



epistle

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Issue II

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Epistle
Literary Magazine

Letter from the Editor

In the inaugural copy of *Epistle Literary Magazine*, I reflected on what it means to be a reader—how I've always claimed this identity with pride, and how it's always been a comforting stasis point to return to. I am eternally grateful for the literacy and education that have enabled me to bear the title with comfort and ease.

In reading through submissions for this second issue, however, I found myself considering the meaning of a different identity: that of a teacher. Overwhelmed by the heartfelt art shared from all over the globe, homages written to educators—some not known for decades by the authors yet still rich with details and affectionate memories—I realized the profound and unique opportunity that teachers have to leave a lasting impact on a person. Be it a parent, a creative writing teacher, or a research mentor, the ability to impart not just classroom knowledge but enduring life lessons forges a lasting bond between two people. In the very best of cases, this relationship extends further; a good teacher, no matter how briefly they are in our lives, comes to be a part of every conversation we have, every story we write, every new person we meet. Their wisdom ripples through our lives like a stone breaking the surface of the water, and we are forever changed.

I was deeply moved and inspired by every submission that I received to *Epistle*, and I am proud and excited to share them in this first print issue of the magazine. This issue is very meaningful to me, as it has allowed me to consider not just the role of the reader that I am proud to have, but the role of the educator I aspire to someday become. I hope that readers will take to heart the lessons of the many mentors honored in these pieces, as this is the way for their legacies and community commitments to live on: through art and advocacy.

Rory Baskin, *Editor-in-Chief*

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Teacher's Touch

Michael Theroux

Sun and water, and good rich soil
Even the smallest seed will sprout
to open, stretch and look about
with the wonder of a brand new soul

Sunlight, and the room to grow
Those first leaves will unfurl
hungry to take in the world
impatient, eager to know

So for a time of soft nurturing
Before Life feels that first storm
that, ah, most surely will come
light shines through, and Life sings

A few can teach the young to stand
in this moment of wholesomeness
This is the time for the knowing hand
you have just such a teacher's touch.

Michael Theroux is entering the literary publication field in my seventh decade. His career has spanned classically trained field botanist and plant ecologist, environmental health specialist, green energy developer and resource recovery web site editor. He is shifting from decades of publishing scientific and technical environmental works, to placing my cache of creative writing—much more satisfying! He has had 87 poems, stories and sketches published in the past three years. His literary writing may be found in *Cerasus*, *City Key*, *Wild Word*, *Ariel Chart*, *CaféLit*, *Midsummer Dreamhouse*, and elsewhere.

Educators Who Stand Beside

Tasha Lashawn

When people think about educators, they are usually referencing the person at the front of the classroom. The one with the lesson plan, the whiteboard marker, the grade book, the authority. But some of the most important educators I've known rarely stood at the front of the room. They worked beside desks, knelt at eye level, translated instructions into something a child could actually hold. They don't always get named, but they are remembered.

From disability support to behavioral intervention, these educators are often the first line of defense and absolutely essential to learning for so many students across the country. They are the ones who modify instruction, who walk a student out for a break when the world becomes too loud, who offer a gentle push to keep going when things feel hard. They are silent cheerleaders, steady and present. They often know the students more deeply than the classroom teacher, simply because of proximity, because of time, because of trust. Their relationships are built on far more than compliance. They are built on patience, care, and understanding. On the slow work of showing up consistently. There is magic in what they do.

I think of the kindergarten aide who sits on the hallway floor every morning with a crying little boy in the first weeks of school. His backpack untouched. His body folded in on itself. Separation anxiety gripping him tighter than his shoes. She rubs his back and tells him she's here when he's ready. Not when the bell rings. Not when the class lines up. When he is ready. She doesn't rush him. She doesn't bargain. She meets him exactly where he is and waits.

I think of the first-grade behavioral technician who sits beside a little girl who shuts down the moment math is mentioned. Numbers blur. Frustration rises fast. Dyslexia turns a simple worksheet into something overwhelming. Instead of pushing through, they modify the work. They offer to scribe while the child explains her thinking out loud. They find a different way in. They stay until the girl's shoulders soften and she tries again.

This is what creating access looks like. It isn't loud. It isn't rewarded. It doesn't come with applause. It comes with presence. With patience. With the quiet understanding that learning cannot happen until a child feels seen.

When I was a child, I wanted to be a teacher because I had several educators who shaped me along the way. My third-grade teacher allowed me to question everything without getting frustrated by my curiosity. My seventh-grade science teacher saw through my attitude and helped me lean into my love of experimentation instead of fighting it. My high school anatomy and physiology teacher, the first male educator who truly saw me, taught me not to give up on myself and helped me recognize my strengths. In college, my first Black female professor saw something in my writing that I didn't yet trust myself to believe, and she encouraged me to do something with it anyway.

These educators believed in me when I didn't believe in myself.

But it wasn't until I entered education myself that my understanding of who shapes us began to widen. I realized that while classroom teachers had influenced me deeply, there were also support staff quietly changing lives all around me. Even when they didn't work directly with me, I watched them with my peers. I watched them help students who felt defeated, who didn't understand what the teacher was asking, who were ready to give up. I saw how those adults stepped in, not to rescue, but to steady.

Later, while pursuing my degree, I became a paraprofessional. That was when I discovered how much I loved working closely with students. The reward didn't come from recognition or titles. It came from knowing that what I did with each student mattered. From watching small shifts turn into growth. From seeing confidence replace frustration and knowing I had something to do with that change.

Becoming a behavioral technician deepened that work. I learned to embrace not just learning differences, but the behaviors that often come from feeling overwhelmed, misunderstood, or defeated. I learned to meet children exactly where they were, without rushing them toward readiness. I helped students navigate not only academic challenges, but the emotions tied to them. I learned that regulation often comes before instruction, and that growth follows safety. Watching those students grow, regulate, and succeed became reward enough.

While I didn't end up in education in the way I once imagined, as a classroom teacher at the front of the room, I now see that my path was shaped by many kinds of educators along the way. Teachers, paraprofessionals, aides, behavioral staff. All of them modeling what it means to show up for children.

Today, as an SEL interventionist, I stand in the space between. I teach students about emotions, self-regulation, and perseverance so they can meet challenges not just in school, but in life. I support classroom teachers when a student needs something extra to access the curriculum. I help bridge gaps when relationships feel strained. I get the best of both worlds.

Watching the work of silent educators, serving in those roles myself, and carrying the heart of the educators who once uplifted me has shaped me into the educator I am today.

Tasha Lashawn is an SEL interventionist and writer whose work centers on education, emotional regulation, and the often unseen labor that supports student growth. She has worked as a paraprofessional and behavioral technician and writes from lived experience inside schools, honoring educators who build trust, access, and belonging beyond the front of the classroom.

Seeing the World Differently, Thanks to Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph

Kristen Monroe

I entered graduate school at the University of Chicago in September 1968. Chicago was then a cold, unfriendly city, shaped for me by the televised brutality of Mayor Daley's police beating anti-war demonstrators at the Democratic convention that August. The university itself was in a rough part of town, and I had to learn to be more cautious than ever before. Having been raised in a small town, I had attended an equally small college in New England. I was thus taken aback when the store detective at a Hyde Park grocery store suggested I not leave my purse in the basket while shopping nearby food items.

The students and faculty at Chicago were also not a typical type familiar to me—best described as barbaric personalities who would roll right over you intellectually unless you stood up for yourself, something I was not entirely prepared to do. Worse, I experienced my youthful identity crisis during my first year at Chicago. I had always assumed I would become a lawyer like my father, have children, and enjoy a happy marriage. How exactly that all was to happen was unclear to me. But it was a plan, a plan that unraveled as I realized I had no role models to show me how to do it. My parents had a good marriage, but not one I wanted. My father was the star of the family, and Mother, equally bright in my view, took a back seat to him, as women did in those days. I knew few professional women whose careers looked appealing. I knew no one who achieved the trifecta: great career, great marriage, and a great relationship with their children.

Enter Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph.

After a lonely first year of discovering myself and making a few new friends, I enrolled in a course on Indian politics during the spring term. Taught by a husband-and-wife team, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, the course was exceptionally well run. It was well organized, thorough, and engaging. This was the first time I encountered literature in a political science class. The Rudolphs included *Passage to India* in their syllabus, noting that the novel's mother is the only person who bridges the gap between Indian and English cultures, a point underscored by her death on the journey home, halfway between the two countries. They also included *Train to Pakistan*, which describes the partition of the subcontinent in all its personal horrors, featuring trains of dead bodies being transported through regions where Hindus could be killed by Muslims, and vice versa. The horror of ethnic cleansing chilled me. Gandhi's courage and wisdom inspired me. I still remember one scene from the Academy Award-winning film *Gandhi*, supposedly based on an actual event during the partition. The scene shows Gandhi lying on a cot, weak from fasting in protest against his fellow countrymen murdering each other. A group of Hindus arrives to surrender their weapons, proving to Gandhi that they will cease fighting if that's what it takes to end Gandhi's fast. As the men leave, one of them turns back and, with great emotion, hurls a piece of bread on Gandhi's cot.

