

proached, so did my time to leave El Monte. Lillian and Monica and Joe were applying for jobs in the school district. I wasn't as focused. During these last few months, I found myself thinking more and more about my exit from graduate study at UCLA. I left too many fragments behind. I had taken enough courses to be close to a master's degree; all I had to do was pass an oral comprehensive and a French exam. A friend of mine heard about a job he thought I'd like and recommended me. An educational program for returning veterans needed someone to tutor English. It sounded just right. I could tutor twenty or thirty hours a week and study the rest of the time. After that . . . well, I'd see. Lillian, Joe, Monica, Ben—we'd be splitting up soon, though we would write and visit. An awful lot still seemed loose and uncertain to me, but something very good came from my two years with them, something basic and sustaining.

I was long gone when Ben saw Tranquilino again. He bumped into him walking out of the market. Tranquilino's English was much improved. He told Ben he'd taken another course in adult school and that he was feeling better about it, a little more confident. Tranquilino asked about me, so Ben relayed the greeting with a telephone call. "Who knows," he said, "we probably got him on the road. It all helps." Tranquilino might have done just as well without us, gone to adult school on his own and become proficient just as quickly. But the more I come to understand about education, the more I've come to believe in the power of invitation. Programs like the Teacher Corps—and many others that developed through those years—generated possibilities for all kinds of people who had traditionally been excluded from the schools. My expectations for Tranquilino had been, in a sense, too narrow. I didn't appreciate the effect we might be having not just on "decoding skills" and "ability to comprehend the gist" but on his attitudes toward schooling and toward the use of English itself, on the way he felt sitting in an American classroom. Much, much later I found out that some of the children of the people we taught—youngsters when we knew them—had gone on to careers in education themselves: they're now teachers in the schools in those East Los Angeles communities. Whether or not we had any small and indirect influence on these lives, I'll never know. But I can't help but wonder what nascent desires for education blossomed as the parents of those children came to feel part of the schools.

There was not much space in Room 316, the third-floor office of the Veteran's Program, but the staff managed to fit a desk and two chairs into a storeroom, just inside the door. That was where I tutored. There were stacks of mimeograph paper and old files and textbooks behind me. A portable blackboard rocked noisily on wobbly casters. The Veteran's Program had been fashioned by an educational psychologist named Chip Anderson and was, in effect, a masterful crash course in the three Rs of higher education. It was housed in the old UCLA Extension Building in downtown Los Angeles. Students were enrolled right out of the service—the Marine Corps particularly—or through veteran's centers in Southern California. Virtually all who signed up were men. They took classes in English, speech, and mathematics, and participated in workshops to improve their reading and study skills. They were also enrolled in The Psychology of Human Relations. This introduced them to the mysteries of the college lecture course and had the additional benefit of dealing with communication and social interaction for a group returning to a culture that must have seemed pretty strange. All students received tutoring and academic and personal counseling. The curriculum was comprehensive and sensible; it provided an opportunity to develop the speaking, reading, writing, and mathematical abilities needed for college. The men I worked with called it academic boot camp. I tutored three afternoons a week, and saw about five or six students a day. Our discussions ranged from subject-verb agreement to the taking of timed essay exams, and, fairly often, ranged

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outward to the NFL draft, music, wives, lovers, anger about the past, and confusion about the future. On the average the men were in their mid-twenties, some were younger, a few were lifers: gunnery sergeants or petty officers who, in their forties, were trying to change radically the direction of their next twenty years. Most of the students had been in the military from four to six years and had been, to use their term, the grunts—the privates and corporals who, in the years just after the prom, found themselves in marshland and firestorms. Some of these men started the program during their last few months of service, and others had been out for anywhere from weeks to years. Hair length became the dating gauge. If a student hadn't been to Vietnam, he came to the program with a legacy of boredom and a handful of firm resolves; some of those who were in Vietnam brought other things. They came directly from hospitals or drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers and, in a few cases, from prison. And some of them were continuing treatment as outpatients for particularly destructive physical injuries or for flitting horrors that could not be stitched or trussed.

I got to talk pretty intimately with men who saw the world very differently from the way I did and who had been through things I could barely imagine. The politics of the group ranged from reactionary to radical, white supremacist to black nationalist, with most mixing hawkish foreign policy with fairly liberal social mores. Some had dropped out of high school, were functionally illiterate, and were coming to the Veteran's Program to gain their high school equivalency; others were readers and theory builders and street poets. From what they told me, it was clear that most of them had academic histories like the kids in El Monte and the guys in Voc. Ed. Their school memories were dreary; I was seeing people at the other end of a frustrated educational journey. They were mustering their resources, though, for one last go at it. About a third of our students were wild boys with few responsibilities, while others were somber men with families and debts. Some had been shot while others spent their time in a sleepy town. I started noticing the scars. David had lost most of his right thumb—he held his pen in place with a nub—and had a scar that ran up beyond his wrist. Richard was missing the tops of two fingers, and the nails on Clayton's hands were replaced by fungus. The underside of Bill's arm, the place where the radial mus-

cles flex to a rounded fullness, was gouged—a layer of slick, brownish skin stretched into place like wet and wrinkled paper.

The ethnic and geographic mix was rich: whites, Chicanos, blacks, a few Asians, fewer American Indians; New Yorkers and Oregonians, men from the Motor City and men from Southern farms. They drove in from El Toro or Camp Pendleton seventy miles to the south, from apartments scattered from Orange County to the far end of the San Fernando Valley, or from homes in East L.A., Lynwood, or Compton. A few lived in awful places close to the program, like the Morrison, a musty hotel that gained a flicker of notoriety when it was photographed for the cover of a mediocre Doors album. And some bused in from the Veteran's Hospital in West Los Angeles. Their needs were profound and, at times, overwhelming to someone as young as I was. They came for education, for counseling, for friendship, for decompression. They came to get themselves back into the stream of things.

The Extension Building is on South Grand Avenue, five or six blocks this side of the rich hub of downtown Los Angeles: Citicorp, the Bonaventure, the Arco Towers. It is one block east of Hope. It is a dirty beige stone building, four stories high. A fire escape crisscrosses all but the first floor of the south side. The windows are opaque, and the curtains you can see on the second floor are light gray. One is torn from its rung and tied back. Next door is a sandstone-colored hotel with bars on the ground-floor windows and 1120 crudely painted on a stucco post by the front stairs. It has no name. In the immediate vicinity are two parking lots and some small, depressed industries: sewing machines, garment hangers, baby furniture, Boston Shoe, ADM Button and Belt, Jo's Liquor and the Morris Cafe are a few blocks to the south. Beer and wine and pool.

Every quarter, fifteen or so teachers and tutors and a couple of hundred students moved in and out of the hallways of the Extension Building, moving through the elevators, the lobby, the lunchroom in the basement. And during breaks between classes, Grand Avenue would intermittently feel the tingling scrape of peripatetic chatter and the heat of a quick smoke. The main meeting place was the lunchroom, presided over by Al Petrillo, a vendor of sandwiches, a player of ponies, and an indefatigable dispenser of jokes with punchlines like "Jeez, Doc, I hope they don't amputate around here, 'cause I'm only in for prickly heat!" Al

was a short man with sleepy eyes who would cradle his forehead in his left hand and slowly look up at you as he made change and insulted your choice of sandwiches or your looks. And behind him, a hundred people lamented and laughed and made bets and dreamed.

