dump or the Goodwill, pulling their truck behind the boat shed after dark when the Gilliams weren't home. The men throw boxes of dishes from the top of the bank, watching them tumble down to the creek. I relished the crash and tinkle of the dishes striking the rocks below.

I never dug or read in that creek bank again, but I still want the steep banks and dirty fingernails.

I have a used copy of Tracy Kidder's Among Schoolchildren with an inscription inside. The message is between two indecipherable names and written with a black felt-tip pen: "May your first year be as successful as your student teaching." There's no other writing in the book, but it's slightly yellowed with a bent corner and three big creases in the spine. It smells musty, a little like cigarette smoke.

Did the new teacher eagerly read Kidder's book during the summer between student teaching and starting in her own classroom? Maybe she had to move, and there was no time for reading between moving furniture and cleaning bathrooms. Perhaps she doesn't like to keep books for rereading, or maybe she quit teaching and wanted to remove all reminders. This seems more likely, but that doesn't make it so.

Or, maybe the person who creased the book wasn't the new teacher at all. Maybe it sat on her bookshelf until it smelled and later it was sold to Powell's. Maybe it has circled among three, four, or five pairs of hands.

What does it mean that I wonder these things? Perhaps there is a mystery to reading, the life of a book, all the readings people have done and all the readings to come.

### III

The door to the tapestry gallery in the Victoria and Albert Museum was heavy gray glass. It made a sucking sound when I pulled it open, letting out a gush of cool air, and I felt a spike of fear, the kind I feel when I stand against something much larger than me, like tall office buildings or big trees. Inside, the tapestries filled each wall, security ropes and information stands strung in front of them. Five or six little benches ran down the length of the room. The few other people in the gallery, talking in whispers, left as I entered.

The Devonshire Hunts dominated the walls; they filled most of the space in the gallery, from floor to ceiling. I walked around the edge of the room behind the security ropes. There was no sense of perspective. The castle and waterwheel were the same size as the men and women next to them. The castle, though small, had all its turrets and a drawbridge. Men carried weapons on skinny legs and women lifted heavy skirts. The people's faces were as one dimensional as everything else, no emotions or responses.

Men and women, trees, and animals were crammed together on fields of grass and flowers, the busy fabric filling the silent room with a strange, unconscious noise. If the dogs in the hunts came to life, all they would have had to do is take one more step and snap their jaws to catch the prey they were chasing. Few of the people were still. They waved their arms, rode horses, shot bows and arrows, drew water from the well and streams.

When I'd circled the room, I sat on a bench. I didn't think about the people who made the tapestries, but the people who owned them after they were finished. I imagined a wall in a castle where the tapestries might have been. Maybe only a fireplace lit them. I

imagined other people sitting under them wondering, maybe using the tapestries to tell stories, or slaughtering and eating the animals they killed beneath them. Maybe they became part of the scenery, like wallpaper we don't notice anymore.

My eyes kept busy; the air conditioners hissed in the background. My thoughts slowed. Until now I had been distracted by the concerns of the present: trains, taxis, bus schedules, itineraries, exchange rates, accents. Three weeks into our trip, this was the first time I had to myself. I didn't think about who else might be hungry or tired or bored. The gallery blocked out the rest of the museum, the rest of the city.

Later that afternoon, in the middle of racks and racks of postcards in the museum shop, I found the Devonshire Hunts and was taken aback. Wait, I thought, these are not the same tapestries I sat with. The colors were all wrong—too much yellow and light green and too bright. I couldn't clearly see the patterns on the women's dresses or the flowers in the fields.

When I reached the 1770's of the dress collection, I saw the suit: a cream, velvet cut-away coat, waistcoat, and breeches. Swirling designs were stitched into the fabric. Leaves and pink roses curled around each other, weaving down the edges of the coat and waistcoat, each button covered with velvet, a rose in its center. The creases in the waistcoat and breeches were gentle and gradual, the coat curving around the back, drawing another line for my eye to follow. The suit let off a warmth I wanted. I pressed my palms against the glass case, aching to wear it myself.

The streams of questions which usually ran through my head stopped. The suit was isolated, nothing more, and nothing less, than itself.

It kept calling me through the glass, and when I tired of standing, I sat on the carpet against a nearby post, knees pulled up, chin in my hand. I don't remember what I thought about, if anything. I only remember loving that suit.

I was afraid I would forget when I came home. I thought I would recognize objects on postcards and in guidebooks, but not remember their presence, their texture. My memory would be as flat and empty as the images I brought home on paper. I was wrong, though; the quiet and warmth remain. Or, maybe, they were in me to start with, and I just uncovered them there.

Another day, I walked down the ironwork gallery, the longest gallery in the museum. Sections of fence, grates, benches, and five foot candlesticks stretched down both walls. I stopped in front of a wrought iron gate with flowers and vines climbing through the gate's rods and cross pieces. The edges and corners in the geometric designs of other pieces were easier to accept in rigid metal. This though, was different, organic. The iron somehow held the energy of living leaves, stems and petals. I thought they just might bend if I blew on them. The gate almost glowed.

Perhaps as the ironsmiths worked, the metal became light and flexible. Perhaps the fire's light was trapped in the gate because it was no longer solid and heavy: it was alive.

**Part Two: Reading School**

## I

I visit Beverly Cleary's shelf whenever I'm in Powell's City of Books. The new editions of her Ramona books are clean and neat compared to mine with broken spines, ripped covers, and stained, yellowed pages. My "Property of Alicia" stickers, coordinated with the color of each cover, are peeling off. I've written my name and address in my fanciest handwriting in most of them. I wrote my name in Ramona Quimby, Age 8 at least three times, including "Alicia Kleiman, Age 8" on the front title page.

A few times I've seen other girls in Powell's, a new Ramona book held to their chest or topping a growing stack on the floor. I wonder how long theirs will last. I've thought about getting new copies, but couldn't get rid of the old ones.

Ramona Quimby, Age 8 was one of the first chapter books I read. Mom bought it at one of those book fairs that come to grade schools, the books arranged by grade level in folding metal bookshelves on wheels. I did not want the book and was too ashamed to admit it. I thought Mom and Mrs. Rye, the school librarian, would be disappointed in me. I remember my chest getting tight, my eyes burning. I tried to hide how I felt as Mom paid for the orange paperback.

The girl on the front cover looked funny, with stringy hair and a skinny neck. She still looks nothing like I imagine Ramona, her skinned knees, untied shoelaces, and big eyes that can't hide surprises or disappointments.

Ramona squirts a whole tube of toothpaste into the bathroom sink in Ramona and Her Mother. She starts slowly, then imagines she's decorating a big cake with flowers and curlicues. I wanted to watch the paste coil in soft piles and enjoy willfully wasting something too. I begged and begged Mom to let me do it, not daring to do it on my own.

I squirted a whole tube of bright blue Aim into a plastic bowl on the kitchen table, kneeling on a chair, squeezing until my knuckles turned white. It wasn't the same though; permission and an audience ruined it.

Ramona was as in love with her teachers as I was. At the end of Ramona and Her Mother, Ramona learns she is “one of Mrs. Ridge’s little sparklers!” We knew how precious a teacher’s attention was.

An obnoxious clown with big feet and orange hair visited Lyle School in the first grade. We went to the library to see his tricks, and I tried to sit as far away from the clown as possible. When the clown asked for a helper, my teacher, Mrs. McCutcheon, joined him up front. The clown told Mrs. McCutcheon to put her hand in a sort of mini-guillotine, making it look like her hand would get chopped off.

I tried to flee because I loved Mrs. McCutcheon. I loved how her name was hard to spell, how she sang and let you sniff her scented pens when she filled in your certificate for finishing a reading unit, how on the first day of school she had a name tag shaped like a monkey for each child. At recess, Mrs. McCutcheon didn’t walk around the playground, she skipped. Even though I couldn’t save her from the clown, I wasn’t going to watch either.

I asked Mrs. Newton, another first grade teacher, if I could go to the restroom. “Alicia,” she said, “do you think Mrs. McCutcheon is going to get her hand cut off?” Of course I did! Didn’t she? I don’t remember how Mrs. McCutcheon’s hand was saved, just that I spent the rest of the clown’s visit in Mrs. Newton’s lap.

Dear Mrs. Cleary,

I’ve been thinking about writing to you for a long time. Though I know you’ve heard from many adults and children, I wanted to tell you I’ve been listening and reading too.

Your Ramona helped make me a reader. When I finished Ramona Quimby, Age 8, I wanted to know and hear more, a sense that’s never gone away. As I’ve moved through other stories, I’ve learned how much the writing of others can offer me, if I read with an open heart and trust the path which leads me from word to word, story to story, book to book.

