

## ***Little Voices Rise Up***

*In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up. --- Camus*

Soon after a new gang with alternate facts and simplified stories took control of the most powerful position on Earth, I drove through a post-flood landscape to High Desert State Prison, an institution created to confine, control and punish the rule-breakers. It was a terrible time – the President Elect, the roaring waters – noise sharp as knives. I needed quiet, a broody story of wings on the face of the waters. A woman's story. A mother's tale, signifying something.

After more than thirty years on college campuses, a novel partnership between California colleges and prisons had me teaching incarcerated men and women who'd signed onto waiting lists for classes. Each semester I'm agent and object, collaborator, accessory and accomplice in crime in a project about getting education. Each term some 100 students send me journals, poems and essays and we read and discuss texts. Sometimes, they add a personal note: *God Bless You, Hannah; Thank You, Ms. Kress*, and a drawing or photograph, like the one on my refrigerator of the prisoners and the abandoned dogs they've saved. I respond with questions or comments, tips on grammar, spelling and punctuation, and Thank Yous to *them* for their efforts and blessings.

Compared to on-campus students with their high-tech addictions, my imprisoned students' capacity for attention is spacious. They *want* what they think an education will give them – opportunity, employment, most of all, freedom –and see me as a kind of merchant whose wares, a passing grade, perhaps, are exchanged in a currency of care. A student twenty years on Death Row writes:

"I was young, I was angry, I had no one to show me. My father was killed by police, my uncle was killed by police, my brother, the only one I had left, was killed on accident by a guard in the tower during a prison riot. It's too late for me now but if I'd had someone...."

"Your story," I write back, "you have that." I know I want it more than he does. True words in dark times.

Sometimes, reading their work, hearing it, I still believe in the story of education, in our capacity for insight and self-correction. Sometimes, when a rare alignment of institutional forces and circumstances permit, I'm allowed to meet with my students and they teach me. I will have dressed in something colorful, earrings, a necklace, and gathered into myself something to give them they can keep, a story to show I believe in them. In *us*. *That* story. Parts in relation to a whole. The *I, you, he, she, it, they, we* story.

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I hadn't been inside this particular labyrinth of concrete, electrified wire and steel since summer. For reasons beyond reason, my own institution wouldn't allow it, and prison lockdowns from multiple stabbings, combined with staff vacations, added to persistent problems in clearance and scheduling. I'd just gotten back my gate pass after a year's exile for requesting another minute after a guard called Time. A kid from L.A. was asking about *Antigone*, saying he wanted to write a play – but where to begin? Everyone else was moving toward the door, and we were still talking, I

suggesting he start right there, from that very moment of asking. The guard must have thought it dangerous, insulting, a woman saying, "Just a minute, please" after he'd said "Move!" His complaint sizzled all the way up the Chain of Command to the Warden. There was nothing to do but submit a confession. "I'm sorry", I wrote, "I should have known not to question Custody. It won't happen again." *That* story.

That's because in High Desert everyone has to be careful. You can get killed by mistake. Once, when I was saying *todos somos los hijos de Shakespeare*, how whatever we say in English is part of that inheritance, *so don't be thinking you can't understand*, someone calls Code, which means all prisoners on the yard have to drop to the ground, those in the rooms remain seated, and teachers and employees move out to the hall. Only guards can go anywhere. We were watching through the window when one of the students walked to the pencil sharpener. That's when someone pressed a pocket alarm and the sound of heavy-booted running with the clang of keys and chains grew to a crescendo and ended with a regiment of guards facing the students, hushed and made little before us. Time stretched into a flattening silence until someone gave word and the students could stand and be marched into the yard where, one by one, they lifted their arms, opened their legs and were frisked, gazing into some imaginary distance and then, with no goodbye for their teachers, sent back to their cells, marking an end to *that* story.

Another time I was taken to Ad-Seg to meet with a student being transferred for psychological treatment. Locked in a cage the size of an outhouse, he was saying he wanted to continue his coursework but wasn't getting back his assignments. He said he *needed help, the children are suffering, was only a child himself when they ran from Cambodia, and everywhere and always the violence*. He wanted to know, Could I help him start a non-profit for children? As he was talking a red light on the wall started flashing and the exit doors locked shut. I figured I'd watch the guards and follow their lead. They looked a bit anxious, watching the light, joking. It seemed a long time before the doors clicked open and the flashing stopped and each of us but my student could have left if we'd wanted. If. *Each of us but him?* Subjects and objects on the axis of a conjunction.

