

## Free Writing · *Sondra Spatt Olsen*

September 28

WHAT AM I doing here, trapped in a grammar class? It would be worse if I weren't the teacher. Students bent over your ragged notebook paper, do you know who you are, and where we are going? Free Writing means writing whatever comes into your head. Don't let those pencils slip off your damp little scraps. Don't stop; don't think. If you get blocked, just repeat the same words till you break through.

Free Writing will set your creative juices flowing. That's what Mildred, Director of Composition, said. And even if it doesn't, it takes up ten minutes of this interminable remedial hour. Wastes ten minutes, that's what I say, me, Fortune's free writing fool—eleven years of experience teaching my guts out, but not the Director of Composition, no, not me. Many are called but few are chosen. We also serve who only sit here till ten o'clock at night in this windowless building. Teaching the Unteachable. Reaching the Unreachable. It's okay if you really want to do it. But I don't really want to do it.

Must keep busy scribbling, though. Theme paper, smooth, white, available at any stationery store. It's the third night of the term, for godsakes, and how many students made it to a stationery store? Two out of twenty. My brain cells are popping one by one, and if I find free writing hard, how are you faring, poor bastards?

May Mildred be smashed with heavy thesauruses, smitten with semicolons, crushed by colons. If I get the chance, I'll wring her shallow chicken's neck. False, smug, self-righteous, hypocritical. O for a stream of icicles freezing her face! O dull housewife with a duplicating machine! She brags like a horse. She's teaching Romantic Poetry tonight in this very building, upstairs where there are snot-green industrial carpets, very chic, while I labor in a bare room, formerly an animal laboratory, drain in the middle of the floor, air conditioning booming off the formica like Victoria Falls.

I fancy I hear Mildred's grating voice through the ceiling, shredding the Odes. Faint melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter. I fast, I faint, I die, I try. If you don't like my harmonica, don't blow it. If you don't like my harmonica, don't blow it.

Stop this nonsensical parody of the only world the world has ever known. Get on with your class, Miss Thirty-Two-Year-Old Free Writer. Start the semicolons rolling.

September 30

Now, ladies and gentlemen, ten minutes ago I was crying in the toilet of

the East Science Facility. Would that interest you if you knew it? Spinster schoolteacher, tough old birdy, meets long-lost lover in dim corridors of the East Science Facility. Almost knocks him over, in fact, since she, always buxom, has gotten very tubby in her loneliness and frustration, and he, always on the small side, has gotten weedy thin in whatever sick situation he's creating nowadays. Separation obviously isn't good for either of these birds, but after two years do they fall into each other's arms and cuddle, crying, "Well-met, well-met," all hugs and kisses and echoes of old ecstasies?

No, sirs and mesdames, they are cold. "How are you, Ivor?" Cold, cold. "Teaching one course while working on your dissertation?" Fine, good. Still working on your bloody dissertation. Too much screwing; one's vital juices stop flowing. (You told me *I* was preventing you from finishing your dissertation, dog, remember?)

"You, Helaine? Still working on your novel?" Sure, pal, would you like to see it? I've got it here in my back pocket. Just dash it off by candlelight after teaching four overcrowded composition courses. A chapter a day keeps the doctor away. Beats masturbation.

Do we exchange confidences? Relive old frolics? Review lusty quarrels and juicy brawls? No, we chat coldly. You look as distinguished as ever, Ivor. Do you still wear tattered underwear? Still shower with a cap on, like a girl? Still thrash around in your bed like a sardine? Publish essays in the *Pisspot Review*?

Perhaps you saw me crying, sisters. Through the mile-wide crack in the toilet door. I was in the cubicle that locks, sobbing into the corrugated toilet paper. I saw you, Charlene, standing in the spot of peril by the mirror (miraculous gray hair detector), getting cracked by the door each time it opened. You gave me a searching anthropologist's look. Some tribes would rather be seen peeing than crying. I pretended to have a heavy cold, my stiff upper lip like a handball court.

Oh, Ivor, why didn't you just put your hand on my cheek and say, "There, there, old duck. If you lose some weight, you can hold out another fifty years?" Or why didn't I just silently kiss your hand?