Man: Eat! (The man pauses, then again vehemently asserts) Eat! I am going to hell, but not with your death on my soul.

Gandhi: Only God decides who goes to hell.

Man, with great emotion: I killed a child. I smashed his head against the wall.

Gandhi: Why?

Man, crying: They killed my son. My boy. (The man sobs.) The Muslims killed my son.

Gandhi: I know a way out of hell. Find a child. A child, whose mother and father have been killed, a little boy about this high, and raise him as your own. Only be sure that he is a Muslim and that you raise him as one.

The movie had not yet been made but the Rudolphs knew of the incident. Their depiction of it revealed the power of political leadership that appeals to the best in us, not the worst. Machiavelli supposedly said a good ruler should be loved and feared, but if you must choose, it is better to be feared. The Rudolphs taught me Machiavelli was wrong. Being loved can move mountains in ways that being feared cannot even imagine, let alone comprehend.

There were other transformative moments as well, scattered throughout the years I was lucky enough to know the Rudolphs. Susanne was giving a lecture in the same course on Indian politics. I have long forgotten her main point, but I remember the phrase she used as if it were yesterday. “I’m far too maternal to throw out the baby with the bathwater,” she said, referring to some theory she had just criticized but wanted to keep anyway. I instinctively turned toward her husband, sitting across from me in the large auditorium. He smiled and raised three fingers. “Three. Three children.” Suddenly, everything changed for me. Here was a woman who was beautiful and accomplished, with a mind sharp as a steel trap and the appearance of a finely crafted Dresden doll. She had three children? A husband who clearly adored her? A PhD from Harvard and a job at the University of Chicago? The thought emerged as if by magic: If Susanne Rudolph could do it, maybe I could too. In that instant, my world shifted. The possibilities felt limitless.

These were not the only times the Rudolphs changed my life. My fourth year at Chicago, I housesat for six months for David Bevington, a faculty member in the English Department. David was a Shakespeare scholar, rumored to be the consultant on the movie *West Side Story*, based on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. My two roommates both worked during the day, so I had the house to myself. I inherited David’s third-floor study, a huge room with a large desk and a table made from a door, placed in the middle of the commodious room. On the table was the entire *Oxford English Dictionary*—not the two-volume, small-print, abbreviated dictionary I later could afford, but the whole thing. I was fascinated. I had never seen such a thing and spent much of my time leafing through it, reading the definitions and derivations of words I had only heard of until then.

David also had a closet filled with recordings of Elizabethan music or, more precisely, the music that might have inspired Shakespeare. My parents had always loved music, and I took that as an excuse to spend hours curled up on a sofa listening to David’s record collection. In the room next to the study—what had originally been a ballroom in the large, formally elegant house—was a vast, sparsely furnished reading room. It was lined with bookcases filled with books and plays that Shakespeare might have read for inspiration. And histories of the period. Always a frustrated history major, I spent hours reading about Mary Tudor and Elizabeth, Lady Jane Grey, the wives of Henry VIII, and his advisors, Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell. It was wonderful. I was supposed to be working on my thesis, and I used to joke that I got no work done during that six-month period. Everyone would always laugh and agree with my self-deprecating remark, “I did nothing at all during that time. Did no work at all. Accomplished absolutely nothing.” Everyone except Susanne, who smiled her sweet little smile and said, cutting through all my self-deprecation, “Nothing except make yourself an educated person.”

How wonderful to have people in your life who recognize and value things in you that you do not see yourself, and who have the good sense and kindness to mention them to you.

I never spoke of any of this until I was married and had my first child. Then I wrote to Susanne, telling her what her mere existence had meant to me. How she showed me it was possible to be a woman—a beautiful,

accomplished, loving, and kind woman—while still having a good marriage, a successful career, and good relations with your children. As I became a professor, I interacted professionally with the Rudolphs beyond just the student-professor relationship. I watched and learned from her and Lloyd as they showed me and so many others how to lead an intellectual professional movement to change the discipline. I saw how they transitioned into new lives, leaving Chicago upon retirement because they did not want to become what they called ghosts, retired faculty who no longer teach or have students and wander the halls somewhat aimlessly, lacking anyone with whom to share their wisdom and knowledge.

They eventually moved into a retirement home in Oakland, where I visited them for the last time. Susanne's Parkinson's was finally taking over her life, and I watched Lloyd lovingly help her count out her pills each day. She worried about his cancer, a new and unwelcome visitor in their lives. In that last year, their son Matthew told me they went into hospice together. "It's basically a race to the end, to see who goes first. After that, the other one doesn't really care," he said. And so it was.

Susanne died on December 23, 2015, and Lloyd died three weeks later, on January 16, 2016. I wrote Susanne's obituary and participated in a *festschrift* honoring their research. But wonderful as it was, their intellectual work was a small part of what they did for me and for so many others. My Chicago contemporaries still note that the best course they took was the Rudolphs' course, titled "The PsychoSocial Aspects of Subjugation, Domination, and Equality: A Study of the Asymmetrical Relationship." The course was brilliant, ahead of its time, and interdisciplinary. It began with psychological literature on how we see the world. It then addressed four asymmetrical relationships, noting how science often justifies domination and subjection. Three of the relationships were predictable: gender, race, and ethnicity. We read a Harvard psychiatrist's biological justification for women's subjugation because of the female "inner space" where the vagina receives the thrusting penis. *Invisible Man* depicts how people saw a Black man, not the individual person. And we learned how imperialists used the white man's burden theme of bringing civilization to a backward people. Heady stuff, but not unexpected.

It was the fourth asymmetrical relationship that surprised me and once again changed my life. We read Philip Aries's *Centuries of Childhood*, which showed me that the typical 1950s American pattern of child-rearing was not the norm throughout history and introduced the novel idea of children as a subject class. I used to joke that this one course cost me a lot because I could no longer rely on my preconceptions but had to step outside myself and ask whether what worked for my parents and me was suitable for these children. Or whether what worked for Alex was appropriate for Nik or Chloe. The Rudolphs' course gave me the courage to look at my own culture as an anthropologist would and ask whether it truly suited the life I wanted.

So, mentors? Yes. Mentors are people we trust, people who guide us professionally and personally, enriching us with their wisdom, advice, and experience. They don't replace our parents. But they show us worlds, choices, and opportunities we never knew existed until they open a door and usher us in. I'm grateful to the Rudolphs every day of my life. Whenever students thank me for helping them, I tell them I'm just trying to pay back the Rudolphs for what they did for me. What a gift!

Kristen Renwick Monroe is the Chancellor's Distinguished Professor of Political Science at UC Irvine and founding Director of the UCI Interdisciplinary Center for the Scientific Study of Ethics and Morality. An honors graduate of Smith College, a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, and a post-doctoral researcher in econometrics and political economics, Monroe has taught at Stony Brook, NYU, Princeton, and Harvard. Best known for her prize-winning work on moral choice during the Holocaust and moral courage in Trump's America, Monroe has won numerous major book awards for her work on narrative, ethics, and political psychology, and she owes much of this to the Rudolphs.

Hands Across Continents

David Lee

To my parents, Robert and Betty Lee

Dear Mother, Father,

I trace the lines of your journey:
from China's crowded streets,
folded suitcases, whispered dreams,
oceans speaking in tongues
we had yet to learn.

You taught us to balance
pennies and principles,
to measure life in effort and honor,
not in applause or ease.

I remember quiet mornings,
your hands over homework,
your eyes carrying the weight of sacrifice
like lanterns in a dark room.

Ethics are not words on walls
but marrow in daily living:
the diligence in sweeping floors,
the courage to open doors
for those who follow.

Your immigrant hands built more than a home;
they carved a world where we could
dream without apology,
seek knowledge without fear,
and always return
to what is right,
not what is easy.

From Pine Ridge to classrooms,
from your hands to mine,
I am your reflection,
shaped by the steady drum of your work,
the compass of your character.

Thank you for the continents
you carried for me.

David

David Anson Lee is a physician, researcher, philosopher, and poet originally from Pine Ridge, South Dakota. His work explores mentorship, identity, and the intersections of culture, science, and literature. His poetry has been published in journals including *Right Hand Pointing*, *Unbroken Journal*, *The Scarred Tree*, *Braided Way*, and *Eunoia Review*.

Dear Mr. Day

Jude Ellis

Dear Mr. Stephen Day,

A LONG time ago you taught at a semi-rural, obscure high school. The impact you had on at least one student continues many decades later.

You may not remember one tall, gawky girl, but you gave her the gifts beyond price.

A speech by Churchill, not simply read because the regents exams required it. You had the class pull down the shades on the windows and hunker down low over our desks. One student acted as radio garble; several others sounded as distant bombs on cue as you read the speech with a brilliant British accent. You awarded us the power of spoken words.

