

Chapter 10. Personal Essays as a Path to Effective Transactional Writing, or No, You Haven't Always Wanted to Be a Doctor

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I am in a Scandinavian apartment with a five-day-old infant, his transitioning-in-to-no-longer-the-star brother, a slew of plastic trucks, a potty chair, air-drying laundry, an IKEA sheepskin, and a nonfiction book called *Severed Ties and Silenced Voices* about Swedish immigrants in Minnesota. My oldest daughter is married to a Swede, and it is a heat-wave July. My mind is far from English courses and classrooms.

I am negotiating with a toddler whose sense of danger and consequences is limited. Attempts at successful transactions can fail. What I want is maybe what he wants, but he is masterful at changing his mind. No breakfast slice of toast. Yes toast, but only if he puts it in the toaster that he can't reach. When the toast is covered with requested butter and strawberry jam, he doesn't want it. He lives in a bilingual home, and I cannot speak Swedish, his preferred language. Though he understands some English, he responds to me in a mix of accurate Swedish and words or sounds that, at times, even his parents cannot decipher. No wonder toddlers cry or try other rhetorical strategies, like saying "come," extending a hand to hold, and leading the way to a basket of construction site diggers and green tractors, a plush rabbit hiding under pillows, a closed door.

Not everyone gets what they want.

After summer slips away and I am guiding undergraduates (first-year at-risk writers, international students transitioning into the U.S. academic system, writing-emphasis minors, or seniors gunning for coveted healthcare slots), I give assignments that help students gain skills, knowledge, and rhetorical power to use when they try to get what they want. Practice in creative nonfiction—truth in content, artistry on the sentence level, and research—helps people on the cusp of adulthood become successful transactional writers. But to achieve this, my classroom companions and I must engage our hearts, minds, and hands in a risk-taking, yet lovely, bargain.

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It's the early 1980s. In the University of Iowa Writing Lab in the English-Philosophy Building, I travel between four students each hour. Part of a team of

grad students working shifts throughout the weekdays, my goal is to help at-risk writers gain fluency and confidence, ability to move beyond generalities, and understanding that their voices are valuable. We young teachers care about our assigned students who sit at carrels and tables; near the door are bins for portfolios of their growing body of semester's work. Some of us completed Teaching in the Writing Lab, taught by Lou Kelly, the Writing Lab director. Others are learning how best to listen to what students are saying and grasping the theory behind the practice of asking writers to talk on paper about what they know from life experiences. Our students commit to attending lab at designated times. This isn't a random drop-in, fix-it, good-bye operation.

Throughout the semester U of I lab students use pens and pencils to respond on lined paper to Lou's sequence of mimeographed invitations to write. Lab students (anxious or relieved, miffed some authority sentenced them to the lab, thrilled their "bad" writer label is evaporating) write on site: no hours-long or weeks-long procrastination. Students write what comes to their mind and receive individual encouragement and feedback often in the form of "tell me more" comments.

Specifics have power.

Lou is famous for wearing Birkenstock sandals. She integrates language acquisition research of James Britton, whom in her Louisiana accent she cozily calls "Jemma," into lab pedagogy. Lou's notion is that successful writing instruction starts with expressive writing for the self and branches into writing for a wider audience—just as babies make self-soothing noises, toddlers insert words about their family and daily activities into an off-tune *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, and elementary school children verbalize in paragraphs with folks outside their family. Britton calls these branches of communication transactional and poetic.

In his essay "Writing to Learn and Learning to Write," Britton says, "Transactional language is language that gets things done, language as a means. Poetic language is a construct, not a means but an end in itself" (107). Britton promotes the notion that when "you read a piece of transactional language . . . you take what you want from it and leave the rest . . . With transactional language, what goes on is *piecemeal* contextualization" (107). Poetic language, for Britton, is "language as art—poetic in the original Greek sense, something made, a verbal object" (106). He claims that "the further you move along this scale [from expressive] towards the poetic, the greater the attention paid to forms, to the organization of form" (107). The writer in the poetic realm wants the reader to engage in "contextualization *as a whole*" (107).

In the lab, where Lou's pedagogy is in sync with Britton's, no struggling writer immediately leaps into demoralizing thesis-driven analytical essays about literature. Academic writing instruction has been slim for our students: small-townners whose schooling is dictated by boards that hate to spend money, athletes from neighborhoods far from Iowa City passed from class to class despite limited communication skills because they score big for their high schools, graduate students from diverse continents who are hampered by limited written English fluency

or sense of organization. These writers have potential. Lou advocates a building-block approach. Learning to effectively craft essays about what you know transfers into more effectively crafting essays about new knowledge. Being a stronger writer means being an active reader. Being a stronger writer means embracing a messy process. In *From Dialogue to Discourse*, Lou writes,

you learned to talk by living in a family of talkers. And you learned to use words in meaningful contexts, you learned to accomplish things with words, by using what you had already learned in personal encounters with your family—as a group and as individuals in that group. These experiences prepared you to cope, with varying degrees of success, with the people and the situations you encountered in the world you discovered beyond your family . . . That is learning through living. And I think composition and speech courses at all educational levels should be an extension of that living-learning process. (5)

In my twenties, I am intrigued by the idiolect, dialect, and standard English mixed in my students' writing. I wonder how many surface errors I should or should not correct, whether commanding students to write about personal experiences is prying, or if content is more important than sentence-level refinements. I am startled by Lou's practice of wearing sandals in bone-chilling winter.

