

LEN BERKMAN

My Student



Masks by Melody Anderson. Courtesy of the Artist.

I THINK I SHOULD have retired at least ten years ago. My older sister Lucy announced her plans to retire, effective immediately, on the second anniversary of her husband's death from dementia. She said it gave her the boost she desperately needed after her shock and grief refused to lift. As a successful serial novelist, Lucy had based her heroic-but-deeply-vulnerable detective on her husband's distinctively kind, thoughtful, but often self-defeating attributes. She needed the back-from-retirement boost to enable herself to return to her laptop so as, in a manner of speaking, to keep her husband alive through his self-evident literary guise. In short, she retired to emerge from retirement. I knew that if *I* announced I would quit teaching, I would likewise return to my classroom in my same-old red sneakers and favorite singer-songwriter T-shirts the following fall. So I decided to skip such a two-step fuss.

Am I selling short my deeper reason for “staying in the saddle” (as I’ve heard some folks call it)? When my students ask if I have “plans”, I have a standard reply: I don’t want to die before my death. They grin to hear me declare this, but I’m caught between interpreting their grin as a diving outfielder catch of my quippish bent—I *am* prone to jest at scars—and their genuine joy that I have no intention of forsaking them before their high school commencement.

I love the majority of my students, in every sense of love except the scandalous. When I was a high school student myself and developed an unreciprocated crush on a classmate, one of that dear classmate’s assertions—which bound me to her *if only in my heart* forever (or, at least, for over half a century by now and counting)—took the form of her confiding in me her dream to become a teacher in a small-town college where she would have known many of her students since, or even “before”, their birth. “I want to have students I can learn to love,” she told me. “Teaching itself is an act of love.” Can you imagine a high school co-ed thinking that profoundly of her adulthood bliss?

Maybe you take my enduring excitement over her as puerile nostalgia. Please, don’t nod so vigorously at my self-demeaning insight! You’re *not* nodding? It’s only that your head is loose and tends to wobble?! Hah! I sure knew what I was doing when I chose you, you clown with a wall of institutional med degrees. Your respected profession ordinarily attracts the most sober and dour of individuals, the most proudly overtrained in analytic theory and woefully under-adept in bounce. At our introductory session, I already spotted you as a maverick, a red-nosed exception to your smug, withheld colleagues. At what point in that session? When you asked me what kind of chair or sofa I would prefer to ease my “bottom” into, and when I gave you my trick request, scanning *no* furniture in your office that *faintly* resembled my stated preference, you explained that you would have to cart my “dinosaur prize” down from your attic. I could tell, when you excused yourself to search for it up there, that you also had something else in mind. You let me wander around your office for a full five minutes, even read a poem or two among those pinned to your lampshades, before you returned with the lemon I had in mind, worn and rickety like a treasured old friend. Do you remember what you said as you offered that lumpy disaster to me? You don’t? You don’t give every newcomer your *routine* comic punchlines? With your romantic verse and memory lapse about your own hijinks, you are even more of a fit

for me than I gave you credit for!

The object of my unrequited passion did find a small-town college to teach at, and she did fall in love with her students just as I still do. She retired when illness struck two of her own grown children, but she still turns out book after book of *literary* analysis, and I'm sure she still rocks on her porch over tea and crumpets when her former students return to town and visit and rock at her side. If you and she met, you'd probably become as attached to her as I was (and, yes, forgive me, still am). You'd *like* to meet her? Your wife, if you have a wife, would let all hell break loose if she learned you let one of your patients shake up your morals as *you* rocked alongside my high school crush and felt your heart start to beat like a speeding train. Really, though, intelligent, caring people like her aren't rare, but they're not all that common either. Why would you, or anyone, expect me to give up a precious lifelong friendship with a classmate who never returned my yearning for a serious romance with her?

True, she and I have had intervals of non-communication, especially when she and a pre-med in her undergraduate class on nineteenth-century poetry began a courtship that led in due course to their marriage. She invited me and my fiancée to their wedding. Jeez, was that a merry, instantly healing, event! Her groom was an exact right match for her, better than I would have been. Just as Zelda, whom I married a year later, was a better match for me—along the lines of what I longed to bring to your attention when we agreed to engage in this “depth analysis” long-term.

You do take notes on what I say, right? I never see you taking notes. You must have what Janet had—Janet's the classmate I'm so happy living happily ever after—an encyclopedic memory. I don't think that's what it's called, but if you have it yourself, you know what I mean. And if you don't have it, why am I going on about Janet and Lucy and my not-retiring and all the questions I keep pummeling you with that are based on my psychological—*psychiatric?*—history? It never struck me until this instant that you may never take notes, not even in your spare ten minutes before your next appointment. My earlier tease about your memory loss was only a stab at affection. I shiver to think you may not remember a thing I've ever said!

You *have* to be laughing so hard for a reason! *Of course*, I'm teasing you! If someone teases *me*, I first have to hide my tears. And when I realize that I fell *for a tease*, I'm not relieved in the least. Don't get

me wrong: I *adore* your laughter. I could eat you up for laughing so uproariously. Janet never found me funny whatsoever. Lucy recognized that I *try* to be funny and said she wished she *could* laugh. They both died recently, by the way, though, I swear, they live on inside me and, with Janet, I won't stop occasionally using the present tense to describe her. My wife is another matter entirely. Zelda outmatches me joke for joke. As that saying goes, we laugh each other's heads off. That's why you made me so buzzed when you told me you weren't nodding. I can't wait to get home and describe that moment of your head wobble to Zelda.

Yes, I actually will: I tell Zelda about each of our sessions blow-by-blow. If I were coming to see you about a problem between Zelda and me, I'd still spill the beans when I drove home, *all* the beans. I thought you *knew* my marriage is like that. Maybe I *am* speaking to thin air. Not to mention *fat* air. Zelda sits on my shoulder at this very moment. She's swinging her legs at you and narrowly missing your cheek. She whispers that I make it hard for you to figure out my real purpose in coming here in the first place and in being here now. I tell her you're *fond* of figuring things out, including my purpose (or purposes). You don't want a patient who spoon-feeds you, any more than my students want a *teacher* who spoons. But I did promise her I'd tell you what happened with one of my students this week, and that we'd confer, you and I, and then she and I, as to what I'd best do about it, if anything. And I hope you'll tell me if I am making things up—and if I am going overboard in citing *this* week as an example of why I won't ever retire until death do us part.