I had been tutoring for about two months when Dr. Anderson called me into his office and offered me a full-time job. He said he had been talking to the men and decided he wanted me to teach English and reading and maybe do a little counseling. I would be taking my master's orals at UCLA in December, so I'd be set to go by January, the start of a new quarter. How about it? I liked working with the veterans very much, felt at ease, for so many of them had grown up in neighborhoods like mine. I accepted on the spot. It was after I left Anderson's office that I started having second thoughts.

In the Teacher Corps I worked informally with small groups of children and had ongoing connection with a team. And tutoring in the Veteran's Program seemed a lot safer than teaching. Someone else created the curriculum, set the assignments, and gave the grades. I was a coach, a compatriot, helping the men as they struggled with their test taking and their writing. If they thought an assignment was stupid or a grade unfair, I could just nod sympathetically and get on with the paper before us. Now I would have to fashion my own curriculum, give the grades, and take the heat for it.

I worried most about the curriculum. One of the English teachers in the Veteran's Program had fashioned a wildly inventive set of assignments that had the students comparing two apples one week and writing a poem the next. It was a maverick curriculum, and I admired its ambition, but a lot of the men I tutored were simply perplexed by it. The other teachers relied on more traditional curricula: a handbook of rules of grammar, lectures on subordination and parallelism, papers requiring students to narrate and describe. I went to the UCLA bookstore and browsed through the various texts in use on the campus: more grammar handbooks. This all seemed cheerless. And the old standby, the writing of essays on unforgettable grandparents and My First Job, seemed as appropriate for the veterans as a hymn at a crashshoot.

I had a month, so I started looking around for a base on which to build my course.

The first possibility that offered itself was, of course, Vietnam. It would seem natural to draw on the veterans' experience, present and vibrant as it was. Such a curriculum would be relevant at a time when relevance was dearly sought. But when I imagined teaching a course on the war, it didn't feel right—felt presumptuous, intrusive. After spending two months with the veterans, I could see that each man was on his own psychic timetable: Some were fairly comfortable talking about Vietnam; others couldn't bear to do it, at least not publicly. And in either case, they were looking forward to an education that would create a future, not one that would force them back through a past of shrapnel and deadly surprise.

It was when I started thinking about why the men had come to the program that I found an answer, one that lay at the intersection of the veterans' lives and mine. The men wanted to change their lives, and for all their earlier failures, they still held onto an American dream: Education held the power to equalize things. After Vietnam, they had little doubt about what their next step had to be: up and out of the pool of men society could call on so easily to shoot and be shot at. From what they told me, it was clear that a number of the veterans were a high school teacher's bad dream: detached or lippy or assaultive. They were my Voc. Ed. comrades reincarnated. ~~But here they were now: 'I'm givin' it a hundred percent this time.'~~ There's probably little any teacher can do with some kids in some high schools: the poverty and violence of the neighborhoods, the dynamics of particular families, the ways children develop identities in the midst of economic blight. You rely on goodwill and an occasional silent prayer to keep your class from exploding, hope that some wild boy doesn't slug another, pray that your authority isn't embarrassed.

But here these students were, five or ten years down the line: different life experiences, different perspectives on learning. It makes you think about those sullen high schoolers in a different light, see their lives along a time line. Maybe no one could have gotten to some of the veterans when they were sixteen, but they were ready now. They were bringing with them an almost magical vision of what learning could do for them, and regardless of

what I had come to know about the realities of higher education, I could sure understand the desire to be transfigured by books.

The veterans' encounter with college led me to reflect on my education in a way I hadn't done before. More than I realized, I had learned a lot in El Monte about developing a curriculum: I approached learning carefully, step by step, systematically. I found that I knew what questions to ask. What had I really learned from studying history and psychology and philosophy and literature? I thought a lot about my best teachers, about Jack MacFarland at Mercy High, about Dr. Carothers and Ted Erlanson and the others at Loyola. I browsed through the books that had mattered and thought about those courses that had opened up ways of considering the world. What intellectual orientations persisted? I went back to UCLA and sat in on a few lectures in the humanities and the social sciences, listening, this time, with a different ear. I talked with other teachers. And this is how I started to think about the curriculum I would fashion.

Given the nature of these men's needs and given the limited time I would have with them, could I perhaps orient them to some of the kinds of reading and writing and ways of thinking that seem essential to a liberal course of study, some of the habits of mind that Jack MacFarland and the many that followed him had helped me develop? If I could do this in some systematic and manageable way, then I would be enhancing the veterans' chances of participating in the institutions they would soon be entering. And while I wanted to be pragmatic—college preparatory was the name of this game—I also wanted to go beyond utility. I was looking for a methodical way to get my students to think about thinking. Thinking. Not a fustbudget course, but a course about thought. I finally decided to build a writing curriculum on four of the intellectual strategies my education had helped me develop—some of which, I would later discover, were as old as Aristotle—strategies that kept emerging as I reflected on the life of the undergraduate: summarizing, classifying, comparing, and analyzing.

Liberal studies had really sharpened my ability to find the central notion in an argument or the core of a piece of fiction. Thinking back on it, I couldn't imagine a more crucial skill than summarizing: we can't manage information, make crisp connections, or rebut arguments without it. The great syntheses and refutations

are built on it. The veterans would have to have practice summarizing various kinds of academic materials. It would give them a nice sense of mastery if they could determine and express the gist of readings that might, at first glance, seem opaque as medieval texts.

Classifying. You could almost define the undergraduate's life as the acquisition of the ways Western scholars have classified their knowledge. The very departments in which I took my classes represented one way to classify inquiry, and I encountered classification schemes in every course I took: taxonomies in biology, genres and periods in literature and the arts, the catalogs of motive and behavior in psychology and sociology. I wanted the veterans to become familiar with academic classification schemes, to sharpen their own abilities to systematize what they study, and to develop a critical awareness of the limitations of the classification schemes that will surround them. I thought up some simple exercises: Bring to class twenty copies of paintings of the human body. Have the paintings represent a wide range of styles, from Florentine humanism to cubist geometrics, but have all information on artist and period removed. It would be the students' job to classify this collection of paintings by any system they could develop. They would probably begin with a simple binary scheme: some of the paintings look like people and some don't. But through my questions look like people and some don't. Rising from their interaction, they would be encouraged to elaborate and revise until they'd agreed that they could go no further. I would then ask them to discuss what they felt was gained and what was lost as they classified paintings and moved from one scheme to another.

Another thing that became clear to me was how much knowledge in the arts and sciences is gained by methodically examining one object or event or theory in relation to another. What comes into focus when a student places *A Farewell to Arms* alongside a piece of journalism? What understanding is gained by listing the features of French schooling next to a description of American education? Entire disciplines—comparative politics to comparative anatomy—are built on this intellectual strategy. Simply by virtue of their humanity, the men in the Veteran's Program continually made comparisons, but I wanted to give them the chance to develop confidence and facility in comparing points of view and explanations and works of art.

The further along I got in college, the more I was asked to "analyze" an artistic product, a physical phenomenon, a social event, to *analyze* meaning to break something down to its constituent elements so as to better understand its nature. But that wasn't the whole story. There was a kind of implied directive to the request to analyze, and it took me quite a while before I realized it. Students are not usually told that such analytic investigation is always carried out with a set of assumptions, and these assumptions are crucial determinants of how you proceed in your examination, what you find, and how you explain your discovery to others. I figured that developing the ability to probe the assumptions beneath an analysis or explanation would be exciting and empowering for the veterans, a little insight into how to pick the academic lock. They would be able to read with a critical eye and thus speak and write with more authority. While I could probably develop this critical awareness by modeling it for the class and by questioning them on their reading, I thought they might also benefit by engaging in a kind of intellectual role-playing that would highlight the assumptive base of analysis. I could, for example, present them with a newspaper story about a man who commits an apparently senseless murder. Next would come an account of how Freud would explain violent behavior. It would be the students' job to slip into that perspective and discuss the story as though they were psychoanalysts. This passage would be followed by one written by a more existentially oriented social critic. The class would then discuss the crime with that perspective, discussing as well what happens to their analysis as they shift assumptions about human nature. How did the frameworks they used affect what they saw?