~

The easy part is knowing what to wear. No blue like inmate clothing. That way if there's shooting guards can tell us apart. The rules? No cell phones, matches, lighters, cigarettes, bottles.... I understand; teachers also have rules: *a lot* is two words; *it's* is *it is*; subjects and verbs must "agree," objects mustn't be confused with subjects. To pass, students must follow the rules. Teachers in prison must know the rules too. Like, for example:

*"CDCR does not recognize hostages ... all persons entering...can be searched ... it is illegal to bring ...weapons, explosives, tear gas, drugs, drug paraphernalia ... alcoholic beverages, wireless communication devices... tobacco products, narcotics, ...encouraging and/or assisting prison inmates to escape is a crime; ... to give or take letters from prison inmates ... give or receive any type of gift and/or gratuities from prison inmates ... interviews with SPECIFIC INMATES are not permitted...[or] [c]onspiring with an inmate to circumvent policy and/or regulations...."*

It's the *teaching* part that's confusing, as in: who's teaching; whose teaching; for whom?

When a prison employee, albeit another of Shakespeare's children, complained we'd invited debate, something deemed inappropriate in a prison classroom, that our students had raised their voices, we were scheduled for a couple hours with the Training Sargent before we'd be let back in. Sargent shows us the display case of prisoner-crafted weapons: knives filed from metal cots or paper clamps, from plastic bags melted, wrapped, hardened, then sharpened to lethal points.

"Trust no one," he tells us. "Teach from the door. Keep it locked and propped so you can run, and always have a desk or chair between you and the students. Never have a prisoner behind you. Know where your guard is. Remember, if an inmate is told to kill you, he has to, or he'll be killed. It's politics."

I'd felt safe before then. Not in the world, but teaching in prisons; respected, appreciated, like I mattered. No kid was going to bust in with some automatic weapon and start shooting. And if anything crazy *were* to happen and a guard couldn't help me, I was sure the prisoners would. The shot-callers tell soldiers – We want education. *That* story.

But what education means, what I'm supposed to deliver, depends on subjects and objects and questions about *whose* meaning. For me, it has something to do with a mother, books murmuring, a winged presence in an opening space. For students, perhaps, it's how each grade of C or better reduces sentences by one week (*Sargent, may we discuss the relationships between a prison sentence and the other sentence – words chained in linear direction?*), unless they're Lifers, or on Death Row, and then, maybe, it's just to pass time or for studying only. For community colleges it's business, and my job is to fulfill a State Contract that pays colleges millions of dollars a year based on enrolled students numbers. For prison administrators, it's implementing changing policies that swing between rehabilitation and retribution.

On this particular day the story I'm carrying has to do with the space of the story itself, its *itness*, and a problem: how we got into the story, and how we can get out of it. Or, if there's no way out, what to do with the mind. It's about shape in changing dimensions, the elegant ellipses.... (waiting or taking their leave). Students, I think, can relate.

My story, small as it be, finds something in the clarifying matters of punctuation: commas, apostrophes and such, waving their little selves, crews of signing indicators; a woman waiting for a train with something in her hand, a child's hand in her hand, and in the child's hand, something to give someone that changes everything, like the difference between *Eat there, friends*, and *Eat their friends*; or, *A woman without her man is nothing*; and *A woman, without her, man is nothing*.

So how to begin? *In the beginning.... In?* In *what*, in *where*? In *whose* story? In prison.... I get to say – *What's the story? Where does it come from? Where are you in it? Who's telling it? Who's hearing it? How is it true? How is it a lie? How do you know? What do you see in the words there and here, hear and ear, I and eye?* I get to play – and my students, a captive audience, listen; they indulge me when I say things like, *The reader and writer are co-conspirators....* I get to ask: *What's your story? When are you a subject, when are you an object?* to say things like, Grammar, like water, shapes how we think.... I'm yipping. If I don't be quiet, someone's gonna (oops) shoot me.

One day I said, "Guess. What's the largest organism on Earth?"