We want to be happy, but how are we going to do it? My class wants to be happy, but how are they going to do it? We want to be loved, but how are we going to do it?

These questions ask themselves.

October 5

Awake, sluggards! Cast off your multiple choice exams. Throw your textbooks out the window. (But there are no windows here—no matter.) Anoint yourselves with salad oil. Put on your royal bathrobes; the feast of meaningless mistakes is about to begin.

How I wish I had a little cookie to nibble on, meanwhile. To compose myself as I compose. Make little announcements. See all those sleeping, swaying heads bounce up.

"Class, I'm taking next week off to be with my lover. We're locking ourselves in the slop closet with a twelve-pack.

"I'm planning to set myself afire. Forget about the theme paper. Please bring unleaded gasoline.

"No, better, I'm planning to set your assignments afire. If you want the ashes, you must give me a stamped, self-addressed envelope by Thursday night."

Peter Heinz is absent tonight. Peter Heinz is absent; so is Jose Pereirra and John Incremona. I don't think you can pass the course, young man. Why not, sir or madame? Because you're stupid.

Where is my plagiarist? There he is, slumped in the back row under the coats. A weedy blond. Butter wouldn't melt the scoundrel. Did he think that I'd believe those fine, sensitive, flawless moments occurred in *his* childhood? And that sublime final image, the blue rubber ball disappearing into the cloudless sky never to be seen again. A bit of poetry in English 1.5. David Gold with the golden hair. A long history of thievery, I'll wager. Absent from the first impromptu essay, clever dog, and planning to be absent from all future impromptus. A strong, solid style, a little better than Orwell's. A maniac's handwriting. Absurd technical errors (like missing capitals) unimaginatively sprinkled here and there. I'll track this plagiarist down if it's the last thing I'll do. Catch him inky-fingered. Nail him at the Xerox. I will not be tricked by a stripling. I'll try Orwell first. Haunt the libraries. Leave no stack unturned.

"How pleasant it is at the end of the day/No follies to have to repent/But reflect on the past and be able to say/My time has been properly spent."

October 7

Full Professor, step right in; take a seat in the back. My guardian and my observer, observe me, yes. An amazing display of talent—no relaxation, but lots of nervous tension and anxiety to make you feel at home. I'd strip myself naked for you, Stranger, but how will you get it in your Evaluation Report?

"We generally do ten minutes of free writing right at the start to let the creative juices flow, heh, heh, heh."

Such tact! Such wit! Fly with me to the blackboard and see how we go. The true thrill—grade a paper with me. Watch me stalk sentence fragments, pounce on wordy constructions, disport myself among awkward tenses, linger on those ever-loving concrete details. I want to caution you about one thing, however. I always put observers on my Death List.

He looks pretty bored, my keen observer, lolling in the back row, playing with his pencil. No learning takes place here, Buster. Why don't you try an Auto School?

October 14

Walking to school from the bus stop today—unspeakable happiness. I floated! I sang! And why?

Because David Gold is alive. He walks, he talks, he exists on this planet. He is sitting before me now, holding his head in his hands, not free writing a bit. All I can see is a grubby green sleeve and some golden hair.

Dear boy. You are my booster cable. I thought my heart had gone dead long ago, but for good or bad, you recharged it for me.

It was his turn for a conference. He sat sideways by my desk, with his lanky legs folded twice over, staring at the blackboard. He had been late; he didn't seem to be listening. I couldn't mention his plagiarism until I had some evidence, and in my frustration I let my contempt show too plainly.

"Losing that rubber ball must have left a big hole in your life," said I scornfully. "Do you always omit capital letters at the beginning of sentences, or do you do it just for me?" "Have you ever thought of attending Handwriting School?"

He looked straight at me for the first time, flushing, and one bright tear rolled out of one eye. At that moment the rest of the class came piling into the room. "I'll talk to you about this later," I said, turning toward the others. "We're going to write impromptu tonight," I told them impulsively.