Most of the veterans were considered to be "remedial level" students. Even those who came to the program as pretty capable writers were hesitant and wrote prose that displayed the signs of an inadequate education: misspellings, verbs that didn't agree with subjects, sentences that strangled in their own convolutions. As for the less capable students—the kinds of writers I saw struggling as children in El Monte—composing was a source of embarrassment, a halting, self-conscious duty that resulted in stunted, error-ridden prose. It has been customary for remedial writing programs to focus attention on the kinds of grammatical prob-

lems that were found in the pages these men wrote. The programs instruct students in principles of grammar and usage ("Use a comma between coordinate adjectives not joined by 'and'"), distribute workbook exercises that require students to select correct forms ("Write in 'who' or 'whom' in the following sentences"), and assign short, undemanding bits of writing. The assumption is that error can be eradicated by zeroing in on the particulars of language. And that assumption seems to rest on a further assumption that grammatical error signals some fundamental mental barrier to engaging in higher-level cognitive pursuits: until error is isolated and cleaned up, it will not be possible for students to read and write critically, study literature, or toy with style.

It would not be until later in my career that I could methodically challenge these assumptions; at this early stage in my development as a writing teacher I had to rely more on the feel of things. It just didn't make sense that not knowing the delicacies of usage or misplacing commas or blundering pronouns and verb forms or composing a twisted sentence indicated arrest at some cognitive-linguistic stage of development, a stage that had to be traversed before you could engage in critical reading and writing. Such thinking smacked of the reductionism I had seen while studying psychology at UCLA. Besides, I had never gotten some of this stuff straight, and I turned out okay. It seemed that, if anything, concentrating on the particulars of language—schoolbook grammar, mechanics, usage—would tremendously restrict the scope of what language use was all about. Such approaches would rob writing of its joy, and would, to boot, drag the veterans back through their dismal history of red-pencilled failure. Furthermore, we would be aiming low, would be scaling down our expectations—as so many remedial programs do—training to do the minimum, the minimum here being a simple workbook-sentence free of error. The men had bigger dreams, and I wanted to tap them.

My students needed to be immersed in talking, reading, and writing, they needed to further develop their ability to think critically, and they needed to gain confidence in themselves as systematic inquirers. They had to be let into the academic club. The fact that they misspelled words or wrote fragments or dropped verb endings would not erect insurmountable barriers to the

benefits they would gain from such immersion. A traveler in a foreign land best learns names of people and places, how to express ideas, ways to carry on a conversation by moving around in the culture, participating as fully as he can, making mistakes, saying things half right, blushing, then being encouraged by a friendly native speaker to try again. He'll pick up the details of grammar and usage as he goes along. What he must *not* do is hold back from the teeming flow of life, must not sit in his hotel room and drill himself on all possible gaffes before entering the streets. He'd never leave the room.

My students, too, were strangers in a strange land, and I wanted to create a safe section of the city and give them an opportunity to acquire the language. We would cover some common errors together during the first few days of class, but, for the most part, I and the tutors I now had would work with students individually through the quarter as particular problems came up on particular papers. This would be a more sensible way to deal with grammatical error and would, as well, give students the sense that grammatical correctness is only one of the concerns of a writer, not the only one, and certainly not the force that brings pen to paper.

Aiming high, however, brought with it a real risk: There was the possibility that I would overwhelm the men, defeat them once again by asking them to do things that were beyond their reach, mystify them with impenetrable language. The only article of faith I had came from a little book by Jerome Bruner called *The Process of Education*. Bruner begins one of his chapters with this remarkable dictum: "Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development." I transposed the promise and challenge of that sentence to adults. It seemed that I could honor the challenge if I used accessible materials and if I had the students work with them in ways that built from the simple to the complex.

I paged through newspapers, magazines, and political pamphlets. I copied out song lyrics. I rifled the books I had been collecting since my days with Jack MacFarland. I excerpted, deleted, Xeroxed, cut, pasted, and rewrote. To give students a sense of how social criticism reads, I used an Erich Fromm essay from *McCall's* rather than assign a section out of *Escape from Freedom* or *Socialist Humanism*. To provide illustrations of psychological states

for our analysis assignments, I relied on song lyrics like John Prine's "Donald and Lydia." To raise liberal studies themes like Appearance and Reality, I lifted a few pages from *Invisible Man*. And so on.

Each quarter, I began by having the students summarize short, simple readings, and then moved them slowly through classifying and comparing to analyzing, which became the capstone of the curriculum. I didn't do enough of this careful sequencing in El Monte, and my curriculum there suffered for it. I explained and modeled, used accessible readings, tried to incorporate what the veterans learned from one assignment into the next, slowly increased difficulty, and provided a lot of time for the men to talk and write. So, for example, I introduced them to the strategy of comparing with this pair of sentences:

In the whole world no poor devil is lynched, no wretch is tortured, in whom I too am not degraded and murdered.

—AIME CÉSAIRE

There exists among men, because they are men, a solidarity through which each shares responsibility for every injustice and every wrong committed in the world.

—KARL JASPERS

I asked them to talk about the message each sentence contains and to talk, as well, about the way each is written: the academic sound of one, the emotional quality of the other. Did the sound affect the message? I would tell them a little about Césaire, the African poet and statesman, and about Jaspers, the German philosopher. Did that information about time and place affect their reading? They would go through many such pairs—finger exercises, as a friend of mine would later call them—doing them orally, writing on them in class as a tutor and I provided advice on wording and direction, and then, finally, going it alone at home. Within three or four weeks, they were working with more difficult passages, like these two cosmogonies—one an Australian Aboriginal myth, the other from an astronomy textbook:

I

In the very beginning everything was resting in perpetual darkness: night oppressed all the earth like an impenetrable thicket.

(And) Karora was lying asleep, in everlasting night, at the very bottom of the soak of Ilbalintja: as yet there was not water in it, but all was dry ground.

Over him the soil was red with flower & overgrown with many grasses & a great pole was swaying above him. . . . And Karora's head lay at the root of the great pole; he had rested thus ever from the beginning.

And Karora was thinking, & wishes & desires flashed through his mind. Bandicoots began to come out from his navel & from his arm-pits. They burst through the sod above & sprang into life.

And now dawn was beginning to break.

From all quarters men saw a new light appearing: the sun itself began to rise at Ilbalintja, & flooded everything with its light.

Then the gurra ancestor was minded to rise, now that the sun was mounting higher.

He burst through the crust that had covered him: & the gaping hole that he had left behind became the Ilbalintja Soak, filled with the sweet dark juice of honeysuckle buds.

II

Theoreticians have calculated a "standard" model of what the big bang may have been like. In the beginning we imagine a great primeval fireball of matter and radiation. We do not have to imagine any particular mass, or even a finite mass, for the fireball. Its density was very high and it was at a temperature of perhaps 10^{10}K .

