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P A R T I I

*Teaching and Writing
Creative Nonfiction*

Teaching College English as a Woman

PROLOGUE

*D*uring my first year of doctoral work I spent all my savings on a lifetime membership in NCTE. Already, in my first year as a TA, I knew I loved to teach. Nothing less than a lifetime commitment to the profession I was preparing to join could express that love.

It has taken thirty years to find the voice, the place in the profession, to tell the stories that follow. When the events occurred, I would never discuss them, silenced by guilt, shame, anger, and embarrassment. Like discussing childbirth (which for the same reasons I never did either until a recent reunion with college roommates), it would not have been ladylike. But two years ago at a summer conference, a one-hour session on “gender and teaching,” attended by women and men alike, metamorphosed into two nights of telling life-saving stories.¹ And so I tell you what it has been like to teach college English as a woman, to become a member of the profession I now and ever embrace anew. Call me Lynn.

I. MY JOB AS VENTRILOQUIST’S DUMMY

Once upon a time, as a newly minted Ph.D. with a newly minted baby, I got the best part-time job I’ve ever had, a half-time assistant professorship at a distinguished Midwestern university. Unusual for the early 60s, and unique to that institution, my job was created in response to the dean’s estimate of an impending shortage of faculty. “It’s going to be hell on wheels faculty-wise around here for the next five years,” he said. So I was hired for exactly half of a full-time job: half the teaching load, half the advising and committee work, half the regular benefits. Our second child was born, conveniently, during my second summer vacation. Though not on a tenure track, I did have a parking space; it seemed a fair exchange. I taught freshman composition, of course, and sometimes sophomore lit surveys. I even taught in a room that overlooked the playground of our children’s nursery school.

During the whole five years I taught there, I never expressed an original opinion about literature, either in class or out. In the course of my very fine

education at one of our nation's very finest universities, taught entirely by men except for women's phys. ed. where they allowed a woman to teach us how to develop graceful "posture, figure, and carriage," I learned, among other things, that only real professors had the right to say what they thought. Anyway, in the 50s there were no concepts, no language to say what I, as a nascent feminist critic, wanted to say. I tried, in a fifteen-page junior-year honors paper, "Milton's Eve did too have some redeeming virtues." The paper was returned, next day, in virgin condition, save a small mark in the margin on page two where the professor had apparently stopped reading, and a tiny scarlet C discreetly tattooed at the end. In shame and horror at getting less than my usual A, I went to see the professor. "Why did I get a C?" I was near tears. "Because," he said in measured tones, drawing on his pipe, "you simply can't say that." End of discussion. I did not sin again.

I had majored in English because I loved to read and to write, and I continued to love reading and writing all the way through graduate school. But somewhere along the line, perhaps through the examples of my professors, measured, judicious, self-controlled, I had come to believe that my job as a teacher was to present the material in a neutral manner, even-handedly citing a range of Prominent Male Critics, and let the students make up their own minds. It would have been embarrassing, unprofessional, to express the passion I felt, so I taught every class in my ventriloquist's dummy voice. Indifferent student evaluations reflected the disengagement this approach provoked—"although she's a nice lady," some students added.

Editing textbooks didn't count. Only the other women who taught freshman composition part-time took this work seriously. (Collectively we were known to the male full-time faculty as the "Heights Housewives," as we learned from the captions on the witchlike cartoons that would occasionally appear on the bulletin board in the English Department office.) I had collaboratively edited a collection of critical essays on Faulkner intended for freshman writing courses, signing the book contract in the hospital the day after the birth of my first child. I was working on two other collaborative texts. The English Department invited my Faulkner collaborator, a gracious scholar of international renown, to come to campus to lecture on the subject of our book, but they did not invite me to either the lecture or the dinner for him. The university's public relations spokesman nevertheless called and asked if I'd be willing to give a cocktail party for him, at my expense. That may have been the only time I ever said "no" during the whole five years I taught there.

Freshman composition didn't count. I was so apprehensive about publishing original writing in my own name that when my husband, Martin, a

social psychologist, and I collaborated on an article about a student's writing process, I insisted that we submit it in Martin's name only. Only real professors with full-time jobs could publish academic articles, and I knew I wasn't one. *College English* accepted it by return mail. "Now do you want your name on it?" Martin asked, "you should be first author." "Yes," I said, "Yes" (L. Bloom and M. Bloom).