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This newborn in Sweden, his umbilical cord's bloody remnant drying until it falls away, operates on reflex, arms and legs flaying seemingly at frantic whim. Involuntary facial movements practice smiles, grimaces, and pursed lips as if blowing smoke rings. Crying alerts his parents who try to interpret. His whimpers sound, according to his toddler-brother, like a puppy. Newborns use helplessness to influence people who could feed them, diaper them, and ask health professionals for survival tips on their behalf.

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I am thrilled to be a writing lab teacher during grad school, negotiating rhetorical challenges and figuring out how to produce a worthwhile transaction for each person. As I do with other students on their first day in the lab, I ask Steve (a pseudonym) to write the first in Lou's series of "invitations" based on personal experience. He chooses a table in front of a window, his back to the room. After twenty minutes he puts down his pen, stares. I walk to his table, sit next to him. When I inquire if I may read what he wrote, Steve silently pushes his paper my direction. In printing that grows larger with each word, he writes, "I hate writeing. I hate this. I hate this. I feel like a pieace of shit. I feel like a iliterite fool because I can't even spell a word like pieace."

Reading Steve's words, I am embarrassed to be a writing teacher. Steve, a first-year college student, was humiliated by his high school teachers. Being sent to the lab by his U of I rhetoric teacher is new humiliation. Momentarily, I am uneasy, tongue-tied. Then I say I'm sorry he'd been made to feel that way. I ask him to tell me more about his feelings and experiences. Eyes focusing on the window to the outside world, Steve reveals a bit more, not much. Realizing his profound anger and embarrassment, I say he doesn't need to stay for the entire hour. As Steve leaves, I wonder if he'll ever come back.

I almost vow never to mention the word "error" to any student, and only to require them to work on content. Steve's teachers had focused on surface errors, cementing his notion that working on writing is a punishment to be dished out as long as he is in college. Each semester another hellish spelling lesson. In *Errors and Expectations*, Mina Shaughnessy writes,

By the time he reaches college, the BW [basic writing] student both resents and resists his vulnerability as a writer. He is aware that he leaves a trail of errors behind him when he writes. He can usually think of little else while he is writing. But he doesn't know what he can do about it. Writing puts him on a line and he doesn't want to be there. (7)

Steve feels "on the line." Two days later when his lab hour arrives, he doesn't show up. But the next week he returns and writes nearly a page. When I ask Steve why he came back, he says, "Because you didn't tell me what I did wrong."

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"I'm sorry," I say to my grandson, "but I don't understand everything you are saying to me. I only understand English, but you know two languages, English and Swedish. You are lucky." His third birthday is soon. His bilingual parents—his translators—are in the hospital, the baby just born, so repetition of single words at increasing volume doesn't help me understand. The toddler, my husband, and I are playing in a Swedish park, where a city librarian has created a temporary mini-library on a blanket spread under a group of trees. Bilingual, she chats with us three, invites the toddler to pick out a book, sit down, and listen while she reads aloud in Swedish. He has so much to say to this stranger. My husband and I stand back. I say, "He's probably thinking, 'Finally someone understands me.'"

After a few stories, we lure him to us with the promise of swinging.

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During the early 1980s, Susan Lohafer, in her *Advanced Expository Writing*, asks our class to write about something that irritates us, using three paragraphs: A, B, and C. Each paragraph should be about the same topic, but audience and purpose

varied. We grad students go home to typewriters and correction fluid; a few days after turning in our assignment, we receive her handwritten comments.

I talk about my husband. He and I are in different grad programs, have different schedules. During supper, he is often chained to NPR's *All Things Considered* listening to Susan Stamberg and Noah Adams, not talking with me. Midway into paragraph A, I write,

Every night it is the same. The addict walks in between 4 and 5 . . . I get a quick hello and then voices from Israel, from Capitol Hill, of BBC correspondents in Iran, of Big Ten economic department chairpersons from France and from Missoula speak to him. Reports about President Reagan and nuclear arms pull words from his mouth like "that idiot" and "what do they think they're doing?" He adds, "I can't believe it. Geez," as if he and the reporter were having an intimate conversation in a restaurant.

My teacher writes, "humorous, believable, telling."

In paragraph B, I plead to newspaper advice columnist Dear Abby to ask her readers to "flood NPR's headquarters with letters requesting that this husband-snatching program be taken off the air" and sign it "Silenced at Supper."

My teacher writes, "clever choice of format! Well done—especially the implicit parody of the Dear Abby genre itself."