Reading *Ramona* has helped me understand what reading can do because she helped me find my loves and fears, big and small, and those of others. For instance, I could never laugh at the children I babysat. When five-year-old Gus wanted to play *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* in the backyard, I did. I didn't like to be laughed at when I was little, and I knew it hurt *Ramona* too.

The *Ramona* I imagine has also grown more complex as I've reread her. At first a friend, I've seen her as a sister and a daughter as well. The last time I read the end of *Ramona and Her Mother* where *Ramona* tries to run away from home, I cried, not because of *Ramona*, but because of Mrs. Quimby. When she says, "I couldn't get along without my *Ramona*," I knew if she was my little girl, I couldn't either.

Now, I imagine *Ramona* as an adult too. I hadn't thought about being her friend as an adult, but the other night I dreamed about her. She was all grown up, the same age as me, twenty-three. She was pretty, with straight brown hair, tall, slender. I sensed her intelligence, her spunky spirit, a gentle heart. I sensed she might love me too.

Somehow your stories are intertwined with my own. I can't fully describe your impression on me because I'm still learning what it is. I keep finding *Ramona* in new places, with new people.

Sincerely,



Alicia Kleiman

## II

Before we walked to the stadium, all the graduates were lined up and numbered in the gymnasium across the street. I had three sets of cords over my red cap and gown. Other students kept asking me what the colors stood for—gold for my GPA, white for the honors program, and red and black for the English honors society.

My class ring was on my right hand. I hadn't wanted one in high school, but I got a college ring for Christmas. It felt bulky; I never wear rings, but I admired the blue stone, the emblem for an English degree, and my name engraved in cursive under the band.

The three cords are on a plastic hanger in my closet now. I don't know where the ring is.

We passed between two rows of faculty as we walked down the track to our assigned seats. The professors stood on both sides of us in their own gowns with colored hoods down the back. I waved to Dr. Corning; he ran the writing center. I hugged Kimberly Jensen, a history professor, and saw she had the pin I cross-stitched for her on her gown. I shook hands with Gary Jensen, Roy Bennett, and Jeanne Harris, three of the reference librarians. At the end of the line Betsy Sargent tucked me under her arm—she thought I would forget my white cords and was happy to see them around my neck. Dr. Holmquist wasn't in line because she was playing "Pomp and Circumstance" on the organ. I saw the tassel of her pink and black cap bouncing over the heads of the graduates who were already seated.

Before the diplomas were awarded, Dr. Youngblood, the university president, asked the students who earned a 3.5 GPA or higher to please stand. She then had people sit back down until only those with a 3.8 or higher, *summa cum laude*, were left. I saw only a handful of others still standing with me. To my right I saw my friend Elaine who wrote poetry for her honors thesis; closer to the front I saw Katy, a past roommate who wanted to be a veterinarian.

I inwardly cringed when Dr. Youngblood spoke of us as examples, and the audience applauded. I didn't turn around to look at Mom and Dad. I knew I'd been a conscientious student and library worker, that I'd written and presented a good honors thesis. I'd done everything I'd been asked.

But I had only begun to realize my accomplishments came at a cost, the weight of which I was only beginning to understand. I'd pushed the costs away, paid them little attention before now. A day rarely passed without my head hurting. I never slept enough

and drank too much diet Pepsi. Though I inwardly swung between fear and numbness, I thought I wanted academic favor the most and ignored everything else. I was starting to suspect that somewhere behind school was something much more important.

In the middle of a photo collage Mom made for graduation is an eight-by-ten of my first school picture from nursery school. I'm sitting at a wood desk next to a shiny red apple which may or may not be real. Behind me is wallpaper printed with shelves of leather-bound books, also stand-ins.

Dark yellow flowers run along the lighter yellow background of my blouse, matched by flower-shaped buttons down the front. The puffy sleeves match the rounded collar; the edges of the arm bands, collar, and button placket are lined with white trim. A wide yellow grosgrain ribbon is tied to the side of my part. My arms are neatly folded on the desk, and I'm looking straight at the camera—the perfect little student.

This was the beginning of school. I wish I knew what I had expected from school then; I'm not sure what I want from it now. I've put this picture in my wallet. It's been a long time.

### III

Fortune's Light was the first Star Trek novel I read in high school. Just the right size to slip into a coat pocket, Commander Riker and an alien woman with gill-like ears against a violet and cerulean blue background on the front—I pick it out from the dozens of Star Trek novels on my bookshelves. I don't remember the story now; what I remember is how vivid the characters on television were after I finished the book. There was so much more to know about the Star Trek universe, and I wanted to know everything.

The following January, I bought two Star Trek calendars, one for the original series and one for The Next Generation. The calendars also listed the birthdays of the actors in each series. Once or twice a month, I made delta shield-shaped sugar cookies and frosted them with the color of the uniform of the character the birthday actor played—gold for

William Shatner, blue for Leonard Nimoy and DeForest Kelly, red for James Doohan and Nichelle Nichols. I sometimes bought birthday cards too. I picked the most festive card I could find in the Hallmark store next to Safeway, wrote a note of appreciation inside, and mailed it off in care of Paramount Pictures.

After the novels, television episodes, cookies and birthday cards, I subscribed to letter and fiction zines, watched movies, and bought a sketchbook and a whole box of Star Trek trading cards. Through each of these I read my own version of the Star Trek universe, a world particular to me even though I shared the basic premises and characters with millions. It became the narrative I told myself, the narrative I sought. The optimism, honor, and duty to serve through the mind and body were irresistible and unmatched by anything I found in high school. I wanted to live a future reflecting the universe I was constructing from the raw materials of the twenty-third and twenty-fourth centuries.

Each Starfleet crew member was intelligent and learned in his or her own field, whether it be in the sciences, engineering, or command. Yet, because these fictitious Starfleet recruits were curious, receptive men and women, they were also willing to learn more and have their ideas challenged. Though I wasn't aware of the phrase in high school, now I would call them intellectually humble. Plus, Starfleet officers were physical as well as intellectual adventurers. In space and on alien worlds, they built new technologies, discovered new forms of life, studied languages and cultures, and assisted sentient and nonsentient beings. Each officer was respectful of the variety and interconnected nature of alien landscapes; each new facet of life contributed things known and unknown to the universe. Dr. McCoy sees this quality of recognition in Captain Kirk when he says to him in the novel Invasion: First Strike, "Everybody goes out into space expecting to see things that are alien and weird. You look at the alien and weird and see a piece of us." Lastly, Starfleet officers were loyal, steadfast. Even if they were assigned to the same ship at random, once they were together they weren't like coworkers sitting in their separate cubicles, but rather friends serving on the same ship. Though it may have been unconscious at the time, these were qualities I was sought in others and myself.

Of course, as a product of our own time, Star Trek isn't perfect. The women wear those hideous miniskirts in the original series, and plenty of enemies are maimed or vaporized. For me, though, Star Trek means freedom, freedom through work which involves the mind and body and knowing we belong to a ship winding through the stars and a narrative winding through each of us. Because of this freedom, the ideal Starfleet officer is in love with the universe.

When I left for college, how I had internalized the Star Trek narrative became clear. I missed it. I didn't have a television, and there was no time to read novels, bake cookies, or draw pictures. I tried to compensate; I brought all my Star Trek pictures and photos to the dorms and arranged them on my bulletin board. Over my desk were the few Star Trek novels I had carefully selected to bring to our tiny room. I never cracked one open during school; I knew I would be sucked in, unable to extricate myself. Entering this narrative for a while might have been a relief, an escape from the pressure of studying, writing papers, and confronting a difficult roommate. However, I suspected coming back out again would only hurt.

If I went home for the weekend, I was overwhelmed by watching *The Next Generation*. The officers and crew looked huge on my parents' twenty-seven inch television screen, the *Enterprise* colossal as it glided through the opening credits and burst into warp drive when the music ended. The colors were more vivid than before—Dr. Crusher's hair softer and more red, Commander Riker's bright eyes even bluer.

I had tackled writing about Lt. Commander Data and Star Trek for my senior thesis; now, I had to present Data to a room full of people. I drew my presentation from the fourth and final section of my thesis which discusses Data's connections to the Tin Woodman of Oz, Pinocchio, and Sherlock Holmes. I brought a large photograph of Data as a visual aid, and wrote in my speech that "Data, like the Tin Woodman, is a gentle man." This thought had begun as a private insight, yet was reinforced and interpreted through scholarship on fandom and popular culture. I learned it was not unusual for serious fans of

television shows such as Star Trek to have a strong connection to their particular narrative, yet I still wondered if I could speak these words and stand beside Data's photograph without embarrassment, without feeling ashamed. In the seven years since I had read Fortune's Light, friends, roommates, and teachers had misunderstood my involvement or dismissed my serious attitude toward it. If others lived through other narratives as I lived though Star Trek, they did not tell me.