Did I imply I think you're fat? *When?* Oh! Is that the sort of hyper self-conscious question someone in your position *usually* asks someone in my position? Wait: you're now asking me whether my hesitant topic of this week is *my* weight? What gets into you to make you think that? Or that thin or obese has anything to do with my centerpiece of concern this evening? My mother said I was all skin and bones. I retorted that that was better than all skin and no bones, and that was the last she ever said on that score. But I did appreciate her looking out for me, and, fact, I do consider myself too thin. Maybe if I looked "more like a man", as both my mother and Lucy long hoped to tempt me to work at, Janet would have swooned, instead of having me keep a proper distance and mainly stay in touch through her and my letter exchanges, despite our homes being a ten-minute walk apart. You

would take to Zelda, though: she calls muscular men likely candidates for narcissism, but she, too, frets aloud that if I ever get seriously ill, I'll have nothing to lose.

Don't let me fool you, Doc: I recognize your neat, clever, off-base-*seeming* tactic, and don't let my fun with wordplay mask each session's step forward from what drew Zelda to find you and me to land in your lap. You are as transparent as a just-washed window. I hardly had to take all those psych courses in college to sniff out your shenanigans. I bet we even peruse identical texts. My early favorite in your field was Dan O. Jackson's *The Etiology of Schizophrenia*. Yours, too?! Sorry I asked that, Doc: I accept your reprimand. I'll mouth your exact, quaintly phrased rules-of-thumb, so you won't need to repeat: "Shop talk for now is *out*," Each word of your thumb is a finger wag; but, if I ever call it quits on my appointments with you, we're not by a long shot going to quit seeing each other. Presumptuous as I hear myself sound, I consider you and me friends for life. After our final formal session, whenever *that* socks us in the jaw, shop talk between you and me will be slam-back *in*. You have ample proof by now that never in my entire life do I intentionally snip off a relationship. I refuse to throw such a filthy wrench at my worst unintentional enemy. Life is about *continuity*!

Why do you press me to tell you what "went on" with my student? Just because my promise to tell *leads you on*? Come on, Doc, promises are possibilities, not *guarantees*; think of New Year resolutions! Do I actually sound "ambivalent, irritated, and nervous"? Simply because I need to get my toes wet each time before I dive into the deep end? Is it cricket for you to judge me *before* you learn what I've such trouble this week sharing with you? Delete that: You're correct to call me on my defensive posture. I apologize. Yes! "*Sincerely!*" Still, may I suggest you welcome the burden I carry here any which way I deliver it? Yes, I'm aware I'm not usually this worked up. To put it in a nutshell—let me take a breath—I don't know what suddenly comes over me. Should I get down on my knees?

OK, *as promised*: I have this student who's taking every class I teach that he can fit into his schedule. The charter school I'm at permits that degree of devotion, the equivalent you might say of declaring a major in college. He's made *me* his major. He actually sought me out

while he was in eighth grade and on a high school scouting tour. His parents were letting him decide whether to go to the private school they chose for him, the “prep” school that prepares you for “nothing of real worth” as he put it to me, or—instead—to attend a public school like the one I’m at, that gives “exceptional” students, including those on the spectrum, special privileges. My school’s Mission Statement proclaims that it “prioritizes passion as the heart of productive pedagogy”. The four P’s! No public school in my experience would affirm something that pretentious, but there you are. And there I was, over four years ago, with this eighth grader who traps me in my office and wants to grill me about my school’s, and *my*, potential role in his future.

I guess I gave him the answers he sought, the *attitude*, so as he left my office with a firm lingering handshake and looked me in the eye to underscore his “promise” to see me again as my official student the following autumn, he pushed a button inside me. Zelda’s and my kids weren’t youngsters anymore. People say we look to surrogates for what and whom we don’t or no longer have in our lives, but I’d had it in spades. Great kids bar none, as you know. But this eighth grader reminded me of none of my own, nor any previous I’d ever taught. In fact, from the moment he stepped across my office threshold, he acted like he was the teacher and I his student. I merely passed the first exam he gave me. Somehow when you pass an exam with flying colors (that’s how he put what I did when I re-met him next that September), it whets your appetite for more. Our sweaty first handshake—and how we stared at each other in silence before he grinned and turned away—still feels like yesterday.

Do I sound a bit too fresh-eyed at my job? There go your wobbly nods in agreement again! Anyway, by the time this student entered his senior year, which is what he’s in the middle of now, it was beyond dispute that I was the child he had dreamed of having all his young life. I didn’t feel demeaned; I felt chosen. Students come and go, and you grow attached to many of them before they head off to college. You hope they’ll return and visit, but, whatever they swear to do in the future, you don’t count them any more as intrinsic to your life, and—fair is fair—they don’t count you as intrinsic to theirs.

If my perspectives were closer to sentimental, I’d have what I guess might be termed an “empty *next* syndrome” as their teacher. I must, however, make an objective psychological assessment of this student.

It's late winter now, not full-blown spring, of course. He's been admitted to every college to which he applied, the toughest to get into that you can imagine. His parents are proud as the dickens, especially over the campuses furthest away, two of them abroad. But he told them, and tells me, that he applied to each of them only as a test of himself. He has no intention of going anywhere. He didn't deign to apply to our local university; I sense he deemed it lower than a "safety," the worse for his being able to walk to its academic sprawl. If push comes to shove, he has shouted in my office once too often, he'd rather die.

He shouts, he says, because the more ears his shouts and their echoes penetrate the more affirmed he feels. His parents are livid. I'm not, but I am troubled. I make appointments for him with our school psychologist, but he doesn't show up. I thought of dragging him *here* with me. Zelda has me investigating my legal obligations to the limit. As I've likely hinted, most others at the school haven't had more than passing contact with him, though he's been friendly enough with nearly everyone, taking one class of theirs apiece. Curiously, none of the teaching staff finds him any less than pleasant, but he doesn't stand out, doesn't show up at any of *their* offices, and seems happier chatting with our congenial custodial staff than with other students or unoccupied instructors during his breaks. He follows these undervalued laborers around while they sweep or empty wastebaskets or do repairs and asks them, on the verge of prying, how they see themselves. If they don't do more than grin at his asking, he'll stick to neutral topics like sports, gossip, general working conditions, a mix of—he says—warm-up stuff of that sort, and also, his dessert topic. . . me. Whatever he tells them about me, he claims, they eat it up like they haven't been fed a meal that tasty for months. They neither tell him he's talking out of school nor send him away.

Can you imagine what it feels like to be "thus devoured"? (Some famous author said that, I'm sure.) To my embarrassment *I'm thrilled!* You never call me a stereotypical egotist, but if you ever do, bingo! you'll be correct. I've got to squash that lip-smacking good side of me, to undercut his worship, I suppose, at the core, to find ways to penetrate his bottomless cup attachment.

Would you say he's toying with me when he talks of ending his life? He doesn't *explicitly* speak of suicide; he puts it passively—he sees his life "threatening to abort." His future, he says, will shortly cease to exist. At his remarkably young age! And he so much as tells me I can

prevent that. He phrases it oddly, but I think I grasp what he has in mind: “All you have to do is say the word,” he pleads. I’m pretty sure he’s implicitly asking Zelda and me to take him into our home, in effect to adopt him as our son. Yes, more like, have him adopt *me*! Until this past week, I wondered if he’d feel differently or even grow more intense if he and Zelda finally met.