A drama club opened a world of lights, sets, words and wizardry. It didn't matter to you that a mere girl volunteered to help with set crew, you taught her to use hammers and saws just like everyone else. You taught us how the smallest part is just as important as a star as the magic takes everyone to make it work.

A lecture about good taste being akin to a baseball field showed opened the astounding power of what teaching could be. You encouraged me to dream that I could do the same.

Your creative writing class dared me to believe that I had talent. My ideas were worth something and thus I had value as a person too. Such gifts gave an abused child the tools to become a competent adult.

The gift of words had the power of discovery. I discovered that I am an auditory learner. Discovered too, that the spoken word could circumvent my visual learning disability. What an incredible benefaction to learn a potential I'd never had the strength to recognize. To find treasure in speech as a coping strategy to pass on to others.

The magic of the theatre has only deepened for the involvement in it. Set crew, actor, sound crew, master electrician, and director, all these skills grew from those first steps. Best of all is the joy of losing myself within the enchantment, and to be able to share it with others.

I left high school without a clear direction. In college my major changed every semester until I stumbled into Education. The fire relit. The idea of education as a career would have withered without your examples. Now I am a teacher. It has become part of what defines me. This gift has been the essence of what my life has become.

Nowadays, I delight in making words dance along paper, even though now it electronic. Newspaper articles, college curriculums, short stories, children's stories, a novel in progress, all because one teacher believed in me. The potential finally given a form. A self-doubter grew into the fortitude to make the attempt and to publish.

The understanding of even a portion of the legacy one has received may go unrecognized or unacknowledged. Somehow it was my good fortune to have several extraordinary teachers. I benefited from their efforts.

If it is my destiny, I wish is I can give someone else even a small measure of the gifts that I've been granted.

To you, Mr. Day, I can only offer my gratitude and memories of a lesson well learned.

Sincerely,

Your no longer Gawky Student

Jude Ellis, a teacher of all ages and stages, has taught Special Education, Middle School, Community College as well as writing seminars. She is a neurodiverse soul with a love theatre, musical soundtracks and magical thinking. As an author, she ranges from computer articles to children's stories to science fiction to memoir to school curriculum. Jude is delighted to be a minor-league computer geek, a tree hugger and an everlasting learner.

Professor T

Paula Praeger

Hawthorne, Thoreau, Faulkner,
names written in white
on a black chalkboard
that framed Professor T,

his teaching,
like a flare
illuminated
the darkness.

He shot
whizzing arrows
of American literature
into banality,
a college classroom,

hoped to pierce
students' brains.

Mine welcomed
pinpricks and punctures,
into which words seeped,
collected, made homes.

Hester's red letter shame

in Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter,

green shoots

in Walden's woods,

Miss Emily's death

in a "house filled with

dust and shadows"

in Faulkner's south.

Professor T. mined

a vein, struck gold.

Literature.

Paula Praeger is an artist and a writer. Her prints have been exhibited in the United States and abroad and she has contributed artwork to literary magazines. Her poems were published in Hindsight, Cancer, Months to Years, Close Up, Visible Ink Anthologies, The Poetry Distillery, Crab Creek Review and Sad Girls Club and Humans of the World blogs.

Influence of a Teacher

Daniel Miltz

The impact of a great high school teacher can never be forgotten.

These words take me back to my days in 12th grade, when school became more challenging—especially in my shop classes. Around that time, I was also dreaming of going to an Engineering Institute, something I had wanted for years. Growing up in a blue-collar neighborhood—I worked hard as a Mechanical Industrial Applied Arts major. Many of my teachers were highly skilled and experienced in Industrial Arts, but one teacher stood out among them—Mr. Anderson, my mechanical drawing instructor.

Mr. Anderson had a unique way of explaining complicated ideas in simple, clear terms. His lessons always amazed and inspired me. He never overwhelmed us with extra work, yet he constantly pushed me to think harder and do better. His teaching style was what made him truly special. Even later, when I met other great professors in college, none matched his ability to motivate and connect with his students.

The most powerful part of education is the bond between a student and a teacher. That connection can inspire success and a lifelong love of learning. What made Mr. Anderson different was his role as a mentor—he encouraged me to aim for perfection and take pride in my work.

In many classes, the lessons that shape us the most aren't found in the syllabus. I was never afraid of learning or taking on challenges, but Mr. Anderson helped me see what I was truly capable of. He never focused on my weaknesses. Instead, he gave me confidence and believed in my creativity and design skills. During my time as an Industrial Arts honor student, his constructive advice and constant encouragement made me want to improve every day.

Mr. Anderson always came to class with a positive attitude. He cared deeply about his students and took joy in teaching us. Great teachers help students grow not only in skill, but also in character. With them, learning feels exciting, and students are never afraid to ask questions.

I will always be grateful to him for going the extra mile—for his kindness, his support, and his genuine interest in helping me grow. His influence has guided me through many challenges in life and throughout my long career as a Senior Mechanical Aerospace Engineering Designer.

Even today, I think of him often and thank God for placing such a remarkable teacher in my life. His inspiration has stayed with me for over sixty years, reminding me of the lasting impact a dedicated teacher can have on a student's life.

Teachers are the true builders of a nation. When they teach with patience, purpose, and sincerity, they shape the next generation into wiser, better people. The question is—how many educators today teach with that same passion and perseverance that make students believe in themselves?

A poet/artist at heart since his formative, bohemian years in California, Daniel draws enduring inspiration from the raw energy and spontaneous voice of the Beat Generation. His poetic journey has garnered over 1,600 accolades across international poetry forums, and his work has appeared in more than 250 anthologies worldwide.

Heart Song

Shauna Alderson

“Welcome, parents and students, to Aria Music’s piano recital.”

Deanda chewed on the inside of her lip. She sat among jittery students assembled in long rows before the stage. Behind them were the studio’s music teachers interspersed among scores of parents. The ones right behind her reeked of bitter coffee as they gossiped about their children. It was nauseating.

This year, the recital was held in a community hall with a raised stage and unforgiving chairs. Blood-red curtains framed the lonely grand piano trapped in spotlight. It was uncomfortably warm in the hall, but Deanda wore winter gloves over her icicle hands. She was always freezing before a performance.

The MC introduced the first performer, an elementary student playing “Für Elise”. He botched the end of the song, but the audience clapped regardless. One by one, students walked up the stage, played, bowed, and left to applause.

Deanda mentally played through her piece, imagined the position of her fingers on the keyboard, and told herself she couldn’t make mistakes. She’d memorized her song months ago for the RCM exam, so she just had to let muscle memory play for her. No slip-ups, and no one would remember her at the end of the night.

She caught sight of an exposed thread on the hem of her dress and tried to pull it out. The hem unravelled even more, and she panic-flattened the thread back into place so it wouldn’t be seen.

Her mother always pointed out her mistakes.

“Uh-uh, redo the scale,” she said as Deanda crammed in a practice session before they had to leave for the recital.

“Mom, it’s just a warm-up.”

“You want to play well for Miss Lutfana, don’t you?” Her mother tapped an arthritic finger on the fallboard. She couldn’t play piano herself anymore due to aching knuckles. “Restart.”

Deanda obeyed, wishing she had plugged her headphones into the electric keyboard so that only she could hear.

But her mother wasn’t done when she’d finished. “You’re not wearing that, are you?”

Deanda looked down at her dress. “Yes,” she replied.

“Wear something prettier. You don’t perform every day.”

“This dress is fine, Mom.” And it was just fine. Solid beige, knee-length, with an empire waist and half sleeves. Not too flashy, not too plain. This dress was made to fade into the crowd.

“Be sensible. Don’t you want people to pay attention?”

She said nothing. She didn't want to be performing tonight at all. But the moment the music studio called her parents about the recital—they hadn't done that in previous years—her free will had gone down the drain.

Her mother huffed away to her dad. "I don't know why she's so stubborn," she overheard her say.

Deanda's shoulders drooped. Her mother just didn't get it. If being heard meant criticism, then she didn't want an audience. Now she aimed for a quiet existence, a ballad rather than a symphony.

"Our next performer is Deanda Helmi, who will be playing Sifford's 'Incognito'."

Her stomach somersaulted. Already?

Mandatory applause accompanied her as she stood bare-handed, leaving her gloves on the seat. She shuffled onstage, dropped into the piano bench, and tried to ignore everyone's eyes. Her fingers were stiff as branches as she hovered them above a G minor.

Ready? Go.

She began on an exhale, playing softly and taking care not to rush. Moving into dominant seventh now, then back to G minor. Same jazzy progression for the next phrase, and then—a discordant note. Wrong position in the right hand. She coursecorrected, but the melody was still off-key. Someone in the audience coughed. She stopped breathing.

She flew back to the starting position, re-ran through the first bars. The same wrong notes in the same measure. No no no, this couldn't be happening! She had memorized this song. She tried to move past the forgotten measure, but her fingers fumbled, unable to find their place without it. She tried to skip the entire beginning sequence and was met with dissonance again.