They shrank back with well-known groaning noises. "It's not fair . . . " "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Then it wouldn't be impromptu." I smiled encouragingly. "Don't be afraid. It's only one paragraph." Only your native language. I hurriedly wrote a topic on the board.

Meanwhile David moved back to his seat, turned his plastic chair around to the wall, tucked his head down to his chest, and sat in that furious hidden posture until I called for their work. All the while I sat there, watching him, half-suspecting his paper was going to be blank.

As soon as the classroom was safely cleared, I plucked his impromptu from the pile. One and a half closely scribbled sheets. Describe a concrete object concretely. Almost impossible for a remedial student. I was a sadist to assign it.

David described his Harley-Davidson so crisply I could see it shining before me on the sidewalk. (Still no capitals, but editors can always fix up that sort of thing.) I thought—perhaps he had this magnificent paragraph up his sleeve,

would have written about motorcycles no matter what the topic. Perhaps he had assorted plagiarisms stuffed in all the pockets of his jeans. Then I remembered the single rolling tear and his scarlet, vulnerable face, the fury in his hunched-over neck. I read the paragraph again, savoring it. I felt an unfamiliar yet well-known stirring in my chest. (All great things are clichés.) I felt joy swelling up, or perhaps it was pain. Felt something, anyway, instead of dead. I remembered the last time I felt my heart move. I was sitting in the front seat of Ivor's car, parked for a long time in the snow. "You don't seem to understand. I'll put it more plainly," he said. "I don't want to see you any more."

I will purify myself for David's sake. I will better my life. David Gold exists. For no other reason, I rejoice.

October 19

A class of five. Five little blackbirds sitting on a branch. My brilliant one is not among them.

George, your work has not been good. Achilles, your work has not been good. Everyone else, your work has not been good.

Nobody's work is any good. Except for my darling.

I had today:

2 cups coffee with real milk

1 toast with diet butter

1 midget bagel with peanut butter

1 cup Bran Buds with skim milk

1 roast beef sandwich with lettuce and tomato and a cup of tea.

That's not too much. A penitential menu. When I come home, I will have:

1 cup decaffeinated coffee with real milk

1 piece of deskinmed chicken, broiled.

That will truly be delicious. That's not asking too much. Who am I to ask too much?

He has a girlfriend. How could I have not noticed it? She waits for him every Tuesday and Thursday evening right outside in the hallway beside the elevator. She is short, size 3, I'd say, young and nondescript. When he emerges, she falls comfortably into place at his side like his hunting dog, and the elevator closes slowly upon them. They never speak. They are shy. Their utterances are too significant for the general public. She is a deaf mute. How will I ever know what the answer is? Why do I want to know in the first place?

They are probably necking in the back seat of a car right now, her head pillowed on his grammar. No, I am hopelessly outdated. They are screwing.

I am glad he has a girlfriend. I am glad he is screwing.

Face it, Helaine. Don't be a fraud. It's not just that he is a fine student with a good mind whom I will be glad to recommend for the Nobel Prize. Not that he's shy and humiliated and at my mercy. He also has rosy skin and long muscular legs in tight pants. He is a beautiful, desirable young man. And I desire him.

October 21

All you can eat and doughnuts, too. A steaming cup of hot coffee, and a cracker. A bowl of chili, reddening your mouth. Plenty of fresh milk and cookies. Sesame crackers and small kegs of beer. Tree-ripened pears with russet flecks on them. Cider and doughnuts. Hot tomato soup with six oyster crackers tumbling on the surface. A bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich crunching crisp, especially the lettuce. No soggy greens, please. Two mugs of fresh coffee with cream. A peppermint stick ice cream cone. Twelve cinnamon buns with jelly inside. A hogshead of cream cheese, one-half pound smoked Scotch Salmon and two dozen bagels. Chilled caviar; black ripe Greek olives. Dainty little cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Rum mulled with cider. A barrel of pickled herrings with fresh onion curls. Carrot sticks as a refreshment. Cold Heinekens beer, oysters, beets with pickles, a bit of salami and cold tongue on fresh bakery rolls with onion and a quarter pound of sweet butter. Freshly scrambled eggs and toast and a very tiny little bit of ketchup. I give up all of these for you, my chicken.