At first the matter consisted only of protons, neutrons, electrons, positrons, and neutrinos, all independent particles. After about 100 seconds, however, the temperature had dropped to 10^9K , and the particles began to combine to form some heavier nuclei. This nucleogenesis continued, according to the model, for a few hours until the temperature dropped to about 10^8K . During this time, about 20 percent of the mass of the material formed into helium. Some deuterium also formed (deuterium is an isotope of hydrogen with a nucleus containing one proton and one neutron) but only a small amount—probably less than one part in a thousand. The

actual amount of deuterium formed depends critically on the density of the fireball, if it was fairly high, most of the deuterium would have been built up into helium. Scarcely any nuclei heavier than those of helium are expected to have survived. So the composition of the fireball when nuclear building ceased is thought to have been mostly hydrogen, about 20 percent helium, and a trace of deuterium.

For the next million years the fireball was like a stellar interior—hot and opaque, with radiation passing from atom to atom. During the time, the temperature gradually dropped to about 3000K , and the density to about 1000 atoms/cm^3 . At this point the fireball became transparent. The radiation was no longer absorbed and was able to pass freely throughout the universe. After about 1000 million years, the model predicts that the matter should have condensed into galaxies and stars.

We emphasize again that the fireball must not be thought of as a localized explosion—like an exploding superstar. There were no boundaries and no site of the explosion. It was everywhere. The fireball is still existing in a sense. It has expanded greatly, but the original matter and radiation are still present and accounted for. The atoms of our bodies came from material in the fireball. We were and are still in the midst of it, it is all around us.

I knew from my own early struggles that students who have not had a privileged education often freeze up when they see readings like these, particularly the big bang discussion with its scripted numbers, the vocabulary of its first two paragraphs, and the heady notions in the last. And they don't have the background knowledge or the conceptual grab bag of received phrases to make connections between scientific theorizing and mythic explanation. But give them time. Provide some context, break them into groups or work with the whole class, involving everyone. Let them see what, collectively, they do know, and students will, together, begin to generate meaning and make connections. One person once read something else about big bang, and his knowledge helps a second person understand the nuclear processes in paragraph two, and that second person then asks a question that remained ill-formed in the mind of a third. And the teacher darts

in and out of the conversation, clarifying, questioning, repeating, looping back to link one student's observation to another's. And so it is that the students, labeled "remedial," read and talk and write their way toward understanding.

The Teacher Corps introduced me to the risk and reward of education, but it was the Veteran's Program that really enabled me to come into my own as a teacher, to publicly define myself as someone engaged with the language of others. It was a good place to grow up. The work, successful or failed, had unusual power. The students possessed long and complex life histories, and they were trying to reclaim a place in the classroom they once lost or never really had. Here are a few of those students and a few of the pieces of their history.

It was the third or fourth day of my second quarter in the Veteran's Program, and I was, by now, very much aware of a bald man staring at me from a rear seat along the west wall of the room. His skin was dark, dark brown, his head perfectly slick, his ear pierced by a tiny gold ring. He wore a leather pilot's jacket and kept his arms folded tightly across his chest. I noticed the arms. Pilot's jackets are big, loose things, and this man's upper arms filled out the sleeves, the leather stretching firmly over his shoulders and biceps. As I moved around day after day talking about writing, and memorizing names, and tapping people on shoulders, and getting one man to address another, this man, Willie Oates, sat back and said nothing. He seemed all forearms and pectorals and husky silence.

At the end of the fourth class, he walked slowly up to the podium, waiting his turn behind the three or four men who were asking about their assignment. I kept talking, half hoping they wouldn't leave. But they did. Then Willie took a step forward and began speaking, pounding his fist on the podium in slow pace with each deliberate word: "You," he said. "You—are— and here he looked up from his fist and into my eyes. "You—are—teaching—the—fuck—outta—me!"

Willie had just spent two years in federal penitentiary. His muscles were the muscles you get from lifting weights two and three hours a day to cleanse your respect in spasms of rushing blood.

During this time, Willie started reading. He read all the literature in the prison library, and while some of that was Hemingway, some of it was also Jane Austen. As he read, he wrote in a journal, and he began to develop a style that was ornate as a drawing room.

Willie Oates and I spent a lot of time in the lunchroom. Al Perillo would be holding court at the cash register, and we'd be in a far corner, Willie's papers and Cokes and open bags of potato chips spread before us. Willie had all sorts of stylistic moves; it was my job to get him to weigh their merits. I would go over an essay sentence by sentence, showing him where he'd kill an effect with excess, or get himself into a hopeless tangle with his eighteenth-century syntax, or use a word that sounded pretentious to the twentieth-century ear. The assessing gaze that Willie had fixed on me was gone. Now there was a gentler look, one full of need—an unprotected intensity of mind. He slid into schooling like an athlete lowering himself into a whirlpool, feeling the heat deep in his tissue. He read Chinese poetry and stories by Pirandello. He wrote a paper using the British social historian J. H. Plumb to analyze American counterculture. He talked about Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver, two other black men who had transformed themselves in a prison library.

When Willie was released from the service years before, he returned to a neighborhood that was poor and burned out. He was an aching, dreamy man who couldn't dull himself and who, eventually, stole some money and a car to try to rip away from the projects and pool halls and indolent streets. He was caught within a week. And now, two or three years later, he saw his chance again. He wanted to know everything, was as hungry as anyone I'd seen. One day he showed me the journal he kept in prison—it was a thick National copybook with a cardboard cover pressed to look like leather. As I paged through it, I saw black, working-class experience fused with the language of teapots and Victorian gardens: whole pages of *Sense and Sensibility* and *The Mill on the Floss* copied down, strained and awkward imitations, beginnings of short stories, reflections on prison that seemed forced but that contained elegant moments. It was a remarkable book, the record of a clash of cultures and a testament to the power of Willie's desire.

He kept a journal now, one filled with assignments from

Speech and Psychology and Math and various rough drafts for me. He continued to write down quotations that caught his ear, these from the lectures and books that presently surrounded him. One from my class that I remember seeing there came from Niels Bohr: "Your theory is crazy—but not crazy enough to be true."

Willie was finding a way to direct his yearning. I would pass on to him books I was just discovering—*The Other America*; *Black Skin, White Masks*—and we would talk about the anger that used to knot him up, the hopelessness that landed him in prison. We talked about education and the use of it to direct the anger outward—dissent rather than involuted despair. Willie developed into a truly individual writer and, as well, learned to handle the academy. He received A's in psychology, English, speech, and mathematics. He went on to major in English at a local state university. He continued to write in his journal. Writing, now, in the university, writing to try out new ideas, writing to redefine himself. Writing and writing and writing.

Sergeant Gonzalez was a twenty-year man, a Marine who, at forty, was near retirement. He was tall and square-shouldered as a recruiting poster. He spoke his mind and he rarely smiled, and he was getting, at best, a C from me. He tried and tried but his writing remained too stunted, too abbreviated and superficial. He tended toward literal interpretations and preferred unambiguous answers. He had worked hard all his life, and hard work always gave him tangible results. So here he was, dropping his head and going over tackle again, and yet again, but with the same step, no little juke, no variation. I knew that he would never give up but that he was close to despair.

I set aside an hour after class and dug up something that I thought might help, a poem from Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*:

BUTCH WELDY

After I got religion and steadied down
They gave me a job in the canning works,
And every morning I had to fill
The tank in the yard with gasoline,
That fed the blow-fires in the sheds
To heat the soldering irons.

And I mounted a rickety ladder to do it,
Carrying buckets full of the stuff.