Paragraph C follows a requested format of "inverted stance."

My teacher writes, "I guess I really wasn't convinced."

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In 1989, I begin my career as a part-time teacher at a small liberal arts college located in northeast Iowa. Some semesters, part-time should be called full-time. I routinely hand out assignments on Stardust, a creamy-white paper flecked with small colors, or paper of solid purple, blue, or green. Sometimes I give pencils as gifts. On day one, before students depart, they write in response to a set of self-as-writer questions; their words help me see their accomplishments and concerns. Interacting with first-year students in Introduction to College English, I incorporate an adaptation of Susan's assignment. This Irritant One and Irritant Two sequence ignites young writers returning to classes after fall break. They're back to doing their own laundry and living in a dorm. Fledglings are surprised when I ask them to switch audiences, challenge them to request action, not merely complain. It's nonfiction practice in successful transaction.

### **Irritant One: An Informal Exercise in Persuasion & Audience**

*As a way to work with persuasion, write about something that bothers you—something that irritates you, makes you wish it were different. It doesn't matter how big or small your irritant seems to others; what matters is that it troubles you. It might*

*be something as small as your work-study hours. It might be as big as a college policy. Maybe it's connected to a person back home or a government action. Maybe it's a particular point of view someone holds. It should not be something about yourself, or me, or anyone in our class. It should, though, be something that a particular person or group of people has power to change.*

*What exactly is it? What happened? Be specific. Why does it bother you?*

*Your readers are your classmates, so select a topic you feel comfortable having all of us know about. If you write about a person at school, don't use their real name. Write at least two, but no more than three, double-spaced pages.*

## Irritant Two: A Persuasive Exercise in Changing the Audience

*Now that you've written to us, a group who probably can't fix what bothers you, write about the same topic, but to a particular person—or group of people—who could fix your irritant. Include an explicit thesis—stating what you want done and why—in the first paragraph. Type this in letter format—as if you are really writing to that person or group. Length should be short and concise—the single-spaced letter must fit on one page.*

*If you wrote about your work-study hours, for instance, write to your supervisor. Tuition? Write to the Board of Regents who set the fees. An unfair governmental policy? Write to one of your country's leaders. An action many people do? Write a letter to a newspaper. The topic is the same, you are the same writer, but the audience changed. Use material from Irritant One—but shaped/trimmed/reworked for the new reader.*

In class, fifteen or so students sit in our customary circle to read each other's Irritant One pieces. They laugh and smile, show empathy, comment aloud when compelled, and hope to read everyone's complaint. My presence as a reader would be an intrusion so I hover at the edge. Near the hour's end, I hand out the Irritant Two assignment and ask the students to help each other figure out their new audiences.

Later, after reading Irritant One and Two at home, sitting near a Victorian parlor window with its bubbled and wavy glass, I comment on the tone of voice I hear and point to several especially persuasive areas. No one gets a letter grade, though I make sentence refinements and usually award a check-plus.

By the middle of the semester, these teenagers have improved their fluency and realize that, as Margaret Atwood says in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, “the secret is that it isn't the writer who decides whether or not his work is relevant. Instead it's the reader” (122).

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While my daughter naps in her apartment bedroom, her newborn lies wide-awake on his back, on my swaying thighs. The baby and I are on a fading green hand-me-down sofa, the perfect height for the standing toddler to kiss the baby's

head. Within moments, the toddler flexes his arm muscles, to show he is similar to Pippi Longstocking, his freckled hero who is not only strong but kind. The toddler's long-sleeved t-shirt features Pippi's likeness and signature stripes. As the boy transitions into a sibling who uses meltdowns to cope, he is entranced by a fictional Swedish girl with upturned pigtails who can lift her horse with one hand. Stories, true and invented, allow us to try on lives, help us see who we are, maybe should be. The infant sibling, though, is not yet a story gatherer or creator, but "programmed to search out faces, although this may just be because the two dark spots that are your eyes are the easiest things for them to focus on" (Alcock 17).

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After 2010, I negotiate for Introduction to U.S. Academic Writing to be added to our college's offerings. I've worked with first-year international students in the Introduction to College Writing classroom and realize most are superb linguists, fluent in numerous languages besides their mother tongue: global citizens. Yet they often haven't written the type of college-level essays expected in a U.S. educational system, have never argued a debatable thesis in prose, have respectfully deferred to the wisdom of elders, have followed a protocol neglecting documentation, have employed flowery phrasing with vague substance. Though verbally fluent and strong readers, some have not composed anything in the English language beyond clusters of sentences. Their strengths and concerns are similar to, but not the same as, native speakers of English, though both groups build on their high school accomplishments.