Didn’t Freud once say, so peculiarly, that when a married couple has sex, there’s always a third person in bed with them? Something like that? I’ve played detective with that image, guessing one way and then another as to the identity of that third. But I always thought of the third as a figure from their past. Or from one of their fantasies. . . though I don’t see why it’s merely a third, not a fourth in bed, or a fifth, till the bed collapses, I suppose, from the sheer weight of each piling onto the mattress. Given how the past and fantasy impact on Freud, I didn’t speculate that the third might be someone in their actual present *or future*—someone, in his own insistent way, adorable.

When I mentioned this to Zelda, she converted it into one of my teases. She’s seen my photos of the boy and calls him a heartbreaker. If he ever jumps into bed with us, she wryly assures me, no one in the world would be happier than horny Zelda. So, please, she says, *to comfort me*, don’t think twice if he pops a proposal to you outright. She plans to head to the gift shop in our main entrance lobby; she promises to buy herself a fancy new nightgown for such an occasion.

That concerned look of yours makes me wonder if I’ve made you envious. Or that you believe Zelda’s joviality masks a mean streak. In all these years, Doc, I’ve never asked if you have a spouse or partner or children you burst back into your home to regale. I assume I’m not supposed to ask that, just like when folks these days apply for jobs: their prospective employers have to keep their damn curiosity to themselves. I hope you’re grateful for how appropriate a patient or client I’ve been. I’ve never even asked how I should refer to myself from your perspective. Should I label myself “in need”? As “sick”? Or all the closer to normal these days, for having someone like you with your wall in my life? I do feel *right* about our long-term relationship, especially since most of your current clientele, I hear, seek short-term solutions for whatever’s disturbing their minds. Maybe someday I’ll discover the one solution that fits all. Maybe the dilemma I raise with you today will lead to the solution that clinches it. Hah. I’d become your latest short-term affair.

In a nutshell, Doc, you have to play King Solomon with me. I need your judgment on how Zelda and I decided this week to deal with this boy's "commitment" to me. ("Commitment" is *his* term. He hasn't yet proposed a commitment ceremony, but I see that in the wings. Forgive my mix-up of allusions, but have we crossed some Rubicon?)

For the life of me, what makes you grin? I'm serious! You know me: I'm even serious when I'm not! Since this student feels threatened with the loss of who he counts on as his future's sole incarnation, Zelda and I invited the boy for afternoon tea where his sole incarnation resides.

He frequently hinted his wish for me to do that. More than once, he voiced openly that he felt hurt to be treated as my student, confined to hanging out with me at my office or on walks we'd take in the school vicinity. Sometimes we sit beneath a tree on the edge of the schoolyard. When other students spot us, they hesitate to come over, but he and I *both* wave them welcome. Some do approach, stand nearby, or sit with us briefly. Not the smallest sign of concealed discomfort or curiosity among any of them; pure well-bred deference, I suppose. If the boy or I have an extra bottle of soda or carton of crackers, we make that available without their having to make a request. One time a sudden rainstorm, somewhat predicted, almost drenched us, but the boy and I had come prepared with extra umbrellas, so even then there was room for two or three others to hover under the branches with us, doubly well protected.

Speaking of teasing (am I at it again?), the boy and I were mildly teased for sheltering under an umbrella for two. But the tease included our usual suspects, who then began to hang with us regularly under what became our "designated" tree. Funny you should want details of how that tease went. One of these suspects went so far as to hum "On a bicycle built for two" grin at us, and put his arm around a male classmate huddled next to him one tree over. Do you take that as the kid's own form of affection or as mockery? I took it as pure enjoyment of all of us, gathered together as we were.

As I hope is non-debatable, my student as well as I always took pains to be inclusive. The steadily enlarged gang of my student's classmates named those multiple tree gatherings our school prom. At the peak of our gathering's popularity, girlfriends and boyfriends from other teachers' classes swelled our ranks, and we launched discussions of novels and stories some felt were given short shrift during a class of

mine or theirs. As their mentor of sorts, I felt so validated.

For that student I tend to call “my student,” proud as he became to “co-host” these discussions, his appetite for creative teaming with me increased. In my defense, I have to stress that no one else’s did. No one overtaxed my available time, in or out of my office, and even my student checked in almost weekly to make sure his flood of ideas didn’t threaten to drown me. As I may have said previously, he would choose to wind down and depart on his own accord, much as I take responsibility for my wind-down with you. He was visibly on edge to do so *before* I requested that he leave or said I had to run off myself. I let his laudable discipline go on until a short time ago, and as he zipped up his backpack and politely drifted away, I heard him loudly repeat—I think just to himself—that it was time he “headed to his doom.” I assumed at first he must have meant to shout “dorm.” The obvious hit me an instant after: Our school has no dorms. I panicked, I told Zelda it was time we opened his eyes. And that, with her help, I knew exactly how we’d achieve that.

“Is he an only child?” I wondered to myself, until I got up nerve enough to inquire outright the day after. He had not spoken of any siblings. Turns out he’s the youngest of eight, with a larger gap between him and the seventh. So, as you and I might ordinarily guess correctly, he’s as good as an only child, but a child with at least nine parents, if we don’t count attentive aunts and uncles. A child with nine lives at his beck and call, I wanted to tease him after that. One or two days later, when it was just the two of us, and he left our tree without a goodbye, I got up the nerve to call after him as he hesitated at the corner traffic light, “If you’re doomed on one front, you’ve got eight *other* futures.” I was too upset and awkward to be my usual bluffer at times like this. He called back, accurately, that my humor wasn’t funny *whatsoever*; but he added with a choked howl, “Not to worry!” as the light turned green a second time and he crossed past the halted traffic: he’d forgiven my incoherence.

I shouldn’t presume I can read his thoughts? Do you “presume” to read mine? I almost always haven’t a clue as to *your* thoughts, but aren’t there open signals between people that we *can* read? Anyway, Doc, your finicky interruptions clog my flow just when I’m finally juiced up for you and ready to pour. So, don’t accuse *me* of beating around some bush you keep whacking. Feel free to look over my shoulder, as you keep trying to do so discreetly: Your ticking clock shows the

minutes I have left with you sufficient to describe my student's visit to Zelda and me, and for you to comment on that before I kick myself out . . . Oh? You really had no idea all this time that I could see *or hear* your clock behind me? I easily figured out from the first how you positioned it to reflect in the mirror behind *you* for exactly that "syncing" purpose. You're sly, Doc, a bit huffy-goofy, but efficient.