One morning, as I stood there pouring,
The air grew still and seemed to heave,
And I shot up as the tank exploded,

And down I came with both legs broken,
And my eyes burned crisp as a couple of eggs.
For someone left a blow-fire going,

And something sucked the flame in the tank.

The Circuit Judge said whoever did it
Was a fellow-servant of mine, and so

Old Rhodes' son didn't have to pay me.

And I sat on the witness stand as blind

As Jack the Fiddler, saying over and over,
'I didn't know him at all.'

David could follow Butch Weldy's story. The poem depicted a real-life situation and did so along a straight narrative line. It nicely fit David's own interpretive predilections.

"So why," I asked him, "does Masters have Butch say 'someone' left a fire going, and 'something' caused an explosion? 'Someone' and 'something' sound pretty vague to me. Is Butch a little slow?"

"No, he's not slow. He just don't know who did it."

"David, who is Old Rhodes' son?"

"I'm not sure."

"If he's someone who has the ability to pay money to Butch, what position would he hold?"

"The boss? No. The owner. He owns the place."

"The judge said that whoever caused the accident to happen was a worker like Butch, and so, therefore, the owner wouldn't have to pay Butch. Pay for what?"

"The accident."

"What would we call it now if someone paid for the accident?"

"Workman's comp."

"Okay, David, now here's an interesting question for you. You're the head of a motor pool, right?"

"Right."

"If one of your soldiers stumbled and released the trip on a jack, and a car fell on a mechanic and injured him, whose fault would it be? The Marine Corps'?"

"Well, no."

"Could you think of any situation where it might be the Marine Corps' fault?"

We went on like this for a little while longer, and then I asked David to list all the information we had gleaned about Butch and his situation: He was seriously injured at work, is now blind, won't receive compensation, is being shuttled through the legal system, and so on. After making our list, I picked up the questioning again, this time about Butch Weldy's past ("What does the first line—'After I got religion and steadied down'—tell us about Butch before he got this job?") and about the degree of control he seems to have over his life. This last issue was an interesting one to pose to David, for he was clearly a man who prided himself on being at the center of his actions.

"David, could you picture yourself in Butch's situation?"

"Well, yes and no. I mean I could imagine getting hurt, but—"

"But? But you would have been more careful?"

"Yeh. Yeh, I'd have been more careful."

"How does Masters describe the ladder Butch was climbing?"

"Rickyety."

"Yep."

And so it went. Within a half hour, we had a long, rich list of detail about Butch Weldy. It was then that I started turning the key.

"Okay, David, look at the wealth of information we got from this little poem. Could we really understand the mess Butch Weldy is in without all this detail?"

"Um, no, no we couldn't, not really."

"That's right. The detail makes the whole thing come alive to us."

This continued for a few minutes, then: "Now, look, you are a powerful guy, and you take charge of things, and you like to have answers, and you can answer for yourself short and sweet . . . but, man, not everyone is like that. Butch is in a hell of a mess, and to tell somebody about it, we'd have to give a little history, and spell out what we know about the accident, and explain what kind of person Butch seems to be and how he feels. . . . Now, what sorts of things are we sure of, what can we say straight out?"

"Well, we could say what happened in the accident, I mean

the ladder . . . the gasoline . . . the explosion . . . all that stuff. And we could say he's blind now and he's going to get screwed by the law."

"Right. Good. Now, what will we have to hedge our bets on? What will we have to say we're unsure about?"

"Hm. Well, we don't know who left the fires going, and we don't know exactly how the explosion happened."

"Okay. And, again, what are the words Masters uses?"

"Um . . . 'someone' and 'something.'"

"Now, what about Butch's character? What kind of guy is he?"

"It's hard to say, but he don't seem to have a grip on things, and maybe he never did. He sure as hell is lost."

"Good. And remember, you started what you just said with 'It's hard to say,' and that's a perfectly acceptable way to talk about some of the things going on in this little snapshot of a man's life."

I won't tell you that this session made David a dramatically better writer; only in Hollywood pedagogy does such change happen overnight. But the paper he wrote on "Butch Weldy" was richer in detail than was his previous work, and it displayed attempts to deal with the uncertain. David's writing started getting a little more ambitious and a little more specific. He was learning some new moves, a few ways to take chances in his writing. That created another set of problems, of course. Saying complex things forces you away from the protected syntax of simple sentences. But error that crops up because a student is trying new things is a valuable kind of error, a sign of growth.

Jerry Williams was thin and walked with a slight sideways bend at the waist; he wore wire-rim glasses that were deeply tinted. Jerry was quiet and solitary and tended to be irritable and rude with the other veterans. No one was close to him. He was a poor writer ("I think that the state of blacks in the U.S. is a easily debated subject. I think this because their is evidence if you want to look at it . . ."), and he'd miss class often. The tutors and I kept trying to catch him up, but then he'd miss school again, and we'd try again, and he'd slip further and further behind. He was a Second junkie, "reds," and the other men called him Redhead. He was loaded most of the time I worked with him. I would guide

him as he wrote a slow paragraph or talk ineffectually with him about an essay he'd forgotten to read. He'd look at me, eyes half-closed behind amber lenses, and respond to my suggestions with hip monosyllables: "dig it" and "right on" and like that. I hoped something was sinking in, though I didn't think much was. He stopped showing up at all during the last two weeks of school.

On the last day of that quarter, while the men were writing their final in-class papers, the door to my room slammed open and Jerry stumbled through. I had never seen him anywhere near that stoned. He made his way down the right aisle, steadying himself against the wall, and walked slowly to my desk. The class had stopped writing and was watching us. "I want to take the exam," he said. I told him I didn't think that was a good idea, that he was way too loaded to write anything. "Motherfucker," he yelled, "don't tell me that!" He slammed his hand on the desk and, in a quick tipsy glide, slid behind me. I wheeled around and grabbed his arms. Two or three guys in the front were out of their seats. But it was a burst of rage, and it faded quickly. Jerry put his hands back on the chalk tray and slumped into the blackboard. "Just let me take the exam," he slurred. Beneath the fuzz of the Second was some quavering desire to be schooled. He looked back up, not at me, but at the men in the first few rows: "I got a right to take the exam."

The veterans and I spent a lot of time talking about language. Sometimes a major part of a class would be taken up with a poem or song lyric, other times I would sneak a quick opportunity for word play into a lesson: "Try writing a sentence like this one from *Native Son*," or "Give me a phrase someone said or a song you heard that caught your ear today." That would go on the board and spark discussion. A lot of the men took to language. For some, linguistic play was part of their culture; for others, it seemed okay to fool around with words if the teacher was getting all worked up about them, was—for God's sake—walking backward into the podium because of a turned phrase.

Jack Cheney was a special kind of student. Every quarter we would get two or three men who had read a lot and were skilled writers. These were the guys who were bored to tears by high school—didn't fit in, were out of step, quit going. But unlike some gifted dropouts, they weren't from families who could af-

ford to send them to special schools, so they were scooped up by the military with all the other uncovered eighteen-year-olds. Jack could do the program's work easily and started asking for books to read on his own. I had a copy of *The Great Gatsby* in my desk, so I gave it to him. A week or so later, he stopped by the office to tell me about a line of Fitzgerald's: He describes the sound of a phonebook hitting the floor as a *splash*. The metaphor stirred Jack's curiosity. "So I picked up our phonebook," he said, all enthused, "and dropped it. It hit on the spine and went thud. Then I tried it again, and the pages hit, and—check it out, Mike—it splashed! How about that?"