As I wrote my thesis, new stories and characters—The Tin Woodman of Oz, Pinocchio, Sherlock Holmes—were woven into the Star Trek universe I already inhabited; the universe became more diverse and more connected than ever. It was also expanded by exposing my personal vision of Data and Star Trek to the examination and scrutiny of academic thinking. Rather than collapsing, my vision connected with respected studies of popular culture. The smaller Star Trek narrative I gave a private, internal meaning grew to include a public meaning as well.

#### IV

Judith A. Langer's book Envisioning Literature, while furnishing an additional way to describe my experiences reading, viewing, and writing with Star Trek, also provides a bridge between those experiences as a student and pedagogical issues I have faced teaching Writing 121. In her first chapter, Langer defines an envisionment as "the world of understanding a person had at any point in time." Langer's chapter only explicitly discusses work done within the classroom; however, I understand envisionments to be developing during and after school. In this sense, envisionment building can occur through thoughts and experiences which are kept private and those which are made public. The content of one can influence the other as well. However, while Langer's work suggests the two can be brought together, Wendy-Vasey's book Nourishing Words discusses the difficulty of this task.

First, two of Langer's four stances which build an envisionment have particularly strong connections to my previous writing on Star Trek and to my current teaching in WR

121. Langer describes stance two, “being in and moving through an envisionment” as “the time when meaning begets meaning; we are caught up in the narrative story or the sense or feel of a poem.” With my own writing, the second part of my undergraduate thesis, “Personal Participation: the Nature of the Star Trek Narrative,” could be viewed as an effort to describe this stance while reading Star Trek. I discussed how a Star Trek fan moves through and among the texts—written, oral, and visual—of the Star Trek universe, and how this differs from how she moves through other narratives. Stance two also fits an activity I have done with my freshmen composition class while working toward writing a summary. In preparation for an annotation exchange with Adrienne Rich’s essay “Claiming an Education,” I asked the students to underline, star, or highlight the text, and to write marginal comments noting what they found interesting or confusing and where they had questions. The physical act of annotating the text could help the “sense or feel” Langer describes; their highlighting and comments tell the story of their developing envisionment. The annotation exchange also demonstrates how Langer’s concept is applicable to texts which are not strictly literary.

Stance four, “stepping out and objectifying the experience,” could also be labeled as the public or “academic” section of an envisionment. Because of this, some may consider stance four the more professionally legitimate stance; however, stance four would not be possible without the previous three, particularly stance two, a complete immersion in the given story. An awareness of the “critical and intellectual traditions and the place of [the] work within them” is the most useful after we have fully internalized the story and noted our responses to it. At this point, students can connect their readings to additional historical, biographical, or critical material. In the case of my thesis, I explored studies of fans and fandom such as Henry Jenkins’s Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture. While it still may have been interesting, Jenkins’s work would not have had the significance for my writing which it did without my long immersion in the Star Trek narrative. For teaching, the implication of stance four and its placement at the end of the list concerns time. Enough time, in the classroom and out, for the earlier stances

must be provided by the teacher and taken advantage of by her students to make the best use of stance four. Time for rereading in light of the new material must not be considered a special bonus but an essential part of the student's work.

The delight of an envisionment, of course, is that it changes, evolves. Langer also explains that "changes can occur through writing, additional thought, other reading, or class discussion. Envisionments grow and change and become enriched over time with thought and experience." As students and as teachers, we should recognize that the experiences which influence these changes may be public as well as private. For instance, a public influence on the idea of Star Trek's narrative structure as open to radical interpretation by its fans was a class on Arthurian legends I took while writing my thesis. I learned that the stories about King Arthur, Merlin the magician, Lancelot, and the other knights of the Roundtable were pieced together over time as different storytellers either added characters and elements or reshaped existing ones. As with Star Trek, the loose structure of the Arthurian legends could be reinterpreted as each storyteller saw fit. Reinterpretation and revision wasn't just one option; it was an expectation. A private influence on my version of Star Trek includes dreams I've had about it. When I think of the Star Trek universe now, the events of those dreams and the pathos they invoke are included.

Langer's work with envisionments encourages us to see the public and private working together, two parts of a whole. However, in the first chapter of Wendy Atwell-Vasey's Nourishing Words: Bridging Private Acts and Public Teaching, the combination of the public and private is problematic. She writes that teachers "assume it to be an occupational hazard that private reading has an authentic quality that cannot be matched in a public setting like school." If this assumption is not reconsidered, private reading is severely devalued. The quality or tone of public and private reading may be different, but one need not be superior or more authentic than the other. Though the relationship between public and private reading needs to be negotiated in situations such as my thesis presentation, my experience with Star Trek contradicts Atwell-Vasey's research here. When I wrote my thesis, I learned about the scholarship on Star Trek, fandom, and popular

culture through school, leading me to new, arresting insights. School can provide authentic, meaningful readings which extend our understanding of a given text.

However, the pressure of grades, performance, or the desire for approval sometimes make this less likely to happen. Students may censor the readings they allow themselves to fully develop in a paper or class discussion or which readings they choose to make public at all because of these concerns. I saw this happen in Writing 121 when students were turning in daily informal writing. Some students introduced and developed thoughtful ideas about the readings or class discussions in this writing; however, at the end of their paper they would explain they didn't raise their ideas in class because their classmates might have disagreed with them.

According to the stories which open Atwell-Vasey's book, teachers may encourage this reluctance because teachers "feel that they don't want to disturb personal readings by addressing them in school." I understand the impulse to create a private space for reading in school, and as a student, sometimes wish for that myself. However, this assumption can also imply personal readings are inappropriate in school, an unstable foundation for further work. Avoidance of personal readings can also break down a teacher's attempt to use reader-response theories in her classroom; these approaches require an openness, a trust in one's reactions to a text. Perhaps if teachers provide time and space for multiple private readings, students could select which readings they make public. This selection could be built into the process of writing a formal paper; students generate many ideas and select or rearrange just a few of them through revision. Some readings, though not all, could remain private.

Finally, toward the end of her opening chapter, Atwell-Vasey discusses a study of reader responses by Norman Holland. She writes, "he concluded that a student is likely to demonstrate patterns of responses characteristic of the preoccupations of the reader's personality." Though the thought often runs counter to the academic writing required of students and the tests teachers must administer, Holland's conclusion can be more of a strength than a weakness. A response which is grounded in our personality is not necessarily weak, insubstantial, or insignificant. By bringing those responses into a public

space such as school, our “preoccupations” can develop a wider significance. The negotiations we make as teachers, students, and readers between public and private may be what animates the strongest of our responses. Both impulses broaden, and complicate, the reader and the text.

Early in the my first term of graduate school, I visited a professor in his office. The weather was still warm with leaves falling outside his open window. I mentioned watching and writing about Star Trek toward the end of our conversation. With a little gleam in his eye, he started digging through a desk drawer, shoving aside legal pads, pens, paper clips and rubber bands.

Two glossy postcards emerged from the drawer—one of Captain Kirk glancing over his shoulder, the other of Dr. McCoy and his gentlemanly smile. This professor had brought Star Trek to school too, and I smiled back at all three of them.

## V

Sometimes, school is an emotionally controlling place. When I read, write, or speak with someone and get fired up about what happened, I can't give myself over to that response. The time and space to dig further into such a response is lacking, diminishing both my inner landscape and my external work. I am losing something important, perhaps irreplaceable. It must be important to give myself over to an idea, a subject, a reading that is bigger than me, but the structure of school doesn't seem able to absorb the energy of this. The energy is dissipated, wasted. It can't seem to hold the times when giving in isn't a bad thing, but a good thing, maybe the best thing.

Only once in a great while have I truly given in during school. A time came last year when I wrote a review of Smoke Signals for a class on critical reviewing. Sherman Alexie's book, the fire and music in the film, and the scarce chance to give in created an unusual time to write, to learn, and to know.

When it was released in 1998, Smoke Signals was publicized as the first full-length feature film written, directed, and co-produced by Native Americans. With the exception of a few minor roles, the actors in the film are Native Americans as well. The challenge of the film, a Sundance Film Festival award winner, was to bring the characters and themes of Sherman Alexie's book of short stories, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, to a wider audience. Director and co-producer Chris Eyre and screenwriter Sherman Alexie tackled the challenge well.

