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Spring 2004

### 115 Vernon: A Journal for Writers, Vol.1, No.2

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**115 VERNON**

**A JOURNAL FOR WRITERS**

**115**

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**VOLUME 1  
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*"FILL YOUR PAPER WITH THE BREATHINGS OF  
YOUR HEART..." - WILLIAM WORDSWORTH*

## An Editors' Note...

What is a writer? How does one write? Why write? In addition to a steady hum of tutoring sessions in the Writing Center, this year's Writing Associates continued to ask these questions.

Representing over forty academic departments and a handful of political and social interests, the Writing Associates of 2003-2004 desired to foster a community in which the writer could flourish. Through dynamic online discussion, small writing groups, and introducing a new lecture series to the campus, Writers on Writing, a plethora of occasions arose for some of Trinity's finest writers to hone their passion.

In consideration of what happens to an Associate's writing once he leaves the College and goes to the "real world," we decided to ask a few former Associates where their writing has taken them in "WA Alum tell it like it is." As well as shifting 115 Vernon's focus to writing, we hope that this edition will continue to cultivate a community of past, present, and future Trinity writers.

Thank you for your contributions to the program. We are particularly grateful for the guidance of Dr. Wall and Dr. Papoulis for their continued encourage and support.

Best Wishes,  
Kate Sullivan  
& Dorothy Francoeur  
Head Tutors, 2003-04

### DO YOU LOVE WRITING?

The Writing Associates Program prepares highly talented undergraduate writers to supplement faculty efforts in the classroom and to expand the opportunities for helping writers on campus and in the community. Students are recommended by

faculty and selected by a special committee composed of faculty and student representatives. Those students selected to be Writing Associates take English 302, Writing Theory and Practice, while serving as apprentice peer tutors in the Writing Center. In subsequent semesters, student Writing Associates affiliate with faculty as teaching assistants in many different courses--ranging from First-Year Seminars to Senior Seminars--and work as writing tutors in the Writing Center, in residence halls, and in a number of other contexts.

We appreciate current Writing Associates' and faculty effort in promoting and developing the program by encouraging suitable students to apply. Applications including a personal statement, writing samples, interview, and references are taken each February. Please stay posted for notices from Dr. Beverly Wall next fall!

## The Writing Center

115 Vernon Street

Trinity College

*Individual Tutoring Services Available*

### HOURS:

**Monday-Thursday 1- 4 p.m.  
& 6:30 - 9:30 p.m.**

### LATE NIGHT HOURS:

**Sunday and Monday  
10 pm-Midnight in the Library**

*Drop in or call X-2468 for appointment*

## "Why Write?"

By Andrew Schurr

Why write? Why bother?

Of all the forms of communication, it is the most archaic. In today's world, we beam our thoughts out over the phone lines, we express ourselves in film images, in recorded song, in tight sound bites and Instant Messages. As soon as a thought enters our heads, it can be bitten off, encoded, and spirited away. Why then should we stoop to put words on paper, one by one, confining them to a sluggish, stale media? Millions can see a film, hundreds can pass along an e-mail. How many can read the lines in your hand-penned notebook?

Why write? Does the world need to hear the contents of your head? Are thoughts expressed in paper somehow more valuable? How can a thought, squeezed through the filter of language, be any more real or true? Our thoughts have color and substance and weight when they exist in our heads, but ink has no weight, and paper no color.

Why bother?

I was in a book store the other day, killing an hour or two between meals. I saw three children—brothers, I think—huddled around the "Harry Potter" rack.

"The movie was awesome," said the first child. "Totally."

"Yeah," said the second. He held the book in his hands, flipping randomly between pages. "Book was better, though. You can..." He paused, frowning

for a moment in thought, then, "I can, like...I can see the colors and stuff in my head."

*I can see the colors in my head.*

I see them, too. If the author is good enough—really at the top of their game—I can also taste and smell. We all experience this, although some people see the colors more brightly, or find the taste to be sweeter. One minute we're trotting along, reading the words, connecting sentences together, and then the dull mechanics slip away from us and we're filled with sounds and images and ideas.

Where did they come from? Sprung from the ether? Beamed directly from the author's mind to yours? What mysterious alchemy is this?

A silly question, maybe. Reading falls into the category of Things That Just Are, like *why is the sky blue?* and *why do hot dogs come in packs of six and buns in packs of eight?* But unexplained wonders are still wonders.

Movies don't do this. TV rarely even comes close. These are images that have already been formatted and packaged, ready to be dumped down our retinas in their final form. If the director wants us to see a house on a windswept beach, we will see it *exactly* as he or she wants it, every angle and trim of the house, every color and swell of sand. And we all see the same thing: each person in the theater will dutifully store the exact same image. Hundreds of identical windswept beaches, all in a row.

And then there's writing.

Ask ten different Tolkien readers what the home of Bilbo Baggins looks like, and you'll get ten

different answers. And a probably an argument, too, if the opinions differ sharply. Take Tolkien's description of Bilbo's hole in the ground: "Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort."<sup>1</sup> As we read it, the machinery in the back of our head grinds up to speed and starts latching on to phrases; "not wet and oozy", "not dry and bare", "hobbit-hole means comfort." A structure begins to expand: *A little door, maybe four feet high, set back into the hill, with a few tufts of dirt peeking around the edges. Wide brick hallways...no, wait, not brick: it's faded plaster, cracking with age, like old pre-war English houses. A lamp at the entrance with a well-trimmed wick. And no, not wide halls, either, but narrow, and cozy..*

None of this detail is described in the book; it's entirely a product of my own imagination. This creation is different, unique, and maybe a radical departure from what someone else's imagination made, and yet it is still undeniably Bag End, humble home of Bilbo Baggins. My Bag End is as real, and as valid, as any other version, including the one in Tolkien's own head.

Ask ten different *moviegoers* what the home of Bilbo Baggins looks like, and you will get essentially one single answer: "Round green door. Grassy, New Zealand-esque exterior. Wood interior, well lit. Low ceiling: Gandalf bumps his head on stuff." Exactly how director Peter Jackson envisioned it.

<sup>1</sup> J.R.R Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (Houghton Mifflin Co, 1999 Reprint),1

But that's not *my* Bag End.

Writing is more than the transmission of an image or an idea. It's an amazing combination of having complete control and ownership of your work, and yet utterly submitting to the inner eye of your reader. The act of committing your thought to paper is merely the beginning of creation, not the end product. At some point the reader takes over and continues building.

When I described how I envisioned Bag End, did you see the cracked white walls? Was it bright inside for you, or dim? Did your mind's eye see the color and the shape of the doorway?

Even the very best of movies—the absolute cream of the crop—can inspire only a ghost of this creative process. We may imagine Rick's dark thoughts as he drinks alone in a bar in "Casablanca." We may see in our minds eye what lies beyond the jungle at the edges of "Apocalypse Now." But we are still entirely in the filmmaker's world, and it is always clear that we are only visiting.

Write because there is power in words that surpasses film and computers and technology. Feel the intimacy of *provoking* the inner eye of another, rather than layering your own images before it. Technology may give us greater speed and a wider audience, but it can also build a wall between your mind and that of your audience. Is convenience worth the sacrifice? Words *can* have color and weight and power, but they quicken only if planted in fertile ground.

So write.

## *The Writer in Me*

*By David Sterling Brown*

*The writer in me is humble because he is unsure  
Never sure about what is written  
Never sure about what is not written  
But that's okay  
Sure that all that he creates will only make sense to himself  
Sure that he is never cocky about his writing  
Because he only thinks of himself as a writer  
Even the "good" and the "great" have their days  
And he challenges the good writer to define "good"  
Because if another who is better is still only "good"  
What happens to that "good" writer who is worse?*

*The writer in me is eager to write  
He has learned through practice  
That he can become better  
He has learned through practice  
That there is still more to learn  
He has learned through trying  
That he can still fail  
Because he is not "good" nor is he "great"*

*The writer in me is patient with his pen  
Never sits at a desk in front of a screen  
Never disconnects himself from his thoughts  
Because when his hand grasps the pen  
And his pen is on the page  
His thoughts don't stop at his fingertips*

*The writer in me is never consistent when he writes  
Sometimes he prefers complete silence  
Sometimes he needs music  
Sometimes he wants both  
It all depends*

*The writer in me prefers no time of day  
He needs neither the moon nor the sun  
To make the ink run  
Out of his pen and on to the page  
He only needs his mood  
It tells him when to write  
It's like a sudden urge  
He has to satisfy it*

Not even *your* God could stop him  
He has a passion  
That passion is his pen

The writer in me  
Developed  
From being a person who simply writes  
To being someone who is a writer  
Now, he understands  
When united words are more  
They are power and strength

The writer in me can be bold  
He may start a sentence with "and"  
Or even "because"  
And if you ask why  
He will tell you "because"  
And if you contest him  
He will say "and"

The writer in me does not procrastinate  
He gives himself time  
He gives his thoughts time  
To develop into something more  
He expands on the weak areas  
And says some more  
He is never done

The writer in me is his worst critic  
He will look at his work  
And tell himself something is not right  
He will tell others something is not right  
Even those so-called "writing-gods"  
Because he knows

The writer in me needs time to reflect  
He likes to take a step back from his work  
So that he can look at it with a fresh eye  
So that he can see paragraph two  
Makes no sense  
So that he can see his thesis is not clear  
So that he can fix the half-ass conclusion  
So he knows

The writer in me cannot do without feedback

He wants criticism at its best and its worst  
Tell him his paper makes absolutely no sense  
He will accept all of your suggestions  
Because in the end that's what they are  
But he trusts you to be honest  
Look him in his eyes when you give him feedback  
Your suggestions are helpful  
Not overwhelming because he has  
Time

The writer in me is responsible  
For all of the language that he uses  
He looks at the literal meaning of words  
Before he applies them to the page  
He understands that in some cases  
"Accurate" is better than "realistic"  
"Realistic" better than "accurate"  
It depends

The writer in me uses writing as his therapy  
When he is happy  
He writes  
When he is sad  
He writes  
When he is angry  
He takes his frustrations out on the paper  
With his pen  
His writing is at its best when he is heated  
When he is hurt  
When he is feeling

The writer in me is not scared  
To take risks and defy the norm  
He is not afraid to  
Travel the path that is  
Least often taken  
And challenge himself  
It's often better that way  
The writer in me never stops  
When he puts his pen down  
His thoughts never cease  
When he lays his head down  
He writes in his dreams

## From Trinity to the Alamo: Writing My Way West

By Robert F. Peltier

Years ago, as an undergraduate, I was a Writing Associate. A week ago, I met Billy Bob Thornton in San Antonio. The connection seems obvious to me, but maybe not to you, so I'll explain all that a little farther on.

First, though, I'll tell you that I was a pioneer Writing Associate, a member of the first group. The position of pioneer is a curious one. There are few immigration laws for the pioneer, it's relatively simple to travel into uncharted lands, and pioneers get to make the rules for the civilization to follow, although that civilization will eventually refine some of the rules and throw out others and enact still others.