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No answer.

"Come on."

"A sequoia?"

"Whale?"

"A forest of aspen!" I tell them. "And its interconnecting roots and branches create sound that communicates to others who are also a part of that sound. Studying literature is like that, each of our voices a sound speaking to others.... Blah, blah, blah. I can't believe I'm saying it! Most of my students haven't even heard of aspen, let alone seen and listened to an aspen forest; they've lived in cities, towns, along freeways.

I should have said the largest living organism is Earth itself, us included, (*we* included?) asked them to look at their tattoos, tell *that* story, the tear drops, names, words and drawings inked into their fragile bodies, mollusks, tendered in numbers and chains. Their listening to *my* story suggests I have something to say, that there is a tale signifying *something*, if *nothing comes from nothing*, nothing must come from something, and something is *something*, right? I know I'm begging.

For students locked in their mazes, my visits are respite from danger, distraction, entertainment, something different to look forward to, a chance for recognition or praise. For me, it's a battle for meaning itself. I travel and get paid to "teach", a reward that indulges a belief that *I* matter. But like my students who come to wonder if the stories they fought in gangs for were truly *their* stories, belief wanes. I'm Sisyphus, tired if not defeated, accessory to a system that benefits by imprisoning the fatherless, poor, unprotected, broken and ignorant. There are exceptions, of course. I recognize a fallacy when I write one. The passive voice does not go unrecognized by me. Sometimes, the rich and powerful go to prison. And sometimes the uneducated, fatherless and poor are models of self-control and understanding.

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High Desert, CCC, Pelican Bay, San Quentin, Folsom, Soledad, Valley State, CCW, SATF, Calipatria, Mule Creek, Men's Colony.... each name a place, and inside each place, thousands of names changed to numbers. I enter with a briefcase, navigating guards, electrified fences, razor-wired walls, and doors without handles that separate the violence and legalized oppression on the inside from the same on the out. "What's your name," I ask as they enter the room where I'm waiting.

"Foster."

"Pérez."

"Johnson."

"Your first names?"

"James."

"Benigno."

"Jesus."

"Hi," I say, "I'm Hannah Kress," extend my hand. We shake.

"You *did* see they were listening," Gail, fellow instructor and program director insists on the way home when I tell her I'm losing faith in teaching. "Hanging on your every word, didn't you *see* that?"

"They're humoring us. The things we say 'Writing is a safe place where we can be honest, free, change our minds, there are many truths, Blah blah blah' – it's embarrassing! They probably just want some unarmed, non-threatening body to look at. Maybe that's the most honest thing we can give them, not this humanities, subject, verb, object, shit!" Gail and I have both noted we've been swearing a lot since the election.

"Stop!" says Gail. "They love us."

"Come on."

~

"I was Iago", a student writes. I don't argue, though I suspect he wasn't. Instead, on the margin of his page I write – Iago is an *idea* of a man who can't care, feel remorse or change. Iago's *I am not what I am*, is as much a warning as a confession. And by the end of the play, the man who uses words for deception refuses to speak. What's *that about*? If I can share with him this story of negation, my student will discover he *wasn't* Iago, precisely because he can say that he was.

It's this listening to a student with a story, hearing a silence, a negation, a first person singular confession, connecting a singular agency to a plurality of others – the I am, you are, he, she, it is, we are, they are – that lets me imagine I might sometimes be useful, that my work can matter, and for moments helps me to grapple – as the doctor who worked at High Desert told me helps her – to see how we, like the deer and the cougar, are one and the same, eaten and eating in an irreparable and inescapable relationship of we and now.

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Now in the winter of our discontent.... No. Now *is* the winter .... Wrong words, again! "What is *is*, I ask them, from the verb: to be, and its fathomless parts? How might *being* be conceived differently in different places, languages, time? What's the difference between *being* in prison and *being* a prisoner; between I *am* in prison, I *am* a prisoner, and I, imprisoned, *am*? What about culture, habits and expectations, all of which feed into what we *think* we know about, say, being successful? What if getting an education isn't about getting anything at all, except, maybe, the chance to know we don't know and then, somehow, be, well, a bit more...free? ...Blah, blah, blah...." *I'm so sorry, I'm thinking, I'm out of control.*

"That's deep," says one student. "I didn't know English was so philosophical." He looks too young to have fathered the son he says he misses. He wants to know when I'll be back. I say I don't know, I come when they let me. The students don't ask who *they* is, though I ask them when they write something like what I've just said.