With support from division colleagues and a faculty vote, the course is approved. It's not an ESL course, nor necessary for all incoming international students to enroll; students invited to take the course are chosen by an administrator familiar with global transcripts. Sections meet twice a week for fall semester; students write about personal experience. A first assignment asks them to talk about one of their talents. The second might be a person or place within a country that represents home, and how interactions with that person or place give them strengths to take with them into this new place. Sometimes it seems like Lou and I are co-teaching, as these are adaptations from her series of writing lab assignments. I ignore surface errors and don't give any grades until after midterm. I move the students into thesis-driven writing about literature, after the personal essay format offers a foundation of practice in supporting general ideas with specifics, analyzing audience, and revising pieces they thought were finished.

My classroom companions—we are a community of writers—are swamped with adjusting to a fast-paced academic schedule, work-study shifts in the cafeteria, speaking to teachers, asking for help. They are searching for friends and teachers to trust, time to sleep, chances to call their families on other continents. Writing their thesis-driven analytical essay about a nonfiction book—such as *The Moth* or *The Girl Who Smiled Beads*—is often stress-producing. I measure their

essays against a standard grid to determine a sometimes-disappointing letter grade. These students don't know it yet, but at the end of the semester when they hand in their portfolios, they are better able to assess this paper as if they are the reader not the writer, and to articulate its problems and strengths with a cold eye.

To make self-critiquing skills stronger after the thesis-driven essay about literature, students dip into persuasive writing. In letter format, they tackle persuading a real person they know from home to come or not come to study at our college. Their argument combines the person's or outside reader's interests, the writer's experiences in college, quotes and paraphrases from an interview with a friend on campus, an interview with one of their current teachers, and information from the college catalog. It's nonfiction close to their hearts, as I assign the topic during registration for spring semester. Thinking about their chosen college's suitability for another person demands soul-searching about what they themselves are gaining or not gaining. So maybe joining a club to meet more people might be a good idea. Sending the letter-essay to the outside audience is optional.

At the end of the semester, students write answers to a set of self-reflection questions including "which essay do you think is your strongest and why?" The essay often chosen is Cultural Identity Persuasive Essay: Opinion and An Outside Source. The prompt asks for a four to six page, double-spaced, persuasive essay in which they support their opinion with specifics from personal experience of living in the US during recent months, include an explicit or implicit thesis, and incorporate quotes gained by interviewing a friend about whether or not they think of the writer as someone from another country:

You are living in a country where you didn't grow up, a guest in a culture you went to great efforts to join. Some of you have traveled in the US before this semester; some of you have never been in the US until you arrived for school. Who are you when you are here? Do you strongly identify yourself with your home country? Do people think of you as a country? Are you an outsider, looking in, or an insider? Are you yourself or a version of yourself?

In the semester's sequence of activities, this essay comes after I meet with each student individually about using specifics, and we go over sentence-level issues that give them trouble. They read aloud to me. Before they draft the Cultural Identity essay, we discuss as a class what they dislike about their present academic environment. They say some U.S. students think Africa is a country. Some U.S. students assume they own pet lions, or, if from Brazil, play soccer. There is too much food wasted in the cafeteria as evidenced by leftovers sent to the dish room. The tossed-around label "America" is demeaning, as it signals Latin America, Central America, and South America are inferior or non-existent. Not enough U.S. students want to get to know them.

Some concerns are heart-breaking, but adaptation strategies show strength. They know I am listening.

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Severed Ties and Silenced Voices, the nonfiction book I'm reading in Scandinavia—when I'm not washing dishes or playing a made-up game of *No! Nej!* with the toddler—traces interwoven tragedies of three immigrants who left Sweden during the Great Famine of the 1860s. The bleak trio and their kin are outsiders, users of two languages, Swedish of home and limited English of a place they might not want to call home.

My daughter first tried on life in Sweden nearly a decade ago; a new language and culture has joys and sorrows. Though she speaks Swedish successfully in her job, sometimes to receive what she absolutely needs, such as getting a medical professional to understand health concerns about the children or herself, her husband speaks on her behalf. The sound of her accent can be a blur to native speakers' ears, indicating she is “not really from here.”

According to *Your Baby's First Year*, before babies are born, they hear in the womb, though “it is not until 35 weeks [gestation] that they are able to hear the full range of sounds. The intonation and timbre of your voice and that of your partner are already very familiar to your newborn” (17). After birth, babies operate by reflex—startle, grasp, rooting, sucking. They can set off a reflex even by hearing their own crying.

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In the 1980s, the formidable Carl Klaus, in our Expository Writing Workshop, tosses out blunt comments. His strategy is to make us look closely at paper copies of our drafts and base analysis on sentences, paragraphs, and words—and to decide whether the overarching whole of an essay deserves long-term attention. Today it's my turn to be the center of roundtable critique. Readers speak in my essay's defense, but we're edgy. When it's over, I'm unhinged. It is hard to separate myself from a personal essay. Other pieces written for Carl's course I stash in a folder for a few years, reread with cold eyes, and revise for publication in regional literary magazines. Over time, practice and risk-taking mean discovering what's possible to say, and discerning what elements work, don't work, and why. Though crafting a particular essay can be a lengthy process, often in Carl's workshop it's as if I am a pale green luna moth granted a life span of about one week. I'm urgent, driven.