My work in nonfiction didn't count. I proudly told the department chair that I was beginning research on a biography of Dr. Benjamin Spock, soon to retire from his faculty position at the same university. I had access to all the primary sources I needed, including Spock himself. "Why don't you write a series of biographical articles on major literary figures?" asked our leader, whose customary advice to faculty requests for raises was "Diversify your portfolio." "Once you've established your reputation you can afford to throw it away by writing about a popular figure." I thanked him politely and continued my research, a logical extension of my dissertation study of biographical method. I could learn a lot about how people wrote biographies, I reasoned, if I wrote one myself. And because I couldn't say to the children, "Go away, don't bother me, I'm writing about Doctor Spock," I learned to write with them in the room (see chapter eleven).

Ultimately, I didn't count either. A new department chairman arrived soon after I began the biography. His first official act, prior to making a concerted but unsuccessful effort to abolish Freshman English, was to fire all the part-time faculty, everyone (except TAs) who taught the lowly subject. All women but one. He told me privately, in person; a doctorate, after all, has some privileges, though my office mate learned of her status when the chairman showed a job candidate the office, announcing "This will be vacant next year." He was kind enough to write me a letter of recommendation, a single sentence that said, "Mrs. Bloom would be a good teacher of freshman composition." I actually submitted that letter along with a job application. Once.

II. ON THE FLOOR WITH THE KITTY LITTER

One of the textbooks so scorned during my first part-time job actually got me my first full-time job, two years later. The department had adopted it for the freshman honors course, and the chair had written an enthusiastic review. Then, dear reader, he hired me! This welcoming work enabled me to find my voice. After ten years of part-time teaching, as bland as vanilla pudding, I felt free to spice up the menu. Being a full-time faculty member gave me the freedom to express my opinions about what we read and wrote, and to argue and joke with my students. My classes became noisy,

personal, and fun. Two years later, I received tenure, promotion, and an award for good teaching. But after four years in Indiana, my husband was offered a job in St. Louis too good to turn down. I resigned to move.

My voice was reduced to a whisper. I could find no full-time job in St. Louis in that inhospitable year of 1974 when there were several hundred applicants for every job. In hopes of ingratiating myself with one or another of the local universities, I taught part-time at three, marginal combinations of writing and women's studies. I taught early in the morning, in mid-afternoon, at night, coming and going under cover of lightness and darkness. It didn't matter, for no one except my students knew I was there anyway. Department chairmen wouldn't see me; with insulated indifference, faculty—even some I'd known in graduate school—walked past my invisible self in the halls. For administrative convenience, I was paid once a semester, after Thanksgiving, \$400. Fringe benefits, retirement, the possibility of raises or continuity of employment were nonexistent. At none of the three schools did I have any stationery, mailing privileges, secretarial help, telephone, or other amenities—not even an ID or a library card. I was treated as an illegal alien. Nowhere did I have an office, until I finally begged for one at the plushiest school, frustrated and embarrassed at having to confer with my students in the halls on the run. After several weeks, the word trickled down that I could share space with a TA—and, as it turned out, her cat, which she kept confined there. This office symbolized my status on all three jobs. It was in a building across campus from the English Department, where no one could see us. It was under a stairwell, so we couldn't stand up. It had no windows, so we couldn't see out, but it did have a Satanic poster on the wall—shades of the underworld. The TA had the desk, so I got to sit on the floor next to the kitty litter. I stayed there, in the redolent dark, for a full thirty seconds.

Then my voice returned, inside my head this time. Its message was powerful and clear, "If I ever do this again, I deserve what I get." I did finish the semester. But I never went back to that office. And I never again took another job that supported such an exploitative system, even though that meant commuting two thousand miles a week to my next job, a real job, in New Mexico. "Go for it," said Martin, and took care of the children while I was away.

III. POISON IN THE PUBLIC IVY

Four years later we moved again to eliminate my cross-country commute. Through research support, graduate teaching, directing a writing program, and supervising some sixty TAs and part-time faculty, my New Mexico job

had given me a grownup voice. I was beginning to talk to colleagues throughout the country, at meetings, through my own publications and those of my students, and I was looking forward to continuing the dialogue on the new job as Associate Professor and Writing Director at a southern, and therefore by definition gracious, “public ivy.”

As I entered the mellowed, red-brick building on the first day of class, a colleague blocked the door. “We expected to get a beginning Assistant Professor and wash *him* out after three years,” he sneered. “Instead, we got *you*, and *you’ll* probably get tenure.” I took a deep breath and replied in a firm voice, “You bet.”