Why hadn't she brought her sheet music? Why was she wasting everyone's time! Any moment now and they'd start laughing, booing her off the stage. She tried to find her piano teacher, Miss Lutfana, in the crowd, but the stares made her eyes well up with tears.

Confidence shaken, hands frozen and face hot, her body told her legs to run.

She stumbled off the bench and—

Suddenly remembered Miss Lutfana's words. "*What about your original?*"

It was during her final piano class before the weekend recital. She asked if she could change her song selection, and Miss Lutfana frowned.

"What about your original? Your piece is beautiful, and I thought you were sick of playing 'Incognito'."

"I'm sure," Deanda said as she wrung out the straps of her book bag. "I'm sorry it's so last-minute."

She didn't know why she'd chosen to play an original composition in the first place. Maybe it was a rebellious urge to perform something her parents had never heard. After all, she'd composed her song surreptitiously with her

headphones plugged into the home piano. Miss Lutfana was its only admirer, and only because Deanda had to practice her piece for the recital.

But she was not a rebellious child, and ‘Incognito’ was a safe choice. It was a crowdpleaser, even if she’d rather not perform for a crowd to begin with.

Her song didn’t even have a name.

“All right, that’s okay,” Miss Lutfana said. “We’ll make the change to the program. I was looking forward to hearing your original on the grand piano... but whatever you play, I know it’s going to be lovely.” She motioned for Deanda to take a seat in front of the keyboard. “Let’s get started, then.”

Slowly, Deanda settled back into the bench on the stage, the shape of her fear morphing into anticipation.

“I know it’s going to be lovely.”

She didn’t have sheet music for this either, but that didn’t matter. She could play this one with her eyes closed.

She sunk into the keys before anxiety could take over. The chords rang out of the piano with a haunting harmony, beautiful. Her fingers glided through the progressions, still cold but certain and unapologetic. Gradually, the melody emerged. The beginning was grim and envious, an outsider looking in. She’d composed this section over two weeks, every day after school, with unfair comparisons to virtuoso pianists stuck in her head. Then the melody rose into staccato notes tiptoeing over eggshells. Her home life. And finally, the part she’d composed after learning under Miss Lutfana, hopeful arpeggios soaring over octaves. This was her favourite part. She slipped on some of the keys, but what did that matter when her blood was pumping? Her body fell into the song, emoting its dynamic texture in all of her movements. In the back of her mind, the obsessive observer noted that she’d never played piano quite like this before.

And when the end of the song sighed out of her, when vigorous applause resonated across the hall, she came back to herself. She caught sight of Miss Lutfana’s proud face, and her parents’, the three of them on their feet in the front row as they clapped.

Deanda stood too and bowed with her elbows glued to her sides, certain that she’d sweated through her dress. But she found herself smiling. People were looking, and she was smiling.

Shauna Alderson is a multi-passionate author, musician, and energy healer. Her fantasy novel, *Paragon*, was published by Zimbell House in 2020. Her poem, “The Archeologist”, appeared in *Balloon Children* (Nightshade Publishing, 2023).

Fluorophotometry and the Quiet Gravity of Ideas

David Lee

To Dr. Richard Brubaker

Dear Dr. Brubaker,

I remember the hum of the Mayo Clinic lab,
the quiet hiss of instruments,
aqueous humor glowing faintly,
and you standing there,
pointing not just to data
but to possibility.

You taught me that research is not only answers
but asking the right questions,
curiosity that digs beneath the surface,
courage that stakes a claim
in unknown waters.

Through glaucoma, I saw more than disease:
patterns, principles,
the architecture of thought itself,
the way one question
can ripple through decades of inquiry.

In early mornings and late evenings,

I learned a lesson beyond measurement:

to trust the mind,

cultivate ideas,

value integrity in pursuit of the new.

Because of you, at the Mayo Clinic,

I learned that mentorship is measured not only in knowledge

but in inspiration seeded,

confidence nurtured,

permission to imagine

what no one has yet imagined.

I carry your teaching forward

in labs, in papers, in every student

I hope to guide

with the same quiet gravity you gave me.

David

Here's to Great Teachers!

Celia Chandler

Great teachers encourage students to sample appetizing and sometimes exotic dishes on the buffet of learning. Now, decades after the food is long digested, I'm still left with the pleasant aftertaste. Here's a sampling of the best on my 60 year menu.

My grade 5 teacher, Deirdre Graham, was the first teacher to leave her lasting mark. Mrs. Graham was cool in a way we hadn't seen from other teachers; having taught high school in town (!) before she joined our elementary school surrounded by farmers' fields gave her an edge. She was also a towering woman imbued with a positive outlook that she passed on to us. Her love for children inspired us to do great and creative things within our little world. I recently Googled her and found her, now an Alpaca farmer. I emailed and she responded in less than an hour, remembering our class. Still gracious and lovely after 50 years.

Audrey Tiffin taught me Grade 13 Canadian Literature. Mrs. Tiffin's extraordinariness was lost on many of the students and indeed on much of the small town where I went to high school. Audrey was proudest of one of her first students, Alice Munro, the 2013 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. But Audrey was proud of all Canadian writers, and taught us about the greats our country had to offer. Her enthusiasm spilled out beyond CanLit: we analyzed *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* in her Grade 12 class, very radical, in a school board prone to banning books for content deemed unsuitable for tender minds. Then there was her overwhelming sense of spirit. There was no dress up day when she didn't wow us with a costume, including her purple strappy sandals on "purple and white" day. Oh, she was way-cool.

I arrived at university in 1985 and took a bit of time to find my feet in the political science department. There I met Barb Carroll, another strong female teacher. Barb took an interest in her students and encouraged us to pursue what was important to us as individuals. She was the first to suggest I might have the chops for grad school. She didn't take anything too seriously though and I remember sitting in her office having a few laughs about this and that. A normal person, sorely needed for this girl from the farm, often out of her depth socially.

My one year at graduate school was the darkest period of my education. I was too young to engage in any serious critique of the exercise of power and felt it that year. I sat in Janine Brodie's Feminist Political Theory class for a full year with five other women—I was the youngest—and said nothing substantive. I hadn't the confidence to express anything because I knew I had nothing interesting to say. Janine saw something germinating in my head that needed a chance to bloom. She never gave up on me even though I had given up on myself, and for that I have always been grateful.

When I joined the workforce I was privileged: Barbara Caplan — Barb — held the top job in Toronto's municipal bureaucracy, City Clerk. She was the first woman in the role and she laughed when she told the story of how one councillor asked her what a woman in her 40s would do with all that money. Barb, however, was not there for the money. Barb was there to facilitate good public decision-making, apolitically and efficiently. By luck, I was tucked into an office on a hall next to the back staircase where Barb would dart regularly down to the underground parking for a smoke. Whether she saw something of herself in me—I like to think so—or whether she appreciated my irreverent and often inappropriate sense of humour, we soon became smoking buddies. Standing beside Barb clutching my lit menthol, I became privy to things I wouldn't have otherwise learned. Barb soon identified

opportunities for my professional development within her department and by 1994, I was the Manager of City Council. Those who've worked with me since will know of my obsessive need to achieve all these things with every meeting I organize. That's all Barb's influence. Barb knew that by preparing the agenda and the minutes, you shaped the way issues would be discussed and remembered, a significant and important role that should never be under-resourced.

It was a different time. Every day, Barb took a stack of "seat work" to a restaurant for a martini, a steak, and to clear the signature pile. If you had letters in that pile, you knew they would come back with edits. She championed the plain language movement at City Hall and was proud of her campaign to eliminate Latin holdovers from the Minutes. If she couldn't find syntactical changes to make, she would add or move commas. We mocked her about it but she never stopped. I am a better writer because of Barb.

Another lunch I was always at that speaks to a different time was the "perfect attendance lunch," Barbara's reward for those who never took a sick day. Unsurprisingly, this was a small group of the childless, as Barb was herself. Barbara identified strongly as a feminist, but today this lunch would be seen as discriminatory against women, often the primary caregivers, and badly out of step with a post-COVID world. Then, perfect attendance was something I aimed to achieve, not just to have lunch but to match Barb's strong work ethic.

One day, Barb invited me with two much more senior women to an all-day meeting at her house to revise Council's procedure by-law, the stuff of nightmares for many but dreams for us. I was a bright-eyed 27 year old who knew nothing. We knocked off for lunch and Barb cooked us something scrumptious which we ate on the backyard deck with wine and cigarettes. She modelled how to mentor and treat staff with respect and kindness, while weaving personal and professional lives together.