These days, Writing Associates are not so much pioneers, as citizens of a settled country. The immigration laws are stiff, all that essay writing and paper submitting and recommendation begging, followed by a mysterious process, behind closed—and locked—doors, that determines who gets to be a citizen and who must wait on the far shore for another chance to enjoy the benefits, privileges, and responsibilities of citizenship.

Before I beat this extended metaphor completely to death, let me just add that some things remain. Institutionally, we still have the tutoring, the special projects that go beyond tutoring, and the continuing focus on improving writing on Trinity's campus. Personally—and, let's be honest, our actions are more often motivated by personal, not institutional, reasons—Writing Associates get to become better writers, to enhance their resumes, and to bask in the sunny praise accorded to all good writers. (And that last may be at the heart of our muse's whispers).

But it all starts with the writing.<sup>1</sup> Writing is a process, not a product. It opens us up to possibilities by creating *new knowledge*. There are things I know that I would never have known had I not written. This creative process seems, to me, miraculous at times. Fiction writers often write about characters "taking over" their novels or stories, but we know that doesn't literally happen. What does happen is that the authors' creations become more alive as they write them into reality, as they learn more about them. The same thing happens to essay writers: the more they write, the more they learn through that writing. How freeing that is! We don't have to know everything before we sit down to write, because knowledge comes to us through the writing itself. Of course, this is not to say that we need never pick up a book nor do the research necessary to our topic. Knowledge is built, refined, and articulated from the raw materials lying in profusion around the messy construction site of our brains.

What's more, if writing creates knowledge, what better subject to write about than ourselves? Journals, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies help us to lead that examined life that Socrates was so keen on.

This astonishing fact of creativity may be what made me want to be a writer, but I'm afraid that I can't be sure, because that original impetus is lost in the mists of history and hazy memory. It's just as likely that I was

<sup>1</sup> I was once told by a high school teacher that I shouldn't start a sentence with the word "but." I pointed out to her that Shakespeare had done just that. She told me that I wasn't Shakespeare. I replied that I never would be if she didn't allow me the freedom to start my sentences with "but." Our relationship was never warm after that.

fascinated by the ability to make letters on a page with a big fat first grade pencil and, later on, with a typewriter (the computer seems less physically connected to this process and, besides, it came along much too late in my life to have been an inspiration). It just seems that I've always been a writer. Maybe because I was good at it, I kept writing or maybe, because I kept writing, I became good at it.

At Trinity, the first class I took was English 100: Writing I (I published an essay I'd written on Martin Luther King from that course as an Op-Ed piece), and I continued to take writing courses, both fiction and non-fiction. Since I hung around the English Building so much, everyone got to know my name, and someone proposed me for the program. I was asked to become a Writing Associate and, not knowing fully what that meant, I said yes, I'd be happy to. Little did I know how happy. Like you current Writing Associates, I tutored (in one of two small rooms since combined to make room 108 next to the present-day Writing Center and, later, in the new center) and studied writing in theory and practice.

Tutoring then wasn't, I suspect, much different from tutoring now: we asked questions and listened closely before making any suggestions, and our goal was not just to help the writers improve the papers they brought in, but also to help them improve their writing generally. We worked hard and were rewarded with the development of our own writing and the cachet that came with the title *Writing Associate*. And we had a pretty good time hanging around the Writing Center and getting to know one another, too. In addition to the tutoring, I also worked as a writing tutor for a film class, and researched the writing abilities and needs of IDP students. I didn't know it then, but all of this was helping me to develop a pedagogical philosophy that would be important to me later on as a teacher of writing.

But all good things come to an abrupt and jarring end, and soon graduation was upon me. I continued to write, including a creative writing thesis, in graduate school, and I taught as a Writing Fellow, which led to my current position as Lecturer in the Allan K. Smith Center for Writing and Rhetoric.

And that's how I got to meet Billy Bob Thornton. As a writing teacher, I attend various conferences each year, including the biggest: The Conference on College Composition and Communication which, this year, was held in San Antonio, Texas. Also in San Antonio at the same time: the premiere of the movie *The Alamo*.

I won't tell you the entire story of how I met him because, although it's a great story, it's too long. I'll just say that Billy Bob (a writer of some note, himself) prefers walking along the streets and seeing the sights to riding in a darkened-window limo.

So, you never know where writing is going to take you. You might meet a celebrity. You might even, though the odds are tremendously against it, attain a degree of celebrity yourself. But if you work really hard at your writing, you *will* get to know yourself and the world around you better. What other activity can promise so much?

## On Academic Writing

By Phillip Welshans

Reading much of what has been written about the process of writing and what makes a good piece of writing as opposed to a bad piece of writing, I have come to the conclusion that very few people choose to write about writing in general or about other writers and instead relish in their own munificence as literates. They sometimes use words like 'munificence' and 'literates' to create a smokescreen of syllables...

Anyway, in exploring my own thoughts on writing, I decided to incorporate this conclusion into a small piece on a topic near and dear to my heart: boring writing. If there's one thing that I can't stand, it has to be boring writing. And if there's another thing I can't stand (and for the purposes of this essay, let's say there is), it has to be bad academic writing. For some reason a scholar can write the driest, most coma-inducing article in a journal, but because he makes his points, it's suddenly seen as a great piece of scholarship. I'm not sure if it's that academics have just given up all hope of ever becoming the Hemingway or Dickens of their profession and have become resigned to boring prose, or if there's really a silent agreement among scholars that everyone must try to write as boring a work as possible. The simple presence of information does not a complete

scholarly article make. I demand flashy presentation as well!

Since August of last year I, like so many other seniors, have been working on a senior thesis that is now just a scant five days(!) away from being complete (according to the History department, which runs my life now, apparently). And, like so many other seniors, I have had the pleasure of reading a variety of texts on my subject. My bibliography stands at six pages in length and eighty-one sources in quantity. Now, of course I haven't read all of these books or articles cover to cover. But trust me, if you're not a thesis writer, you can't know how disturbing it is to suddenly realize you have read more books on your subject than your age three times over.

I'm not sure what it is about poor academic writing that bothers me so much. Certainly it's the style, or rather the utter lack thereof. But more than that, it's a combination of the dry writing and the natural melancholic subject matter that most scholars write about. It becomes a diabolical combination that drives young students away from academic journals in droves. When someone is trying to write about economic trends in the Tang dynasty or the history of the slave trade in eastern Africa during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, by definition they're writing about a topic that seems boring to most people. While it may not be boring to the *writer*, they rarely seem to understand that in order for the

*reader* to be interested, they have to be entertained. I'm not talking about being entertained in the usual sense of being distracted (by TV or a movie or a video game, etc.), but instead the concept that fiction tends to adopt: using colorful prose to tell a story in such a way as to keep the reader's attention. For academics, the story just happens to be true. Unfortunately many scholars could not write a colorful sentence if you paid them (wait a second...they *do* pay them!).

For instance, I am reading a book for a class I am taking on the Civil War Era entitled, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War*, by a great American history scholar, Eric Foner, who teaches at Columbia. Unfortunately for Dr. Foner, he can't write without inevitably lulling me to sleep. A subject of immense importance to antebellum American history becomes the bane of consciousness. On the cover of the book there is a phrase, "With a New Introduction by the Author" as if that's supposed to be a selling point. Luckily, I have read Foner before and was fully aware of his dry style going into the ordeal with *Free Soil*... and so was able to skip the New Introduction by the Author without feeling too much guilt. And by 'too much' I of course mean 'none.'

My point in all this is that one must be very careful when writing academically. While

you shouldn't write your thesis in iambic pentameter and try to have it read like a work by Homer, you also can't make it so matter-of-fact that there's no life in the words. I don't plan on being a scholar when I finish my education, partly because I couldn't stand having to read the dreary, one dimensional work of my would-be colleagues that is sure to emerge in the new generation of professors and academics. In a profession as ancient as that of the scholar, things cannot and do not change overnight. But History and Economics and Sociology and everything else are all supposed to be fun and interesting. And yes, fun to the writer, but also, to the reader.

Sometimes I wish I could say to the writers, "Look, I know that since you wrote 300 pages on the Republican Party of the 1850's that you are interested in it. Now, when I read your book, try to make *me* interested in it too, if only for a brief moment in my life." That's the part of scholars' jobs that I think most have either never grasped, or have lost touch with. And thus, we as students, and genuinely interested lay persons, are forced to suffer through many years and thousands of pages of diatribes by the Eric Foners of our world when what we yearn for is a combination of academia and prose that will give us illumination and enjoyment.

Did I mention that I enjoy the munificence of my syllables?



## Writing Practices

By Simira Freeman

"You're a great writer."

I shift in my seat, and my eyes drop modestly as I search for the right thing to say without seeming surer of myself than I really am. "I like to write."

"Your use of language is very effective and vibrant. I didn't realize you wrote so well. I haven't gotten a chance to read too much of your writing. But this is great."

I feign a nervous smile, "Yea um, I really enjoy writing personal essays, there is so much freedom in those."

She leans forward excitedly, awaiting my profound response. "Can you describe yourself as a writer?"

"Well I..."

"I mean like what is the writing process like for you as a writer? Do you have a special way you like to do things? A pattern you follow? Anything?"

I pause thinking of an answer worthy enough to serve as my reply, but all I can come up with is, "I just write."

I see writing as an extension of my brain. The constant stream of consciousness, runs like the tentacles of so many axons to the base of my

fingertips and onto the page. They leap effortlessly now, across the synapse from thought to word. The womb of my writing world need only have a means with which to transcribe and a relative level of comfort. The rest is dictated by my state of mind. Treasured moments of heightened interest in content tend to lead to the most insightful analysis.

How does a self-proclaimed writer describe the process of *writing*. I suppose in the same way an artist describes the process leading up to the creation of a masterpiece. However, is writing even a process at all? Perhaps for others, it is, but for me, conceptualizing it as such is relatively new concept. After years of writing for the sake of the thrill of creating, it wasn't until recent years that as other people continue to define me as a "good writer" that I've been asked to identify my process. How do you identify something you never realized existed separately?

As I volley the idea around in my head, I can feel a temporary feeling of inadequacy oozing over me slowing my flow of thought, as I feel the pressure to define what comes to me naturally. If all good writers have a process then where is mine. As of late, there isn't a special chair or special time of the day, or a special place where all the precursors to an eventful writing session merge at the pinnacle of writing success. Instead, I just write. I begin expecting the overall continuity of my statements: the love child of thought and desire to emerge on its own, born from the fruit of my words. Is this all to my writing process: perhaps. I've come face to face with questions that have the

words "writing process" looming in their subtext, but I always shy away from trying to define it. The irony of it all is that describing my writing process is one of the only written tasks that I find difficult to capture in words without sounding contrived. This stems from the unavoidable fact that if I haven't definitively concluded whether or not I have a consistent writing process, so how then can I describe it to others.