Don't be misled: When I call you out on your cleverness, that's one way I express my undying admiration. No doubt about it, Doc: you're scrupulously trained. I give you 98 out of 100, and you damn well know that not even my student deserves 100.

I thought you'd at least *smile* at my imitation of a true grade-book pedant. With a watch-and-wait face like yours, you must be terrific at poker. I'm sure your holding-back comes with the territory, like prison guards drawn to *their* careers by their sadism. Excuse me, *some* guards. Far be it from me to malign a group when I mean their job. But look: aren't *you* responsible for my welfare, just like I'm responsible for my student's? That's "student's" with an apostrophe *before* the 's', though of course what's also true is the apostrophe after, to span my prom folks. I've never liked apostrophes: None of us *hears* them. Just like *some* shrinks don't hear their patients. See? This time I said "some", and this time it did register a beat on your eardrums. *Some* teachers mistreat or mislead or *injure* their students, right? That's what Zelda and I were determined I'd try my hardest *not* to do. Zelda's not ever come close, without her even trying.

This is what we ask ourselves: Since my student "foresees" that if he leaves here for whichever top college nabs him tightest around his waist his life, his future—not simply his present—would be kaput, might his gloom and doom reverse itself were he to come face to face with a future that is strikingly *less there* than his—at least in length of time? Doc! how can you ask *whose* future is less? You're looking straight at the unnamed. Yes, here I am, old as the hills, my future babbling: *teach teach teach* till you drop. In time, I *will* drop.

Sheer attitude prompted Zelda's and my domestic move, our narrowed but wiser focus on the priority of our *jobs*, assisted by where we'd delegate most housework to a facility's staff: no more lawns to mow, sidewalk snow to shovel, and if a significant proportion of our new fellow tenants are enfeebled, why let pity, discomfort, and withdrawal outweigh our compassion for being their neighbors? Our thrust to downsize and get real was little other than a dent in a pillow

that shows you where you lay your head. We'd be *The Sound of Music* chorus incarnate, the spitting image of broad outlook and perseverance. Can you look me in the eye and say I'm all pomp and bluster? If you dare nod at that, put up your dukes.

Anyhoo, we formally invited my student for tea. Naturally, Zelda commissioned me to escort him on foot to our changed address. If I didn't, as he glimpsed the pick-your-own walkers and wheelchairs at our community building "parking lot," even before he spotted our private entrance, he might think he was lost and never knock. Of course, soon as he did realize where he and I were headed, he grabbed my elbow and stood stock-still. I stared him down in silence. He turned his face away, but he couldn't keep from what sounded weepily nasal. Sometimes it's harder to watch and hear a youngster try *not* to cry than to have him burst into sobs. My student actually sat right down on the flagstone path that runs through Zelda's and my courtesy garden to our front door. Stiff as a board, he started to untie the shoelaces to my red Converse. After a stretch of silent untying, he looked up at me, saying only, "I need to do this."

"Do what?" That's exactly how I replied, Doc. I wondered if I should offer my student my pocket handkerchief, but I decided against that in favor of a quip: "Do what?" I said twice more, when he kept looking up but gave no answer. "Are you interested in kissing my feet?"

He laughed at that, and in the same moment his sobs let loose—a full orchestra of chokes, sobs, coughs and what have you—like he'd never stop unless I slapped him. Which I thought of doing. You see that in the movies when someone's upset for no reason and needs to be unwound. It can look kind, or at least well-intentioned, and generally it works. The one who's slapped calms down in seconds. The one who performed the slap gives himself kudos for astute, if cruel, compassion in the extreme. If confusion and fear of conflict reign, of course, the slapped and the slapper rush together into one big hug. My student, though, stayed down there on the flagstones, sobbing without cease, his eyes at me like a puppy's. I almost shouted "Zelda!", so she'd come outside and help. But I was afraid the shout would make my student feel rejected, like in the Handel you overhear at Christmas. Instead, I blurted out to him, "We have a stalemate, sir," making no sense again even to me. "Either you stand up like a man, or I sit down like a boy," I warned with hollow authority. He pulled off my untied sneak-

ers one by one while his fingers further loosened the laces without even a glance back down at them. His unwavering focus on me forced me to stay self-controlled. “It’s high time we went inside,” I counseled in my stocking feet. “Feel free to take off your sneakers, too, my son.”

That did the trick. He jumped up and tied the loosened laces tight together so he could drape my two sneakers around his neck. “How do they look?” he asked, his sobs at an end.

“Nice,” was all I could think of in response.

“I want to wear something of yours when I meet your wife,” he sort of explained.

“She’ll appreciate that,” I told him, adding like an idiot, “Mightily.”

“That’s how I see it, too,” he chuckled.

“In we go, then” I decided to urge. If I didn’t, we might continue to stand stock-still, transfixed. I could see Zelda part our living-room curtains to peer through our window. Finally, as my student and I made our way to Zelda’s and my door, I told him, “I’m glad they let us have a garden. Zelda can’t live through each spring and summer without little homegrown bouquets.” That was true enough, but I could have done without such a passive verb: “let us.” Nevertheless, to underscore my point, I added, “Our old home had gardens on every side. And we could choose which annuals and perennials to purchase. Our floral display used to be as diverse and profuse as in a mail-order nursery catalog.”

I could tell, from how he shut his eyes tight as Zelda opened our door and ushered him inside, that what Zelda and I envisioned would occur was already sinking in. When he almost tripped over the boot rack in our narrow front hall, he kept blinking, as though trying to drive from sight what he had to confront. “You live *here*?” he asked, with inexplicable accusation in his voice, “right next door to all *that*?” I couldn’t sort out which possible interpretation of such annoyed surprise felt likeliest.

“Did someone you know live in this cottage before us?” Zelda replied. I marveled at her choice of a neutral response.

My student turned to me and pointed back through our still open front door, as though a ghost were about to trail after us. “They *let* you have a garden?” he kind of moaned.

“That was our precondition for agreeing to buy in,” was Zelda’s helpful explanation. “Nor did we want to be stuck in one of this institution’s ‘community apartments’ and take our meals with every ran-

dom resident among us,” she continued. “People our age are desperate to climb to the top of the wait list for a single-family cottage like ours, even one right next to the high-rise memory care unit that nearly made you faint.” For precision’s sake, I nearly offered a footnote to Zelda’s bluntness, about all the plan options we had had available to us if we were willing to wait six or seven more years, but at that moment I wasn’t sure my student was actually listening to Zelda as much as working his way through a cloud. “Do you enjoy getting your hands down into the earth, too?” Zelda went on. When he didn’t answer, she persisted, “Young man! What flowers would *you* most like me to suggest to our horticultural wing for this spring’s planting?”