“We” contains multitudes; one never knows at the outset how many. Although the delegated greeter never spoke to me again, it soon became clear that *we* meant a gang of four equal opportunity harassers, all men, all tenured faculty of long standing, all eager to stifle my voice. Their voices, loud and long, dominated all department and committee meetings and, word had it, the weekly poker games where the decisions were really made. I could do no right. I was too nice to my students; everybody knows that undergraduates can’t write. I was merely flattering the students by encouraging them to publish; that they did indeed publish showed they were pandering to the public. My writing project work with schoolteachers was—aha!—proof that I was more interested in teaching than in literary criticism; misplaced priorities. My own publications, ever increasing, were evidence of blatant careerism. I received a number of grants and fellowships: just a way to get out of teaching. The attendant newspaper publicity, though good for the school, reflected badly on my femininity.

Although I was heard in class and increasingly in the profession at large, I had no voice in the departmental power structure. The gang of four and, by extrapolation, the rest of the faculty, already knew everything they needed to know about teaching writing, they’d learned it long ago as TAs. Faculty development workshops were a waste of time. The college didn’t need a Writing Director anyway; the students all wrote well, the faculty all taught well, and Southern Public Ivy had gotten along for two hundred years without a Writing Director. Why start now? As a way to forestall my imminent tenure review, this hospitable group initiated a review of the position of Writing Director. If they could demonstrate that there was no need for the job, despite the thousand students enrolled every semester in required Freshman English, not to mention the upper-division writing courses, oversubscribed and with waiting lists, and the initiative in other departments for a writing-across-the-curriculum program, I would not have the opportunity to come up for tenure. Because the review was, of

course, of the job and not of the person in it, I, of course, could not be consulted; that would compromise the impartiality of the process. Nor could I discuss the ongoing review with colleagues; ditto. Or the department chair; ditto. Or the dean; ditto, ditto.

The review began in September of my second year. Nobody identified its criteria; nobody told me what it covered; I could not ask. Occasionally a friendly colleague would sneak into my office during that very long fall semester and tell me that he was so anguished by the proceedings he wanted to resign from the review committee; *sotto voce* I urged him to stay on it. A borrowed voice was better than none. Rumor had it, I heard, that I was talking to a lawyer. How unprofessional. Or was I? I whispered. The campus AAUP president heard about the review; write me a letter, he said, outlining what's going on, and I'll send it to the national office. So I did. And he did.

Then, on a clear crisp evening in January, tenure became irrelevant. Our family dinner was interrupted by the phone call that every parent dreads. Come right away.

We saw the car first, on a curve in the highway near the high school, crushed into a concrete telephone pole. Next was the rescue squad ambulance, lights revolving red and white, halted amidst shattered glass. Then the figure on the stretcher, only a familiar chin emerging from the bandages that swathed the head. "He was thrown out of the back seat. The hatchback door smashed his face as if he'd been hit with an axe," said the medic. "I'm fine," said our son, and we responded with terror's invariable lie, "You're going to be all right."

After six hours of ambiguous X-rays, clear pictures finally emerged long after midnight, explaining why Laird's eyes were no longer parallel—one socket had simply been pulverized. The line of jagged-lightning stitches, sixty in all, that bolted across his face would be re-opened the next day for reconstructive surgery. "Don't go out in a full moon," sick-joked the doctor, howling like a banshee, "People will mistake you for a zombie."

Laird had to remain upright for a month so his head would drain, and our family spent every February evening on the couch in front of the wood stove, propping each other up. Every day the Writing Directorship review committee asked by memo for more information; every day I replied, automatically. I do not know, now, what they asked; I do not know, now, what I answered; or what I wrote on student papers; or what we ate, or read, or wrote checks for during that long month.

But I do know that in early March the AAUP's lawyer called me and his message was simple: "A university has every right to eliminate a position,

or a program, if there is no academic need, if there are no students in it, for example. But it cannot eliminate a position just to get rid of the person holding the job. If Southern Ivy does this, they'll be blacklisted." He repeated this to the department chair. When the department voted, in its new wisdom, in late April to table the review of the Writing Directorship until after I had been reviewed for tenure, a friend, safely tenured, whispered to me, "You just got tenure." The thick copies of the committee's review were never distributed; I was awarded tenure the next year—and left immediately to become department chair at Urban State University, tenured, promoted to Professor, with authority to have an emphatic voice. The review was never reinstated, says a faculty friend still at Southern Ivy; for six years the Writing Directorship went unfilled.