I don't yet know my hoped-for career as writing lab director will remain a day-dream, nor that I will morph into a “basic writing” classroom teacher who adds upper division courses such as Creative Writing: Nonfiction or Literary Ventures: Life Stories to her repertoire. But some of my grad student cohorts and I ponder how we would run peer workshops. I form a resolution. I will ask for honesty and helpful kindness, not mean-spiritedness, as readers write comments following a prepared set of questions meant to guide revision. *What are the draft's messages to you? What is especially effective? Why? What do you want to know more about?*

Offer at least three specific suggestions. Underline any hard to follow sentences, but don't make sentence-level corrections. Without re-looking at the draft, what images or scenes stay with you? A quick "this is great" or "this is horrible" is not an option. Each reader will sign their name to take ownership.

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A few weeks into September 2017, my Creative Writing: Nonfiction class reads Paul Kalanithi's beautifully crafted memoir *When Breath Becomes Air*. Before materializing mid-afternoon on Tuesdays and Thursdays, my student Carly Mester and her classmates write responses to prompts that aim to foster close reading. This jump-starts conversations about what the dying-while-living neurosurgeon says and how he relays messages about being a doctor and patient.

In their late teens or barely into their twenties, my student-writers prepare for their futures. Kalanithi died in March 2015, at age 37, closer to their age than mine. During one discussion, the focus pivots to whether a doctor being treated for stage IV lung cancer should perform brain surgery. Carly raises a hand, reveals she recently underwent brain surgery. Paul, she ventures, is smart enough to know when he should stop doing the job he loves. The junior data science major trusts him as narrator and character. By speaking aloud, Carly gives herself permission to wrestle with her unwanted medical story, put some control on the emotional and physical experience of allowing her skull to be opened. Carly shapes words for others to hear. She makes her personal connect to universal, untethers her internal voice from external silence.

Though Carly doesn't know it yet, this semester she'll build a collection of creative nonfiction pieces on the diagnosis and aftermath of a brain tumor. In the nonfiction textbook *Tell It Slant*, Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola suggest "sometimes, what matters to us most is what has mattered to the body" (7). In an email, Carly tells me she is "not one to talk much about my brain tumor and the consequential unilateral hearing loss stemming from this, apart from the occasional social media post. Because of this, most students and professors in courses I have taken have no knowledge of my disability." She does not "desire special attention." While brainstorming possible topics for assignments, Carly decides writing about her life situation is not a "cop out." It is freeing and frightening.

From September to November 2017, Carly drafts and polishes essays on a "golfball-sized dragon, medically categorized as large" that "was now discovered: full of rage, spitting fire, wanting to burn down my castle." "Slaying My Dragon," Carly's first essay, begins with the dateline August 1, 2016 and a neuro-ophthalmologist saying, "We'll just get an MRI done, just to rule out anything serious." In paragraph two, datelined August 2, 2016, Carly sits "on the chilled concrete steps outside of my workplace, hysterically sobbing over a phone call." The essay quickly abandons a diary format, its sections inconsistent. The tumor is "rare, benign" with imagery evoking kingdoms and battles in an undated paragraph

three. Undated paragraph four is a show of strength against “my dragon” and a list of abilities to summon for the “slaying” of the “beast”: “guts, resilience, intensity, toughness.” The structure switches to a series of paragraphs or sections talking about each of these words, including the information that she has two surgeries, but elaborating on only the second. The last paragraph keeps up the knight versus dragon imagery (though the essay never says “knight”) and reveals the September 8, 2016 date of the first surgery.

No wonder this tumor pummels my student’s mind: I dished out this Aspect of You memoir assignment close to the first anniversary of her initial brain surgery. The anniversary of the second surgery will be in late December 2016, just after the end of the semester. As a creative nonfiction writer, Carly is trying out format and metaphor to proclaim that she is victorious; she concludes “My dragon has been slayed, not only physically by teams of astounding surgeons from across the country, but mentally by myself as well. Its fire and rage are extinguished, no longer trying to burn down my castle. For I will not let it.”

The piece is a fine first attempt, but too empty.

Carly’s second essay about her brain tumor is a response to the assignment, *Rooted in Place*. This requires weaving research about a particular place and personal experience of being in that place. She titles her meditative essay “Abyss of Solitude.” Carly’s place is the Grand Canyon, the national park she and her family visit five days before her second brain surgery is performed in Phoenix. Carly sections consistently and uses a single asterisk between four sections spanning five pages. At Mather Point on the canyon’s south rim, Carly hints at the aftermath of the second surgery: “My soon-to-be-lost unilateral hearing takes in the chirping of the birds, the wind whistling through the rocks. I appreciate the magnificence before me.”

I learn she has a twin.