Returning to school at 36 to do a law degree was daunting. I was in a pack of hungry 23 year olds, smart as hell, and competitive. I was privileged to be in John Kilcoyne's 1st year contract law class. Johnny K helped students realize law school is a bunch of hoops necessary to be allowed to use a tool to effect change. Preparing us for our first set of exams, he did a top 10 list. Numbers 2 and 1 are worth sharing here. No. 2: "exercise virtuous anti-social behaviour," meaning avoid getting caught up in the pre-exam communal stress-out outside the exam room and the post-exam scrum. And No. 1: "Get a Life." I hadn't taken an exam, except the LSAT for which my score was mediocre, in 12 years so this was welcome advice contra what the school was feeding us and we were feeding each other. At our 3rd year "prom," he did another top 10 list on life as a lawyer and while I don't remember the first nine, I clearly recall his number one tip: "if you're stuck, you can always use a post-it note to roll a joint." Yes, Johnny K was irreverent. But he taught the law so we would remember it, with the necessary rigour but peppered with humour and scathing critiques of law, policy, and practice. He kept the big egos of law students in check and bolstered the tender psyches of people who'd been bruised by being for the first time in classrooms with colleagues remarkably smarter than most of us.

Sometimes teacher inspiration comes not from benefiting personally but from knowing someone since teenagehood. Liz Kaufman emerged from the womb 60 years ago with no need for a GPS. With a teacher-mother, Liz was both nurtured and DNA-destined to educate. When we met in high school, she was already eagerly taking on coaching skating, teaching swimming, and tutoring jobs, demonstrating the nascent skills that would serve her throughout her career.

Liz's professional single-mindedness awed me. After an English undergrad she got a two year education degree at the Institute for Child Study, equipping her for a 35 year teaching career during which she never lost her passion for equipping kids with the skills to succeed in life. Liz's love of language and literacy gave her a laser focus on teaching first graders to read as a way to unlock so much for them.

I am grateful there are people who can move the needle on others' development since good teaching makes for better people who, in turn, will help improve the world. Dear teachers, keep serving up that buffet—your power is greater and more lasting than you know.

Celia Chandler won a Canadian Online Publishing Award for her series on her husband's medically assisted death in 2020. That kickstarted her writing. Since then, she's won the 2024 Eden Mills Non-Fiction Contest, and been shortlisted elsewhere, including the Amy MacRae Award for Memoir and the Porter House Review 2024-2025 Editor's Prize. She's had work published in the *Toronto Star*, *Gemini Magazine*, *Ariel Chart International Literary Journal*, *Months to Years*, *CommuterLit*, and *Witcraft*. Celia's working on a book about mid-life reinvention called *Lane Change* and writes weekly from her laneway house at celiachandler.com.

Upon Reading And...

Duane L. Herrmann

A poet speaks
into the winds of time,
another hears
and responds,
as time goes
others join in:
a conversation
through the ages,
mind upon mind,
and humanity
grows richer
for the listening
such action
fights the darkness
of ignorance
and destruction.

Internationally published, award-winning poet and historian, Herrmann has work translated into several languages, publications in a dozen countries, in print and online, including nine collections of poetry, a sci fi novel, a history book, two collections of short stories, and many children's stories. His poetry has received the Robert Hayden Poetry Fellowship, inclusion in *American Poets of the 1990s*, Map of Kansas Literature (website), Kansas Poets Trail and others. These accomplishments defy his traumatic childhood embellished by dyslexia, ADHD; now compounded by cyclothymia, an anxiety disorder, and PTSD. He spends his time on the prairie with trees in the breeze, writes—and loves moonlight!

He Taught Me to Avoid Long-Winded Writing

Beata Golembiowska

I was lucky always to have good Polish teachers, which is why I really enjoyed the subject. I didn't apply myself to grammar; writing essays was my passion. Already in elementary school, I wrote long epistles embellished with florid descriptions of nature. In high school, a Polish teacher we adored taught our class for a while. She was young, beautifully dressed, highly cultured, and linguistically sophisticated while also being pretty and graceful. The boys had crushes on her, and the girls would study and try to recreate her outfits. How devastated we were when she went on maternity leave! She consoled us with the promise that we'd get a replacement teacher we'd definitely like. And since he was much better educated than her—"he has a doctorate"—he'd teach us more than she could.

We waited for our new "teacher with a doctorate" with great curiosity. I'll never forget our first lesson with him. We were seated at our desks and absolute silence reigned in the classroom: a testament to our intense suspense. The door opened, and HE walked in: short, rather portly, and casually dressed. He didn't smile, as "our teacher" always did. He looked at us searchingly and, it seemed to me at the time, with a touch of contempt, as if to say: "With my doctorate, I'll have to stoop to your level." At the time, we were working through Wyspiański's (a 19th century Polish writer) *The Wedding* a book I hated because the author's language seemed uncultured to me. Mr. Stefan Buksiński—that was the new teacher's name—tossed his notebook on the desk and, in a throaty, unpleasant voice, immediately began hurling short questions on the opening description of the set design.

"What was the view from the wedding guests' cottage window? What photograph hung above the desk? What candlesticks stood on the table?"

No one had read the introduction to *The Wedding* carefully, if at all, so even I, always ready with an answer, didn't dare to give one this time. Instead of calling us idiots (as other teachers had done), or explaining why these details were important, Mr. Buksiński began to pace among the desks and ask more questions, this time listing individual elements of the set design: "Two Jewish candlesticks stood on the table. Why were they Jewish? A copy of Matejko's painting *Racławice* hung above the desk. Why this particular painting?"

The students who were arbitrarily called upon to answer happened to be known as the class dunces and had probably never volunteered to answer a question during the entirety of their schooling. It's no wonder they shrugged and muttered, "I don't know." The teacher, however, persisted. He explained, threw in more questions, and finally, perhaps to get him off their backs, these "class dunces" engaged in conversation. This strange lesson passed very quickly. As soon as the door closed behind Professor Buksiński, the classroom swarmed like a beehive of activity. "Terrible, a weirdo, always grimacing, a nag"—almost every mouth hurled epithet. Only the two boys who had been questioned, who were normally prone to abusing teachers quite brutally, kept quiet this time.

I prepared for the next lesson meticulously. I read *The Wedding* several times, took notes, and even memorized a few passages. Some students were just as ambitious. At the teacher's first question, this time about the character Jasiiek, several hands shot up, including mine. I wanted so badly to demonstrate my knowledge! Unfortunately, the teacher's gaze passed over our raised hands and, as before, he approached the back desks. This time, he began demanding

answers from a few other students, including a very shy girl. He spoke to her first. The poor girl blushed and paled, unable to utter a word. Mr. Buksiński sat down by her desk and began explaining why the figure of Jasiek was so important and what he symbolized. His monologue was interspersed with a very unusual question for a teacher at the time: “What do you think about that?” The poor student finally managed a short answer, as did the two other students being grilled by the teacher. Thus ended the next lesson. This time, we didn't rush into negative judgments of the new professor. We'd never met a teacher who devoted so much time to prying students' opinions out of them. We were curious to see what lay ahead and what Buks (as we nicknamed him) would surprise us with next.

A month passed. I stopped volunteering to answer questions, knowing the teacher wouldn't call on me anyway. We quickly realized he was only focusing on the worst students (he'd probably carefully studied the gradebook). His tactics, which initially stunned us, gradually began to appeal even to the “class dunces” he was grilling, who began to prepare better for the lessons. The effect of “Buks's teaching method” brought unexpected results! Our class engaged in such heated discussions about the readings that the conversations continued during breaks and after-school social gatherings. It turned out that the students the previous teacher had ignored could debate on par with the best. Most importantly, they realized their worth, which began to manifest in improved grades even in other subjects.

I'll never forget my first essay for Buks. I devoted a lot of care to it, and as usual, it was very lengthy. I was certain I'd get an A—the grade I'd always received until then. As I picked up my essay after class, I blushed when I saw a multitude of underlined sentences and a series of margin comments on the first page. I sat down at my desk and quickly leafed through my essay. Every page looked like the first, and the last one bore the grade: a C+! My face flushed deeper in shame and humiliation. Oh, how I hated that awful teacher! Once the initial shock wore off, I began to calmly review the comments. I was ready to fight for a better grade, but I had to prepare for battle.

I arranged to meet the teacher after class. I sat down at his desk, unfolded my essay, and read his first comment. “Why did you cross out that sentence? I worked so hard on it?” I still remember my indignation, and I still remember professor Buksiński's lengthy response. It was essentially a lecture on the importance of words and their overuse: how each word must mean something, and each sentence must convey its own message. He pulled out *The Wedding* and started quoting some of the sentences I didn't like very much because of their terseness. He then returned to my own, long and flowery, ones. It was an incredible lesson. My subsequent essays became much pithier and contained less and less underlining. I'll never forget getting one of them back, marked a B+ with the comment “good job.”

Buks was our teacher for only a few months. Rumors circulated that he was expelled from the school. Perhaps the pro-regime administration (I attended high school during communist times) didn't like the fact that he stimulated our minds, encouraged us to ask questions and find our own answers? That he wanted to create thinking citizens out of us, which is the first step towards overthrowing totalitarianism.