Jon Davis wasn't as well-read as Jack, and, in fact, never saw himself as an intellectual, didn't care much for school. He entered the Veteran's Program just to gain a few months reprieve from a Marine Corps life that had become intolerable to him. But during his twelve weeks with us, his deep need to be free of military codes and restrictions fused powerfully with his growing facility with written language. Halfway through the program, he made me promise not to laugh and then told me that he thought he might want to be a writer.

Jon still wasn't sure about college. The military had seeped so thoroughly into his being that his response to any institution—church, school, state—was harsh and physical, an existential gag reflex. So when he finished the program, he headed north, away from L.A.'s industrial terrain, toward that magical, rootless garden so many young Americans were seeking. And the era met him, of course, with its Zen farmers and hippie craftsmen, with Kesey and Brautigan and Gary Snyder. Several months after he left, I received a long letter telling me he'd settled, finally, in a small town in Alaska. The stores weren't crowded, he said, and he worked in the forests, and he lived in a fine old house:

I was sitting here smoking cigarettes . . . half-listening to some A.M. discjockey . . . letting thoughts come and pass and thinking maybe one will take hold. . . . Alaska affords a fellow a good atmosphere in which to think and write: there's a lot of air and ground, trees and tundra; wide open meadows where you can spy moose if you're quiet and in a pious mood at early dawn. . . .

No one could doubt the veterans' motivation; some were nearly feverish. But over my time with them, I had come to see how desire was only part of the equation. A number of the men—like me during my early schooling—had skated along the surface of true education, had read too little, were propelling themselves forward on the jet streams of fleeting dreams. So they did all the things that learners, working class to upper crust, do when they lose focus or get scared or give up: They withdrew or faked it or cheated or got stoned or stayed home or blew up.

I and the other English teachers had three tutors to assist us—Tony, Patrick, and Kevin—and once we began to understand the fear of failure at the origin of the veterans' troubling behavior, we refused to give in to it. The more we worked together, the more we pepped each other into trying almost anything to reach the men we taught. We would flatter and plead and use the phone and yell and breathe deep and, more than once, walk down to the Morrison Hotel to pound on a door. Sometimes we pushed too far and found ourselves in situations we were too inexperienced to handle—like the time I sat in a shabby apartment with a blue-eyed addict and looked at the needles and saw open up before me a hopelessness and screaming rejection that I could not begin to address. But we also succeeded, and our successes fueled us. Kevin once said about one of our students: "If I have to, I'll kiss his ass to make him learn." If any of us could have translated that into Latin, it would have become our motto.

Morgan was a Marine scout who had been sent back to the states with two Purple Hearts and bits of shrapnel alongside his knee. He was a quiet man and his childhood couldn't have been more different from mine. He boxed, wrestled, and played up on the line and graduated to racing motorcycles and hunting wild boar with a handgun. At first glance, Morgan did not look all that imposing—five feet nine maybe—sloping shoulders, a slightly large rump. But then you think about it, about the guys you've seen with that certain angle to their trapezius muscles and with that wide beam and those thick thighs, and then you know: This man carries a tremendous centered power.

Morgan had meant grief for teachers since the day he got off his kindergarten mat. He had shined on innumerable lessons, sneered at too many ideas, turned thumbs-down on the mind. He had driven his parents nuts, wildly, almost suicidally trying

to forge an identity. But he had something, and though his tolerance for diversity rivaled the Emperor Nero's, you wanted the guy to like you. I used to require students to see me after I'd returned their essays. One of the first times I was scheduled to meet with Morgan, he appeared in my doorway with his essay crumpled and proceeded, in a remarkable act of frustration, to bite off the corner of the paper. His grade wasn't so hot, and, to make matters worse, he found out that another student he couldn't stand had received a higher mark. He walked around the room and ranted and waved the paper and, finally, sat down begrudgingly and smoothed it out so we could work on it. We went at the essay point by point, and I remember how happy I was, thinking, "I got him now. I've really got him."

The Veteran's Program gave me both the incentive and the courage to try new things, to lead outward and follow my curiosities, many of which were being sparked by my teaching. I realize now that I was creating for myself the kind of rich interdisciplinary course of study I couldn't find at UCLA, one that was grounded in my work, that fused mind and world. In higher education, there is a politically loaded distinction between "pure" and "applied" study. Pure study is elevated because it putatively involves the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake—mathematics and literature are good examples; applied study (engineering, medicine, education), because it is situated in human affairs, is somehow tainted, is less—well—*pure*. What a bewildering distinction, I would have thought. What a silly, bloodless dichotomy

While I was in graduate school, I kept a list of words I didn't know—*evanescent*, *lassitude*, *diffident*—an attempt to catch up and keep up. Now I started buying notebooks again, wide-ruled Vernon-Royal composition books, but this time because language had become so vibrant. Exotic words lifted off the pages of novels like butterflies: *canescent*, *cadenza*, *Xantippe*, *chandelle*. I wrote out the names of plants (Bishop's Cap, Black Vesuvius, King of Blues); diagnostic terms from psychiatric manuals—*cereza flexibilitas*, the waxy flexibility of the catatonic's arms and legs; road signs—these from the route to Joshua Tree: Yucaipa, Cabazon,

the Honey and the Rock Motel. I copied sentences I thought were rhythmic or clever or richly imagistic, like this one out of Ishmael Reed: "The street was a dumpheap of Brueghel faces, of Hogarth faces, of Coney Island hot-dog kissers, ugly pusses and sinking mugs, whole precincts of flat peepers and silly lookers." I clipped out and pasted poems I wished I had written: "Blackie, the Electric Rembrandt," "Corazon," "Oh Taste and See." I Xeroxed descriptions of marvelous things—here's an ecstatic flight of Saint Joseph of Cupertino: "He rose into space, and from the middle of the church, flew like a bird onto the high altar, where he embraced the tabernacle."

I found a linguistic companion in Kevin, the tutor who worked with me in the Veteran's Program, for he was writing short stories and was on the scent of his own elusive language. I would meet with him in what he came to call his office, the rear of an old wooden garage behind a Venice apartment building. The garage was narrow, and Kevin's Volkswagen took up the front half. In what remained, room for an old Chrysler maybe, he had wedged the oak desk that had been his father's, two chairs, three metal bookcases (one on top of the desk itself, steadied by the rear garage wall), a tiny electric heater, and, underneath it all, a frayed red Oriental rug. You could see through the loose wall slats to the adjacent garage: a primed Chevy raised tireless on ornamental brick. Kevin and I would lean from the two chairs toward each other, sharing a handwritten poem or my notebook or one of the heavily underlined novels we were currently using to educate ourselves. "Listen to this," he would say bending forward, each elbow on each knee, splitting the spine of *The Bushwacked Piano*:

Payne opened his mind like the sweet dusty comic strip from a pink billet of Fleer's bubblegum and saw things as deep and appropriate as soft nudes on the noses of B29's. He saw longhorn cattle being driven over the Golden Gate Bridge, St. Teresa of Avila at the Mocambo, pale blue policemen nose-to-bung in an azure nimbus around the moon.

Then he would look up smiling and reach back feeling for a pen on his cluttered desk. "Jee-sus! Is this guy ever having fun!"