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During lock-down, a guard takes me to the students' cells, tells me to stand back and speak through the grid on the metal door, "so no one can throw anything at you, like feces, or urine, or spit."

"I'm not worried," I say. We need to talk, they're mixing up pronouns, and their subjects and verbs don't agree. And we have to talk about the harder stuff, like how Iago says *I am not what I am*.

It's not easy hearing through a closed metal door with only a gridded, peephole window to see through. I stand close, face to the grid. My student steps toward me.

"Stand back," my escort reminds me.

The student is smiling but I sense discomfort. He didn't know I was coming, doesn't have a shirt on. His celly is listening. I ask if he's received the comments I sent three weeks ago.

"Not yet," he says.

"Pay attention to punctuation," I tell him, "it matters – standard, college-level English, okay? And remember your essay is *your* idea, not a summary, *your* voice at the center." I'm shouting so he can hear me. I'm embarrassing him. I shouldn't see him like this. It's too intimate; no one else should be listening. Forgive me, I'm thinking as I follow my escort along the locked doors of the tier, clanking down each metal stair, past the guards in their windowed room, out into the open.

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When classes are allowed again, twenty minutes into one, someone calls Code. There's been fighting on the yard.

"What are they fighting about?" I whisper to the guard who comes to check where Gail and I are standing in the hall.

"Housecleaning."

"Housecleaning?"

"Taking out the trash."

Gail is inching closer to the door so she can keep speaking to her students. She'd been defining "epic". From the doorway she's asking them to imagine an American epic, something about heroism and war, "Way bigger than the individual," she's saying, arms tracing what could have been wings at her sides.

"Anyone?" No answer. She turns to me. I'm not thinking quickly: Climate Change, Dakota Pipeline, Black Lives Matter? I've just been told about taking out the trash – a piece of metal, implicit.

"*Grapes of Wrath*?" "There's a journey, devastation of a world, machinery, weather, banks, death, suffering, heroism, learning, survival...."

"Yes!" Gail says. I'm relieved, the good student always. We have a story. The guys look at me, impressed. Good, I think. Doing my job. The students are waiting. I move into their expectation, a space my education provides me.

"Speaking of nations and war," I say, "I've a question. What do you guys think about Trump and his alternate facts?" Teachers know students learn by talking and listening to each other, and I'm sure they've been listening to us too long. Suddenly, it sounds like kids let out for recess.

"The wall won't work!"

"They'll find a way to get under or over it."

"Anyone knows that." There's laughter, energy.

"Does Trump's language remind you of any characters we've...?" No answer. We're going too fast. "What about decency, power, Wright, Shakespeare, Kafka, Vonnegut, how does your reading relate?"

My pushing, foolish or not, opens a door and everyone has something to say and wants to say it. One voice becomes dominant. It's Justin, the A student who blames Othello for believing Iago, not Iago for manipulating Othello and everyone else in his way. Justin is insisting Trump can do whatever he wants because he's elected. I want to say something about how it's not what he can do, or wants to do, but what it shows us about what we do. But it's too noisy, there are too many words.

Gail jumps in. "Not by the majority of voters! Trump talk is Capitalism, oppression of the working class...."

Now everyone's talking and no one is listening to Gail who, by then, is entirely outside the prescription of the doorway, although our students, bless them, remain seated, arguing about what it means to be legal.

Gail is going on about capitalism. "They're not listening," I nudge her.

The A student is loudest. He's playing with us. I feel but can't stop it. I should have stepped back. But instead, in an effort to assert some semblance of order, step forward, raising my voice above the rest. I've been told I seek the last word, a need for denouement, an answer, structure, order in disarray.

"Wait!" I shout for their attention. "*Important, necessary* work is being done by people who can't get citizenship. They cross borders because they *have* to. And what about those who'd be killed by gangs if they went home? You should know about that. What about the Jews turned away, ending up in the gas chambers?

"Jews made the bomb," says Justin.