As with anything that I intend to write, whether personal, emotional, or academic, I define my position, feelings or beliefs first and then write as though moving from a starting point to a finish line. The words almost always find their way, as if my thoughts have some innate power to arrange themselves coherently on the page. Perhaps, I am fortunate in this regard. Although, regardless of how fluent the process is, I usually subject my writing to a barrage of revision.

Revision to me means *playback*. I playback my thoughts by reading them aloud. Hearing my words and how they fit together makes it easier to see which pieces don't and need to be rearranged. This playback period, is like listening to a familiar song I know all the words to. And just I sing along. As I add things or take them away, my ear plays along catching any inconsistencies in the pattern. But even when I revise I use the same method as I did the first time, letting the additional thoughts find their way to the paper unobstructed. After the playback, I *sit* back- away from the piece and in most situations I don't return to it. I enjoy the feeling that comes from being able to produce

something physical: a piece of writing from something as abstract as a thought.

Although I never really understood it as such, this is what many would interpret as "my writing process". I never really thought of it as a process, only what I tended to do most of the time. When I sit down to write, I rarely encounter that wall of self-censorship that blocks the flow of free thought for many writers. The writing process for me seems to be a collection of abstract goals that I have the tendency to want to achieve in all my writing. During the creation of it, I put less focus on structure and more on the importance of fostering a stream of coherent thoughts. Even when writing in a more personal setting within the pages of my journal, I often begin with something in mind and move through it with a definite starting point. I tend to pay less attention to how the words are organized because they usually organized themselves.

My confidence in using writing as a means to express myself through words makes writing less forced. I find security knowing that my words reflect a point of view derived from my own beliefs, and that the process of writing organizes those perspectives in a fashion that allows others a rare insight to my subjective consciousness.

---

*"Don't compromise yourself.*

*You are all you've got."*

*—Janis Joplin*

## Elemental: A Seasonal Journal in Four Acts

By Dorothy Francoeur

### Prologue: Ode to the Macintosh - written from the blizzard

With the snow, it still feels like Christmas in my apartment. In some form or fashion, there are presents everywhere - some are old, but no less appreciated, like this Macintosh computer I am currently using. Hawk, my pagan friend, rescued it from a dumpster behind the Hartford Public Library, refurbished it, and then presented it to me in his shy and useful way. Since then, it has become the perfect writing instrument for me, small enough for my bedroom, and comfortable to use. Its needs are simple, like mine.

As I sit here typing, I find myself enjoying the tactile clack of this old Macintosh's keyboard! I sit with it cradled on my lap, like a rectangled cat, perched royally on top of my gold and cobalt tapestry pillow. For a time, I look out at the blizzard and type blindly, enjoying the sensation of petting this keyboard-kat. It purrs under my touch, relishing the life in its circuitry, perhaps appreciating (in its way) its narrow escape from certain death. Like all things aged, used, and battered, its functionality was overlooked, disregarded, and disdained.

Storytelling becomes easier with this old Macintosh. Its keypad responds to a gentler touch, like me. Like the kind of touch you offer when you are busy watching a blizzard, worrying about tapping so hard you might disturb the flakes caking up in white-frosted curves along the bedroom windowpane. The top flakes blow across one another, weightless in the raging wind. I have come to believe that storms and storytelling are both forces of nature; each is forged by the elements - air (voice), water (intuition), fire (passion), earth (words on the page), and spirit (transcendence). With these guidelines in mind, let this elemental journal begin.

### ACT 2: Spring, Silver-Yellow, Air

The voice of spring is like a Maiden, breezy, willful, and risky. She begins to speak in late February - just before the first white and yellow crocuses. In Her are the seeds of summer desire and autumn fruit. She comes on the wind when March's Lion roars. He, as Her champion, drives away with wind and sword the Silver Dragon of Winter. It is the Maiden who brings forth the trembling beauty of spring. And we, as mortals, fill our lungs with her breath and our ears with her song.

In spring, Air brings freshness and new beginnings. It can cut, coldly, like a white, metal knife. It can churn your world into sudden chaos, like so much rubbish on city streets. It startles like a whirl of grey and white pigeons, whose wings beat against one another in their upward spiral toward some distant rafter. Air drifts, carries, lifts - it is a bird's lover. Winds dance and disperse the last leaden clouds of indecision, revealing a golden spray of sunbeams streaming toward the land, penetrating and reviving, warming and reminding, that we are here to wonder, to imagine, to realize, love.

In the Earth's belly, life quickens.

Once, in early spring, I went away from my mother to give birth to a daughter of my own. I was only fifteen. I left home on a Sunday morning in late April. The day was yellow with daffodils and dandelions. Sun-washed flowers grew everywhere but in my heart. My journey was funereal and I arrived with relief at the blood-red brick home for unwed mothers. Inside, I saw nuns wrapped in black shrouds, moving through the corridors without seeing the ghosts of girls around them. They were the Sisters of Mercy, and I made my confession to them, because I was Leonard Cohen's *Suzanne*, dressed up in my Salvation Army rags and feathers. And by the beginning of the summer, with my daughter gone far from me, I had touched their perfect bodies with my mind. *For Tracy Lee, b.6-15-1967... wherever you are...*

### ACT 3: Summer, Green, Fire, Passion

To me, summer starts on Mayday, when nature-loving ladies rise at dawn to wash their faces in the morning dew, just as our great-grandmothers did. On Mayday, verdant hues of grass and leaves emerge, expand, and quiver in the sunlight. According to Pagan lore, the spirit of Robin of the Green Wood is about, and that of his Merry Men. It is a time of mischief and revelry, of matchmaking and dancing, when couples court and spark, love-drunk bodies conjuring in the summer. Long after dark, as the fiddler slices his bow across catgut strings, a lilting melody drifts skyward with sparks from the smoking wood fires, trailing like a snake, out into the deep, hooded night. But that is a dream. And now I am awake.

By Mayday, the nights are long and languorous. Blossoms fill the yards and byways of Hartford city, shocking the pavement. Bees buzz fatly, gluttonous with flower nectar. Even in the daytime, passion effuses the very air that I breathe. I notice it in unexpected places, like while walking on congested city streets where throngs of humans jostle for space with too-large cars, city buses garishly shrink-wrapped in advertisements, and darting, shark-like yellow taxis. In downtown Hartford, along "Cigarette Row," the living corpses are pulling hard on their death sticks. Their exhaled nicotine has, over time, coated the sidewalks a dark, brown-gray. With growing revulsion, I anticipate walking among them in August's blistering days, when discarded bubble gum oozes in pink stickiness, bleeding into the cracks of the broken sidewalks in front of Traveler's Insurance. There, in spite of the filth, street musicians barter their golden songs for the price of one night's supper. All of this goes on as day changes over to night, as emotions rise, fast and hot, their urgency consuming our collective soul, as naked rhythms pound inward from every direction.

Summer is for hearts on fire - even those hearts beating alone.

### Epilogue: Winter, White, Ice, Spirit

*Autumn turned to winter overnight this year, leaves turning into pages of bittersweet recollections that scatter through my mind and out my fingers. I have been dozing for what feels like years, emerging, finally, from the Earth, as the Wise Woman.*

Now, I am living a dream, wrapped up in an ivory and fringed shawl, surrounded by beloved whiteness. It begins with the bed comforter - a soft, queen-sized puff covered over in white eyelet lace. Underneath, the sheets are white-striped Egyptian cotton. An ivory wall hanging climbs behind my pillows adding texture to an otherwise barren wall. The white does not end, not with miles of snow extending beyond the window. It is lucky that I like bright bedrooms. My windows face east, to the rising sun, and to where all things must begin, like this new phase in my life, where I am learning how to write again in all of this . . . whiteness.

Turning my head, as I type, I see the cars are half buried now, snow drifts up to the wheel wells of all but the tallest SUVs in my apartment parking lot. The evergreens lining the street are frosted all down one side, like wax-dipped tree candles at Christmas time. Or, like larger versions of those toy-like miniatures used in recreating New England villages, where mirrors become ponds and a tiny, white-steeple church becomes the focal point, surrounded by cunning cottages, a Main Street lined with shops and thronged with costumed villagers.

White is everywhere outside the window. The blizzard has consumed the parking lot and street, making imperceptible the dark green letters on the Hess Gas Station's neon-lit roof. The bushes are disappearing underneath the drifts as night intrudes on the scene. Watching, I realize that storm-walkers, seeking warm, dark sanctuary, must transcend the weight of years, moving, all at once blinded, but guided by, the White. It is time for them, and me, to hibernate, to nestle between soft, white sheets. To sleep, perchance to dream, until life begins again.

# PROCRASTINATION

By

Syre Matin Khan

Procrastination

What should I write? I cannot think. I think I'll go and get some coffee.

Two hours later: I need to be creative; I am writing about procrastination, but it cannot be a research paper and it also has to be personal. I want it to be interesting also.

Forget it: I will write it later; I have lots of time.

Procrastination: it is a deadly disease; it slowly wears me down, until I am ready to give up. Its approach is slow, steady and surreptitious: as I go to do my work, it comes close to me, standing on its toes, leaning close, whispers in my ear, "Where are you going? Come, come, that is not the way. Why go in that direction? It only leads you to study, work and stress; it takes away your time of fun and leisure. Enjoy life, have fun. Follow me. Come, come, don't think about work; sit here and watch a movie."

Knowing fully well how many times before I have fell into the same trap, wooed by the exact same arguments, I try hard to fight procrastination; at the back of my mind is the trepidation of the consequences of following the path that procrastination leads to: stress, frustration, fatigue and all-nighters — I do not want to go there.

I reply to procrastination, "No, I cannot watch a movie. I have too much work and a movie takes too much time. By the time the movie ends, it will be too late and I will have to sit up all night. Besides, I have other work tomorrow and I want to get some sleep tonight so that I can do that."

Procrastination, wily as ever, wholly conscious of my inherent inclination to succumb to its arguments, coaxes me, "No, you don't want to watch a movie? That is all right; we can find something else for you. Oh no, come back, don't go to work again; even I know you have work. Listen: don't worry, you have time. It is only eight at night; your paper is not due until tomorrow morning and plus, it is only a five page paper. How much time do you really think your paper is going to take? Hardly four hours; you only need to do a little research and then you can write it."

My resistance against procrastination is weakening. Gradually, I am yielding to its arguments, thinking that they do make sense, "Well, perhaps, you are right. The paper is not that difficult and it should not take me too long. I could probably finish it by two or three in the morning if I start at ten; then I can sleep for seven or eight hours; not bad, actually. But maybe I should just finish it off right now. What do you think?"

Stifling its self-satisfied snicker, knowing it has gotten me once again, procrastination replies, "No, no. You should have some

fun; work can be done later. Come on; just watch this basketball game; only one half is left. It will only take half an hour. Then you can go and work. Come on; it is not such a big deal."