October 26

I can't help thinking someone is out to get me.

Could it be me? Am I out to get me?

This time I arranged our conference better. Little seminar room not used at this hour. Thirty minutes before class time so we won't be interrupted. I have emptied my papers on the table to give the little cell a homier look. I have muted the air conditioning. I have put his last essay with a big red A in magic marker on top of the pile. Everything to put him at his ease.

He is not at his ease. He does have a pleasant sweet odor about him, which I can't quite place. He has crossed his legs more gracefully this time, but he's still looking at me as though I'm about to take a bite from his rosy flesh. He thinks I am a meat-eating dinosaur—ferocious *Tyrannosaurus Rex*—when I am really a shy, love-sick *Brontosaurus*—huge vegetarian with a marshmallow heart.

"You are a talented writer," I begin. "What are you doing in this remedial class?"

"I failed the proficiency exam. Do you think I'm taking this class for fun?" He is still angry with me. He speaks in a thin, waspish, bratty young man's voice. "I failed it three times, if you want to know."

I try not to be insulted. I hate English 1.5, too, so why should I be insulted? Am I teaching it for fun? "You must get terrifically nervous, then," I say kindly.

"I don't know."

"Well, there must be something on your mind when you take the exam."

"I think it's because my mother works here."

Oh, I think. I visualize the refugee daughter of a great philosopher, scrubbing floors in the library. Blonde braids pinned upon aristocratic head. All hopes pinned on her son. "Does your mother expect you to do very well? Is that why you're nervous?"

"You know my mother. She teaches in this department." A petulant smile tweaks his mouth for an instant before he drops his dynamite. "Mildred Gold." Director of Composition. Administrator of proficiency exams.

The son of Mildred. In a flash I understand everything. Omission of capital letters is, after all, a reasonable act for the son of Mildred. He does pretty much what he wants. Revenge is his reason for living. Does poorly in school because it irritates her. Is lazy. Has gotten everything he's ever wanted. Psychologically unsteady. Poor boy.

Also oddly, in the same flash I understand something about myself. Humiliation is the root of the attraction, but it's *my* humiliation, not his. Humiliating for a grown woman to care about a boy. And now that I know whose boy it is . . . I feel self-disgust oozing up.

He lives in the home of my enemy. Empties her garbage. Shovels the snow on her front walk. Walks her poodle. I've lost all respect for myself. How can I care for the fetcher and carrier of Mildred's petty household domain? Her bootblack.

He was once a speck in her ovaries; he passed down through her birth canal, squeezing her bladder. She wiped his baby ass for him, and he vomited over her when he was sick. These sordid custodial details notwithstanding, he now has the power to hurt me, that is, I now love him desperately. I am helpless and angry, but my fine old poker face does not betray me. From outside I appear calm and beneficent, not even very much surprised.

"It must be hard for you to study a subject your mother teaches, in a program she directs. Why don't you switch to another school?"

"She won't allow it. It's inconvenient."

"What about your father?"

"My stepfather. He does whatever she wants. She's a very powerful woman."

Admiring (spurious) smile on both our faces. Mildred. What do I really

know about her? She is always rallying others to her causes. Collecting money for the Big Chairman's wedding present (third marriage, why bother?). Appeals and posters clutter her office. *Sauvez les Tresors de la Nubie. Rettet die Schatze aus Nubien. Salvad los Tesoros de Nubia*. Prevent new coal gasification plants in Navajo Territory. Save our Football Field. Ban the Bomb. Robert Frost's sappy face beams over her shoulder. None of this good work seems native to her. Everything's a front. She works hard to seem goodnatured. Her hostile, stupid eyes twinkle from behind her aviator frames. For some reason, she hates me.

"I could speak to her about it. You really don't belong in a remedial class. You must know it."

He gives me a blank look. A marble-eyed look of elegant Greek statues. Antinous, the Emperor's favorite, whom I also fell for once at Olympia.

"Of course, I'm very glad to have you in my class," I say warmly. "I like brilliant people."

Whatever made me think he was diffident? He accepts my declaration with bland indifference. His royal due. "I was thinking of going out west," he remarks.