I couldn’t resist a sharp intrusion. I requested that Zelda give him a chance to get his bearings. In fact, I needed to get my own. I had assumed we’d have a casual and comfortable first visit over tea and cookies, with just enough conversation among the three of us to make my student realize that, even at Zelda’s and my advanced ages, we *did* retain a foreseeable future. Even rows of annuals have a future when someone plants them in May. Whatever was equivalent to our well-tended garden in my student’s purview, he had years more than we did to cultivate anything he chose. And to cultivate *himself!*

Past his inner storm, he suddenly became polite, but with a sporadic hush that troubled me. He looked back and forth between Zelda and me, and then he said, very low, very measured, as if his words took a great deal of thought, “Would you guys mind if I just stood here? I just want to stay in one place for a while.”

“In the middle of our hallway?” Zelda inquired. I think my student felt she disapproved of his ‘just standing’. Even when Zelda offered, “May I serve you some ginger snaps while you stand?”

Very simply, my student asked, “Am I in your way?”

To which Zelda replied, “Our kitchen’s right behind me. I’ll return momentarily.”

The instant she left us, my student said to me, “Are you depressed?”

I almost blurted out, “I thought *you* were depressed.” Instead I remarked, “Why do you ask?”

“I didn’t expect you to be here,” my student explained, though I couldn’t tell what he meant to explain.

“I have difficulty understanding each word of yours,” I exaggerated. But I did single out the most *crucial* difficulties: “be” and “here”. To clear the air, I added, “Does my ‘being here’ offend you?”

“Of course not,” he replied without hesitation. “We all have our preferences.” He sounded uncharacteristically mature. “I merely didn’t realize,” he again seemed to “explain,” in as undramatic a fashion as he could, what struck him as quite a natural dilemma. But then he declared, “You’re too young.” He’d put his finger on it, exactly as I’d hoped he would.

“Too young to be depressed?” I shot back. I finally, I thought, had this promising and deluded youngster in the palm of my hand. I had thrust into his grasp a mirror that he had only to scrutinize to reflect on his and my kinship and differences. If a man at my age deserved to be no less excited by my future than a boy at his, he’d *have* to acknowledge his doom-gripping was way premature. At the same time, it hit me that I *might* be depressed. My voice might have knowledge it had been keeping from me.

Doc! How can you ask why I call him “deluded”? It’s not obvious that he considers me his oxygen? Am I truly oxygen personified? Do I inflate my impact on my student as much as you have suggested I inflate your impact on me?

Listen, you opened and clamped your mouth several times these last few minutes, and I applaud your *uncharacteristic* restraint from interrupting me again until now. Want to hear my growing sense of you? You’re secretly insecure, Doc, afraid to resemble those stereotypical analysts in comedy skits that you *would* be if you nonchalantly, in fact *strategically*, let me go on with a periodic noncommittal “Hmm. . .” and “I see.” But, but, but, just as I’m about to reach the pinnacle of what I have to reveal to you, the clinch-mark of why I choose *this* session to share my beloved student and my concern with you, you go *BAM* and practically axe-murder my momentum. *Of course*, I’m angry! I have a justified bone to pick with you! I’ll have an entire *skeleton* to pick IF your bumbling obsession with making sure you understand me, or *worse*, making sure *I* understand me, damn-it-to- hell, persists.

Right now, Doc, your glare betrays what *you* won’t admit! Wouldn’t you love to swing a bat at my head! Look, I’ll calm down if you’ll calm down first. If you don’t feel ready to bear with the homestretch of my dilemma, I’ll amenably cut short the extra hour you said I could have. They’re not really hours anyway, are they? Fifty minutes is *already* ten short of sixty, Doc. As those smug kids at school, not the teasers beneath the trees with us, like to snap, “Do the math!” What? How can you confuse a student this important to me with one who’d hurl such

a challenge at *any* of his teachers' heads? And when I called him "deluded," I wasn't feeling negative about my student, I was being *modest!* (That makes no sense to you?)

Oh? Now I have your generous approval to "resume regardless"? Thank you, Doc. Yes, *yes*, YES, that's an angry, hurt, *fed-up* thank you from a patient you've stupidly injured. A special-recipe-of-mine-thank-you. I go to the bitter end to make things easier for you to grasp by striving my utmost to be *abnormally* honest, yet you don't seem the least bit grateful or impressed or able to follow me. Don't most of your "clients" require you to pull their teeth to get them to reveal the tiniest morsel of their hidden embarrassments? This sweet little civilized office of yours must cater to higher peaks of shame than Zelda's church-going colleagues' weekly confessionals! Mark me, though: I do not dump my experience on you out of shame. I'm paying you for your advice on how to redeem my most well-meant and faithfully described blunder!

Doc, you're mistaken: Contrary to your insidious conjecture, "my" student *has* no unrequited love or sexual urges to wax about and mourn. Never has had. Because he would have told me if he did! Another left-field toss to second from you when my student and I are running to third? Nor—watch the mud you slip on—do I ever play transitional object tag with him. My distress is of a sharply different order. But I can see how an *average* analyst might take the defense route your interpretive questions travel.

I *don't* mean to insult *you*. Nor "demean," a skill at which you're suddenly an expert. I assume you've read all that's been published on countertransference? Maybe even done some internal gut-punching of your own? One can't have a countertransference if one refuses first to have a transference, not so? That goes for both of us. I thank you for acknowledging my "wisecracks" can hurt. I didn't assume I have that power or appeal for you. But if you say I do, I guess it must be. You aim to compete with me for which of us plays the more rip-roaring self-discloser? Do *you* want to start paying *me*? Got you there! Now may I *genuinely* resume? Doc, I have no one else to turn to.

When my student said, "You're too young," it wasn't with the attitude, or the insight, or the paradox that he understood at last how Zelda and I still enjoy our future as late in our lives as we do. Nor did he at last take in the vastly longer life-journey that lay, that damn well *stretched*, ahead of him. *I* was the deluded whole-hog sentimentalist,

foolishly all set to claim victory over what I considered to be *his* adolescent extremes, those he'd finally come to face.

Out flew my misguided attempts at pompous education, aimed as gently as I could to satirize his literary idols: My student's a Walt Whitman devotee, sprinkled with an ounce of Thoreau's pond, topped by a dollop of Emerson. I wanted him to realize his despair had been ready to cheat *both* himself and his idols, to cheat genuine realistic Whitmanesque optimism and grandeur to the bargain. Then I'd get to the dessert I'd prepared: Having hammered my counter-vision with glowing success, I'd lighten up as satiric healer and give him an overtly affable shoulder rub. It hardly ever pleases me strictly to highlight another person's excesses and then leave him writhing, unless that person forces me to do so.