Convinced, I say, "Yeah, you're right. Just this game though."

Procrastination says, "Of course."

End of basketball game: Procrastination: "Come on, change the channel; some other interesting program might be coming. Don't worry, you have time."

Flash-forward:

It is after midnight, perhaps one a.m., and I have unwillingly trudged to the computer lab. Finally, it is time to get to work. However, even here I am not beyond the clutches of procrastination; it resides in every computer around and manifests itself, particularly, in the form of the Internet. How ironic is it that the computer, which is supposed to help one work faster and more efficiently, is the primary source of procrastination for me and multiples of others like me. Not only does it facilitate me to procrastinate more, it exacerbates this by pulling a facade over my mind that I am actually working: an open Microsoft Word document combined with an open Google window — as a proof of research — allow a false sense of satisfaction to pervade me; in my mind, both these programs are testimony to the fact that I am working. The Internet plays the actual villain; it opens a multitude of pathways, each distinct, for procrastination to venture down and play hide and seek with me; procrastination lures me after itself, to follow it, to find it; always leaving just enough of a trace behind to allow me to keep going in its pursuit, but never enough for me to actually find it; yes, that is my mission: to follow procrastination down those enticing pathways, to capture it and to lock it away in a safe from where there is no escape for it and no more pursuit for me.

However, this chase always ends in utter failure for me. Every night, I begin the pursuit of procrastination with renewed zeal; I continue at it unremittingly for hours on end; finally, I am exhausted and give up. I look at the time and am flabbergasted; it is already three a.m., three hours since I came to the computer lab and still there is no sign of any progress in my work; two or three lines of jumbled rubbish is all that I can show for the time spent here. I decide now that it is time that I, finally, got to work. However, as I think this, I gradually start feeling drowsy, as the sleep catches up on me; I have gone through the same routine the previous couple of days and hence, have had only seven to eight hours of sleep in the last two days. Also, it suddenly dawns on me that I have insufficient time left to complete my paper; under the spell of procrastination, I had grossly underestimated the time it would take me to finish my paper. Perhaps, I might be able to complete it, but it would not be my best effort and I would have to rush through it. In this fatigued and perplexed state of mind, suddenly a sign starts flashing incessantly in my head, blaring like the loudest alarm possible, obstinate not to stop until I pay heed to it: EXTENSION, EXTENSION, EXTENSION. Yes, that is the answer, I think in my mind; now I will finish the paper tomorrow.

Tomorrow night:

I have followed the same pattern as everyday and the same signs of "EXTENSION" are floating in my head;

obviously, that is not an option anymore since I have already exhausted it. Now, I have no choice; I have to finish the paper tonight, come what may. It does not matter whether I am sleepy, tired and have a stalled brain; I have done this to myself or allowed procrastination to do it to me and I have to live with it. It is a sickening feeling. Why does it have to be like this? Why can't I stop procrastinating and start working at a reasonable hour when my mind is actually willing to work, when it is not stuck? Why can't I just finish this damn paper? It has been three days now that I have been trying to write it, but I cannot write. Another night of procrastination, another night without sleep, another night with this sick feeling. Why do I do this? Will I ever get rid of this?

While trying to write an economics paper one day, I decided to procrastinate by finding out why I and so many others like me are afflicted by this problem of procrastination. Why do we procrastinate? Obviously, I went on to Google to search. What I found was interesting, though not really surprising. According to research, "procrastination is a complex psychological behavior that affects everyone to some degree or another;" it is the "avoidance of doing a task, which needs to be accomplished." Procrastination has a close relation with avoidant coping styles, which is "the tendency to neglect problems that cause anxiety rather than confront them." Procrastinators look for avenues that help them to avoid the job at hand; in chronic procrastinators, who comprise twenty percent of the population, this trait is not restricted only to work, but encompasses all realms of life from paying bills to filing income tax returns to cashing checks and so on; it is basically a way of life.

Those avenues of distraction that take up a small amount of time and that are easily accessible without much effort — checking e-mail while working, surfing the internet while 'trying' to research, going to get something to eat or drink, taking a 'break' to smoke etc. — are especially popular among procrastinators. From my own personal experience and after having talked to other major procrastinators like myself, I can say that diversions such as checking e-mail are particularly so attractive because they provide me with an illusion to deceive myself that is acceptable enough for me to go through with because even though all these distractions fulfill my subconscious goal of avoiding my work, they take a relatively short span of time to carry out; thus I can hide or ignore the anxiety and self-reproach I feel at not working behind the facade that checking e-mail or going for a drink will not waste 'much' of my time and when I am finished doing that I will immediately get back to work. This thinking develops through the following internal dialogue:

Procrastination says, "Syre, go and get some coffee for yourself; you need a break since you have been working consecutively for three hours."

I protest, "But I have only completed one paragraph; the rest of the time I have been surfing the web and not working."

Procrastination, crafty as ever, replies, "Quality matters, not quantity. And anyway, getting coffee will only take five minutes; then you can come back and start working right away."

I think, "Well, procrastination is right; getting coffee won't waste much time."

Obviously this "time" reason is only to dupe myself or satisfy my mind; the 'real' reason why I choose these specific activities like getting coffee to avoid work is because they hardly require any effort on my part, so I am willing to go through with them without any hesitance. When I am having this internal dialogue, I conveniently ignore the fact that I 'already know' in my subconscious that I am not going to "immediately get back to work" and that I will indulge in another activity of the same sort, again fooling myself with the same "time" argument. From this analysis, I have derived my own definition of procrastination that I think is applicable to most procrastinators, but which definitely fits me perfectly: it is an unremitting circular cycle of deceiving yourself to avoid work.

Procrastinators are typically very optimistic about the time they have to finish their work. I, for one, almost always grossly underestimate the time it will take me to complete a task. This optimism about deadlines is inherent in my desire to procrastinate. Since I want to avoid doing work, I try to push the time when I start work as far away from myself as possible. Obviously, this is only a subconscious decision; in my mind, when I make this decision, I actually think that I can finish a certain chore in the limited time I give myself. However, when I finally get to work, I almost invariably realize — as do most procrastinators — that I do not have enough time or at least as much as I would want to complete my work. Supposedly, when this happens, procrastinators, realizing the eventualities of not completing the work on time, suddenly experience an eruption of adrenaline and start working at a rapid rate. Most of the time they are not only able to finish their assignment on time, but it is usually also of a quality that satisfies them. This leads to the procrastinators actually believing that they work best under pressure; the truth is that the only reason you are progressing rapidly with work under pressure is because you have no other choice; you have to work to fulfill the goals you set yourself; however, you have lost the freedom to work at your own will.

A common misperception about procrastination is that procrastinators lack time-management skills. As I have said before, procrastinators are more optimistic about the time they have to complete a chore compared to most people, but this does not mean a paucity of time-management skills. The main problem that procrastinators face is that of self-regulation or in fact, a lack of it. Procrastinators are unable to regulate their activities; I often tell myself angrily — typically after a sickening night of procrastination when I have wasted the whole night — that I am going to start work early in the evening the next day and finish work by midnight at the latest without procrastinating in between; after that I can relax. After making this master plan, satisfied with myself, I go to sleep soundly. By the time next evening rolls around, the whole plan is forgotten or even better, I remember it, but I keep telling myself that I will begin working in "five minutes"; in the meantime, I go and get coffee, check my e-mail, read the newspaper or just talk to a friend; those five minutes finally end after midnight is long gone and I am sitting again procrastinating — this time by scolding myself over the way I have procrastinated the rest of the day!

To: WritingCenterJournal@trincoll.edu  
From: "Muller, Robin M (2004)" <Robin.Muller@trincoll.edu>  
Subject: RE: Technology And Writing  
Date: Wed, 24 Mar 2004 16:01:25 -0500

A Love Affair with my Handwriting

I used to have handwriting more chaotic than an unmown lawn - letters fleeing left and right, stretched absurdly like rogue blades of grass, "o"s as unround as strawberries. I became notoriously illegible - forced to stay after school for after-hours handwriting class. I, the lone student, lingered behind, parked in an empty classroom in a curved orange plastic chair, while Mrs. Brobeck graded spelling tests. Too naive by far to demand extra credit for my efforts, I slowly learned a forced order to my 3rd grade penmanship - an art I worked hard to perfect. I am proud of my handwriting now, and though my "r"s sometimes open too widely, like "v"s, and my lower-case "e"s look strangely like "z"s, I like the way it looks on the unyielding lines of a notebook page. It is angular, strong, yet identifiable... obviously mine. I think it suits me. My best friend once jokingly said that if my handwriting were a computer font, she'd type in it.

This, ultimately, is what saddens me when I sit down to type, fingers poised obediently in place above their home keys: that I can't control the angles of my "w"s. That I, for one, would never cross an upper case "J." Still, I simply cannot justify rebellion. To write papers by hand? Absurd! And being an e-mail addict, I rarely write letters anymore. There is something so sad about typeface, and sadder still that I have to succumb to the overwhelming lure of its convenience. The sacrifice I make for this efficiency is of something I truly worked hard for. The way I write is a cultivated art to me, developed on sheets of double-ruled paper as the grade-school janitors turned out the hallway lights. I have surrendered, nonetheless, to the sad conformity of computer font: I type in Times New Roman.

And Oh! How I miss the look of writing! When I find myself distracted in class, I often doodle words in my margins instead of pictures. I like the long ones, with tangles of unusual letters. Extraterrestrial. Syzygy. Quixotic. I have perfected the art of writing backwards, and with my left hand. The only thing I ever like about math is how my numbers look.

Ultimately, my love affair with my handwriting is on the rocks. Less and less do I see the angular points of upper-case "M"s. I take fewer notes. I write fewer letters. The last thing I wrote down by hand was an e-mail address. I am mourning the imminent passing of my penmanship the way, years ago, I bid goodbye to the savage tangle of my chaotic, grade-school script. As much as I resist this admission, I am becoming, regrettably, a typer. There is something obviously lost in this sad transition - something personal, and, for me, a kind of history - the loss of something I had found every 3rd - grade Friday, in a curved orange plastic chair, while Mrs. Brobeck graded spelling tests and the janitors turned out the hall lights. I guess my best friend hit on something. If my handwriting were a font, I'd type in it.

- Robin Muller

>On E-mail

> If I have someone I don't want to talk to, I tell them to e->mail me. God, it's convenient. I can sit on that little message in my in->box for ages, watching it slowly fall back in rank as newer messages >take it's place.

> There's an implied time delay with e-mail that can be >stretched almost limidlessly. We expect someone to call us back quickly >if we leave them a voicemail. We expect an IM to be answered within a >minute or two, at most. But e-mail is at the mercy of the Devils of >Technology. Who knows if it actually made it there? Who knows if it was >on time, or two days late, or a week late? Or if some nefarious >computer deleted it along the way? If you don't respond to a phone >message, you get an angry call in about four days. If you don't respond >to e-mail, you get a politely worded "I'm not sure if you got this..." >about two weeks later.