"Next summer?"

"Next month."

"Oh, please, David. Don't do anything precipitously."

"I'm going by motorcycle. If I go, I have to do it before it's too cold."

"Does your mother know about this?"

He gives me an "Are you kidding?" look.

"How are you doing in your other courses?"

He looks pleased. Glad I asked. "I'm failing two, math and sociology, and A plus so far in the other, in Ivor Braun's class. He wants me to major in Comparative Literature. And I don't know about your class."

"C," I say, just to shake his self-image a little. Exactly like Ivor to give out A pluses at midterm, then let you down hard at the end with a B. Did the same to me once. "You deserve an A, David, for content and general style, and F, of course, for punctuation. But if you sat down for twenty minutes and read your grammar book . . . . Why didn't your mother tell me about your problem? I see her almost every day."

"She wants me to be independent."

"I'll bet."

I say it out loud, sarcastically. He doesn't flinch. He doesn't blush. His eyes are green and filled with contact lenses. I hate to mention how long his eyelashes are.

"Don't speak to her about it, please," he says seriously, fiercely. "Just pass me. That's all I need."

"How old are you, David?"



"Twenty-one." He grins, ashamed.

"So old?" Only eleven years between us. Dr. Johnson's wife was at least twenty years older. He was inconsolable when she died, but kept right on writing his Dictionary.

"I dropped out once before, when I was in high school." He leans forward a little, as if telling a secret. I'm enjoying his lovely fragrance. "My mother got me a job with Scribner's, as an office boy."

I think more about Mildred, what it must be like to live under her benevolent direction. I can't imagine what it must be like.

Mildred wears a lot of makeup. She articulates poorly. One of her mimeographed notices began, "Due to a lack of examination booklets . . . ." I guess you could say she is vulgar for an academic, or academic for a vulgarian. She takes a housewifely interest in paper clips, envelopes, and exam books. She is the chateleine of the supply closet.

At the end of each semester, Mildred collects a set of essays from one student, chosen at random from each class. They must be submitted in a lightweight, softcovered binder with metal fasteners. She reads through the papers and makes some trenchant comment. Last term mine said, "Fine!" The semester before that, there was no exclamation point, so I guess I've improved. A few years ago, I taught Creative Writing, which I rather enjoyed, but Mildred thinks I do better with Composition. "We need good people in Remediation," she said, good-naturedly. She likes to be chummy. When I stopped seeing Ivor, she said, "I see you've stopped seeing Ivor." When I lost the office key, she said, "Do try and be more careful with this one. I know you're an artist and have published a book, and all that, but . . . ."

It's nine-thirty. The class is looking at me a little bit cross-eyed; they're tired of writing. David is smiling at me from way back there, flirtatiously peeking at me from under his hands. It's a kind of sweet blackmailing smile, a buddy-like smile, most unsuitable for student-teacher relationships. I know you know I'm a gem, that smile says. I've revealed my true identity like Billy Batson. What are you going to do for me now?

I will close up shop. One final thought occurs to me: the ultimate humiliation. That pleasant, sweet odor I liked so much was, oh help, bubblegum.

October 28

Tonight an unusual show: Ivor and David together. Standing together at the front of the lunchroom, they cancelled out each other's good looks. Ivor, of course, seemed much older; next to David's bright head his gray hairs suddenly stuck out stiffly, like brush bristles. He seemed worn, stained, as though seen through a muddy filter. David, on the other hand, without Ivor's authority, looked white and pasty, like a pie taken out of the oven too soon.

I had a clear view, but couldn't hear at all. They seemed to be speaking pleasantly enough, but urgently. Why were they standing up? This was no passing chatter. At one point David thrust out his hands in the incongruous shrug of a Yiddish peddler. He couldn't account for something. What the hell was it? I was torn by curiosity, but kept flicking my eyes back and forth mock-casually, and desperate to see, purposely blocked my vision with my upthrust coffee cup. It occurred to me, as it often does, that someone else in the lunchroom might be watching me. I determined to betray nothing to the unknown watcher, but felt on reflection that I must look like a frantic bunny, my head swivelling, eyes swimming, my mouth still chewing wildly my already swallowed food. But of course there was no one looking and nothing to be seen.