I still remember professor Stefan Buksiński, who taught me not only the value of words but also respect toward every person, just as he treated all his students. I owe my passion for writing to him. I constantly keep his feedback in mind when I proofread my writing. “Avoid long winded writing” is the key comment.

Beata Golembiowska is a writer, journalist, photographer, and film director. She holds a Master's degree in Environmental Biology from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland and a diploma in Photography from Dawson College in Montreal, Canada. From 2006 to 2016, she worked for the Komorowska Foundation for Art and QueenArt Films. She is the author of biographies, novels, albums, interview collections, and articles. She directed the documentary *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained*. Since 2014, she has been a reporter for the Toronto daily *Gazeta*.

A Self Made of Words

George Yatchisin

For Carl Klaus

The sort of day when the non-stick pan sticks.

The spinning beachball of death appears

at every keyboard click, a wicked wheel of fate.

The neighbors you actually like crash a drone

on the roof of your house, which suddenly seems

less safe to be naked in, blinds open to let

whatever dim excuse this January light is.

Then the news that one of your favorite teachers

has passed, the one you aped when you taught,

trying to be tough but fair but kind. But more

than anything, turning on minds to as many gorgeous

words as possible, a lifeguard at the deep end

while they swam among sensuous sentences. Damn

this world with your discerning wit no longer in it.

George Yatchisin is Santa Barbara Poet Laureate, 2025-2027, and the author of *Feast Days* (Flutter Press 2016) and *The First Night We Thought the World Would End* (Brandenburg Press 2019). His poems have been published in journals including *Antioch Review*, *Asken*, and *Zocalo Public Square*. He is co-editor of the anthology *Rare Feathers: Poems on Birds & Art* (Gunpowder Press 2015), and his poetry appears in anthologies including *Reel Verse: Poems About the Movies* (Everyman's Library 2019).

The Power of a Teacher's Red Pen

Cindy Kluck-Nygren

With her red pen,
Sister Mary Joyce circled a single word
in a single sentence
somewhere in the middle of a single mid-term exam
and wrote three words in the margin.

The sentence defended (or did it oppose?) a decision made by
a protagonist in some literary classic that
freshman year students at the all-girls' Catholic high school
were compelled to read
and analyze in mid-term exams.

The sentence, when first written, began with two words separated by a blank space:

“A _____ determination”.

The blank space a placeholder
reminding the exam's author to come back later
and insert a word that adequately conveyed the intensity of the
protagonist's emotions in that singular moment of the story.

Seconds before Sr. Joyce announced
“Time's up”,
the student returned to the blank space,
whispered a prayer to St. Jude Thaddeus
(the patron saint of lost causes and desperate situations), and

hastily scribbled in a word to fill its emptiness.

“Time’s up.”

Essays were done, regardless of whether they were finished.

Small packets of lined notebook paper with light blue covers were placed,
face down, in a single pile on Sr. Joyce’s desk.

Thirty young ladies exited the classroom,
sighing and whispering as they raced to their lockers,
their soft-soled shoes silent despite their hasty retreat.

One week later, thirty young ladies waited for Sr. Joyce to return their exams,
some with fear, others with confidence, one with self-doubt.

Today, decades later, so much is forgotten.

The name of the protagonist. The title of the book.

The argument presented in the essay.

The score of the exam. The grade in the class.

Today, decades later, what is remembered is that,

with her red pen,

Sister Joyce had circled a single word

that had been added to a single sentence

somewhere in the middle of a single mid-term exam

seconds before the “Time’s up” announcement and, that

with her red pen,

Sister Joyce had written three words in the margin:

“Excellent word choice!”

With her red pen, Sister Joyce had

inspired a young woman to fall in love with the power and strength—and truth—of words.

With her red pen, Sister Joyce had

instilled in her student

“A fierce determination”

to write.

Author's Aside: The author's freshman yearbook includes this note written by Sr. Joyce: "Keep that poet alive, Cindy! Sister M. Joyce". And yes, it was written with her red pen.

Cindy Kluck-Nygren recently moved from the heart of the Midwest (Chicago, IL) to the heart of the Texas Hill Country. She has produced works in various genres: creative nonfiction; poetry; speculative fiction; short stories; and flash fiction. Most recently, her poem “Homesick” received second place in the international Briefly Write Poetry Prize 2025. Her first chapbook is in editorial review. Cindy is an avid fan of live music, travel, small batch baking, and long walks. In that order. And the long walks are only so she can continue small batch baking.

Search for Identity

David Lee

To my English teacher, Thomas Walker

Dear Mr. Walker,

I still hear your voice echoing through Culver's halls:

"Who are we?

Who will we become?"

Hamlet whispered his paralysis;

Siddhartha walked rivers I could not name;

Prufrock counted moments in coffee spoons,

and I learned to count mine in questions.

You gave me maps of human hearts:

constellations of moral choice, yearning,

vast landscapes within a single soul.

Through Conrad, I saw darkness not outside

but folded into the marrow of men;

through Dostoyevsky, the weight

of conscience pressing on fragile shoulders.

Between your annotations

and the questions you asked

that had no answers,

I began to see life as a manuscript

I was authorized to edit, revise, sometimes tear up.

Thank you for showing me, at Culver,

that literature is more than stories:

it is the lantern

by which we navigate ourselves.

David

Mr. Lester: A Case Study on the Dynamics of Turning Reality into Fiction

Chris Stolle

“Why are you picking a dead man?” That’s what anyone brave enough to inquire would ask me once the rumor started to filter throughout school. Thankfully, I had a ready answer.

“He’s had the greatest impact on my life. No one else would have reached me if not for him. I can’t imagine honoring anyone else,” I would tell each inquisitor.

Earlier that day, a group of us seniors had been called down to a meeting in a classroom I hadn’t been in before. I knew everyone there—well, I knew their names and reputations—but whenever I was around any of them, I was certain they didn’t have a clue who I was.

Mr. Michael, our rotund grade-level principal, came into the room to greet us.

“Congratulations. Because all of you have attained a 3.5 or above GPA throughout high school, you have been chosen for Academic Excellence. I’m passing out a sheet of paper that needs some information from you,” he said. “Specifically, I need the names of three teachers, in ranked order, that you would like to honor as the one who has had the greatest impact on your academic career. Once you’ve filled out the paper, you can head back to class.”

I didn’t hesitate. I wrote down only one name, handed in my sheet, and started to leave.

“You put down only one name. We need three,” Mr. Michael said.

“That one’s the only one I want,” I said, slipping out the door and not looking back.

That lone name was Mr. Cyrus Lester.

You might think a man with such a name might signify royalty. When I was nine years old, though, he mostly seemed like my grandfather. From the time I started school through fourth grade, I was often in trouble for one malady or another, whether pulling a girl’s hair, talking too much in class, or getting into a fight—all punishable by being thwacked by a paddle.

Fifth grade, though, was the start of my transformation into someone—and something—else. I needed to become a white-washed butterfly. But I had to start as a mere fuzzy caterpillar.

Mr. Lester was somewhere in his 60s, a little portly, with dark-orange freckles dancing across his bald head and those glasses that oozed with authority yet grandfatherly gentleness. I think he always dressed in a gray suit with a navy tie. He was an old-school professional and seemed like a male version of Mary Poppins—practically perfect in every way.

I can still remember a few provocative exchanges that he and I shared.

“What?” I asked, turning from the water fountain toward Mr. Lester. He had called my name to tell me to watch what I was doing, but I really needed a drink and was rushing my classmates.

“Don’t say ‘What?’ Say ‘Excuse me?’” he said.

These very public reprimands didn’t embarrass me. I used them as learning experiences.

“You’ve aced every quiz so far. How do you do it?” he asked me one day. Our quizzes were a matching game, and we knew the answers in advance, but you still had to remember them.

“What I do is give a word to each letter and then create a sentence.” I didn’t know it then, but this is a method called mnemonics and is perhaps the best way to remember any sequence.

Three other experiences that year actually forecasted my future vocation. One was something that started at the beginning of the year and became a regular routine. When I finished an in-class assignment early and if we were between lessons, my reward was the opportunity to go to the school library. Many students would have abhorred such an incentive, but I had started to become quite a voracious reader, as I found that words took me to exciting and inviting places. But before I was allowed to read any books—in an agreement that I suspected was not solely of her own invention—Ms. Foston, the librarian, requested that I reshelv books. Again, other students might have detested such a requirement. But I loved the idea that other students could find the books they were looking for if they were back on the shelves. Then, I would grab the newest Encyclopedia Brown or Amelia Bedelia book, sit on a whistle-shaped seat, and read.

As a sophomore in high school, and although Mrs. Foston had since moved away, just mentioning her name in an interview got me my first job. My task? Shelving books, of course.

The second experience occurred near the end of the year. I was milling around outside before school, waiting for the bell to ring, when Mr. Lester opened the door to speak to me.