The storyline of Smoke Signals is drawn primarily from a single story in Alexie's book, "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." In the film and short story, the main character is Victor Joseph, a twenty-two-year-old Indian who has lived on a reservation in Washington his entire life. Victor's father, Arnold, left his mother when he was twelve; Victor has not seen him for ten years. Now, Victor's father has died, and he must travel to Phoenix to recover Arnold's ashes. Victor cannot afford the trip himself, so he is accompanied by Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Victor is nothing but annoyed by Thomas, whom he has beaten up and ridiculed since they were children. However, without Thomas's mason jar of change and stray dollar bills, Victor will not make it to Phoenix.

Some of the film's characters do not appear in the book, and some are changed significantly. When Victor and Thomas arrive in Phoenix, they contact Suzy Song, played by Irene Bedard. Suzy is a friend of Arnold's who discovered his body inside his hot trailer. Though she does not appear in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, in Smoke Signals Suzy is the link between Victor and his father and partly responsible for one of the central images of fire and smoke in the film.

The dark side of Victor's humor in the book is not carried over into Smoke Signals. Victor, played by Adam Beach, is more silently angry than his counterpart in Alexie's story. A lighter version of Victor's humor in The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven is transferred to Thomas, whose character experiences the largest transformation. Since the story "The Trial of Thomas Builds-the-Fire" is not included in Smoke Signals, the serious, more tragic side of his character does not appear in the film. The film version

of Thomas plays the wiser clown to Victor's sullen straight man. Thomas, played by Evan Adams, dresses in thick glasses, a nerdy vest and jacket, braids, and a wide grin.

These smaller changes add up to a more hopeful outlook for Smoke Signals than for The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven. In Alexie's book, there is no hint of an easy answer to the problems of reservation Indians. His depiction of reservation life includes the hopelessness brought on by economic depression, wide-spread alcoholism, and a sense of failure which does not allow anyone to really succeed. In the film, Victor's struggles are seen within the smaller scope of his own family, rather than the entire reservation. The narrower focus makes the end of Smoke Signals potentially more hopeful.

Because the majority of the film happens off the reservation, Victor and Arnold can also stand for many other fathers and sons. This is not a criticism since Victor and Arnold cannot be removed from their cultural situations. Ultimately, Smoke Signals is about the strained relationships between fathers and sons, but strained primarily because of where the fathers and sons have been raised and what their people, their tribe, has experienced. When Victor confronts his father's memory, he confronts the shattered memories of his tribe as well.

The pain and difficulty of confronting the past is illustrated by the final scenes of Smoke Signals. Standing on a bridge over the Spokane Falls, Victor hurls the beat-up tin full of his father's ashes into the water and collapses onto the cement wailing. Victor appears on the bridge after Thomas's final monologue, based on the poem "Forgiving Our Fathers," by Dick Louries:

How do we forgive our fathers? Maybe in a dream . . . shall we forgive them for their excesses of warmth or coldness? Shall we forgive them for speaking through walls, or never speaking, or never being silent? Do we forgive our fathers in our age or in theirs? If we forgive our fathers, what is left?

Victor's cry echoes the wailing music, carrying us through the end credits, back out into our lives, our own relationships with parents, children, and into what happens when children grow and parents die.

## VI

In August of 1999, one month before moving to Corvallis to start my Master's program, I finished reading Grace Llewellyn's The Teenage Liberation Handbook and walked down to Dallas High School afterwards. Behind the new front door I could see the cafeteria, the long formica tables with attached benches folded against the wall. I used to sneak my lunch into the library to avoid the cafeteria and noisy hallways, to eat and read my Star Trek book in peace. I hid my paper sack among my textbooks and sat behind the orange study carrels near the encyclopedias. I'm sure Ms. Hunt, the librarian, knew what I was doing, but she left me alone. I always cleaned up after myself and took any trash back outside with me.

I left the front door and started looking in the nearby windows, cupping my hands around my face to block out the sun. The first window was the office for Dobie Long, one of the guidance counselors. I could see all the school and senior pictures on the bulletin board over her desk, including me wearing a yellow, red, and purple flowered dress with red buttons and purple Converse high tops and holding a mask I made in advanced theater.

On the back of her office door was the Star Trek poster I made for Dobie. I copied and colored pictures of different Star Trek aliens from a book and glued them to yellow and purple posterboard. Sometimes when I talked to her, she would ask what sounded suspiciously like counselor-type questions.

I've always had a good memory. I remember moving into the house my parents live in now when I was two and a half. I stood on the porch watching Grandpa lift my crib out of the truck and later checked the kitchen cabinets for anything the previous owners might have left behind. I usually think a long detailed memory is an asset, revealing material which lets me see myself more fully. However, when I read The Teenage Liberation Handbook shortly before coming to Oregon State University, people and incidents I had set aside or thought I fully understood violated their safe confines. I was surprised, and I was hurt. I didn't understand as much as I thought I did. Now, the school scenes I remember have a fearful layer of new truths.

We took showers after class in 7th grade P.E, regardless of whether we were sweaty or not. Naked and dripping wet, I and twenty-five other twelve-year-old girls stood outside the shower area, waiting for everyone to finish before Mrs. McIntosh allowed us to grab a towel and cross the concrete aisle to our lockers. I stood as still as possible, arms crossed, trying not to bump anyone else's bare chest.

If a girl was not taking a shower, she had to go into Mrs. McIntosh's office and tell her why. "Kleiman: period" I'd report as Mrs. McIntosh make a little check mark in her gradebook. By the end of the year, she accumulated a fairly accurate record of my menstrual cycle.

At conferences, Mrs. McIntosh told my parents I was a sweet, quiet, young lady. I hated her.

I wanted to be on the track team in the 7th grade, and of all the events I could run I chose the hurdles. At 4'9" and a little on the heavy side, I could barely get my butt over the bar at first. I tripped a couple times, hitting the ground with my palms, and never did better than fourth place. I refused to talk about the meets when Mom picked me up in the school parking lot.

When it came time for the district meet our coach, a student teacher, still let me run the hurdles. When I asked her to sign my yearbook, she wrote, "I enjoyed having such a hard-working girl on the team." I had kept telling myself during the whole track season I could quit if I wanted to, but I didn't.

I keep seeing this picture of myself: After riding the bus home from the junior high school, I'm sitting on the couch watching Oprah, wearing a pair of white stretch pants and a green, white, and black plaid shirt I wore at least once a week. My hair is in a ponytail. I wore a ponytail every day of 7th grade, except the day of school pictures. I didn't even take it out when I went to bed. It hurt when I pulled the rubber bands out in the morning, but I just washed my hair and put the ponytail back in again.

I know that not everything about school was bad. When I walked into Dobie's office the first time and saw two Star Trek calendars and play figures of Captain Picard and Commander Riker, I knew I had a new friend. Time with her, whether it was working with the cast and crew of the spring musical or talking in her office, was one of the best parts of high school. But I wasn't happy as I looked inside those windows either. I'm glad I had the library to hide in, but why did the students wandering the halls or eating their own sack lunches make me want to hide in the first place? I probably gave Dobie good reason to ask her questions.

The more I remembered, the more the bad parts of school blinded, tainted the good parts and changed how I see both now. The good parts aren't as pristine as they used to be, and the bad parts are more significant than ever before.

As I read the chapters in The Teenage Liberation Handbook on how to engage different subjects outside of school, I didn't find myself thinking so much about subjects I've come to love, but those I think I missed out on—math, science, health. As I read, I wanted to shriek thinking of the headaches and nervous stomachs, the loathing, the manipulations I might have avoided, given the chance to pursue these subjects in my own time, when I was ready.

For instance, one afternoon I was making up an Algebra II test after school in the back of Mr. Fobert's classroom. I could get the correct answer for most of the problems, but I couldn't do them fast enough to be finished by 3:30. At 3:28 I looked up and gave Mr. Fobert a long I'm-doing-my-best-it's-giving-me-a-headache-aren't-I-pitiful look. He let me take the test home and finish it.

If Mr. Fobert bought my look, I saw how easy it really was to manipulate teachers and wondered why I hadn't tried it sooner. But if he didn't buy it and knew what I was doing, why did he let me get away with it?

Even as a little kid, I had a firm, stubborn sense of my own integrity. Yet, reading The Teenage Liberation Handbook reminded me of when I violated my integrity, my honesty with myself and other people. I never told Mrs. McIntosh I felt humiliated or the track coach I wanted to quit, and I took the extra time for the math test which the other kids didn't get. Small incidents, maybe, but they shaped the kind of place school was and sometimes still is. School is the place where good grades and what the teacher thinks come first. Integrity comes second.