Before you dispute me on that two-step approach—I can see you're about to, but haven't I prepared you for my total obtuseness?—let me quote how my student opened *my* eyes. "You're too young," he began again, with a yet more plaintive but still more clearly based sorrow, "for me to lose you." Managing to tell me that, he couldn't remain upright. He softly fell against one of the walls of our narrow hall space, his arms outstretched as though, if a wall could be hugged, he would clasp it to his heart. The wall muffled his subsequent remark, but he couldn't bring himself to look at me as he spoke. The gist was that he'd presumed only that *he* had the choice to fail to graduate and to stay at our high school with me. But now, seeing where we lived, where we'd sheltered ourselves, he said, he had to face the bald sight of my mortality. That was more than he could bear, he cried. No matter how much time he could calculate I might reasonably have left on earth, his determination never to lose me was out of his hands. College-bound or stay put in high school, whichever he chose, he had to face the loss of me either way. Life, he proclaimed, mounts loss upon loss, with even one life lost "a flat-out offense to whoever we hold responsible for creating the first living organism." (God's truth, Doc, my student is seldom at a loss for phrases like that.)

He was suggesting that, realistic as I periodically claim to be (until I lose my senses more than many), I don't take my death as significant enough, at least not as seriously as I take my refusal to retire. I humbly ask you how should I have best replied? As you know I have no trouble declaring that while the choice to retire or not *is* in my hands, the choice of how much longer I live indeed is not. "Out of my hands,

out of my hands,” I crooned to him, kind of satirizing myself or maybe the dream most of us humans cling to, that life and death be other than they are. “Out of my hands” sounds like a pop song lyric, doesn’t it? I presumed my reply had to go light, but I went too light: “I’m like Tom Brady. He kept going into his forties, and now he’s going all over again,” Can you imagine a lilt like that? I followed my misguided croon with a twinkly coda that I hoped my student would hear as a healing refutation of his anxiety that he would lose me on the spot.

At my mention of Tom Brady, my student turned from the wall and looked strangely into my eyes, “Where did he keep going?” he asked dully. Did he expect my reply would reveal whether I had begun to suffer dementia? Or had he no clue as to who the hell was some guy named Tom Brady? Do *you* have no clue?

I held my student’s troubled gaze. “Do sports mean little to you?” I asked, aware he might consider such a question equally apropos of nothing.

“Why would you expect them to mean anything?” was his reply, humoring me I suspect. Even his pronoun, “them”, didn’t ring right, as though all sports in existence were one big lump.

“When I was your age,” I elaborated, struggling to make a *morsel* of sense to him, “I played handball by myself against the door of a curbside garage, until the owner complained to my parents. “Did you ever play anything that lonely?” I asked. At least I was distancing us from the death topic. When Zelda appeared with cookies or something, she’d interrupt only what would strike her as chitchat.

“I threw snowballs at icicles,” he surprised me by announcing. “The icicles hung from the eaves of my neighbors’ slanted roof. My friends and I competed with each other, to see whose snowballs hit the most icicles and knocked them to the ground.” He had never mentioned *having* a friend before. I actually couldn’t tell if, friend or no friend, he ever did feel as dangerously lonely as I used to feel. I assumed he did. His attachment to me seemed to verify that, but the mention of my solo handball years stirred even less bounce from my student than Tom Brady.

That chitchat intended to calm, bounce matters little, though, right? So, I persisted with an idle dribble, “In sports, you have to be shrewd, you know. You have to anticipate the other guy.”

“What other guy?” he asked. Ah! At least, our ball was rolling.

“Whomever you play against,” I said with pointless wisdom. “Or

play *with*.”

That’s when Zelda arrived with a tray of a cookie assortment.

Zelda accompanied her *welcome* interruption with a startlingly ambiguous comment to my student: “There is *always* choice, young man. I *believe* in choice.” Had she taken so long to bring the cookies because she had paused to eavesdrop? My student may well have concluded that.

“When it comes to cookies, I wholly share your point of view,” he told her. Was he masking his upset through diplomacy? Was he recovering this fast from his emotional flood? Was he intending each of us to hear his reply through a distinctly different context? I felt him give me a glimpse of the adult I still hoped he would decide to live and become.

Zelda invited my student into what she called our lounge—our combination living room, dining room, bedroom, and my home office. Also Zelda’s office, though hers on campus is more sizable than mine, and she can do the bulk of her projects there undisturbed. Our kitchen, as you might guess, has no space for a table and any chairs. If we weren’t so eager to end the toll that our disagreement about whether and where to move had taken on our marriage, we probably would have come to afford one of our senior community’s larger cottages, but when you have services included, and a healthcare facility as part of your “complete lifetime” package, even a cottage as “cozy” as ours is nearly beyond our double-income. As I apologized to Zelda, I realized I should have seen her point of view from the outset. You’re bewildered? You would have liked to have discussed that with me? Come on, Doc: Why would I want to bother you with such domestic silliness? And how I’d make you feel about your own skyrocketing fees? Besides, I couldn’t tell you, even a month after Zelda’s and my tussle over this, who was the stubborn one and who the more generous. You’ve heard *ad infinitum* my strong belief in adjusting to the powers that be. No other way can lead to happiness!

Don’t tell me: In all these years you and I have been seeing each other, I’ve not referred to Zelda’s academic standing even once? How odd of me! Could that be because, despite your penchant for interruptions, you never once asked? I’m sure I mention Zelda enough to pique your interest in her. “More than” pique? What’s “more than” supposed to suggest? You can be quite a joshier when you put your mind to it, Doc. Look, I’m sticking my leg out to you. Pull my leg to

your heart's content.

Actually, though, my student had no idea about Zelda, either. I can hardly keep my wife in the shadows, but I do consciously avoid boasting about her reputation, her national visibility. Is that a fault? Everyone in our social circle is either a professor or married to one. You must have heard the exaggerated one-liner, that our Commonwealth's major *industry* is academia. Well, here we are: goddamn *proof!* Are *you* a professor, as well, without *my* having guessed it? I seldom *thoroughly* peruse the stuff that hangs on walls when it comes to someone as widely recommended as you, even when they leave the room to let me finally study their wall cover to cover. I was sure, on the other hand, that you'd know loads of specifics in advance about me that might mightily contradict the impression I hoped to make on you. Your warmth and ease had me dive right into the muck with you. That's what I fancy I also provide more cleanly, maybe more would-be heroically, for my student: Except that when *my* time with *you* is up, I get up and go.

So there we three stood in our all-purpose, cozy cottage "lounge." My student couldn't bring himself to sit down, even after Zelda beckoned him to do so with her chin and said she would set the tray of cookies on his lap. Our little eating table had to be reserved for the pot of tea and cups that she'd carry out next. My student looked at me surprised, and I realized that the chair Zelda thought would most comfort him was a recliner he likely took as a symbol of "the man of the house" throne of honor. "Zelda rescued that chair from our old home for her nighttime reading and for the music we listen to before our bedtime," I said, to relax my student into it. Chairs should never be revered.