All this worked its way into my poems and my teaching. I was spending more time writing: Whole afternoons disappeared as I

My poems / notes

sat in my apartment's little alcove, the window open to a Pacific breeze, saying the words out loud, trying to catch their rhythms, trying to render some curious thing I had seen. I had never taken a creative writing course—I don't think they were even available at the schools I attended—so I relied for instruction on the people I was reading; and Kevin's good ear; and Dr. Carothers, my Loyola mentor, whom I'd drive out to see when I had written a fold-erful. I started mimeographing the poems, stapling them together into little books and giving them to my friends. They would put them on their tables or take them to work to pass around, then others would ask for copies, and, so, finally I began sending a few poems to small press magazines, many of which were mimeographed themselves. I didn't think it right to bring these things into my classroom, but working on the poetry certainly got me to thinking about writing from the inside, and it helped keep me in tune with the struggles the veterans were having. Better yet, as I scoured contemporary poetry for work that could teach me something, I found poems that were perfectly suited for the classroom—and some of the veterans, as they got to be more proficient writers themselves, wanted something extra, wanted to know what else they should read, wanted me to talk to them about making their language jump. And I did. And sometimes I would see wonderful things beginning inside and beyond that faded building on South Grand Avenue: "... open meadows where you can spy moose if you're quiet and in a pious mood at early dawn."

When I started teaching in the Veteran's Program, I was given limited counseling duties, mostly providing guidance for further schooling. The other counselor, the full-time counselor, was an even-keeled, soothing woman named Shulamite Ash, and by watching her at work I learned a good deal about helping people determine their educational and vocational interests. But as time went on, I found myself increasingly curious about the dark side of counseling. Men would come to us panicked about failing in college, or beaten down with inadequacy, or worried about the strains in relationships their personal redefinition was causing. They were sure they couldn't make it, they'd say; they just knew they didn't have what it takes. This was familiar stuff to me. I would tell them about some of my own uncertainties and encour-

age them to talk further. But I knew they needed more, that I had to get educated fast on how to help someone through this kind of crisis. I asked around and found that the Veteran's Program was fairly close to Los Angeles' pioneering Suicide Prevention Center, a place that trained lay volunteers to be crisis intervention counselors. I went through the training and began taking calls on the hot line. Before very long, I was presenting cases myself at the orientation sessions and supervising new volunteers.

My involvement with counseling was marked by continuing opportunity to learn and by a strange draw toward more and more troubled people. I hadn't been at the center six months when I began working with their most difficult population: the chronic callers. These men and women had long histories of suicide attempts and hospitalization. They were society's marginal people—sporadically employed, on some form of public assistance, alcohol or drug dependent, living alone in those desolate buildings you see nested along the freeway. I learned all I could from the center's psychologists about the chronic callers, and it seemed that the more I found out, the more involved I wanted to be with the students we had who were slowly moving away from the boundaries of such a life. They were in treatment at the VA hospital but often needed day-to-day assurance from us: support, advice, sometimes a simple check on reality. There were times when we were more social workers than teachers, and I think that dual role—following as it did the experience in the Teacher Corps—profoundly laid open the social dimension of teaching. It shaped the way I thought about the classroom.

The person I spent the most time with was Arthur. Arthur was a big man, pudgy, with a gentle, boyish face. He had been in the hospital for several years—diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic—and had made sufficient progress to begin his reentry into society. We spoke often. His madness and his recovery were still very much present to him, and he would occasionally talk or write about both.

Arthur had always been a singular man. An isolate before he was drafted, he formed few alliances in the service, choosing to stay alone in the barracks, reading or listening to the radio. One man became his friend—a mechanic from Nebraska—and they would sometimes go to the movies. But the mechanic's time was short, and Arthur spent his last year pretty much by himself.

After he was released, he drifted through odd jobs—night watchman, dishwasher—and moved further and further into the desperate warmth of a megalomaniac vision:

Day after day I fought the urge of meeting people and at night I walked alone fearing everything that was alive. . . . On the one hand I felt awe inspiring, omnipotent and omnipresent. . . . I took my abuses out on society, and on the other hand I sat or walked alone in the dark, sad, despairing city streets at night, a beaten, broken man.

When he was completely mad, Arthur used to roam the streets in a cape and carry a walking stick and posture and preen and strike out at passersby. One night he threw a chair through the window of a diner, and that was when the police came.

Arthur tended to turn in his papers late, and sometimes he wouldn't make it to school. But he did okay in our program, handling its challenges and its many potential threats. Neither madness nor Mellari had permanently damaged his thinking, and though he was a little cautious—at times halting—his critical skills were good and got better. He worked well with the tutors and finished most of his courses. When I was growing up, I didn't see many people regenerate themselves. A lot of men and women seemed lost on South Vermont, Lou Minton took his own life, and my father's health never reversed itself. Here, now, was someone emerging from the deepest misery. Slowly, slowly moving out of isolating madness. The majesty of small progress. I had not seen it on South Vermont, for I was knee-high to the neighborhood's unhappiness. But I was seeing it now, and it was a powerful revelation. Even at the extreme, there is possibility.

The Veteran's Program, like many language and literacy programs, paid teachers by the course. Wages were fairly low, so I had to teach a lot and over the years ended up working in a variety of settings. I tutored in a community college writing center and counseled CETA workers in a summer job-training program. For a brief while, the administrators of the Veteran's Program tried offering some English, humanities, and mathematics courses right on a military facility. So every Tuesday and Thursday evening I drove the freeway out to an Air Force base on the southwestern edge of Los Angeles County, engaging a roomful

of uniformed men and women in discussion about *The Old Man and the Sea* or a Grace Paley story or "Blackie, the Electric Rembrandt." Extension also ran a college preparation program for people in low-level law-enforcement jobs—parole aides and the like—people who came from poor backgrounds and had only high school diplomas, if that. The program was housed in the downtown center, so I would walk from the third floor to the first to teach a survey of world literature: Introductory Humanities. Each class had an intimidating range of ability. There was Domingo, a parole aide whose gang tattoos had faded along his weathered skin, whose writing was a halting scribble. But there was also Reba, who carried two notebooks and was very quiet and who, it turned out, was a more fluent and assured writer than speaker—for in writing her self-consciousness could not muffle her words.

My own higher education did not include serious study of the classics or of European literature before the twentieth century, so I didn't know much about some of the books I had to teach. I had read *Don Quixote* and Voltaire and Dostoyevski, but I knew little about Greek or Roman drama, or the epics and tales of the Middle Ages, or Dante. So I was explaining things like the origins of Greek tragedy, the evolution of its structure, and the way it was performed that I had learned in a flurry the week before: sketching out the stage on butcher paper, acting out alone in my apartment the placement of characters and the turns of the chorus, doing the things I would do later with the class to help them visualize the action. I drew maps and flowcharts of the events and stood people up and marched them through key scenes. Because the language of so much of what we were reading was difficult, I prepared lists of questions to guide the students' study, showed them how to read play dialogue, asked them to talk to me about the basic themes of the books—honor, vaulting ambition, betrayal—and relate those themes to their own lives and to the events currently in the news. I tried to humanize the distant eras we were studying—telling the class, for example, about the German burgomaster who wrote to Voltaire asking, "In confidence, is there a God or not?" (asking, too, that the philosopher answer by return mail). But still, for some, it was the wrong time and place—the reading was laborious and remote. They would need courses preliminary to this one, and they would need a dramatic

change in the demands and derailing seductions and random catastrophes that their neighborhoods threw their way. Domingo, the tattooed parole aide, dropped the class after three weeks. For others, it worked. The readings started to take hold—in a variety of ways. Blanche, who was about fifty, sat there laughing out loud as she read a prose rendering of Chaucer: "It was the best bout she'd had in years—he thrust away like a madman, hard and deep." "Hard and deep," sighed Blanche, shaking her head. She started tapping the desk: "Mmm hmm. Hard and deep. My, my." Reba, the quiet one, began spending her break asking me questions, wanting to know, in her soft voice, what her library might have that would help her. She asked me about college. Did I think she'd have a chance? I got her a catalogue from the local community college, and we started talking about courses.