My junior year in high school I was on the newspaper staff and did a story on in-school suspension. I pretended to be suspended and reported on my experience. Mrs. Day, the newspaper advisor, and Mr. Green, the dean of students, were the only people who knew I wasn't really in trouble.

Instead of going to class one morning, I reported to the in-school suspension room across the hall from the main office. The room had four or five student desks facing the wall and a desk for Mrs. Newsom who supervised the suspendees. I was directed to a desk, told to sign a form to indicate I understood the conditions of in-school suspension, and given the homework assignments which my teachers had sent. At first I didn't mind my confinement; I finished my homework in about an hour and spent the rest of the time writing and reading a book. However, I wasn't allowed to even leave my chair without permission. Mrs. Newsom had to come to my desk before I could ask to use the restroom next door.

My teachers and other students discovered I was "suspended" when the homework requests were sent out. The general response was shock; my ability to commit a serious infraction was doubted or dismissed entirely. Only Nikki Gilliam, whom I'd know since we were four and was my best friend in grade school, believed I could have done anything wrong. Nikki rightly knew I had enough of a temper to say something nasty or viscous if thought I'd been insulted.

When Mr. Green came to retrieve me, he said Mr. Warner, my teacher for College English, had come down to his office. Mr. Warner told Mr. Green he knew it wasn't any

of his business, but could Mr. Green please tell him what I did? I went down the hall to Mr. Warner's classroom and peeked in the door. When he saw me he said he couldn't imagine what his archangel might have done.

At the time, I thought I hurt Mr. Warner's feelings, and maybe I did. I was also confused; I didn't understand why he thought I was an "archangel." I liked Mr. Warner because he made us write a lot, helped me understand Romeo and Juliet, and wrote lots of comments on my papers arguing with the points I made. Tackling his challenges made me a serious student; they didn't make me perfect.

When I think of this incident now, I'm ashamed of myself. In-school suspension isn't a joke. Aside from whether it is an effective punishment, lots of kids spent days confined to that room. Putting me in there demeaned whatever that punishment might have meant to them, mocked them. My inability to see that narrowed my understanding of what school meant to those kids who, for whatever reason, didn't or couldn't fit into the preset patterns of A-F, forty-five minute periods, and textbook reading.

This afternoon, the 1st of September 2000, I finished rereading The Teenage Liberation Handbook. The quotation accompanying the illustration on my Mary Engelbreit calendar for the new month reads "One hour of life, crowded to the full with glorious action and filled with noble risks is worth whole years of those mean observances of paltry decorum." Above the words two little boys in swimming trunks, arms and hair flying, swing over a pond on an old tire. One, holding onto the tire with his knees, can almost reach the tree branch above him. The other tips backward, ready to splash into the water below. In the background, a tiny yellow school bus drives down the road without them.

## VII

## Twenty-Two Reasons I'm Angry

- I work between sixty and eighty hours a week teaching, attending class and doing homework for French, writing, and literature classes, but I don't know why I do it.
- I'm \$30,000 in debt because of school.
- Brooding about the future distracts me in the present: I don't hear students who come to my office or Anna while we eat dinner.
- When I spend Friday evening, Saturday, and Sunday working, the weekend is no weekend at all.
- I haven't had the time to consider my conversation with Lisa about Ph.D programs.
- The day I canceled my two WR 121 classes and stayed off campus, I still spent six hours grading summaries and writing out French exercises.
- I cried five times last week, and I'm already up to twice this week. If I hadn't contained myself before teaching today at four, it would be three.
- I'm trying to get more sleep, but it isn't working. My dreams are chaotic—running, shouting, speeding trolleys, hanging from ledges—and I wake up weary.
- My bathroom is dirty, and I didn't have time to clean it this weekend.
- I realized Sunday afternoon I wanted to see my mom, but it was too late.
- Mom and Aunt Debby went to see my grandparents weekend before last, and I couldn't go too. Grandma and Papa aren't going to live forever.
- The work I want the most—writing for this thesis—is the last I turn to at night.
- The hours for the language lab are terrible. I have to make an extra trip to campus Sunday evenings if I'm going to do the listening exercises for French.
- I did a search on emblem books for Heidi Brayman Hackel's class, and our library didn't have the materials I needed. I ordered them through ILL, but they might not come in time for my presentation.
- The library now charges 7¢ a copy.
- Half of my two o'clock class doesn't seem to listen to me.
- The same class keeps asking when they will get their papers back.

- When I did hand papers back, Matt was bitching and moaning about his grade on a revision within my earshot. I wanted to knock him flat.
- I don't want to be angry at the students—Maggie, Tim, Milissa, Kerry, Jonathan—who are listening.
- I hate the suggestion of a teacher's pet. I hate it. I am not a lap dog.
- Deep honesty and sincerity seem undervalued. Admitting I love those around me or the book in my hand sometimes feels shameful.
- Who can I tell about this anger? What's permissible?

## VIII

I first read Parker Palmer's The Courage to Teach in the week between the orientation for new teaching assistants and fall classes starting. I read it fast, like a horn player running through a string of sixteenth notes in one breath; it sounds wonderful, but leaves a sense of the whole rather than a full understanding of the bits and pieces.

Little bits of Palmer's work had come to me earlier, but I failed to catch or identify them. Toward the end of my first term of teaching Writing 121, I was flipping through journal entries from an undergraduate teaching of writing class I took from Betsy Sargent. In my first entry for the first week on Peter Elbow's essay on embracing contraries she has underlined a phrase—“fear of revealing ourselves”—and written with her green pen in the margin of my notebook paper “Yes—Parker Palmer's books.” I was startled; I hadn't remembered her writing this or mentioning his name. Why hadn't I gone to the library and typed “Palmer, Parker” into the author search? Somehow her comment slipped through my usual screen of diligence.

Now, I think I was perhaps too angry to catch it, wanting to blame my fear on someone else, anyone else. I was angry because I was losing the ability to will myself to finish reading and writing for school. I was afraid of failing, of disappointing my teachers and myself. Pressure from within and without had hit its peak, and I was ready to give a hard shove back.

Early in The Courage to Teach, a student asks “is it OK to use the word I” in an essay Palmer has assigned. I stopped reading at this point because I could hear Palmer’s voice in my ear, in the air. The flat black ink blew open. I heard his gentle tone, the easy pace of his words, and the rumble behind his voice.

A few weeks before, I’d moved to an apartment in Corvallis. I had NPR on all day long because my TV didn’t get hooked up for almost two weeks. The radio followed me around like the cat; it came in the bedroom where I folded jeans and underwear, in the kitchen while I unpacked dishes, and into the living room to sit on top of my computer box while I stacked books on the floor.

I had paused during an interview with a couple of writers on education one afternoon, and one of the writers was speaking about fear in the classroom. I had forgotten about it until I came to this student’s question in The Courage to Teach. It must have been Parker Palmer I heard that week—I’d heard Palmer say “is it okay to use the word I” before in his interview on the radio.

I heard Palmer’s voice in person when he visited OSU in February of 2000. I dressed for the occasion in my current favorite shirt and best pair of L.L. Bean jeans; I even polished my shoes and got all the cat hair off my coat. The day before I bought a new blue-tinted notepad and broke out a new fine-tipped Pentel RSVP pen. This was serious.

After Palmer’s workshop in the afternoon, I stood waiting to briefly speak with him, shifting my weight from one foot to the other, buttoning and unbuttoning my coat. He looked grandfatherly in his big sweater and offered a firm hand to each person, listening intently to their words. Finally, I introduced myself as a TA in the English Department and thanked him for coming. I said his work seemed to be as much about being a student as being a teacher, and he agreed.

Looking at his books now, it's not his voice I remember the most. I remember how unimposing his height was and how his hand engulfed mine when we shook. He embodied his own words, which first nudged me into silence and later into words of my own.

I saw many people I knew at Palmer's lecture later that evening, including Teresa, another TA in the English Department. When I met her parents and her husband, she introduced me as her "good friend Alicia." Surprised, I said little in response, but carried that home with me.

I read Psalm 20 that evening before going to sleep. Thinking of Parker Palmer and Teresa, I read, "May he give you your heart's desire / and fulfill every one of your plans. / May we ring out our joy at your victory / and rejoice in the name of our God. / May the Lord grant all your prayers."