"What? What's Jewishness got to do with it?" I've moved into the forbidden area to face them, as if my words can change things. "*Listen*. I'm your *teacher*. Facts matter. Information matters. Do we applaud Iago, kill Desdemona, bomb Dresden, again and again? Force-feed the Hunger Artist like a Christmas goose, stuffing ourselves with alternative facts? What have you been *reading*?"

Silence. Perhaps they knew it was best. Someone had seen us. It's our guard, standing behind Gail. I walk back to the door and stand next to this young mountain of a man, find comfort in his lee. I'm the oldest and shortest of the only three free people in sight.

"I'll tell you something," he surprises me, speaking to the men from the doorway. "I'm twenty-three years old, been working since I was thirteen. This morning when I came to work I was playing my music – loud, like I like it. Mexican music." Everyone is listening. "And as I was pulling into the parking lot, another guard drives up, rolls down his window, says, 'Hey, do you know what country you're in?' 'Yeah,' I say, 'the country where I can play any music I like. You know where *you* are?' Then I amp it up louder and pull into my space." Even Gail is quiet. "It doesn't matter that I'm legal," he continues, "that my father is legal, that we always paid taxes and worked. So I'll tell you something, if you think Trump is good for this country, you really think that, you're *llenos de mierda*."

It doesn't occur to me to translate for those who don't know Spanish. Only a couple of the men wouldn't have understood *you're full of shit*, and they'd have caught the gist. The guard's face is genuine, there's a softness to it, credibility, like a good essay.

I want to thank him, but he's gone. He came only to say Code was lifted. We never see him again. Rumor is he was transferred.

"They don't listen to us like they listened to him," I tell Gail on the way home.

"He's a guard, carries a gun."

"Maybe we'd command more attention if we whispered, were so quiet they'd have to *strain* to listen.

"They won't."

"We should be more quiet."

"We're twice his age, have three times his education. They should be listening to us, not him."

"Maybe he's the one should be teaching."

"Don't say that. You don't mean it."

"Maybe I do."

~

The best way to describe it is *icky*, like I was groped and groping, dirty from Gail's outburst about capitalism and the working class, and my own pitiful demand – *Listen, I'm the teacher...* I'd sat down next to him, taken his hand, covered with tattoos into my smaller bare one and held past the time I felt him want to let go. I'd constrained him.

"Justin," I'd said. "What are you *doing*? You're supposed to be *thinking*!"

"Just kidding," he said.

"You're like a dog getting others to bark."

"Okay," he said, grinning.

"*Think*."

"I will," he said.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

As soon as I released him he left. I didn't watch the guard frisk him, free hands touching property.

"Do you think," I ask Gail, "they ever just want to be quiet, to curl up next to that big guard, not be frisked or have his finger up their butts, just have him *hold* them?"

"You're funny," she says.

"No, I mean it."

~

It's dark by the time I get home, though by the end of January there's light on the horizon. Soon it will be six, then seven, then eight, then nine, then ten until solstice, and even then there's the other side of the world, the on-going change of light in it.

My husband is waiting, table set. Soon we can eat. I go to the bathroom, turn on the water, let it run hot. I wash my hands with soap, wondering if my student wanted to do the same after I'd held his hand too long, demanding, the old woman of a young man, that he restrain himself. Such liberties, I'm thinking. That mother stuff, that – let's hold hands, be nice, blah, blah, blah shit... Idiot! And now, I'm apologizing! I hate Iago and Othello and Desdemona too. The only non-nauseating one is the servant, Emilia. If it's *thinking* I'm after, what's wrong with hate? Haven't I learned anything? that we can't dismiss the villains in the story, but must listen to and include them – if we're lucky survive *with* them.



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We add greens to left-over pasta, watch the news, then a movie about Hemmingway.

"Pick any number between 1 and 10," Hemmingway tells Protagonist-looking-for-a-father who finds one in Hemmingway-looking-for-a-son. "Any number, and make a story."

"Six."