> *Silly. Of course I got it. I just don't like you.*

> And then they'll wait another two weeks for a response. >While I twiddle my thumbs with glee.

-Andrew Schurr

# Writing

## - With - Technology

**Syre\_Kahn (1:25:15 AM):** livin without email nd chat is unimaginable now...it makes life so much easier...i mean who wants to write a letter now...its stupid... like wats the pt? ive always hated writin letters...its jus so time consuming nd i jus don't have da patience for it...nd now with email nd chat theres no reason to waste my time with letters...ya I know ppl say that email nd msging r not personal like letters...its prob true...the novelty of letters has surely increased bcse of mail nd chat nd gettin letters DOES feel more personal...but i still don't really c myself writin 1 to ne1...in fact i now find even writing emails too tuff...me nd my eternal laziness!! but its not only my laziness...technology jus has a way of spoiling us...as things become more easily achievable...we want to do less nd less...neways ive rambled for long enuff...

**Auto response from Kirk Quinsland (1:25:20 AM):**

IM Haiku:  
what up??? nm, u??  
nm, sorry, gtg  
s'ok bud, 18r

**Beth\_Miller (1:30:52 AM):** As an adjunct faculty member here at Trinity and at Quinnipiac University, I extend my office hours and availability by using AOL IM with my students. I have created a screenname just for them and I have found that IM is an excellent "real time" way to hash out thesis statements and give brief feedback to questions they might have about upcoming assignments. I now include guidelines in my syllabus for my students with regard to my IM policy - I promise that I won't view their profiles, or just chit chat with them for no reason. I consider both an invasion of privacy. The rule is, if I am online, I am available for them to get in touch with me. It can be hectic at times, but overall, I love having it as a teaching tool.

**Auto response from Edna\_Guerrasio (1:30:58 AM):**

Always alive yet he never sleeps,  
Deplete of wisdom, yet knowledge he reaps.  
Arms overreaching in all man's endeavors,  
False companionship he offers, while relationships he severs,  
Falters on occasion by virus or disease,  
Unaware of his master, yet always wishing to please.  
He is a world traveler, unknowing of his own address,  
Always fast on his toes, I have come to expect nothing less.  
He has become native to my world, each of my days,  
Morning begins and Night ends with a distant gaze.

I sit at the computer,  
My pen has run dry.

To: WritingCenterJournal@trincoll.edu  
From: "Schurr, Andrew W (2004)"  
<Andrew.Schurr@trincoll.edu>  
Subject: RE: Technology And Writing  
Date: Wed, 24 Mar 2004 19:24:06 -0500

IM has the light pitter-patter of street patois. Expedience is the key; it doesn't matter what you say so much as how fast you're saying it. The most erudite of Rhodes scholars will turn into a fourth grader when that "BING!" of an IM hits them.

\*BING\*

what up?

\*BLOOP\*

nm, u?

It's not that we're dumb, really, or that the old hunt-and-pack conventions of single-letter words and dropped connectors is still necessary. We're all speedy typers. We grew up on it. We can pontificate with the very finest of multi-syllabic sentences, fingers pounding away at high speed. But we don't. It's not cool. We all want to appear calm, collected, almost withdrawn. Perpetually in a rush, but unwilling to elaborate or put forth anything but the bare necessities.

\*BING\*

U coming 2nite?

The James Dean, rebel-without-a-cause version of communication. In ten years, perhaps all of our e-mail and letters will look like this, too. Or we'll get words and ideas ultra-condensed, until an entire conversation can be expressed in under ten letters.

-Andrew Schurr

**Mark\_Witt (2:31:55 AM):** It may be that nothing has quite the potential for a warping the way we interact than aol instant messaging. I have myself have been able to survive going cold turkey by not installing aim v.28.34 on my new laptop. But at one point, especially in high school, things were getting of hand. It went so far as to preclude verbal communication between myself and my high school roommate, *while we*

*were in the same 14x14 foot cell!* We could go hours without speaking to one another out loud and only interacting through the visually debilitating, occasionally clever, usually obnoxious medium of aim-speak. It's now been 347 days since the last time I chatted and I'm a recovering aim addict.

**Kirk Quinsland (2:33:22 AM):** so i'm supposed to write something about technology and how it's affected the way i write... and i don't really know what to say about it, but i suppose i could start by talking about the things that make me bitter, like people who use stupid abbreviations like "gtg" or "ttyp" or "lol" or even "LOL". if it's really funny, honestly, show some imagination or non-laziness, and actually what bothers me even more are people who actually SAY things like "gtg" or "ttyp" as if they're 13 year old girls... but as for my writing, IM has actually given me an entirely new and different style, one that doesn't care how many sentence fragments get tied together with commas (and never any other punctuation, or unconcerned with capitalization (except to draw emphasis to something or, sometimes, when using an abbreviation) or unbothered by an overrepresentation of ellipsis marks, which i use to indicate that i'm sort of done with a thought but don't want to use a period (since periods are so final and IM conversations are extremely open)... though i am very concerned with spelling things correctly, and always make a point to correct myself if i notice... and now that i think about it my e-mails are completely different, i rarely use more than three focused sentences, any more just seems silly, as a matter of fact (more whining) i hate e-mails that go on and on repeating the same thing over and over, or just use a lot of words when many fewer would do, just make the point and move on... anyway, i guess that's pretty much it, so...

### In Cyberspace, No One Hears Your Screams

By Dorothy Francoeur

HelpDesk Ticket # 14907 has been opened for you. If the information below is incorrect or you have questions about this ticket, please call x2100. Please do not reply to this message.

Computing Center  
Problem Number: 14907  
Open Date: 4/14/2004 4:34:17 PM

Problem Description: She used a zip disk on the computer and now it doesn't work. Probably corrupted.

Corrupted? My whole life was on that disc! Why do I feel like Sarah Jessica Parker in *Sex and the City*? The End.

My resistance to email is peaceful and personal. In this cheetah/gazelle paced world, I don't want anyone not to use email if they want to. I just don't want anyone to send it to me, or expect a response. People who believe in email don't make me nervous except at those fairly rare times when someone speaks to me of email in the hushed tones of religious reverence. I guess this indicates my line drawn in the sand--the line between email as tool, and email as icon. False idols and all that.

Not only am I anti-email, I am also ante-email: I arrived on the earth and became a shaped package of selves when email was just a gleam in the scientist/discoverer/inventor's eye. I was six years old before I ever got sucked into a tv screen. My father felt that tv was an unconvincing substitute for radio, since you couldn't see nearly as well watching tv as you could see listening to the radio. He also felt tv was an invasion of privacy (I wonder. Did he feel that people on the tv screen were watching him? I guess that's a question for the psychologists). But of course I ought to tell the rest of the story: when I was six, my father bought a behemoth of a console tv which became, instantly, the focal point of our living room. On reflection, he probably thought it best to 'keep up with the times.' He was, after all, a sensible man.

Keeping up with the times--so far, I've done pretty well: tv, yes; telephone, yes; voice-mail, yes; call-intercept, yes; I-MAC, yes; satellite dish, yes; the preventative miracles of the high-tech medical revolution, yes. But I have to ask: will all this make me a better person? More efficient multi-tasker, yes; more acceptable in society, more up-to-speed?

the blur of me may resemble  
the pelt of cheetah or gazelle  
but who can tell?

Yes. All this may even make it possible for me to live a long and less risk-riddled life...ninety? Should I try for the big one-0-0?

My 'better person' is a self who moves physically, emotionally, mentally (but aren't they all entangled in each other?) farther into the 'being' in being alive. And that involves slowing down; that involves attention, and not only the attention that comes with sitting still--imagine assembling your tools: the pine branch because its wood is soft. The book-size piece of birch bark because its underside is smooth and hard. The cutting stone, maybe obsidian, with which to sharpen pine branch to a point. And the fire, hot enough to char the point, but not so hot you burn it. Then you begin to write, black tip of stick against birch bark's underside--by the time you've done all that, you've honed what you need to say.

In closing, I think you should know that my husband and I are currently in the process of buying an expensive satellite cone just for our Mac computers. Our house sits in the middle of two hayfields in rural western Massachusetts, heartland of the most ancient phone lines. These phone lines will not tolerate much of anything, especially internet and email. Why are we doing this? Is it our goal to go into bankruptcy? Clearly not; after all, at least one of us at a time is fairly sensible. We don't want the email, but it's a package deal: internet/email. And maybe we'll end up using email. Who knows? I think of my father and his long ago decision to buy a tv--my husband and I are going to get with the plan, go with the flow. And even if email is an unconvincing substitute for the face-to-face where more than the words do the talking, we don't want to be left behind.

Do we?

Respectfully submitted,  
(by means of my old typewriter)  
Elizabeth Libbey

## FEAR AND THE WRITER

By Allison Eno

I'm really not sure why I believed I was the only person on this planet who felt insecure about my writing. I applied to be a Writing Associate and was accepted. I carried my letter of acceptance around with me for weeks--just to remind myself that it was true. Last semester, I remember my first day of English 302. I arrived to class early and waited to meet the other students who were naturally better writers than me. A flush began creeping up my neck, my heart began to race, and this really comforting question crossed my mind--"What the hell am I doing here?" Funny thing is--turns out I wasn't the only one feeling this way. I was pleased and relieved (yes, anxiety loves company) to find I was simply not alone. This little revelation has since made me question how someone becomes a good writer, but still has a hard time accepting it.

For me, the knowledge that I have some skill and talent to write creatively is a new concept. Most of my fellow Trinity classmates seemed to write with apparent ease throughout their high school years. My story does not read this way. I was in my early 30's before I began to believe I deserved the "A's" I was receiving on essays and short stories. Professors would tell me I was a strong writer; they would ask me to help other students, and all I could think of was how long I would be able to fool everyone. It seemed more like luck to me--perhaps professors appreciated having me in their classes because I busted my ass on every assignment. I cannot explain this insecurity. I'm asking you to think about the concept of a writing tutor who is insecure about her own writing. To the average student who seeks help on papers in the Writing Center, this may seem ridiculous. I mean, Writing Associates are supposed to be an authority on writing, right?

So why do so many writers focus on their weaknesses rather than accepting and enjoying their successes? Why do we doubt our talent or

skill? I don't have an answer to these questions--I only know what works for me and that is persistence and never letting fear stop me. I wish I could count how many times I sat back and thought to myself, "Who the hell are you kidding....What makes you think you're a writer? You can't even remember learning grammar in elementary school and you weren't exactly an over-achiever in high school (an understatement)...Not to mention the fact that you're not getting any younger--are you sure you don't want to get a nice desk job and forget about this writing stuff???" My answer to this last question is always a resounding HELL NO!!

In spite of my neurosis, these are the moments where I remind myself of what I'm trying to achieve--I love to write. I have more stories inside me than I will ever be able to get on paper. When I write I become a different person--I'm able to talk to my father who died last year, I'm able to write through my past, relive the happy times, and sometimes come to grips on the not-so-happy times. I write for me.