## IX

When I first read The Teenage Liberation Handbook and The Courage to Teach, I was not part of the audience either book addresses. The Teenage Liberation Handbook is written for teenagers who are fed up with, depressed by, or disgusted with junior high and high school. The book presents unschooling—leaving school, recapturing one's time and passions, and exploring the world in a manner of one's own choosing—as a viable alternative. When I read it in August of 1999, I was finished with high school, had graduated from Western Oregon University with a Bachelor's in English, and was starting my Master's at Oregon State in a month. Grace Llewellyn's book seemed a moot point, but it was not. At the end of her book, she proclaims "I get the most stunning letters from readers of all ages, in school and out, teenagers, parents, teachers, college students, other adults," thus throwing me in with her wider audience and assuring me my response to the book was legitimate.

I could not dismiss this response, perhaps the most forceful response I've ever had during or after reading a book. As I read, I cried in my room, sitting on the back porch,

walking home from the public library. The anger I felt—boiling hot fury—threatened to crush me. It was directed at school, myself, and my current situation. I'd been complicit in the pain and mess school was causing, what Palmer calls “the silent conspiracy that allowed that institution to rule [his] life.” I had grown increasingly bitter about school over the past year, but when I read The Teenage Liberation Handbook, I understood for the first time that it simply wasn't a matter of me against “them.”

When I wasn't reading or crying I was walking around in a daze. I felt panicked and abandoned; who I thought I was and what I thought I wanted to do was all called into question. The world was blowing open and all the possibilities I'd never considered or had long forgotten blasted in. I'd been in school for the past twenty years but never honestly, openly considered the consequences of being shaped by the practices and assumptions of that institution.

I considered not coming to Corvallis and OSU at all. I didn't see how I could continue as a university student and start teaching freshman composition with the thoughts I was having. I didn't want school inflicted on me anymore, and I didn't want to inflict it on other people. However, I didn't think it was right to back out on the commitment I had made on such short notice. Plus, I was packed to move. I'd paid the first month's rent on my apartment. I'd bought furniture, “teaching” clothes, and a long raincoat. I thought I'd like Corvallis as a town. So I came, but with a heavy heart.

As a teacher, I wasn't part of Parker Palmer's audience in The Courage to Teach, at least not yet. Palmer is addressing teachers who have been hurt and burned after working for a number of years; I hadn't taught my first class yet. However, in the introduction to the paperback edition of his earlier book, To Know as We are Known, which is aimed toward those interested in religious education, he writes “I am delighted that To Know as We are Known has reached a wider and more diverse audience than I had thought possible.” Like The Teenage Liberation Handbook, Palmer's work seems to stretch beyond its author's original intentions.

My response to my first introduction to Palmer's work was also forceful, visceral. Chris Anderson, the Composition Coordinator, read a few passages from The Courage to

Teach on the last day of the orientation for new teaching assistants, including “The external structures of education would not have the power to divide us as deeply as they do if they were not rooted in one of the most compelling features of our inner landscape—fear.” The Teenage Liberation Handbook had forced me to admit how fearful I was about school, and at the moment of Chris’s reading, my own fears were being voiced. My face grew hot, and the room blurred as I tried not to cry in front of the other TAs. Zipping up my backpack and walking out into the September sunshine, I thought this book might change things too.

Each book begins by discussing fear and its connection to school, The Teenage Liberation Handbook from a student’s perspective and The Courage to Teach from a teacher’s perspective. Each proposes its own approach to our fear as well—leaving educational institutions completely in The Teenage Liberation Handbook, physically remaining in the institution but taking our “spiritual leave” in The Courage to Teach. These two books and these two viable choices have been crashing against each other for the past two years.

*TLH: School won’t answer the door when real chances to learn come knocking . . . life is unexpected. Sometimes it offers something more glorious than what we’d planned, and we lose if we’re not ready to let go of our agenda.*

*CTT: There is an alternative to waiting: we can reclaim our belief in the power of inwardness to transform our work and our lives.*

How would these lists be different if I let go and stopped waiting?

Subjects I’ve Swam In

theater

Star Trek

essays

Subjects on Hold

Shakespeare

WWI poets

war literature in general

children’s books

William Blake

gardening

drawing  
 women's history  
 Italo Calvino  
 quilting  
 cooking  
 Arthurian legends

*TLH: Forgive yourself for everything. Forgive your teachers for everything. Forgive your parents for everything. Forget the lies school taught—forget that learning is separate from your life, that you can't teach yourself, that you are defined by your grades, and all other such nonsense. Detoxify. Purge.*

*CTT: No longer are "those people" or "that place" my immediate problem. My immediate problem is me and the silent conspiracy I have had with the institution, the conspiracy that allowed that institution to rule my life.*

One Wednesday afternoon I continued to think about the Lord's Prayer after I left the noon Mass in the student union. I was taken aback as we said "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." I need to forgive teachers who, intentionally or not, hurt me, and hope the students I have can do the same for me.

With some of my students, I can feel them resist the pressure of their grades, and while I want them to listen, another little part of me is glad they resist. I'm glad they don't let me define them. Sometimes when I look at my students, I can't help but see myself, especially with some of the girls. The more time I spend with them, the more I remember myself as a freshman and the choice I made to bury myself in academics.

Maybe it's not just forgiving my teachers and hoping my students can forgive me, but also praying I can forgive myself.

*TLH: Good grades are often equally dangerous. They encourage you to forsake everything worthwhile that you might love, just to keep getting them . . . Good grades, moreover, are addictive. You start to depend on them for your sense of self-worth, and then it becomes nearly impossible to do anything that will jeopardize them . . . You stop taking risks.*

*CTT: Of course our students are cynical about the inner outcomes of education: we teach them that the subjective self is unvalued and even unreal. Their cynicism simply proves that when academic culture dismisses inner truth and honors only the external world, students as well as teachers lose heart.*

I called the university's information line the week after summer classes were over and heard from the tinny, mechanical voice I'd received two A-s. A few moments later I was walking up the driveway and onto the main road. Twenty minutes passed before I saw I wasn't watching the slippery gravel, looking for patches of poison oak, or feeling the tug of the two dogs at the end of their leashes. I was averaging up As and A-s in my head.

*TLH: Your learning is your job, not your teacher's job. And all you need to start with is desire.*

*CTT: Face to face with my students, only one resource is at my immediate command: my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this "I" who teaches—without which I have no sense of the "Thou" who learns.*

Sometimes, my course evaluations tell me more about the students who wrote particular comments than anything else. This fall, one early in the pile writes, "This [class] wasn't really a point of enthusiasm for me to start out with. I took it because it was required and did not try to get into it much." Was this student willing to meet me halfway? "Not always clear when giving instructions, but willing to clarify" another writes in heavy pencil. In this brief phrase, I see a student who asked his questions and a teacher who did her best to respond.

Now, I'm asking how and whether it matters that I've read these books and had the responses I did. Can unschooling be part my future? What difference has it made to start teaching with an awareness of Palmer and his work? Palmer, quoting the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, writes "Try to love the contradictions themselves . . . Live the contradictions now" (86). The contradictions are in me, my students, my teachers. It is not a matter of whether reading The Teenage Liberation Handbook and The Courage to Teach will change

who I am as a student and a teacher. It's a matter of how they continue to change me, whether I decide to formally remain either one, how I decide to live the growing contradictions.

**Part Three: Reading Life**

## I

Other students hate the 8 a.m. shift at the Western library, but I don't. The bell tower starts playing as I walk down Monmouth Ave., through the center of campus, under the giant pine next to Campbell Hall. In front of the humanities building the bells play "Scarborough Fair," and as I cross the brick crosswalk in front of the library, a hymn with several alleluias begins.

Later, the library opens even earlier. I volunteer to do that too, forgetting I'd be inside by 8 o'clock, cleaning copy machines rather than hearing the bells play.

I pick up my alarm clock: 6:45, avoiding its chirp for once. I turn on NPR's Morning Edition, but hear classical music instead. What time *is* it?

The hands of my alarm clock say seven. The battery in the wall clock is dead. I try the T.V.; all I see is a blank blue screen. The music continues playing into a timeless, unmarked void. My stomach clenches, I throw off my nightgown. Dripping in front of the radio after my shower I think Oh God, Oh God, Oh God, Oh God. The music crescendos, unleashes a final crash, and the host of Performance Today announces: ten past ten.

Not holding tears in anymore, grabbing shorts and Birkenstocks, I jam my toothbrush in my mouth. I snatch up my backpack and ride toward campus; the sunshine is sinister, berating.

My tires bump over the curb, and I stop just short of crashing into the bushes. I think, I better stop in the restroom to rinse the red out of my eyes. I pull open the front door of Moreland Hall, and the clock on top of the student union bongs once: 10:30.