After a section ending with reflections on feeling “nothing but alone” while her family will have each other during her upcoming operation, and that “the loss of control has hit,” Carly writes this section of three paragraphs:

The Hopis are one of the oldest living cultures in documented history, with a past stretching back thousands of years. Referred to as *Öngtupqa* in the Hopi language, the Grand Canyon carries great spiritual significance for the Native American tribe that has long inhabited the region. Upon death, a Hopi is believed to pass westward through the *sipapuni*, or “place of emergence”—a dome of mineral deposits that sits upstream from the union of the Colorado River and the Little Colorado River inside the canyon—on his or her journey into the afterlife.

I mull over the concepts of death and the afterlife with increased frequency as each day closer to surgery approaches. The likelihood of demise under the knife in this procedure is well under

one percent. One percent is not zero. I am given waivers, signing that my knowledge of the risks is clear. At some point, death is inevitable. For a newborn little girl, exuding amazing health since the womb. For an ornery old man, lying in a hospice center. For a nineteen-year-old woman, living life seemingly normal until an attacker is uncovered in her brain. Not many things are certain. Death is.

About 4.5 million people visit the Grand Canyon each year, and an average of 12 people die there annually. The deaths can be attributed to anything from natural causes, medical issues, and suicide to heat, drowning, and traffic crashes. An average of two or three deaths per year are from falls over the rim. Whether control is lost in a person's hands or in higher jurisdiction, death cannot be escaped. The Grand Canyon covers hundreds of miles of Arizona desert, a human is only a speck in this area. The canyon does not have any regard for life, for its inanimate nature does not let it. As living creatures, cherishing life is possible. No matter the circumstances that death may arise, relishing time on Earth is vital.

Carly has eased herself into the slippery genre of creative nonfiction, where answers can be elusive.

The last in Carly's trio of essays connected to her brain surgery is titled "Hear Me Out," a revision of an earlier piece for an early November due date. This is the star product of her attempts to corral her altered life: specifics developing a narrower focus of hearing loss, more showing than telling, cliché phrasing absent, no dragon slaying or castle burning, a consistent diary pattern, threads of repeating imagery about her mother crying, a fast-paced present tense, streamlined inclusion of facts, developed scenes tied to some of the five senses, more sentence-level artistry. Of December 23, 2016, Carly writes,

Once again, events unfold just like the first surgery, except this time with my twin brother: check in, pre-op, paper gown, anesthesia, mother crying, reality fades to black, eight hours, ICU, oxygen mask, family appears.

A neurosurgery intern approaches me while I lie motionless in the ICU hospital bed. While he asks standard post-operative questions, I suddenly say, "I'm not sure if I can hear out of my right ear." The intern cups his hand over my ear and speaks. I still cannot decipher with certainty whether my hearing was damaged or not, for my mind is still cloudy and processing things around me at a lower-than-average mental speed. However, I do notice a slight muffling of the surrounding noises. I

look at my family and weep, creating intracranial pressure and pain in my freshly carved skull.

In an email to me, Carly says about her disability and writing, “I am not ashamed of what I have been through and it is a part of me, and you have instilled that mantra in me.” In spring semester 2018 Carly threads pieces of these essays about her tumor, two surgeries, hearing loss, and constant ringing in her ears into application material for a Pediatric Brain Tumor Foundation scholarship to help with college expenses. She wins.

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In *Prospect and Retrospect*, Britton writes that for a toddler, “talking to himself about what he is doing helps him in two ways: first, he interprets to himself the situation that confronts him, clarifying and defining it; secondly, he organizes his own activity within that situation. At this stage his monologue is in a strict sense ‘a running commentary’” (72). In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott writes, “tell the truth as you understand it” (226). Reflecting on nearing his final undergraduate years at Stanford before training to be a neurosurgeon, Kalanithi writes, “I was less driven by achievement than by trying to understand in earnest: What makes human life meaningful?” (30). Perhaps this familiar question is at the heart of allowing students to expand their rhetorical flexibility through crafting and reading creative nonfiction: these intersecting ways humans capture and examine life stories, shape the personal to have universal significance, wrestle with truths calling our names.

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Taking a break from childcare, my husband and I tread a gravel path at the Baltic Sea’s edge in Stockholm—an archipelago city of islands and water. We have just left the galleries of Waldemarsudde, the former home now art museum of Prince Eugen of Sweden, a landscape painter and art collector who lived from 1865–1947. We discuss the paintings of Sigrid Hjertén, a stranger to us until today. People and places, categorized by decades, speak from stark walls. A 1916 self-portrait in a black dress enhanced by a light blue yoke. Red lips sneering on a purple-suited man with a beaky nose. A full-lipped child looking toward the viewer while its parents are in profile. The artist invites me to gaze and judge, consider life, hers or mine, parceled into episodes, before my husband and I board an evening train.

With brush strokes and color, Hjertén, who died in 1948, has made a successful business transaction; I enter the museum gift shop hoping to buy postcards of her work.