Writing for me has led to something even more important in life--a focus. Okay, so I am a slow learner. I can admit this. However, I'm really making up for lost time--writing my way through three years at Trinity so I can go to graduate school. The real truth is that I write because I must. I still doubt myself, overanalyzing the quality of my work. I will probably always do this--it is just in my nature to think of myself as someone who is not so special. But it is the other times in my life that I cherish--those times when I submit a piece of writing to a contest, apply to a school I usually would think is way out of my league and be accepted, or get that "A" on a piece of critical analysis that I absolutely despised doing. These are the times I embrace--that will guide me through the self-doubt and lead me to my goals. I am afraid of writing. I love to write. I love to do what scares the hell out of me. How do you think I got here in the first place?

## Poem for Mike

By Sophie Schrage

My mother thanks me  
for taking her to a Billy Collins reading,  
then asks why I don't write  
lighthearted poetry, why my  
poems are always so dark, so somber,  
so elegiac.

I now realize why I have had trouble  
making you into a poem.

You are too good for my brand of poetry.  
You are too kind  
and too real and  
do not hurt me at all.

I have countless poems,  
odes to boys who have flitted in  
and out of my life  
like pigeons who come for bread  
and scurry away with only crumbs  
in their wake.

I have written about crummy  
high school boys  
who were so alluring  
with their big pants and  
big personas  
with blunts behind their ears,  
a marker always ready to catch a tag  
and one hand free to hold my hand  
but who still returned  
to their Park Avenue or West End apartments,  
secretly appreciating their  
Jewish, or Anglo-Saxon, or Italian mothers  
waiting up for them as they entered  
with the morning sun.

I have written about boys who kissed me  
like I was the last girl they were ever going to kiss.  
I have written about boys whose arms I have fallen asleep in  
and whose arms I know I'll never again be in.

But you, you remain too good for this poetry.  
The love sonnets have already been done.  
I can't compete with Shakespeare or Neruda.

I can't write about you who is so good  
who pads the earth for me  
in downy layers  
who ushers in the day  
waking me with whispers,  
shutting the alarm before it goes off.

## **Writers on Writing Series: Fred Pfeil**

### **Whose Writing? Who's Writing? By Sean Hojnacki**

In Plato's *Symposium*, Agathon begins his speech on love with a rhetorical gesture: "I wish first to speak of how I ought to speak, and only then to speak." Is this not how one always already speaks? Speech always has an address written into it, a listener who confronts the speaker. All speech confronts the injunction of how the speaker ought to speak, before a single word is uttered. So what speech concerns us here? What obligation concerns this speech?

Academics become very familiar with the position of authority by necessity of their position. The lecturer always already addresses students from a position of authority on one topic or another—Lacanian psychoanalysis or the political economy of the Masai—inasmuch as these topics are domains of knowledge. But what about writing? What can be said about writing? Who is in a position to speak about writing with any sort of authority? And moreover, what mysterious writing is this? What text? Whose writing? Who's writing?

Artists often take recourse to a model of art as inspiration; writers are notoriously vague about the method of their craft—a compulsion, a channeling, a labor, an inexplicable gift for the privileged few. Professors often speak of writing from a position of authority, but only with regard to the mechanical rules of language. Creativity is the impossible opening in the act of

Poetry thrives on listening, and indeed, on the silences between words. Fred constructs the process of composing poetry as primarily a study of silence, an examination of the dialogue between silence and poetry.

writing. How might one acquire insight into the craft of writing, that inexplicable operation? One would hardly have the audacity to suppose that by asking a writer how to write a poem, or a novel, or even an academic essay, that said writer would then be able to impart some technical knowledge, which might endow the listener with an ability to write a poem, novel, or essay.

Something like this audacity invited Fred Pfeil to 115 Vernon St, the Trinity College Writing Center, to speak precisely on this impossible topic of writing. By academic standards, he is an authority on writing—a professor in Trinity's prestigious English department in addition to being a published writer, both as a critical essayist and a novelist. In speaking about writing however, Fred (I should point out that he might wince were you ever to call him "Professor Pfeil," though by his manner of dress, you might hardly expect him to be a professor of anything at all, and in reality, one is just as likely to find him conducting a non-violence workshop at a prison or perhaps protesting the war on terrorism in creative ways as one is to find him actually teaching a class on film theory) again and again repudiated any position of authority on writing whatsoever.

But what Fred offered was much more significant. Far from the familiar mystifying dross on writing (remarks on inexplicable creativity) which is of no help to anyone, Fred's were practical words on the materials themselves of writing. As opposed to dwelling on the consciousnesses involved in putting thoughts on the page, Fred's discussion spoke to the material reality of the writing process—listening. One could say that to speak about writing, one must first speak of how one ought to write, and only then speak of how to write. Automatic writing is useless as writing (for all except Yeats); listening must precede writing.

Fred elaborated his talk in terms of modalities of listening across three different forms of writing—poetry, novels, and the academic essay. By suggesting this metaphor of listening, the most familiar concept of the writer is stood on its head—mimesis. The model of the writer as producing a narrative of memory is familiar by now, a task "completed" by Proust, but repeated book after book up to present day. Listening, by contrast, necessitates not some crude introspection into the self, but instead an opening of the self to the world. To clarify, these modalities of listening should not be conceived as eavesdropping, taking notes for a novel based on an overheard conversation in a bus. More fundamentally, the model of listening does not demand any sound per se—listening to silence can be an extremely valuable activity for writing. What one fails to realize is that this practice of listening itself takes practice.

Try listening to silence.

How long can you go without growing restless?

Empty your mind. Allow silence to think.

Is there a residue to the silence?

Does it speak back?

Of course, Fred readily admits that these modalities of listening are merely a powerful metaphor for how he has experienced the writing process. And yet, is this metaphor not a necessary fact of the process of writing? Few know silence better than Fred. His intimate relationship with silence goes far beyond my own, and indeed, beyond that of anyone else I know. Last fall, on sabbatical, Fred participated in a six-week silent Buddhist retreat. Immersed in silence and meditation for such an extended period of time, the first realization one comes to is that silence is far from silent. The absence of spoken language merely serves to call attention to the cacophony of mental life, the vast array of sensual stimulus and thought which emerge in the silence of the speaking subject. Undeniably, listening is a thoroughly active process.

So, how does listening bring about writing? We must recall here Fred's three modalities of listening with regard to genre, in a mere descriptive sense. Poetry thrives on listening, and indeed, on the silences between words. Fred constructs the process of composing poetry as primarily a study of silence, an examination of the dialogue between silence and poetry. Perhaps the fragment of whistled radio jingle, or the image of a friend's face long passed on, or a name of some long forgotten banker encountered at a cocktail party—poetry arises amidst such fragments. The writer mediates between silence and language, and nowhere is this mediation so silent as in poetry.

In contrast to the tranquility of listening as found in poetry, writing novels or academic essays burdens the writer with a further task of mediation. Listening becomes more difficult in the course of saying so much. As opposed to prizing the sublime metaphors that poetry reveals in language, novels and essays demand work from the writer. The fact of labor imposes itself on the writer in forcing a progression from word to word, in demanding that the writer forge sense and continuity from this addition of words to one another across pages. Somewhat ironically, the mechanical demands made by language in the course of forming a proper sentence demand work on the writer's part. Of course, listening precedes writing in novels and essays, but the mediation requires considerably more output from the writer. In the case of novels for example, the writer may have a conceptual sense of the project—what works and what does not, which characters need to do and say which things—but explicating these concepts through plot and characters is a considerable task. This is why one must live with the novel in composition, according to Fred. It is absolutely necessary that a writer return to the novel-in-progress nearly everyday, lest the conceptual sense of continuity might recede back into silence.

Unsurprisingly, essays, specifically those of an academic kind, are the most work in Fred's view. Perhaps this is because essays are the most faithful to the mechanics of language, or rather, the most encumbered by the mechanics of language. Rarely is an academic essay notable for its creativity. Intellectual or theoretical creativity in this context should not

be confused with linguistic creativity. Indeed, academic essays as a genre are rarely grouped with novels or poetry. Perhaps this is because the academy rejects this model of listening; academics always already speak from a position of authority. This is the most familiar model for the essay—an authority expressing an authoritative interpretation on one academic subject or another. Similarly, academics generally have trouble listening, being so anxious to speak as an authority.

But contrary to conventional wisdom, work should not be encouraged, at least not in writing. Work assigns a worker to a task. By contrast, listening demands no listener; silence is not exhausted by listening. And with regard to the writer, where does the author emerge? In the listening prior to writing, the position of the writer cannot claim authority. Though actively listening, the language found in writing is hardly the writer's language. The writer is a reporter, a third party, a mediator in the conflict between language and non-language. So considering the result of this mediation, writing, two questions arise: 1) whose writing is this? 2) who is writing? Given Fred's model of listening, the answer can only be that while the writing is to some degree or another the product of the writer, his words are borrowed. The writer never writes, but is written upon by silence.

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But then they danced down the street like dingedodies, and I shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!"

- Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, pt. I, ch. I

## W.A. Alum tell it like it is ...

### Anthony J. Canata, Esq. '93

Now almost ten years removed from Trinity and the formative years of my writing style, I continue to write, both professionally and personally. I find that both bring me great satisfaction, but in different and complimentary ways. On the one hand, my professional writing, as a lawyer, challenges me to articulate and create, literally, binding relationships between parties. I draft motions, contracts, and wills. I also write letters and memoranda articulating a position or creating a record for later use in litigation (e.g. a letter describing a breach of duty and demand of payment).

On the other hand, in my personal writing I break through all of the edifices that give structure to our world. I write as a spiritual exercise to penetrate deeper mysteries, to expand and deepen my awareness of things and of eternity, to access the ground of being that is the source of life. Such writing is for me akin to meditation, karate, hiking – and any other practice that aids me in letting go of my 'self' and allows me to experience life directly.

At Trinity, writing was very painful for me, because I lived in constant fear of what I guess one would call writer's block, or just plain fear of failure. I would start assignments as early as possible, and work through a number of drafts, often working right through the night. My writing style was a manifestation of my insecurity. Fortunately, my style resulted in great

technical and intellectual gains. Writing is a medium for expanding the mind beyond its thought-range and depth. Successive, sharper, deeper drafts lead to the expression of sharper, deeper thoughts and ultimately to the development of a sharp, deep mind.

My writing now is more or less spontaneous. It just happens. I do not do much thinking about it, nor do I typically revisit it in any severe way. I suspect that is because I start sharper and deeper in my understanding of things, and have developed the skill of expressing that understanding as well as I can the first time around. I also suspect that my style reveals a more balanced, self-forgiving attitude about my writing and my life.