Hemmingway pauses, writes on a napkin, hands to Protagonist:

*For sale - baby slippers, never used.*

I'm wondering, can happy stories be deeply true? Are sad stories reductive? How about a Hemmingway exercise with my students? What about the nine words one of them sent me for his Haiku assignment:

*Left to rot  
in hell I sit  
they forgot*

Or just two words:

*I'm sorry.*

Or seven: *Teacher with useless stories expelled from prison.*

After midnight I still can't sleep, wondering how to relate Hemmingway's exercise to credibility, the writer's task – saying one true thing, connecting the aspen grove with subjects, objects and prepositions. I imagine climbing into that big guard's arms, wishing my embrace were big enough to hold my students. Sometimes in my dreams I'm still nursing a child. Sometimes, like Tlazolteotl, I'm eating filth. I no longer imagine anything I can teach or show. Unless it's quiet. Not as in an absence of sound, but a deep, layered audible space.

~

The week after our class-from-the-doorway the training Sargent is telling us prisoners' ingenuity is remarkable, "they can make a weapon out of anything and even without one can kill you. The majority *want* to be criminals; their emotions control their actions. Nothing personal, just politics."

It's *all* personal, I'm thinking. All of it.

"We're a team," Sargent continues. "If a CO tells you to do something, *do* it, no questions asked." (I'd been talking with students about words and meaning in order – Don't just *do* something, stand there). "Trust the COs. They know when something isn't right. They'll take you out, stand you against the wall, lock the prisoners in. Make eye contact with the guard in the tower. Be sure he sees you."

He says education is the most dangerous place in prison, where people who aren't normally together pass dope, weapons, or information about where the next hit's going to be and who's going to do it.

"Sir," I say, "not to contradict, but I've always felt safe with my students."

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"Don't," he says. "End of story."

We thank him and shake hands, say we understand.

"Good," he tells us. "Report anyone asking you for something. Happens all the time."

~

Next time Gail and I are in High Desert State Prison I don't extend my hand to our students and stay near the door. I trip over my stories, get things wrong: pronouns and their relationships; punctuation no longer waving for attention; the credibility of the writer, the safety of inquiry, broken. I'm afraid.

But that night, thinking about subjects and agency I decide I can quit when I want, or they can fire me. I think about who gets to tell the story. I decide I'll take again my students' hands in mine, sit like I used to. Unless I'm ordered to the door. Passive voice, sometimes okay. Truth is, some sentences last lifetimes. Others incomplete. *She was a talker, wasn't she....* I'll be quiet, Flannery. I promise. *That story.*

I'll keep thinking about prepositions: story for my heart; hand in my hand; pain because of your pain; gift from you *to* me – prepositions, those sweet currencies of sharing.

In a sonnet the student who'd been barking for Trump makes the object/subject distinction with a preposition:

I woke up this morning to the mirror  
Found an image to a person not known  
I rubbed my eyes but still it was so clear  
The reflection was not really my own  
Tattoos and scars still covered the body  
But the eyes were new and not of my kind  
Lost was the hate that always burned hotly  
A rage and hate not spinning in the mind  
Who is this stranger? I ask to myself  
Who does not wear blood of men he has beat  
There is no flames to mark his future hell  
The violence is gone, he has new feet  
    This new man is I, I am this new man  
    For a split second I seen me not damned

~

I want to tell my students that each story opens or closes a space between us, that in a universe restored by listening, in the silence where we can hear the myriad and wondering little voices rise up, we might understand the suffering in hate, see the child in terror and find, in that discovery, some comfort.

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I'm guilty of more than I will say. I admit, Mr. Sargent, I have received gifts. In my desk drawer, the note: *I am a college student on Death Row. Thank you for giving me a second chance to re-write my essay.* On my bookshelf from a Lifer in the drought-parched valley, a collage of blue construction paper titled "Soft Rain" and the words, *Dear Hannah, it smells like rain.* On my refrigerator door, a photograph of prisoners with their guards, and the once abused but no longer frightened dogs the prisoners have saved. My student, Jesus, is standing in the back row smiling, his arm around Jesse, another student, and Jeff to his left, is smiling as well, a leash folded in his right hand. Jesus has drawn an arrow to each of them for me, and written their names so I can put a face to their writings. Just above and to the side of himself, he's simply written *me*.

In this simple act of naming and joining – agent with object, the I with the me – I know he sees me seeing him and I too am seen. Jesus casts a net, gathers us in, agents and objects together, his arm a wing, a parenthesis, and in that moment a universe for me is restored.

- End -