"We're eager to see how that chair fits you," Zelda chose to underscore—with a curious expression in her eyes—to bolster his belief that he would not insult us if he plopped there. He asked where *we* would sit. We told him we had all sorts of choices that might not be apparent, just like our love of our little senior cottage might not be apparent. Our cheer seemed to amaze him. I felt rise from its coffin my hope that my initial purpose in inviting him to our "retiree campus" might still be achieved. But then, a look of "rein yourself in" lit Zelda's face. Did I overdo how playful and optimistic we "old folk youngsters" can remain? Whatever had passed through her mind and took the form of her fleeting, off-put expression drained my confidence that

my behavior represented me at my topmost.

My student seemed caught between a high wind of pleasure and utter wide-eyed curiosity as he informed Zelda, “You have a funny look on your face.” Bold of him, I thought. I was rattled by such a direct assertion to the hospitable stranger she still was to him at that time, yet I also got a kick out of his catching her look as I had.

Zelda’s resulting exchange with him unnerved me even more: “I look funny?” she replied. “It’s just that you’re different than I pictured.” My student spun his head toward me—an instant silent accusation.

“I’m not like what your husband told you about me?” he batted back at her. And he dug in deeper: “Am I better or worse?”

I felt I had to jump in to prevent a collision, but as I opened my mouth to speak, Zelda replied, “Neither. He’s not described you even once.” I hope you can imagine how every unanticipated word of theirs pushed me closer to my personal cliff-edge.

Before I could pipe in with a heated correction, Zelda backedpedaled, enough at least to cool my temper before its winds toppled me over: “He doesn’t talk of you in any detail,” she clarified, looking only at my student and seeing the degree to which *he* appeared as jolted by her earlier blind sweep as I was. “But I’m aware,” she went on, “of how you and he have come to know each other *unusually* well, and I concluded—*my* mistake—that you’d be more outgoing.”

As though she hadn’t made her point sufficiently and my student deserved more details, she continued: “My husband’s ordinarily shy. Even our *closest* friends have to work hard to draw him out.” She registered each glance my student directed toward me as she spoke, which likely accounted for her last-ditch attempt to smooth the boy’s discomfort: “Don’t worry about your teacher’s sensitivity to what I say to you,” she advised rather clumsily. “He’d say the same about himself.” I damn well would *not*!

My student, unable to stop being wide-eyed: brought this matter closer to home: “Do *you* have to draw him out?”

Evading a genuine answer with a semblance of explaining the obvious, Zelda flatly replied, “We’re married.”

I finally jumped in with my own prohibitive: “Don’t pursue her answer any further, please. She’ll think you’re a snoop.” Surely, she’d see he had no right or reason to press her on this.

“I disagree,” Zelda said gently. “I like his interest in us. Most of our friends rarely pose questions to me. His interest springs, doesn’t it,

from his warranted and quite moving attachment to you.”

Zelda’s surprise perspective gave me pause. “But haven’t you often *complained*,” I pointed out, “that our friends are more interested in me than in you?”

“They don’t ask *you* probing questions either,” she rejoined, “not of the kind as this young man is brave enough to bring up.”

The “young man” blushed. Was he susceptible to her flattery? Or was Zelda seeing a dimension in him that my anxieties blinded me to? I decided to try him out, so to speak; to open up to him as, of course, I *did* sometimes hesitate to do with Zelda, until she poked me in the ribs and called me a wimp. “Our friends are generally Zelda’s colleagues and peers,” I told him, squashing my uncertainty as to whether he’d catch my drift. “What does a husband feel like when all he is is a high school teacher surrounded by hoards who are openly dazzled by his accomplished spouse?” When I’m at my most fragile, I refer to her peers as “Zelda’s gang.” When she’s at her most impatient with me, I know that my words will make Zelda bristle. When she demands it, she counts on me to apologize.

My student likely failed to take in a single word I spoke. Instead of responding to my risky disclosures, he asked Zelda what classes she teaches. *Did he really want to know that?*

Her indirect reply was a wide-open door: “Are you interested in linguistics?”

His expectably uninformed answer might have ended their quasi-conversation: “Is that a school subject?” But it did not.

Zelda took pains to be clear without condescending: “It’s how people talk with each other,” she began. “How they use whatever their language happens to be.”

My student was quick to make a connection: “Like you and I are talking *now*?”

When she decided to give him a taste of her profession, I won’t deny that Zelda fascinated me: “Kind of,” she smiled. Could she actually find my student charming? And she elaborated! “A student of mine once wrote an entire essay on the use of ‘of’ in that two-word phrase. As contrasted with other uses of ‘of’ in proper English.” Can you believe she’d go that far with him?!

He could have been daunted, but—I was shocked—he connected the dots! “So,” he threw me off balance, “without the ‘of’ kind is just ‘kind’?”

You didn't need a crystal ball to see how badly Zelda wanted to throw her arms around him. "Exactly!" she exclaimed. "Though I wouldn't say 'just.' 'Kind' is complicated all by itself."

My student altered his angle: "Was your student a good student?"

Zelda's enchantment with him grew: "Yes," she smiled again. Did her lips quiver as she offered more specifics than I would have chosen to include? "My student was excitingly excellent. She's now a junior professor in my department. She went away for graduate school training, and then we brought her back."

One word from my student stopped her midstream: "She?"

Not thrown by this whatsoever, Zelda twinkled, "Does 'she' surprise you?"

Nor was my student thrown by what I viewed as Zelda's gender-consciousness challenge, or even by her amusement tinged, perhaps, by a modicum of condescension: "Ah, youth," that sort of thing.

I had another impulse to step in between them, but my student was not phased: "I just wondered," he said, instantly catching himself with amusement of his own: "Maybe I shouldn't use 'just' here, either. Do you think?"

Zelda's gentleness stunned me: "It's all in what you mean by 'just.'" I wish she treated every *faux pas* of mine with such allowance.

My student finally turned back to me and announced, "Your wife is exciting."

What can a husband say to *that*?! "I fully concur," was my pompous comeback. I'd never talked to my student that artificially when we shot the breeze with his classmates under our tree.

Was I nervous? Why would I be? I was so excited! I was over-excited! I was filled inside with thoughts of how inadequately I had handled my student's depression when what I really should have done was excite him!

You believe I *do* excite him? Now that you make me reconsider, how can I claim otherwise? Come to think of it, excitement is at the heart of his attachment to me. But *faced* with the excitement I instill in him, I'm at a loss. Is that what you're leading me to contemplate? Why *am* I at such a loss? And if my student's and my wife's mutual enchantment holds up, will my wife find herself at a loss as well?