As for the future, I may write articles about legal issues relevant to my practice, and have actually begun to do that recently. On the personal side, like many people I think of publishing some of my writing, should it ever congeal into something that could be called a book.

A last word to the writing associates: writing is a great gift, and a double-edged sword. Like any worthy endeavor, it may lead to great awakenings, but awakenings rarely come without difficult choices and changes. To paraphrase Nietzsche, you may draw conclusions, but then your conclusions may draw you.



## Patrick W. Gavin

Although I always knew that I wanted to be a writer, I have always struggled with how exactly to achieve that objective. Unless you're bankrolled by someone, you can't just sit and write and expect to get paid for it (at least you can't expect to write what you want to write and get paid for it—there are plenty of jobs to write what other people want you to write).

After graduating Trinity, I moved to Princeton, NJ to teach 7th and 8th grade History and English. It was during my third year as a teacher that I realized that teaching—however wonderful—was not what I wanted to do forever. I needed to get moving on my writing, in some sort of capacity.

But again...how?

During my time at Trinity, the genre's of my writing was diverse and chaotic: poetry, political columns, humorous sex columns, short stories, long political essays.

When I began looking for jobs, my main question was, how can I write and still get a paycheck? With credit cards and student loans, money was an issue, making the job search all the more difficult since writing jobs are notoriously underfinanced.

You can't get a full-time job writing fiction, so I axed that.

I wasn't in a position to get a column, so I axed that.

Journalism. Reporting. There's writing with a salary. Although the thought of working and reporting the local cop beat wasn't exactly thrilling, everyone must pay their dues somewhere, so I began looking for reporting jobs in Washington, DC.

But how does one get a reporting job without any reporting experience? Although I had plenty of writing under my belt, most of it was opinion writing that required little, if any, reporting. Few newspapers or magazines are willing to take a chance on someone based on their writing "promise"; reporting skills and writing skills are vastly different and they needed to know that you can report.

Of course, how do you get a reporting gig when all of the newspapers reporting gigs are filled and they're only looking for the occasional op-ed?

Accordingly, I began writing op-eds for local newspapers, in order to acquire a portfolio of clips to send to prospective employers. My "expertise" and "community stature" as a teacher made many local papers very receptive to my opinion pieces, and I began to have a sizable stack of clips.

Still, employers wanted hard writing, not opinions: anyone can think, but can you report?

Ultimately, I did not gain a reporting job, not simply because of my lack of reporting experience (many were willing to take a chance on me, but I simply couldn't afford to wait until those jobs opened up). I took a job at a think tank in DC and have continued to freelance on the side, with opeds in the Christian Science Monitor, Miami Herald, Chicago Tribune, Baltimore Sun, and others. I am now putting opeds on hold and working on longer feature pieces. Ultimately I hope to obtain a permanent job at a magazine such as the New Republic, Slate.com, etc.

Since I've left Trinity, I've realized a few things about writing, and accordingly, my perspective has changed. The most notable difference is that, at Trinity, you have free range on your writing. You can write about your neighbors left-handed milkman who has seven dogs, one of whom only has three legs. And you can get this piece published and people will tell you that it's great and you'll still have health insurance and food in your stomach and a roof over your head. Outside of Trinity, one needs to be more practical. There are 6 billion people out here, compared to only 2000 students in there. You have to think about what people want to read, and—almost more importantly—why they want to hear it from you. I've heard from countless editors, "This is great...but what are your credentials? What makes you qualified to write about this?" Of course, in the fiction world this doesn't matter. Of course, good luck finding a "fiction writing" job out of college.

I also look back on my writing at Trinity, and even of just one year ago, and—although I never would have guessed it then—it is amazing how much better your writing becomes with age. It's more seasoned, mature, less radical and carelessly passionate, more reasoned, and better researched. Keep at it, and you'll soon be looking back on your old pieces, asking yourself how you could have written such careless prose, or such a weak argument. There are subtleties that one eventually learns...and that's when your writing can really take off.

## Writing My Decisions

Amy Judy

Occasionally I know exactly how to begin a piece of writing. The first sentence becomes clear in my mind before I sit down to write. It is the first sentence that is the impetus to write that specific piece, and revisions are based on making the content fit to the introductory sentence. Other times, I decide upon the topic that I want to discuss, but must suffer through piles of revisions to find a proper introduction for that topic. Most of the time, I start writing with little preconceived notion of direction. "Sit down," I tell myself, "and buckle-up."

I rarely identify what I truly want to write about in one simple step. And since undirected writing does not follow a direction of its own, I use it to determine the direction of a future piece of writing. Though every sentence stems from the preceding sentence (at least in my mind), there is no attempt to help the reader follow along with abrupt shifts in tone and topic. These pieces loll along, like a slow Sunday stroll. Thoughts, images, and memories detract me from the starting point. And as one would react to intermittent distractions in the course of an aimless walk, I react to these unexpected shifts in my writing. I stop, I examine the distractions, and eventually I move onward towards an unknown endpoint. I am moving from point A to Z, but Z has yet to be identified. I do check my digressions, because progress must continue in the same general direction, but my starting and ending points are just as important to the process as the circuitous path that joins them.

Writing helps me decide what I want to write about by identifying themes that keep resurfacing, or concepts that I struggle to move beyond. In literature classes, we are taught to analyze prose to gain a deeper meaning from the author's particular use of words. When I re-read a piece of my writing, I analyze my choice of words, and my changes of tone and of topic.

How I write about a subject can teach me more than *what* I write about that subject. Identifying the endpoint, the main point, or an undirected writing can be arduous, but it is always rewarding. I learn something new about my topic every time I write about it, and I frequently learn something about myself as well.

My undirected writing ceases when I have identified the heart for a future piece of directed writing: a theme, perhaps an unresolved issue. I am not on a quest to draft the Holy Grail of concluding paragraphs, but I always approach undirected writing as if I'm trying to reach an endpoint, a conclusion. I strive to write a last sentence with a point, a five-word thought, a conclusion of sorts. As fellow children of the 80s, you best all remember child-genius Doogie Howser, M.D. Though I'll credit much to Doogie's boyish good looks, I'd like to think that concluding thirty-minutes of teen angst with a catchy and mature (computer-generated!) diary entry gave the otherwise mediocre sitcom a fighting chance. Though I'm certainly no child-genius, forcing myself to summarize undirected writing into a single, concise thought pushes me to clarify a main idea worthy of re-examination.

For this reason, undirected writing frequently helps me make decisions not only about writing, but about life as well. Overwhelming problems are distilled down into single, attackable issues. There is something very comforting in settling on one main thought. In writing, it's called a thesis. In my life, I call it making a choice.

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*Far away there in the sunshine are my highest aspirations. I may not reach them, but I can look up and see their beauty, believe in them, and try to follow where they lead.*

—Louisa May Alcott

## What I Have Learned

By Erica Martinson '03

I have learned many things on leaving Trinity and its esteemed Writing Center. For example, I have learned the importance of getting up early to get a parking space, and that writing in the library on cold mornings clears the brain. I have learned that turkey bacon is precooked and that coffee is almost always better when made by someone else, that one must never wash a Portobello mushroom, and that anyone will call you "professor" if you stand in front of a class and put your name at the top of a syllabus, whether you have earned the title or not. I have also learned that while writing is hard, the teaching of writing is, quite possibly, the most difficult endeavor man has ever undertaken.

This may be an overstatement—or perhaps an oversimplification. I have yet to decide. In the past six months, I have found myself routinely standing before a roomful of skeptical freshmen who have all admitted, at one time or another, that they either hate to write, think they're "bad at writing," or too lazy to try very hard. My reaction to each of these has been, without fail: "how can anyone hate to write?"; "we all do one thing well in writing, whether we know it and believe it or not"; and "why, *why*

would you confess something like that to your teacher?"

The last statement—for these students I can only do my best to convince them that the laziness will only get them mediocre grades and a very boring educational experience, and they are never truly impressed. Most often, the students that make the first two comments, however, make them in conjunction: "I am bad at writing, and so I hate to do it." These students have made me wonder about my own relationship to writing: do I love writing only because I think I am good at it?

It's a hard question to answer. There are things I'm not particularly good at that I enjoy doing: singing, driving, singing and driving simultaneously, playing cards, wearing heels. I have hated writing some papers I thought rather good, and I have enjoyed writing papers I know to be not quite as good. Why is writing so particular that people who are "not good at it" tend to dislike it?

The students I taught last semester were a difficult group to figure out. They didn't love to write, they didn't love to read, and I questioned constantly my ability as an instructor. Often, I found myself attempting to "explain" something, as I came to think about it, with very little idea as to *how* I could do so. I felt the same frustration they did—I believed I was "not good at teaching." I still enjoyed it,

for the most part. A bad experience in the classroom did not make me want to leave forever, though it made going back to class the next day all the more difficult. I wanted to sit down with them and tell them I knew how they felt, and I wanted us to fix it together. Tell me how to teach you, I'll tell you how to make your writing "better."

As I've gone into the new semester the past few weeks, trying a new set of principles and ideas, letting—or rather, making—the students work at writing and figure it out a bit more independently, I figured out the problem. One of my greatest challenges this year has been the constant and worrying idea that no one has ever taught me "how to write." I hear the words, and I know when they sound right or wrong, and I fiddle with them until they sound the way they should. I've had teachers show me structure, illuminate grammar, tell me about methods of research and organization and such; I've had wonderful writing teachers, and they've taught me to recognize my own good writing qualities. I write with confidence because I don't have to worry about "how to do it." That's ingrained.

So how do you do that for someone? How do you teach them so well they don't have to think about it anymore? Can that even be done? When I hear my students say they're "bad at writing," and I see them grimace

apologetically as they hand me a paper, I sympathize. I've got to learn the same things they do—how to make it sound right, how to make it effective, how to do it without thinking. The thinking is the part that hurts. All of us, we have only the raw material, the words and the ideas, and we've got to put it together and make it sound pretty.

I haven't had students this semester say they are bad writers, or that they hate to write, but I am sure they're there. They're sitting in class without the structure or the methods, maybe without the words. I still don't have any easy answers about the words, about that part of the process that remains fairly mysterious to me. I'm uncertain about the methods, but knowing that I can at least begin to make myself certain.

I have learned that if you do not take out the trash, no one will do it for you, that the Sunday paper does not come if you do not subscribe, and that asking a question does not guarantee a satisfying answer. I have learned that you cannot be good at something just because you want to. I don't have convenient resolutions for my students or myself, but I'll tell them the same thing I've learned since leaving Trinity, both about writing and teaching: this is hard work; it takes practice and patience; being shown the way will only take you so far.

I took two degrees at the University of Cape Town under Prof. JM Coetzee. One was a Masters in Literary Studies, which I was awarded in 1996, and the other a Masters in Creative Writing, which I was awarded in 1999, the same year Prof. Coetzee won his second Booker prize for his novel *Disgrace*, and three and a half years before he took the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. By that time, Prof. Coetzee had left South Africa in order to build a house in Australia and was dividing his time between that country and the United States, where he teaches at The University of Chicago and Princeton. Many believe (I among them) that Prof. Coetzee should have won the Nobel twenty years before he did, after the publication of his harrowing masterpiece *Waiting for the Barbarians* in 1980 and the equally harrowing *Life and Times of Michael K* in 1983, for which he won his first Booker.