I hear the courthouse marking the hours I should be asleep—eight, nine, ten, eleven, and the news comes on in the next room. Under my pink and white bedspread, I can see through the screen in the window: the stop sign at the end of Church St., the lamppost on the corner, a dirty blue light. A car skids around the corner onto Academy. Some

teenagers walk by, laughing. I hear a whirling outside. I know it was the mill at the other end of Church St., but when I was little I thought it was the sound that night made.

Tonight, in my new apartment in Corvallis, I don't know if the clock I hear is on campus or at the courthouse. Lights from the parking lot cast shadows on my curtain. Two blocks away, another train whistles and rattles down the tracks. The windows rattle a little too, and in the corner, the ring on the door of the fuse box jingles.

## II

After turning in grades Wednesday morning, I stopped in the office to check my e-mail. There's a message from Chris; one of my has students complained to the department chair. The student says I am late to class and write vague comments on papers. I feel my face flush; I am mad and I am embarrassed.

Who is this student? 8 o'clock or 11 o'clock section? I mentally scan the faces in Moreland 332 and Fairbanks 300. I get out my class lists, look them over, and read the message again. Guy or girl? Someone who came to office hours or someone who never spoke to me directly? Where do they sit? Did they skip much? Did I do something to offend or is someone disgruntled about their grade?

The student remained anonymous--no words, no voice, no paper, no face. I told Chris I wouldn't worry, but I lied and I did.

Alissa brought her paper to the office on Monday of finals week with a card clipped to it, a small pink envelope sealed with a flower-shaped sticker and my name written neatly across the front in magenta ink. She was gone before I turned around from laying her paper on my desk. Trying not to tear the sticker, I opened the card and saw a purple "Thanks!" scrolled over a floral background. "Thank you for helping me with my papers," she wrote inside. "I hope I can come to you for help in the future."

Alissa matches her card. Her dark blonde hair curls gently at the ends and brushes across her forehead. Every day she wears a thin gold necklace and small gold earrings with jeans and a trim shirt or blouse. Her shoes are unscuffed. In class she writes with pink, green, and purple ink; her revisions have at least four different colors of highlighter running across them.

Standing at my desk behind the office door one day after class, I hear David ask Alissa what grade she got on her paper. I hate this nosy question and silently tell him to mind his own business. Alissa pauses, and using one simple sentence, tells David she got a B and continues down the hall.

During her conference Alissa looked me in the eye, showing me her drafts, asking questions, explaining what did and did not work for her in class. The two students before her didn't take off their coats or backpacks and spoke in a line of clipped "Yes" and "No." Alissa laughed and didn't scoot her chair away.

### III

The first day of introduction to theatre, Blair Cromwell wore a pair of faded blue jeans with Minnie Mouse painted on one leg and Converse hightops. She had dozens of pairs—orange, yellow, purple, a patriotic pair with red and white stripes and a blue tongue with white stars, blue and green plaid, and even a red and green pair with jingle bells on the laces for Christmas. It wasn't long after I had my first class with her that I started wearing Converse hightops too. I had everyday pairs and good pairs—one time red and another purple—that I only wore with dresses. For high school graduation, I bought a brand new pair of black Converse hightops and a package of colored rhinestones. I arranged the rhinestones in patterns all over the Converse, and Mom made a royal blue dress with red and yellow rhinestone buttons to match.

Between that first day and graduation, the responsibility Blair let me have in the theatre grew. Fall of my senior year I was the stage manager for The Foreigner. Before the play I gathered all the props, including a wheelbarrow, the hubcap from a VW van, and

a newspaper from Atlanta. During the show, as I gave cues, threw the hubcap onstage, and cooked a breakfast of fried eggs backstage in the dark, Blair's keys jingled in my pocket. Blair told me the play was in my hands when it opened; any problems would go through me before they came to her. I respected that I was responsible for the play, but I loved the responsibility because Blair gave it to me.

Blair didn't have a window in her office. Some days she didn't see the sun at all; she arrived at school before sunrise, spent the day in the theatre and her office, and went home after rehearsals. One day I stayed home "sick" and painted her a window: sunshine, clouds, flowers, and a big blue sky. I don't know if other kids thought I was a teacher's pet. Once in a while, though, I wondered if Blair knew my admiration was honest, without pretense. As much as I wanted her to know I loved her, I wanted her to know that more.

During my freshman year at Western I did well academically, but I was often homesick, even though home was only eight miles away. Homesickness was part of it, but I think another part was that I'd lost something I had in the theatre in high school. I couldn't articulate it then; I just cried whenever Mom left me at the dorms again. Now, I think I was missing the sense from Blair that the work I did mattered.

I did meet Solveig Holmquist at Western. I found her posted at a table for the music department at an activity fair at the beginning of the school year. Sitting amid a jumble of chairs and a table full of pamphlets and handouts, Dr. Holmquist was looking for new choir members. I had no plans for singing when I walked into the gym and was signed up for an audition when I walked out. Dr. Holmquist was more than a new teacher; she was a force.

In rehearsals, Dr. Holmquist would say she wanted us to know a piece of music so well she could literally shape us as we went—louder or softer, faster or slower—without us getting lost. Near the end of my first year with her, we were performing a Rachmaninoff piece in Russian during the last concert of a three-day tour. The piece was slow and subtle;

we had to concentrate on her and one another, following and listening closely. About a third of the way through the piece, I no longer controlled how I moved through the music. Dr. Holmquist's hands breathed for me.

Singing in Dr. Holmquist's choir was much like working with Blair—I wanted to be around her and work with her more, regardless of whether she spoke directly to me or not. Because I was not a gifted musician or performer, I volunteered as the choral librarian the last year I sang with her. Numbering folders, sorting out piles of music, passing it all out at the beginning of the term, getting after people for not turning it in at the end, and digging through the dusty music library could be thankless tasks, but they weren't. Dr. Holmquist knew her strengths and weaknesses, one of the later being organizational tasks such as these. She couldn't run a 150 member choir by herself; she needed help.

By the end of the three years I worked with Dr. Holmquist, I surprised myself because I was no longer jealous of the people who received more attention as soloists or members of the chamber singers. I stood in my place in the middle of the front row of the soprano section and was happy. I didn't mind that 150 people would be turning in their music that night, and I'd have to sort it all out the next morning. I was even looking forward to it. I can't help but think this was because Dr. Holmquist needed, valued the work I did for her and the other choir members. I'm not a great musician, and Dr. Holmquist knew that, but she let me deeper into her work in other ways.

I haven't always been let in. My first term at Western I was the publicity manager for the theatre department. Only a few weeks after the term began, I smacked against overblown egos—students, professors, and staff—which had free reign over whomever was convenient. I felt as if I was walking under the cartoon characters floating over the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The woman who was supposed to proofread the play programs I put together only checked to see if her own name was spelled correctly and then dared to

complain when she found an error after the programs were printed. One of the student directors alternated between insulting me over the phone and missing the appointments I set up with him. People didn't return my calls and ignored my messages.

Western's theatre department was alternately infuriating and frightening. I knew I needed help with my new job; however, my efforts were often dismissed or ignored. By November I quit. Having worked with Blair so much, I was sure working in the theatre department would be ideal. I was wrong.

I was reminded of each of these jobs during the English department's orientation for new teaching assistants this fall. Walking down the stairs in Moreland Hall, Chris Anderson, the Composition Coordinator, remarked I would make a good administrative assistant. At first I laughed; working with Chris, Charles, and the new teaching assistants didn't seem like work at all. Last spring, Chris had asked Charles, another teaching assistant, and myself to help with the orientation and to observe the new TAs once they began in their own classrooms.

Chris needed our eyes and ears because he didn't have time to get to all of their classes. Little things we did mattered too—Charles bringing flowers from his garden, my taking copying requests downstairs and cutting muffins in half. Charles and I had our time, intelligence, and understandings to offer. We offered ourselves, even in our smaller tasks. Charles cut flowers from the ground in his backyard; the muffins and the sticky butter knife held my fingerprints. And when we offered, Chris and the new TAs accepted.

By the time Chris and I reached the bottom step, a pattern I hadn't seen before popped into place. I saw something vital and life-giving in work which takes the middle ground, work which stands in the margin between a specific person and a larger group. As the stage manager in high school, I served Blair, my fellow theatre students, and those in the audience. At Western, I served Dr. Holmquist, other choir members, and people enjoying the concerts. I served Chris and the new TAs during the orientation.