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It’s spring 2018 in *Literary Ventures: Life Stories*. When introducing the unit on personal statements with a prescribed number of characters for an online

application, I spin a true tale of two scientists: my brother and my sister-in-law. One hires graduate students for wildlife field research in the United States and Canada. The other hires post-docs for experiments in a Midwestern plant pathology lab. One says if he is not reeled in by the end of the first paragraph, he doesn't read the rest. The other reads to the end of each statement. Applicants don't know if their readers (who put hopefuls in a yes, no, or maybe category) will be like my brother or sister-in-law. I urge my students to compose with honest specifics so they come alive in their bid for an internship, job, graduate program, scholarship.

Make someone care.

For inspiration, I read aloud a few examples from past students. My tip sheet urges them to begin a personal statement with a narrative, drop it, and pick it up in the end. I recite its list of familiar phrases and words to avoid: I remember, things, stuff, everyone, it was something that, I am someone who, I was given the opportunity to, out of the blue, and also, I began to realize, I started to panic, I believe, I could hardly contain my excitement, in today's society, I personally think, it made me the person I am today, memories that last a lifetime, I have always wanted to be a doctor.

I lose my filter. *No, you did not want to be a doctor when you were born! Or a physical therapist! Or a summer camp counselor! Or a CPA in Minneapolis! Or work for an NGO! Or even always help people! You were a baby! Delete the word always! And while cutting, reduce the number of times you use I, my, and it. Trim lengthy verb conjugations to past, present, or future. You'll have better results—trust me!*

My charges are surprised I can be bossy.

Our three-week Personal Statement unit includes one-on-one brainstorming conferences (where I pose questions and jot down spoken answers for on-paper-take-away), a peer workshop on a draft-in-progress, a peer workshop on an improved draft, and a finished-for-now living document to change as needed. If a student already submitted a personal statement for graduate school or a job, they write a fresh one. Selecting truths to persuade an audience can be tough. Neither cockiness nor meekness is persuasive. Because it's easy to sound like a resumé list, blending specifics with analysis is challenging. Approaching a personal statement as a personal essay—a portrait, or perhaps essay of ideas with a thesis, supported by life experience specifics and analysis—can be persuasive. Just ask Meredith Arpey, a senior who *always* wanted to be a doctor.

After a class period early in the semester, while other students are clearing out or chatting, Meredith inquires if I will read a personal statement that she already sent to medical schools which rejected or ignored her. I skim silently while she fusses with her backpack. The statement presents Meredith as a generic shadow rather than a capable person. The first paragraph is visually off-putting. A colon after the lead sentence, an indented long quote from a story whose author and title aren't mentioned, a quote within the quote, and a flush left return to the long quote's conclusion. Meredith's eight-line quote from "a father of a fifteen-year-old boy" starts, "It begins with a young boy on the beach amongst thousands of

starfish.” Meredith tacks on some attributes “a great physician” should possess, such as “weighing risks and benefits,” says “death is a natural part of life,” and ends the paragraph with “I see traits of a physician in that young boy on the beach, and I see those traits within me.” Talking with Meredith, I discover she had summoned the ghost of Loren Eiseley and his much-googled Star Thrower, a story not hers to tell.

Paragraph two further buries Meredith’s personality and accomplishments in, for example, a random dance marathon reference and vague sentences, including “pediatricians have a unique opportunity to serve as role models for sick children.” Paragraph three begins, “There is one unifying characteristic I have noticed among all the physicians with whom I have interacted and who have become my role models: their ability to connect with and develop relations with their patients, who come from all walks of life.” She finishes by connecting “fifteen years of playing club and collegiate soccer” with “environmental science,” and generalities applying to teammates playing with a ball and students having a major.

I say, “Meredith, I would not have let you send this personal statement. There isn’t anything compelling enough to make a reader care. But you can write a strong piece. Think of this one as practice. Did anybody besides you read this?” To her answer, I say, “Parents are not necessarily the best judges, because they love you.”

Meredith accepts this challenge: she wants to win.

After numerous drafts of a start-from-scratch personal statement and conferences where I question her abstract claims and push her to craft true scenes, Meredith presents herself as a multifaceted person who comes alive on the page. Flood waters and mosquitoes bookend her finished statement. In her soul-searching writing process, Meredith realizes she can happily see herself in a public health graduate program, not medical school. After completing a public health program, maybe she will try for medical school; maybe, though, public health is her true calling. Meredith’s revised statement begins:

On Wednesday, August 24, 2016, I awoke to see my favorite place on Luther College’s campus under four feet of standing water. It was pre-season of my junior collegiate soccer season, and our team was looking promising; we had only graduated three seniors, and we were excited to get the season underway. Instead, our practice and well-kept game fields looked like a mosquito breeding ground. Our community was more important than any practice, so 150 Luther student athletes flooded Decorah to push water out of strangers’ homes, salvaging all we could. This unfortunate event instilled a deep commitment to help communities determine and better understand ways to protect and enhance their public health.