Oh yes, I forgot to mention that David's girl was present throughout the colloquy, standing silently at his elbow. She impressed me as usual as being very short (She always seems only to come up to David's elbow. His elbow stands out in these scenes), very dowdy and vaguely nice. Naturally I never focus on her, as my eyes are engaged elsewhere. I would not recognize her alone.

When the conversation, which took about three minutes, was over, David and the girl walked briskly out of the lunchroom. Now something strange happened, which I have read about in books but never experienced before. Either David put his arm around her as she trotted along at his elbow, or else he didn't. I, an alert type, watching with the fixed seriousness of a U.N. observer, am uncertain. Perhaps they flowed along so smoothly, so adhesively that it looked as though they were connected by an arm, and I seized on this false dramatic detail to remember. Or perhaps there was an arm, and even as I looked at it (this is what I have read about in books), I was unwilling to see it.

November 4

I am not even on campus. I am on Main Street in front of the public library, at least three miles away, when I hear the zoom of a motorcycle. The chances that this will be David are 7,000 to 1, but these days I am thrown into a frenzy by the sight of any motorcycle. It's the ambiguous figure of the helmeted, goggled rider that throws me—the masked rider of the plains. This time the figure I imagine is David is David. It must be, because the rider in back is Mildred.

The bike pulls up to the curb for a moment, and she hops off, spry as you please in her denim pants suit. She's a pretty high kicker for a woman her age; you have to give her credit. Goes to the health club three times a week and

steams herself to a pulp. Takes Yoga, too. I saw her chuffing away in the lunchroom once, noisily demonstrating how to expel poisonous, used-up air from the lungs. She sent a little poisonous stream my way.

As David roars off, I try melting back against the library wall, but she's spotted me. She hails me excitedly. I wonder whether to bring up David's problems, but as usual, subtlety is not a requisite with Mildred.

"Well, are you going to pass him?" she asks.

"Mildred," I say diffidently. "Why don't you send your son to another school? It can't be good for him to study under your shadow, so to speak."

Her powerful carbon-arc eyes shoot me a furious look through her glasses, but her mouth continues smiling benevolently. "He's not failing, is he?"

"Mildred," I begin again, "I won't fail him unless he forces me to do it. The trouble is—he's stopped doing his assignments. How can I pass him if he doesn't write anything?"

"Well, I thought if anybody could handle him, you could, Helaine. I can't make him write. I haven't been able to make him do anything since he was toilet trained." She laughs raucously. "What he does and when he does it are a mystery to me. He has his own apartment over the garage. He has his own transportation, his own stereo. You don't know what it's like to have a teenage son these days."

"If David doesn't like college work, maybe he should just be cut loose. He's not really a teenager anymore, is he?"

Mildred is really furious with me now. Or is she in pain? Her face has creased badly in a spasm of some emotion; it's hard for me to tell.

"We've tried that already. He quit a good job in publishing to work in a soda fountain!"

The image of David in the guise of a soda jerk is painful to me as it is to Mildred, but for different reasons. Perhaps he has waited on me in a comic book cap, and I've thought him negligible.

"Helaine, Davey is beyond my control. That's what I'm trying to tell you. How will he get along without his diploma? He can't stay in my garage forever. And he used to be such a bright, cheerful kid." Mildred's voice is breaking. She is actually weeping, her eyes glazed over. She is metamorphosing before my eyes from department tyrant to bereaved parent, and I resent it. Dammit, Mildred, stop snivelling. Stalin worried about his teenagers, too, perhaps.

November 9

He did not come for our conference tonight. He did not give me any assignments. He entered the room all tousled, rain-bedraggled, his jeans soaked up to the knee. Perhaps he'd been stuck on the highway. "David," I called out

cheerfully. "You look as though you waded to class." He stalked past my desk, avoiding my eyes.

I rather expected it. Screw you, he's saying. You claim to be my admirer and friend. Prove it. Pass me no matter what I do. Fail me, and I'll go west. Go ahead, wreck my academic career.