Describing what studying fiction under Prof. Coetzee was like is impossible without describing the awe people had of him at UCT. Prof. Coetzee is a fearsome scholar, a book reviewer of the highest order, a prolific writer and an inspiring teacher. When I first arrived at the university two years after graduating from Trinity, I discovered that the English undergraduates at UCT (and a few of the post-grads) simply referred to Prof. Coetzee's office on the top of the arts building as "God's Domain". He was one of those very few scholars (Derrida, Foucault and Chomsky come to mind) who capture the imagination of established researchers and freshman alike. His novels are written with an uncompromising precision, the kind of fiction that lends itself to endless scrutiny and discussion. Yet he was known to eschew the public light, and the interview requests that he received almost monthly from around the world. The first-year English students at UCT (who, like freshmen everywhere throughout history are anti-conformity, anti-establishment, anti-everything) admired his reticence. Because most of them were required to read at least one of his novels, usually *Waiting for the*

*Barbarians*, he had legendary status even though he had not given an undergraduate lecture for some years by the time I came to Cape Town in 1994. It was unfortunate for them, for he is a hypnotic speaker.

Prof. Coetzee had little to say to the press and was notoriously brusque in his dealings with staff members. I hesitate to say, as others have, that he was unfriendly or snobbishly aloof. I would instead describe him as distracted, a man very conscious of the value of his time. He was also shy. Because he was one of the best-known scholars in the department, students in the graduate program were eager to gain his approval. A murmured word of encouragement from Prof. Coetzee was enough to make one's whole year. His disapproval, on the other hand, struck hard. In one seminar I attended, he listened carefully to a presentation given by one of my classmates on postmodernism. The woman, who is now widely published in the field, ended the presentation with a summation to which Prof. Coetzee replied, "I cannot agree with that." Dead silence reigned over the class, and the woman burst into tears. Prof. Coetzee looked on at us blankly, waiting for the next student to present.

He once dropped me an email asking me to call him in his office when I had a moment. It was unprecedented for Prof. Coetzee to ask for such a call, and I prepared myself by reading through my manuscript as it stood and trying to pre-empt what he might have to say. I finally phoned him and his dry voice came on the line. "Hi Ron," he started, "I just wanted to ask you about what happened on the last twenty pages of text you handed in for our meeting Thursday."

I waited, wondering what he wanted to know, but that was all he had to say. "Could I ask what was wrong with them?" I ventured.

"They read as if you wrote them directly from your own thoughts."

And that was it. I told him I would rewrite the pages, print them and bring them to his office that day. It would never have occurred to me to email the edited text to him and ask him to print it out, as so many of my students now do with me. I cancelled all of my

appointments for the day, set to work and when I was finished, I trudged up Devil's Peak to the University and his eyrie.

Prof. Coetzee met with me every two weeks and would have met with me more, if I had so desired, to talk about my fiction. On the morning of our first meeting I walked up the hot back stairs to his top floor office. He had been given what was clearly the most desirable office on that floor, which is set aside for senior staff members. It was Spartan. There were a few books on the shelves, some piles of student papers beside them, a small, wooden table with a computer pushed in the corner, and his barren desk by the door. I sat down in a straight-backed chair in front of him. My manuscript lay between us. The look he gave me on that first day was the look of a master chess player gazing at a neophyte opponent across a board, waiting for the opening move: inquisitive, polite, and challenging. I realized that I would have to drive the meeting, and fumbled through a few queries. When I was finished, I gathered up the edited manuscript and left. Because I had not prepared, the whole episode took perhaps ten minutes.

On every subsequent meeting I brought along typed queries that related to exact portions of text. Some of these meetings lasted 40 minutes or more. As I was now doing some teaching of undergraduates, I asked him how he might handle some of the problems I was having planning my own senior fiction course. His advice was to have students share their work and submit to open criticism from their peers. I asked him what I should do if a student was unwilling to let the class critique his or her work. "Inform them they cannot take the class," he said evenly. I still run my course that way.

Our relationship slowly became more cordial over the years. I would routinely drop off material to his small apartment close by where I lived, and every so often asked for extensions on my work, which he readily granted. I suppose the most important thing I learned from Prof. Coetzee was that fiction and editing fiction are important. I had of course read his novels by the time we met, and I was impressed by his ferocious hatred of

oppression, by his refusal to avert his writerly gaze from the grotesque and the painful. Before starting work on my MA, I had lived close-by Soweto teaching underprivileged secondary school students for just under two years, and was well aware of the brutality of the regime that was just leaving office when Prof. Coetzee and I began work. During the time when the minions of the apartheid government were routinely detaining and killing people without charge, or, as was the experience of one of my female colleagues, raping them in holding cells for the crime of having a lover of a different race, Prof. Coetzee was busy writing novels describing the apartheid government's ministers as tyrants, sadistic brutes, and, in *Age of Iron*, "a locust horde". At the time they were written, these words could get a South African jailed or worse. But because his novels are so complex, allegorical and sometimes downright baffling, the censor and his enforcers apparently left Prof. Coetzee alone. I know I myself would have worried in the dead of night when the South African police used to round up its malcontents had I written those things during the same time when many white intellectual leftists were being arrested for simply wearing a politically provocative T-shirt.

I also found that Prof. Coetzee made me feel like a legitimate writer, and because he was so rigorous, I have little fear of editors and agents. Prof. Coetzee, for all the mystique that surrounds him, remains to me a fairly straightforward person: a hard worker and a clear thinker in a world of talk show self-promotion and fashion-fiction. I have sold numerous documentary films, articles and pieces of fiction to numerous editors over the years and I have yet to find one who is as penetrating in their criticism as Prof. Coetzee. Studying under him gave me a kind of fearlessness that has served me well and has enabled me to edit the work of others for a living. This is no small gift.

*Former Trinity Writing Associate Ron Irwin (1992) teaches creative writing at the University of Cape Town.*

## Writing: Two Snapshots

By Patricia Pierson '93

When I think about writing, past and present, I think of two geographic images. The first is a winter landscape from my first shift in the Allan K. Smith Writing Center. It was evening, and the snow fell in little drifts around the bright lampposts lining the pathway outside. There were a couple of spanking-new computers and lots of comfortable chairs and couches to read on. Looking out the window that night at the falling snow, I felt that being a Writing Associate was the most exciting job I had ever had. It was so much fun to meet in seminar with the other tutors and to talk about essay writing and pedagogy. I look back on this as the time that I was invited to participate in a lively conversation about writing, a conversation I am still having today.

The next image I have is of my first day in graduate school, when I was driving onto a California campus on a sunny fall day. I was going to teach my first college composition class, and was pretty convinced that, at twenty-three years old and a new college graduate myself, I would quickly be revealed as the fraud that I felt I was. At the end of the college's long driveway, there was a roundabout with a huge flagpole in the middle.

When I drove past it, I entertained the idea of turning right around and going home.

Right now, I am many years past both of those scenes, working on a Ph.D. in comparative literature, and teaching composition and literature classes as my regular job. As a doctoral candidate in the humanities, I have found that writing is my most important task. It is something that constantly challenges me in the form of small things, such as literary translation exercises, or big things, such as the timed exams I wrote to advance to candidacy in my degree program. At the same time that I struggle with my own writing, I am instructing undergraduates in how to improve theirs. Even now that I am the instructor, there are so many times that I rely upon that most basic and essential teaching skill I learned as a Writing Associate: being able to engage my then-peers and now-students in a conversation about their ideas and their writing. Now, as a writing teacher, whenever I feel like driving into the roundabout and heading back home, I go back to those exciting moments in the Writing Center when, as a newly-minted peer tutor, I was able to ask total strangers about their writing. And they were happy to respond.

## Kate Adams and Beth Miller

We struggled over this assignment. We don't know why we thought this would be any easier than any piece of writing we have ever done. If there is one thing we learned from the Writing Associates experience, it was that writing isn't easy. Writing is a difficult, time-consuming, gut-wrenching process. Whenever our students tell us today "writing is just too hard," we tell them that it is hard for us too. We just have more comfort with the difficulty as an expected part of the process. Skill does bring with it ease – it just brings confidence and comfort.

While for some there is skill and that skill helps tremendously, there isn't enough writing skill possible to make writing easy. So inevitably we figured we would sit down over dinner one night and "bang out" the article touching on all the ways the Writing Associates program and the English 302 class in particular affected our lives. Then as dinner wound down, coffee and dessert were on their way, we realized all our discussion and planning had gotten nowhere. We had no outline, no thesis, no plan. All we had were nebulous feelings about confidence, support, encouragement, and self-fulfillment. How do you explain that one class determined your future, your career, your joys and your pains, as well as your best friend? There aren't words to describe how changed our lives became as a result of the Writing Associates Program. How funny that a class designed to enable our writing is the same class that stymies us now as we try to write about its affects on us.

The Writing Associates program gave both of us confidence when we each needed it most. It fulfilled an inner need we had to express ourselves academically in a way that did not only benefit us. The freedom the program gave us to legitimize our interests beyond the

academic, beyond the next essay or grade, provided a release of the stresses of college. Not only did the Writing Center become an exclusive refuge for each Associate, but also it represented a unique place on campus where we felt wholly confident and completely at ease. For us specifically it became what Virginia Woolf suggested all women writers needed, a room of our own. We felt comfortable and in control, able to help and support our peers and each other through tutoring and writing. There is nothing unique to our experience. Each new associate has his or her own road to the program. Beth was an IDP student ten years removed from academics. Kate's need for the program was not mirrored in her grades. We both had reasons to fear rejection. In fact, Kate was rejected the first time, but through perseverance and Dr. Wall's candid suggestions, she applied again and was successful. We both needed this program and its affect on our lives isn't quantifiable.

We are writers. We are teachers. We find ourselves happily mired in the academic world. That world isn't always a kind or easy one, but the need to cultivate and develop good writing in ourselves and others is immense and so we find ourselves at Trinity College or Quinnipiac University or Northwestern Connecticut Community College trying to recreate that experience we had in the Writing Associates Program. We don't believe we will ever find anything so perfectly designed for our needs and aspirations, but the experiences we shared with ourselves, with each other, and with our peers has permeated every aspect of our lives.

How has the Writing Associates Program affected us, both then and now?

We need to free-write on that for a little while longer.

# The Back Page

The Trinity College Writing Associates publish this journal on an annual basis for writers across the disciplines. Next issue: Spring 2005.

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## The Spring 2004 Staff of 115 Vernon:

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### Farewell to our Senior WA's:

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### Welcome to our First Year Associates:

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Julia Hoppock '06  
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