IV. ESCAPING THE RAPIST

Fortunately, even as department chair I could continue to teach, and I often taught *Women Writers*. One day my class, not only writing-intensive but discussion-intensive, began arguing about Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Some claimed that Arnold Friend, "thirty, maybe," who invades Connie's driveway in "an open jalopy, painted a bright gold," his eyes hidden behind mirrored, metallic sunglasses, is in love with the pubescent teenager about whom "everything has two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home." Others asserted that from the moment they met, Arnold's "Gonna get you, baby," signaled the abduction with which the story concludes. Though he does not lay a finger on his victim, Friend does, they pointed out, threaten to burn down her house and kill her parents—scarcely acts of love. After screaming for help into a disconnected phone until she loses her breath, Connie has no more voice and walks sacrificially out into the sunlight and Friend's mockingly waiting arms: "What else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in? . . . You don't want [your family] to get hurt. . . . You're better than them because not a one of them would have done this for you."

Such compelling evidence clinched the debate, and I decided to reaffirm the students' interpretation with a life-saving story of my own. "A decade earlier," I began, taking a deep breath. I had never thought I would tell this story to my students. "My husband, adolescent sons, and I were camping in Scandinavia. But it was a dark and stormy night in Stockholm, so we decided to spend the night in a university dorm converted to a youth hostel for the summer. At ten p.m., the boys tucked in, Martin and I headed for the showers down the hall. He dropped me off in front of the

door decorated with a large, hand-lettered sign—Damar. Women. Frauen. Dames.—and went to the men’s shower at the other end of the long corridor. As I groped for a light switch in the pitch black room, it struck me as odd that the lights were off at night in a public building. The room was dead silent, not even a faucet dripping. I walked past a row of sinks to the curtained shower stall closest to the window, where I could leave my clothes and towel on the sill.

“As I turned, naked, to step into the shower, a man wearing a bright blue track suit and blue running shoes shoved aside the curtain of a shower stall across the aisle and headed toward me. I began to scream in impeccable English, ‘Get out! You’re in the women’s shower.’ He kept on coming. My voice had the wrong words, the wrong language. I screamed again, now into his face, looming over mine as he hit me on the mouth. I screamed again, ‘Get out!’ as he hit me on the cheek. My mouth was cut, I could taste the salty blood as he hit me again in the head. I began to lose my balance. ‘If he knocks me down on the tile,’ I thought, ‘he’ll kill me.’ Then I thought, still screaming, ‘I don’t want my children to hear this.’

“Then time slowed down, inside my head, the way it does just before you think your car is going to crash when it goes into a skid, and the voices, all mine, took over. One voice could say nothing at all for terror. I had never been hit before in my life. How could I know what to do? The man in blue, silent, continued to pummel my head, his face suffused with hatred, his eyes vacant. Another voice reasoned, ‘I need to get my clothes and get out.’ ‘But to get my clothes I’ll have to go past him twice.’ ‘I should just get out.’ Still I couldn’t move, the whirling blue arms continued to pound me, I was off balance now and afraid of falling. Then the angry message came, etched in adrenaline, ‘I didn’t ask for this, I don’t deserve it, and I’m not going to take it.’ I ran naked into the corridor.”

The bell rang. “You’re right,” I said. “Oates’s story is about violence, not love.” The students, whose effervescent conversation usually bubbled out into the corridor as they dispersed, filed out in silence.

That was on a Thursday. The following Tuesday, an hour before our next class meeting, a student, svelte and usually poised, came into my office, crying. “What’s the matter?” I asked. “Saturday night,” she said, “I was walking home alone—I live alone—and heard the phone ringing in my apartment. When I rushed in to answer it I must have left the door open. Because after I’d hung up, when I went into the kitchen a man stepped out from behind the curtain, grabbed me from behind, and shoved a gasoline-soaked rag over my face. As he began to wrestle with me, he ripped my shirt trying to throw me down. Suddenly I heard your voice in

my head, repeating the words you'd said in class, "I didn't ask for this, I don't deserve it, and I'm not going to take it." I ran, screaming, into the street and flagged a passing policeman. You saved my life."

"No," I said, "you saved your own life."

CODA

The computerized NCTE membership card says that my lifetime membership expires in 1999. As the date draws closer, I write headquarters about this. Several times, and still no answer.

I will have to raise my voice. My commitment to teaching English is, after all, for life.

NOTE

A variation of this chapter has been published as "Hearing Our Own Voices: Life-saving Stories" in *Writing Ourselves into the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies*, ed. Sheryl I. Fontaine and Susan Hunter (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992), 89–102.