I had a fantasy about him the other night. A daydream, that is, I was controlling it. I dreamed he came to my apartment for tea. I dusted especially for him. I bought two cakes from the Dumas Patisserie, and I took my Tabriz carpet out of hock.

He brought grass, special high quality Arizona Gold, and we sat on the carpet, sharing a joint. In my dream he wore a fuzzy woolen sweater of an unusual orange, something pumpkin-like but more pleasant. All colors were sharp because of the imaginary grass, and I felt myself leaning imperceptibly towards him like a tropism, till I felt the sweater fuzz against my bare neck. We were listening to Chopin, *Valse Brillante*.

You think this was prelude to an erotic fantasy? He stroked my neck, I slowly unbuttoned my blouse, my nipples popped out, he unzipped his pants. You are wrong, quite wrong. You know me very little. In my dream I never forgot he was David. In my dream we simply sat in a deep passionate calm; Artur Rubinstein was doing all the work. Then David said solemnly, "Thank you, Helaine, for a very happy moment. Don't get up; stay with the music." He left the package of grass on the table and went away and I never saw him again.

November 16

He is absent again. He is not here tonight. He is absent again. He is not here tonight.

Freewriting freewriting freewriting because I'm so afraid. I have to hold my face together.

She came in, the girl, just now while I was writing, and said, "Here are David Gold's assignments. He's sorry they're so late."

I stare at her. "Where is David?"

"He said please excuse the handwriting, too. He was nervous; he had to write them on his wedding day."

"His wedding day!"

She giggles. "We were married this morning at City Hall and tomorrow, if he finishes his paper for Comp. Lit., we're going to California." She giggles again, a cheerful young girl.

I stare at her harder. She looks wholesome, a nice friendly face, too nice for him. She's wearing a useful gray jumper. She should be wearing Alençon lace with a bouquet of stephanotis and sweet peas. From the back of a motorcycle she hurls her bouquet.

I hold the envelope steadily in my hand. "You're going by motorcycle?"

"No, by plane. His mother gave us the tickets as a wedding present. We were going to go at Christmas, but we decided not to wait."

The people in the front row have stopped writing and are looking at us curiously. Up till now I have never let anyone, not even my observer, interrupt my free writing.

"Now that he is up to date . . . " She has a soft voice. Her enunciation is very good. "David wants to know, can you please give him an Incomplete Grade? We'll be back next semester."

The result of this question is that I begin shaking from the waist down at my desk, just as if I have palsy. My legs are trembling so violently, I have to keep shuffling my feet as though something unpleasant has stuck to my shoes. I can also feel myself blushing, but to my astonishment, the girl doesn't notice a thing. Of course. The desk has a little skirt around it for modesty's sake.

"Why doesn't David come and ask me himself?"

He can't. He's writing this paper for Comp. Lit. And I think he's embarrassed."

Now that I look at her, I recognize her from the front desk of the library. She has checked me out many times. I wish to say, "It is highly irregular to give the grade of Incomplete except in cases of serious illness or a death in the family," but the words seem like bullets, and I can't mouth them. Instead I put the envelope in my briefcase, and I nod, smiling. I clear my throat, I croak a little, I say, "Have a good time." As she exits, smiling, I see she is taller than I had thought. I still don't know her name.

This happened one minute ago. I already feel a little remote from it. I am planning to resume my normal life. My mouth has already frozen back to its normal shape. My legs have stopped trembling. No one could tell how I feel.

How I wish I could start all over again as a tadpole. Something small swimming around in a sea. Something squirreling along.

I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. I don't know where to go. The door is blank. The wall is blind. The floor has a drain.

The mouse lurks in the pantry. Garbage roots in the backyard. Birds fly in the circular sky.

Don't relax for a minute. Make sure to sleep at night. Give a knock if you exist. No knock if you don't. Nod your head if you can breathe. Forget me. Forget me not.

November 18

Another opening, another show.

Another opening, another show. Another opening, another show.

Another opening, another show. Another opening, another show.  
Another opening, another show. Another opening. Another show.