When I look over the work I've done in school, it's these jobs I value the most, where the work is more than a neatly printed, well-argued paper. It's the people I value

too. Long hours aren't so long and tedious tasks aren't so tedious when I believe in the people, and therefore the subjects, I am serving. Because the teaching, the music, and the plays mattered, sticky fingers, endless folders, and late rehearsals could be endured. The subjects gained a richness because of the people through whom I came to know them.

And over time, the work of these subjects has given me the chance, an opening, to know each of these teachers and to be known by them as well. Because they fully engage their subjects, they engaged me. I found new spaces within myself, onstage and off, because Blair Cromwell, Solveig Holmquist, and Chris Anderson met me in those spaces. I found new spaces for dignity, respect, and love with each of them.

The margin is a fruitful place.

#### IV

What does writing from the margin look like? Does it look like an essay?

I think such writing takes the experience and knowing of individuals as seriously as larger groups, acknowledges the rhythms and contradictions of both. A writer's connection to the subject matter is always implicitly granted. This connection need not be endlessly discussed and dissected, but readers and writers aren't allowed to forget about it either. It is emphatically assumed.

I hope work done in the margin can be taken with us to new places and positions, that our insights travel with us. I won't always be at Oregon State University or in Corvallis, but I do hope what I've learned comes with me when I leave. From the margin I've seen more of school, more of reading, than I ever did before.

#### V

More and more, rereading—looking again—seems the most important. Even if I spent the rest of my reading life on books and subjects I've already entered, I would have enough for a lifetime of work. I don't know why I need more.

This afternoon an inner warmth slowly grew, a gentle outlook in which words have a depth, a deepness that is always there but I don't often find. These are the times for rereading, returning to those books I haven't seen all of yet. Words speak, the air is thick, and I am ready to listen.

I could have heard more from the best books on my shelves this afternoon, perhaps later described in writing what I'd seen and heard. But I didn't reread anything. I left the books closed tight, turned my back, and returned to the schoolwork on the table.

School often makes me angry, but today I was grieved. It was wrong that I didn't reread anything today. I was given the inner space but did not respond with the proper time.

## VI

*Reading ought to be an act of homage to the God of all truth. We open our hearts to words that reflect the reality He has created or the greater Reality which He is. It is also an act of humility and reverence toward other men who are the instruments by which God communicated His truth to us.*

*Reading gives God more glory when we get more out of it, when it is a more deeply vital act not only of our intelligence but of our whole personality, absorbed and refreshed in thought, meditation, prayer, or even in the contemplation of God.*

*—Thomas Merton*

Sometimes I am as angry and confused about school as when I moved to Corvallis two years ago. It often seems I haven't learned or solved anything. Yet my questions have deepened, gathered more into themselves.

Now, I have a more complicated, nuanced idea of what has drawn me to school, drawn me since the day of that first school picture in the yellow blouse. Reading is part of what has kept me in school, yet my love for it did not originate there. I have learned my love for reading is fundamental to who I am, a gift I am unwilling to set aside or deny. Over the last two years, it has grown richer, more intense in ways I don't fully understand. Because I now see reading at the root of much of how I reach myself and others, it is more beautiful and awe-filled. However, I have also learned how reading can be threatened,

stunted by school, by academia as it is now—a difficult and heartbreaking lesson. Reading in its deepest sense must be protected, nurtured. Too often the time and attention school demands pushes away the reading and ways of reading which reveal my heart and the hearts of others.

I'm learning I must limit school if I am to prevent it from cutting off what I love the most, what makes me feel loved. I've seen how out of balance my time and attention are and felt the threat of that. With stops and jerky starts, with many steps backward, I'm learning how to approach a balance. I'm learning to imagine what balance is.

## VII

“Leave me alone, Hours. / I'm just living here. Let Now win.”  
—William Stafford

What is now to us, right here? Now is the clock ticking, and no one looking at it. Now is the banging from the Coke truck making deliveries to the student union across the street. Now is the fluorescent lights glaring down at us. Now is David reading these words aloud, smashing them together. Now is Cully coming in late. Now is a breeze coming though the window, the heater on too high.

“Final Exam: American Renaissance”  
a Stafford poem full of fill-in-the-blanks

Is this a test? The question hangs in the air, but no one claims it. I say, “Don't worry if you don't know the answers, this isn't a trick.” I see Cherrith and Colin don't believe me, while John, smirking, quickly fills in the blanks. Others glance at each other and whisper: What does she want us to say? Or, I don't get it. They look guilty, as if they shouldn't be talking, as if this really is a test. For a moment, standing in the doorway, I see what words can do to us, even when they are missing.

“If you took a whole term of American Literature and your final was a lot like this poem, how well would it show what you learned?”

When we do freewrites, I usually do them with the class. Sometimes I look up and stage whisper to someone, “Don’t stop, keep going.” Today I let them go a good long time, enjoying the mess my own blobby purple pen was making, sounds of pens scratching, people shifting in their seats, the occasional page turning. Today, in my mess, I discovered the above question.

I ask the class this question; they either stare back or look away. I wait. At least for today, I can stand the silence longer than they can. Abby finally looks up, raising her hand. “I don’t think any test shows everything you know. What we learn never completely fits into these little slots.”

Yes.

Because she and I know we can’t get everything, we get more.

## Postscript

Last March, I found a used copy of Alberto Manguel's A History of Reading in the Bookbin. A few moments of browsing revealed Manguel's generous affinity with all readers. With a combination of historical scholarship and the personal essay, Manguel's book traces a line connecting readers from around the world and through time. Following an illustrated gathering of readers from St. Dominic to Charles Dickens to the blind Jorge Luis Borges, Manguel writes, "All these are readers, and their gestures, their craft, the pleasure, responsibility and power they derive from reading, are common with mine. I am not alone." Manguel is not alone and neither am I and neither are you.

The reading behind The Infinite Margin is broad, yet it has all played out against the hope and largeness of reading I found in Alberto Manguel's book. As I've considered who and what the influences on this work have been, I realized there are several sides to the question. If I were to follow Manguel's example, I would devote a chapter to each one. One chapter would discuss places and institutions, especially bookstores and public schools and universities. Another chapter would discuss books, the most explicit influences on this work being Grace Llewellyn's The Teenage Liberation Handbook and Parker Palmer's The Courage to Teach. An additional chapter devoted to people would discuss the time I've spent talking with professors, students in my Writing 121 classes, and other teaching assistants and graduate students.

The process of writing The Infinite Margin began last winter in Advanced Composition with Chris Anderson. There I learned two lessons which encouraged me to continue the work I began in that class. First, I learned that essays, creative non-fiction, was the genre for which I'd been looking, where I fit. Second, I learned that the process of working in a small writing group was not only challenging as a reader and a writer, but also very pleasurable. Susan Wood and Anna Harrell, the other two members of my writing group last winter, not only encouraged me to explore new subjects, but also asked thoughtful questions which made me reconsider what I had already written.

I've spent the time between now and last winter building on these two lessons. The writing I did in Advanced Composition showed me reading and school were worth further time and attention. Last summer, I followed two veins of reading, one of creative non-fiction on various subjects, the other on school. I also met regularly with Anna Harrell and Michelle Abbott, two other graduate students who are also writing creative non-fiction theses. The writing I shared with them grew from the reading I was doing over the summer, most of which is included in my works cited and consulted. In the fall, Anna, Michelle, and I were joined by Chris. From September to March, Chris helped us expand, revise, and arrange the material we had generated over the summer into our finished work.

The connections which have developed among my reading, teaching, writing, and the various courses I've taken while working on The Infinite Margin has also been very satisfying. In his book Writing the Australian Crawl, William Stafford describes the position which makes such connections possible. "The stance to take, reading or writing, is neutral, ready, susceptible to now . . . Only the golden string knows where it is going, and the role of a writer or reader is one of following, not imposing" he explains. Ultimately, the process of writing The Infinite Margin has been twofold—mindfulness toward my thoughts as I've read a book or worked through another school day, followed by rethinking and revising what I learned through writing about those thoughts. I have learned that working through a chosen discipline, a regular course of thought and action, is rewarding and gratifying in its own right, outside of the shape which a final piece of work may take.

Alberto Manguel closes his book by considering the difference between the book I've held in my hand, A History of Reading, and the book he imagines reading and writing, The History of Reading. "The History of Reading, fortunately, has no end" he explains. "After the final chapter and before the already-mentioned copious index, our author has left a number of blank pages for the reader to add further thoughts on reading . . . I imagine leaving the book by the side of my bed, I imagine opening it up tonight, or

tomorrow night, or the night after that, and saying to myself, 'It's not finished.'" I imagine that in the days and hours after the end of The Infinite Margin, you and I will be writing on one of those blank pages.

Corvallis, Oregon

June 2001

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