“Can you help me with something?” Mr. Lester asked. His face seemed slightly ashen, his voice sounded hoarse, and he had developed a rough cough.

“Of course, Mr. Lester. What can I do for you?”

He asked me if I would carry some milk crates filled with books from the office to the classroom. I readily agreed, as I endeavored to continue to impress Mr. Lester, who had become my sole source of inspiration and confidence, and I needed him to keep feeding me.

“Thanks for your help. You’ve done your good Samaritan deed for the day.” He patted me on the back, and I went back outside to continue to wait for the school bell to ring. I almost felt like wings had started to grow where my arms are, but I wasn’t yet ready to fly.

I knew that I would have to find at least one way to repay Mr. Lester to show him how much I appreciated all the good Samaritan deeds he had done for me. So, despite my horrific handwriting, I started to write a poem for Mr. Lester, eventually producing a clean version. I commissioned my grandfather—a genius with wood—to prepare a wooden plaque suitable for presentation. I remember how much Mr. Lester appreciated the gift, and I felt embarrassed by this because most students don’t think about their teachers in such poetic ways.

I didn't much think about fifth grade or Mr. Lester or that poem until the spring semester of seventh grade, when my mother gave me some bad news.

"Mr. Lester's in the hospital. He has lung cancer. Do you want to go see him?"

"Is it serious? Is he going to die?" I asked, not really knowing much about cancer or what kind of prospects he might have to get better. The last time I saw him—captured forever in a Polaroid—was when I shook his hand after I had graduated from elementary school. Perhaps that's the memory I preferred to keep, and maybe I'd go see him once he left the hospital.

Around this time, Mr. Wisheart, my English teacher, told us that the local paper was having a writing contest, and he encouraged us to enter. I started writing a very short memoir about Mr. Lester, as it was a topic fresh in my mind, and I thought that it might allow me to work through my extremely vague emotions about illness and death. My essay won for my grade, and I don't remember any fanfare or remuneration for this achievement, but my story found its way to Mr. Lester—still in the hospital—and I was told that he greatly cherished the recognition.

Weeks later, though, my mother let me know that Mr. Lester had passed away.

"Do you want to go to the funeral?" she asked.

"No," I said, and I went to my room. I didn't cry. But I cursed myself for not having made an effort to go and see him. But my inability to face my regrets toward not seeing Mr. Lester one final time—in life or death—is what caused me to choose him for Academic Excellence.

"We're doing everything we can to find someone. Are you sure you don't want to choose someone else?" Mr. Michael asked when we had a second meeting about his progress in contacting all our teachers and getting them to accept our honors.

"I'm sure. I want to honor Mr. Lester, whether someone is there or not."

I was told they would keep trying, and I knew classmates were laughing at me behind my back, but I had to do whatever I could to let Mr. Lester know that he made a difference.

By the day of the ceremony, I had not been given an update. My parents and I arrived at the banquet, sat at our reserved table, and watched as teachers came in to greet other students. I felt like all eyes were watching me. I had resigned myself to the fact that no one was going to show.

"Excuse me. Are you Christopher Stolle?" a woman in her early 80s, with white curly hair and neatly dressed in an indigo dress with tan platform-soled shoes, asked me.

"Yes, I am," I said, standing up and extending my hand, which she graciously shook.

"I'm Clara Lester, and these are my daughters, Heather and Lisa. They're both teachers."

Of course they were teachers. Why wouldn't they be? I was truly stunned, as I had not expected anyone and instead had more guests sitting at my table than at anyone else's table. We chatted about our memories of Mr. Lester. And she gave me an engraved pen and pencil set, as she knew I was heading to Indiana University to study journalism—and, yes, I studied education too—in the fall. Then, we went to the auditorium to listen to prerecorded memories we had written for our teachers as well as their reminiscences about us.

It was quite an evening, and as I walked Mrs. Lester back to her car, she told me something I hadn't expected. But once I heard it, life began to make a little more sense.

"Chris, you might not believe this, but I feel like I know you very well. Cyrus often talked about you when he came home from work. I think if any of us knew he wasn't going to make it, we would have made more of an effort to reach out to you to come see him."

"I don't think I could ever have any greater regret than not going to see him."

"Do you remember the poem you wrote for him?"

I nodded, slightly too stunned to respond.

"Cyrus always felt that you had—and I think you still have—a lot of potential. Never let that go. You are a talented writer. And I'm reminded of that every day. When you ever start to doubt yourself, remember that the poem you wrote for Cyrus still hangs on a wall in my home."

Christopher Stolle has many roles: partner, uncle, son, music aficionado, baseball enthusiast, and, occasionally, writer. His writing has been published by Indiana University Press, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Coaches Choice, *Roe River Review*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *Flying Island*, among many others. He lives in Richmond, Indiana.

A Group of Children With Bruises Under Their Eyes

Kate LaDew

Teenagers, barely, never been to a museum. They are too tired to be young,

The teacher asks, “Why do you think?” pointing to a painting of a woman. “Why do you think he painted her hands this way?”

She already told them in class about him, not an assignment, just talking. Whenever she just talks it's usually about art, about colors and feelings and the smell of paint. She told them the artist had a favorite picture of his mother, and, after she died, decided to paint the picture, almost exactly, except for the hands, white and fluffy, like cotton, like mittens, like clouds. She said one afternoon, when she got permission, she would take them to a place to see this painting, and, after months, here they are, in a big white space that makes you nervous, everything perfect and clean with ceilings that go on forever.

“Why do you think he painted this at all, when he had a photograph just like it?”

The boy who missed two days of school last month to attend his mother's wake and funeral says, quietly, softly, “Maybe,” and everyone looks at him. He never speaks, mostly, unless he has to for group, but they are only surprised, not angry or bored, and wait, watching him.

The teacher, depressed and wanting not to be, had, after a week or two of angry, bored faces, decided to try jigsaw learning, splitting her class into home groups, each member of the home specializing in one aspect of a topic. Say, Martin Luther King's childhood, another, Martin Luther King's letters from prison, another, the Montgomery Bus Boycott. They met with members from other homes learning the same aspect, and, after mastering it, returned to their group to teach everyone else, every child a piece of the puzzle, integral, necessary, working together to complete the final jigsaw.

So, no, they are not angry, have not been bored for weeks, only surprised, wondering if this is a part of a puzzle, one they don't remember being asked to learn, if the boy with the dead mother is teaching them something they'll need to know, later.

“Maybe,” he is looking at the painting. “Maybe he remembers her hands, his mother's. Maybe he remembers her hands as so soft, so gentle, they felt like cotton to him, like fluffy clouds. But, in the photograph, he can only see them, and, in his mind,” the boy is holding up his own hand to his face. “In his mind he feels them, and so, he made the painting, to remember how she made him feel.”

All the children too tired to be young are very quiet, very still. It goes on, everyone looking at the boy with the dead mother looking at the painting, his hand placed softly on the side of his face. And then, the biggest of them, the tallest child who is never mistaken for one, weaves through their group, puts his arm around the boy with the dead mother, pulls him into his chest and holds him there. It goes on, everyone watching. And then, the rest of their group, slowly, like clouds converging to create a piece of shade, weave their own arms around the tallest of them

and the boy with the dead mother, a ball of hoodies and sneakers and warm hands and hearts. And if the teacher were to take a picture, she would call it "home," but her phone is in her pocket and her fingers are wiping under her eyes. So she opens them wide, snaps them shut, watches the backs of her eyelids, a picture she can feel.

Kate LaDew is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Arts. She lives in Graham, NC with her cats James Cagney and Janis Joplin.

The Teacher Responds to E-Mails During a Brief Break

John Jeffire

“...this Woke DEI bullShit has GO.”

—from a concerned parent’s e-mail

Marko hasn’t eaten since yesterday,

so I give him my tuna sandwich.

Cara needs me to open the

unisex bathroom—she’s

battling the stomach flu.

Jamal has a slash on his forearm

oozing puss, so at break my wallet

and I dash to the pharmacy

for antibacterial ointment

and gauze bandages.

Malachai was bullied at the

water fountain, so during

passing time I walk him

down to take a drink together.

Aleeza’s mother is dying of cancer

so I forgive all late assignments.

Eldios is living with his cousin

to avoid his father’s fists, so I

contact counseling services

and give up my prep period

for a week to let him speak.

Tasha's father has lost another

job to crack and despair so

I bring her an old winter coat

to meet the gathering cold.

At some point in the day, I

must answer a swarm of emails.

I save the dumbest for last,

the one that demands I stop

teaching Hughes, Morrison,

Douglass, and Giovanni.

In my daydreams, I compose:

Your concerns are duly noted,

but, if you will, please help me

answer a few questions:

To whom do I deny equity?

Whom shall I not include?

Where on the bones of diversity

do I build your wall?