As reader, I am hooked. Paragraph two talks about how “pursuing a degree in environmental science opened my eyes to worldwide risks created by a changing



environment.” Meredith illustrates that claim with specifics that include “an environmental policy and politics course gave me insight into issues such as China’s one-child policy and water quality in Flint, Michigan.” Paragraph three discusses her “senior capstone research paper on ways a changing climate will affect the spread of malaria primarily in African countries” and that “malaria control leads to resistance to anti-malarial drugs and poses further environmental and individual health concerns.”

The personal statement is about Meredith. Paragraph four reveals she was a summer “intern at the State Hygienic Laboratory at the University of Iowa” where in the sample preparation lab, she “completed ancillary tasks including stocking and cleaning glassware, disposing of drinking water as well as oil and water samples, preparing standard solutions, and chopping and pulverizing foliage samples for testing.” Paragraph five shows her compassion for strangers through sponsoring “an impoverished Haitian child, ensuring he eats daily and attends a school where he can receive attention from a nurse” and being “heavily involved in Dance Marathon, an organization that provides emotional and financial support for children battling life-threatening illness at Children’s Miracle Network hospitals.”

Who knew, until now? Meredith concludes:

A few weeks after the Decorah flood that drowned our first five home matches of the season, the breeding ground dissipated, leaving a terrible smell, an excess of mosquitoes, and a muddy playing surface. Even though our soccer team dedicated our practice times to serving our community, for the first time in Luther College Women’s Soccer history, we made it to the second round of the national tournament. We lost to the eventual national champions, but more importantly, we helped our town recover. Though my competitive playing days are now over, I remain dedicated to and excited for a lifetime of learning, working with others, and serving both the public and the environment, and enthusiastically look forward to the next steps in my education and career.

This young person welcomes me, her reader, into her life experiences and yearning with images of water and mosquitoes. Meredith “pledges,” as Miller and Paola say, “to be as honest as possible with the reader and to make this conversation worthwhile” (149). Meredith is accepted at seven out of the eight schools that receive this personal statement in her application.

Meredith is accomplishing what she wants: a life-enhancing transaction.

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Now a seasoned professional with publications and a wealth of spiral-bound blue grade books, I can’t shake a sometimes frustrating conundrum. I graduated

from the University of Iowa's Master of Expository Writing Program during its trail-blazing infancy, when creative nonfiction was not a much-used phrase. Under the leadership of Richard Lloyd-Jones, my companions Lou, Susan, and Carl intersected with my journey inside the English-Philosophy Building, fostering my desire to become an effective, intellectually curious, and confident teacher and writer. The academic world I encountered after my Iowa City life is hierarchical. Some colleagues question the unfamiliar M.A. degree. Do I fit in their Ph.D. scheme? Years after the innovative program's name is changed to Nonfiction Writing Program (NWP), offering an M.F.A. "terminal" degree, the then-director of the NWP assures me I am grandfathered in and belong to the respected M.F.A. clan.

But who am I and what do I say in a Notes on Contributors entry? According to *Your Baby's First Year*, "Newborns are very sensitive to smell and your unique body smell is an important part of how they learn to recognize you" (17). For sure, I *never* wanted to be a doctor.

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The end of August 2018. I toss around the notion that maybe this academic year is my swansong. Teaching writing is labor intensive. Maybe this is the last of the hundreds of students, thousands of papers, and hours of creating or revising sequences of meaningful nonfiction activities to help students gain confidence on the page, preparing them for the successful transactions they want in college and beyond.

I flirt with revisiting a languishing memoir a decade in the making, compiling my newspaper essays about British royal watching in which I'm a quirky character, drafting a personal essay about a Victorian-era Dollar Princess from the Midwest who married an impoverished English lord. I conjure my University of Iowa teachers as I walk from my house to day one of classes. On my way home, fresh batches of *Self as Writer* responses in my satiny-beige backpack, I fall into rhythm. On-the-cusp-of-adulthood souls, some frightened and some eager, willing to learn, are entrusted to me for a short time. It is an honor to be their guide as we engage in our risk-taking, yet lovely, bargain.

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Within hours, my husband and I will leave for the United States. A ripened bouquet of pink roses and airy leaves sent by my daughter's Swedish co-workers, and zinnias picked from a community garden plot are on the kitchen table alongside a roll of paper towels and last night's plastic bib decorated with a smiling purple elephant riding a scooter. Pushing three miniature cars and trucks on the tabletop, the toddler is singing in his version of Swedish about his personal world to the tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. His song names his family, including the baby, and wee-oh, wee-oh sounds of an ambulance's siren, a vehicle crash. He

says the word “crash” in English. I understand the concept as this is his morning pattern, his ritual while lying in bed, faintly awake, or after he pads into another room, holding his plush rabbit.

This has been my life for over three weeks, this gentle quietness my child’s child and I share before the others in the household, including the newborn, awaken. *Severed Ties and Silenced Voices* is back on a bookshelf. The toddler straddles two languages and has no firm concept of time, yet internalizes that we are connected through transactions and love.

And sometimes through toast smeared with strawberry jam.

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