And there was Olga. Olga reminded me of the tough girls I had seen in El Monte. Hair teased, heavy mascara. She was older—she was still rebellious. She fought me all the way on *Macbeth*. She complained about the language—"How do you expect us to read this stuff?"—and about the length, and about its sheer distance from us. I'd sit with her and drag her through a scene, paraphrasing a speech, summarizing a conflict. Sometimes I'd articulate exactly why she hated it, to talk at it, make her about how it made her feel to sit here with this book. Finally, we finished *Macbeth*. One night in that eggshell basement lunchroom, she wrapped her hands around her cola and began to tap it on the table: "You know, Mike, people always hold this shit over you, make you . . . make you feel stupid with their fancy talk. But now I've read it, I've read Shakespeare, I can say I, Olga, have read it. I won't tell you I like it, 'cause I don't know if I do or I don't. But I like knowing what it's about." Probably the most unusual teaching I did was through an extension program called Learning Line, a set of courses delivered by telephone conference call to people who—because of children, injury, or the infirmity of old age—were unable to leave their homes. The folks I worked with were residents of convalescent hospitals; I led a poetry class with about nine participants who were assisted, when assistance was needed, by their nurses and

Olga
Reba
Blanche
Domingo

aides. My students were spread over Los Angeles County, from the affluent West Side south to Torrance and east to my old neighborhood in the center of the city. Once a week I would sit before a large blinking telephone console in an old storeroom and one by one get all the participants on the line: Addie and Emma in South Central, Ernest and Florence in West L.A., Lucille and Elsie in Torrance. I'd begin by reading from poems I'd selected ahead of time and sent to them, short, direct poems with sharp images and, for the most part, a meditative feel, poems, like this one from ninth-century China, that would trigger memory and reflection:

Cold air drains down from the peaks.
 Frost lies all around my cabin.
 The trees are bare. Weak sunlight
 Shines in my window. The pond
 Is full and still. The water
 Is motionless. I watch the
 Gibbons gather fallen fruit.
 All the night I hear the deer stamping
 In the dry leaves. My old harp
 Soothes all my trouble away.
 The clear voice of the waterfall
 In the night accompanies my playing.

I'd read the poem again and ask what they thought. Addie would signal in from South Central: "It sounds real peaceful to me . . . like the man's had a good life, and now he just likes to play his music." Then Lucille: "Oh, honey, it reminds me of the little spot I grew up in, I swear it does . . . the cabin and the trees . . . and a lake. . . . I liked it very much." I'd ask Addie if the poem reminded her of any particular place, as happened with Lucille. And sometimes Addie would address Lucille directly.

Some of the participants were hard of hearing and pretty energized, so it was difficult for them to engage in any extended exchange over temperamental trunk-line connections. But others were in decent shape and got involved via the telephone with people in other homes. They started sending me favorite poems of their own, some they had written themselves and some they had found in magazines:

*Lucille
 wrote this
 poem
 about
 me*

Will she ever come to my castle of dreams—
 To those gardens of rarest bloom?
 Will she ever see the sparkling streams
 Where gentle lights illumine?

These threw me. They were sentimental as could be, and the rhymes were strained, and the diction archaic. They were the kinds of poems all my schooling had trained me to dismiss. But the intentions and feelings behind the poems were present now, couldn't be discounted, a clashing of aesthetics and human need. I wasn't quite sure what to do. I rehearsed several critical responses to the blank console. They didn't feel right—at all. The solution came indirectly. My mother called me one night to ask if I thought a card she bought for her doctor was okay. She read me the Hallmark rhyme, and I was about to tell her what I thought when it hit me. Addie and Ernest and the rest weren't sending the poems for criticism; they wanted to pass on a gift or show off a little—they wanted to participate in some fuller way. I didn't need to be the critic. There are times when it's better to let all that schooling slide. So I simply Xeroxed their poems and sent them to everybody along with my own selections. What followed was a nice surprise. The participants ended up liking both, but for different reasons: they liked the rhymes in the poems they had selected and liked the feeling of the ones I picked. And that opened the door for us to not only share the associations and memories the poems evoked, but to talk a little about technique as well. One of the women who wrote poems herself tried one without rhyme. "Here," she said in her thin voice. "Here's a poem like one of the ones Mike sends us."

For all the other teaching and counseling I was doing, the Veteran's Program was still my home base: I had an assured number of classes, and I taught year-round. But programs like this come and go. Political winds shift with the seasons. Public interest in the issues that gave rise to the programs wanes and flits to a new looming threat.

"There's a job opening up on campus," Chip Anderson, my first boss in the Veteran's Program, was telling me over the

phone. I was sunk down in the tattered easy chair in the counselor's office, staring out the window, absentmindedly watching the secretaries walk to the parking lot across the street. Chip's voice seemed far away: "I need someone to run the Tutorial Center in my program. You should apply. It's not teaching, it's administration . . . and supervising . . . and maybe some tutoring too. Why don't you apply . . . I don't think the Veteran's Program will be around a whole lot longer." Every so often, people come together and create in places like the Extension Building a special kind of work. From the work, a few of the helpers and a few of those being helped emerge transformed. Then money dries up, new political agendas are drawn, the people leave, new ones cease to come. The programs fade. They're written up and filed away.

Chip had left the Veteran's Program several years before to take over the directorship of UCLA's Educational Opportunity Program, known, in shorthand, as EOP. EOP programs sprung up on American college campuses in the late sixties and early seventies to recruit and assist students from low-income and minority backgrounds. The programs emerged in a variety of guises, were more often than not politically turbulent, ranged in purpose from the cynical and ineffective to the hopeful and comprehensive. Someone should write their history. The program Chip was running included counselors and tutors and provided a wide range of services. The Tutorial Center was a big operation: Around sixty seniors and graduate students were hired part time to tutor a whole range of subjects, from astronomy and Italian to mathematics and English. "I need someone to make everything systematic," Chip was saying, "someone to set up a good training, to talk about learning, to tighten this baby up. Whaddaya think?" I had hoped that something was going to come through at the Suicide Prevention Center—they had been talking about making me director of training—but a huge chunk of their funding, too, had fallen out from under them. They were cutting back rather than hiring. I was sinking fast in the mire of soft money.

My work with the children in El Monte and the veterans and, for that fact, with the old folks and the people I was counseling had taught me a lot about learning—how to foster it, what impedes it—had shaped for me a sense of human cognitive potential. The veterans had forced me to think critically about the cru-

cial transition into college, what it is that students need to meet the intellectual demands the freshman year makes of them. And all those charged and problematic encounters with the children and the veterans and the parole aides had sharpened my ability to help people out when they felt the fear of failure and all the other emotional spasms that come with change. I would be taking all this, Chip kept pushing me to see, back to that pivotal time that was so difficult for me, back to the freshman year. "These kids need what you got. Bring it here. Teach these tutors about all you've learned." I would be going, once again, to UCLA, but this time in a position to do something. So I went out and interviewed with Chip and his staff. There would be kids like I was, I figured, young people trying to get their bearings in the unfamiliar. Maybe this should be the next place I go. UCLA. Back to where I had been before.

*Back to
UCLA
back
again
before*