John Jeffire was born in Detroit. In 2005, his novel *Motown Burning* was named Grand Prize Winner in the Mount Arrowsmith Novel Competition and in 2007 it won a Gold Medal for Regional Fiction in the Independent Publishing Awards. Speaking of *Motown Burning*, former chair of the Pulitzer Jury Philip F. O'Connor said, "It works. I don't often say that, but it has a drive and integrity that gives it credible life...I find a novel with heart." In 2009, Andra Milacca included *Motown Burning* in her list of "Six Savory Novels Set in Detroit" along with works by Elmore Leonard, Joyce Carol Oates, and Jeffrey Eugenides. His first book of poetry, *Stone + Fist + Brick + Bone*, was nominated for a Michigan Notable Book Award in 2009. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Philip Levine called the book "a terrific one for our city." His short story "Boss" appeared in *Coollest American Stories 2022*, which won the International Book Awards Prize for Fiction Anthologies. In 2022, his novel *River Rouge* won the American Writing Awards for Legacy Fiction, while the manuscript for his novel *Detroit South* won the 2025 Claymore Award for Literary Fiction.

A Tribute Too Late

Roger Barbee

In September 1968 I left my hometown in North Carolina and travelled to Maryland where I began teaching in a rural county on its Eastern Shore. Like most recent college graduates, I was eager and knew I was ready to “change the world.” I had four years of learning behind me that I felt had given me all that was necessary to conquer any hurdle that presented itself. I had, as Mark Twain observed, “the confidence of a Christian holding four aces.” When I arrived to my assigned junior high school, I was not fazed by the number of students assigned for my two 7th grade classes of Language Arts/Social Studies, the poverty of my students, and all the problems their poverty would present. After all, I had my degree, and one of my sisters had helped me carefully choose a small, but versatile wardrobe fitting for a young educator.

Because this was early in the integration of the county’s schools, the tracking system was used. In such a system students were placed in classes based on academic scores. My two classes of Language Arts/Social Studies were sections 7-14 and 7-4, one the lowest academic class, and the other near the top of the academic ladder. My 7-14 section met in the morning in the main building, and after lunch 7-4 met in the National Guard Armory directly behind the school. The racial make-up of the fourteen sections was not surprising—the lower sections were all Black and the highest sections were white, and in the middle sections there was some balance of Black and white students. However, as I mentioned, I was ready to take on any problem of education and to correct it. I do not remember myself as being arrogant, but I was confident.

Many of my sixty odd students were mired in poverty. Before too long I learned how to ignore the odor of clothes worn too often without being washed, or the breath from a mouth that knew no oral hygiene, or the sour stench of urine. I learned how to smile when I gave my Chap Stick to a student who had asked to borrow mine. If returned, I later would drop it into the trash can. I became accustomed to “loaning” lunch money. I learned to deal with any discipline problems in my room and not to send any unruly student to the school office because that short trip would likely result in a paddling of a Black student by the white principal or his white assistant. I learned to make two lesson plans for my classes—one that I turned in to the principal, and the one that I used in my room. I learned the value of keeping my classroom door closed to the outside world of the school.

An 8th grade girl that I remember as Joyce taught me a valuable lesson about the influence of parents. One day walking down the main hall, I saw a girl at the water fountain. A substitute teacher was calling for her to return quickly to class, and the girl said, “I will when I am ready, God . . .” I took the girl to the office and she was suspended. Two days later I was called to the Guidance Counselor’s office of Mr. Jim Robinson. In his office sat Joyce and a woman with disheveled hair and a loose dress covering her amble frame. I noticed that her shoes were well worn like her dress, and that they did not properly fit her calloused feet. Mr. Robinson informed me that Joyce would be allowed to return to school as soon as she apologized to me.

The four of us sat in the small office and Mr. Robinson gently told Joyce to apologize to me so that she could return to school, but she just sat looking down at the floor. Mr. Robinson repeated his request a few times with the same result. Finally, Joyce’s mother reached across the sofa they shared, shook her daughter, and said, “God . . ., Joyce, apologize to this man.” I looked to Mr. Robinson and said, “I accept Joyce’s apology” and walked out—never to forget that lesson.

Before September was over, I became aware that, although I had knowledge and skills to offer my students and fellow educators, they had offerings that I needed to accept willingly and with grace. One student named Jerry began calling me only by my last name, but he pronounced it as “Baabe”. However, he said it with affection and respect, so I went with it. I became aware that the more I gave my students, especially the less gifted ones, the more they gave me. The words of my Granny Susie resonated in my ears: “Sugar draws more flies than vinegar,” and I learned that for many of my students, kindness was the most important thing I had to offer them. English and social studies could follow.

Four of my colleagues took me under their care and guided me in how to teach and sometimes more. Irvin and his wife Doris, both teachers a bit older than I, fed me good meals since a young single man would not cook or eat healthy. They also offered me social outlets with their friends, and they tolerated my immature actions by always being a safe harbor where I could lick the wounds that only a young man could inflict on himself. Frank taught me how to live and enjoy each day as if it were a song or other gift involving music. He was, after all, a music teacher. His attitude concerning life was not trivial, he was old enough to be my father, but he had learned that most events in life were not to be taken too seriously. Fred, too, was old enough to be my father, and he had a “lazy eye” that took me some time to become accustomed to. A large, imposing man, he was an assistant principal, but his office was down the main hallway away from the main office. He taught me how to politically navigate a school and how to avoid conflicts with the administration. He was wise in the way of schools and men. He shared with me all the wisdom of his that I could absorb. But Jim Robinson, the guidance counselor, taught me the biggest lesson of all.

Somewhere in my early months, and for some unknown reason, I began carrying a yard stick. I would use it as a pointer to the chalkboard, tap it on the floor to gain the attention of my students, lean on it when stressing a point or correcting a student’s behavior, or just carry it in my hand as if it were a sword and I a young officer. I don’t remember how long I carried the yard stick, but I will never forget Jim Robinson asking me to come into his office one day during my free period.

After we had settled, Jim asked me about the yard stick and why I carried it. I gave him the best reasons that I could, some of which I have mentioned. He then went on to tell me that my 7-14 students, the ones who had class with me in the main building, came from extremely poor homes. I told him that I was aware of that, but what was his point. He then explained to me how the poverty of their homes meant that their parents were usually uneducated, frustrated by their life circumstances, and sometimes heavy drinkers. He went on to explain that many of the fathers and some mothers were crude and that my students had grown up in brutal environments. Parents like these, he went on to explain, thought little of beating one of my students with a limb or stick or hand. For so many of my students, he said, life at home could be mean, and often the safest place for them was school. I asked Jim what that had to do with me, and he looked at me and said, “The yard stick, Roger. Your students see it as a weapon in your hand. It will make them fear you.” Stunned, I sat for quite a while with Jim in his office and having taken in all his words and their importance, I thanked him and went to my classroom down the hall and put the yard stick in the room closet. Then Jim surprised me again when a few days later he came into my room and thanked me for listening and explained that our conversation was a rare one in his experience.

In *The Odyssey*, the young Telemakhos, the son of Odysseus, has Mentor, a comrade of his father, to guide him. I, too, had my Mentors who were Black and they took a young, idealistic white man in their care and worked to help him understand things about living and teaching. And as I look back over these near fifty years since that fall of 1968 and write about them, I thank them for their patience, wisdom, and willingness to share their craft with a young man. They taught me much, but most of all they taught me, as we say in teaching literature, the point-of-view—to see every “yard stick” through the eyes of a child.

Thank you, Irvin and Doris, Frank, Fred, and Jim.

Note: I wrote this essay in May, 2018, but think of it Thanksgiving, 2025 because those five good people are still remembered and cherished for their goodness over fifty years ago. As much as anyone or anything, they helped form me.

Barbee is a retired educator living in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia with his wife, one hound, and three cats. His words have appeared in *The Washington Post*, the *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Page & Spine*, *Memoir Magazine*, *Rain Taxi*, *Potato Soup Magazine*, *Ailment*, *New Southern Fugitive*, and other print or online publications. His poetry chapbook, *Applewood Street*, was published in 2022 by Plan B Press. He has lived since 2001 as a T5-6 paraplegic.

The Stone

Amanda Rosas

There is your voice, a dusty serenade of a voice,
and I recall a time when the work was union and
love fought soft or warm, and a fist snug
on the chest meant peace was carried from within,
uncompromised.

Do you remember our community? You built it.

You were like a saint dropping the first stone
at the foot of the crowd.

You were more adult than the adults knew how
to be. You named me transformative,
but I assure you I am all the more transformed
by life's classroom giving me to you.

Amanda Rosas is a mother, educator and Pushcart Prize Nominated poet. She draws spirit, beauty, strength and creativity from the Latina women in her family and from her husband and three young daughters. Originally from San Antonio, TX, Amanda writes to preserve and honor the memories and stories of her Mexican ancestors. Her poems have been published by the *Latino Book Review* and *CALYX*, among others, and her personal narratives as an educator can be read online at *Edsurge*. Amanda lives in Golden Valley, MN, and loves running, reading and watching *Gilmore Girls* with her three Rorys.

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