When I reach the moment of what most dismays me—far more upsetting than a simple *faux pas*!—please tell me if you anticipated I'd go that far.

I can't take up more than my allotted extra time? May I remind you, Doc: I'm *watching* your clock, just as you are. *Absolutely*, I'll "cut to the chase"; I was already at the *cusp* of the chase! (You don't need to add "at last", Doc. You sound just like Zelda!) I was *at* the chase well before your reprimand.

In brief, my student then turned his attention totally to my wife. "If I apply to your university and get accepted, will you be someone I can turn to for advice?"

"Why would I not?" she tossed back to him.

"I promise not to be a nuisance," my marvel of a student tactfully assured her.

"Have you been a nuisance to my husband?" Zelda asked, looking at me with a wink.

"I think so," my student said, as though Zelda had directly accused him of that and he was merely, with a strange calm, agreeing. "But I've learned my lesson," he added with a grin. A grin! One day earlier, he was prepared to end his life!

"I'll be tough on you," Zelda went on, "even if you never do become a nuisance. College will teach *you* to be tough."

My student was not my student; I swear, Doc, he had become someone else! "I'll be prepared for that," he shot forth. "I want to major in linguistics." I had the urge not to pinch myself but to pinch my student. *He* had become the dream I was dreaming. The dream and the dreamer: *both* of us. I had ceased to be present.

"I'm sure that my husband will write you a glowing recommendation," Zelda said, holding my stare and nodding at me. "And I'm sure you have other teachers who will do so as well."

"Not really," my student told her. "Will that be a problem?"

"We'll have to see about that," she said quite seriously, but it was clear she was not shaken by his earnest concern. And then she added ludicrously, "If need be, I'll write a recommendation for you myself." For the first time, though it would have been obvious to me long before had I given it even a modicum of thought, she recognized the dilemma I couldn't resolve all year. She was acting on my behalf with my student, not simply on his. But she was proceeding with a care I hadn't thought to take and didn't believe I had the guts to carry off: "I need to warn you," she told him, "I may decide to retire a year or two after you arrive. But I will make sure not to leave you in the lurch. My colleagues in linguistics are a splendid group of scholars and

human beings.” She concluded with, “Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

My student laughed. “You don’t frighten me,” he declared.

It was Zelda’s turn to laugh, “Did you think I was hoping to?”

“Yes,” he said, placing a finger on her lips. “You think I need to grow up.” Zelda looked about to gasp. “Don’t deny that,” my student cautions, as though *he* has suddenly become the one in charge. He removed his finger from her lips and placed it on his own, and then he blew her a kiss.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Zelda practically whispered.

“I watch people do that,” he replied. “Did I do it at the right time?”

“The time is always right for communicating what’s in your heart,” Zelda counseled, “but not everyone will agree. Sometimes it’s best to learn before you leap.” I couldn’t determine whether Zelda was offering her advice to *me* as well as to my student. Before she reached the end of her sentence, she was glaring straight at me. I felt I had done something wrong, maybe dangerous, maybe sinful or *shameful*, but I didn’t know what. “You need to know,” she continued, her glare like a nail hammered again and again into my skull, “exactly with whom you take that risk.”

Doc, that’s when I lost it in spades. I began to shriek, “*I don’t understand anything! I’m going crazy!*” I’m sure you can explain me to myself at that peak pitch of my response, but I know only that I was overwhelmed by a vision of Zelda and my student as total strangers to me. *They* were the ones with a profoundly significant history, and I was the outsider they invited into their home. I had to dash as fast as I could, away from the institutional cottage I found myself in that I could not grasp any longer as my home. If both Zelda and my student hadn’t made a dive for me and blocked my exit, I swear I would have run screaming out the door, never to come back to myself. I would have raced from this eerie cottage into a white-out.

My student had me tackled and flat on the floor. Zelda must have dashed for a jug of cold water; I knew only that she was emptying a jug on my head. I remember her assurance to my student that she would quickly return with a mop. My student straddled me from behind and basically sat on me—to keep me from getting up and hurting myself, he later claimed.

As Zelda mopped the puddle around my head, she and my student started to converse about my “condition.” I felt like I was in the

middle of a story that Zelda was making up. She told my student I had been mentally unbalanced for several years, “but he’s been under good psychiatric care since his first episode,” I think were her exact words. Interestingly, she considered what happened merely an “episode,” implying it would soon pass and vanish.

She proceeded to get yet more personal. She told my student she had tried repeatedly to persuade me to retire, “but he convinced me that when he’s with students he’s totally ‘himself again’ and that his students *count* on him. He sees himself as their life-saver.” Could she actually be discussing *me* while my student sat on me? When she added, “Especially with certain students who cannot envision having a future,” I began to believe what she said was true of someone and also true of a certain student of his. She said that he viewed students more as symbols than as individuals. And then she said something more bizarre than anything she had said before: She said he had singled out this *particular* student and that *she* had suggested he invite that student over for tea and cookies.

You ask me how long ago did this occur? Why are you asking me *now*? Shortly after our last session, I think, but if you ask me it feels like yesterday or tomorrow. Life is like writing poetry—which I do on occasion. When I’m caught up in a new poem, I totally lose track of time, and even track of who’s writing the poem.

You’re about to dial Zelda? What does *she* have to do with what I’m telling you? I told you I’d give her a report. For all I know, you’ve secretly recorded every word of mine in this “double session.” Better than taking notes on me for sure! If you’ll permit, I’ll take your tape to her myself. Sure, Zelda can come and drive me home, but even in the dark I can drive myself! Anyway, she *can’t* drive me; she’s teaching right now. Her *evening* class. That’s when she shows films and has them listen to *her* tapes. *I’m on some of those tapes, too.* Her class studies how someone who hails from my part of this country but who has an adequate speech education can half-lose his broad childhood accent. Sometimes I listen to her tapes of me too intently. I feel like I’m here in my body and I’m there in my thoughts in one exhausting moment of breath.

Doc, when someone tells tales about himself, should he use the present tense and should he speak in the first person or the third? He’s doing *that* this very moment. . . Suddenly you ask if my student truly exists! The only question is whether his teacher exists. And if he doesn’t exist, or if he ceases to exist, how does anyone whose life

he has nurtured carry on? My student confronted me with that very remark.

Ah, suddenly you think it wise to increase my dosage! I disagree but go ahead! See if I care! See if I take it! I go out of my way to share my experiences with you down to the subtlest, most self-exposing details, and you want to make me suffer for my effort? Now I *am* losing my temper? Listen, Doc, I have *no* temper to lose. All I have is confusion. And not only about what happened with my student. Confusion about you!

Push comes to shove, my “episodes” are as rare as cucumbers. I’m committed to adjusting to *any* circumstance except when I’m confused about the circumstance. After all you’ve seen of me to the contrary, can you say I act like an idiot *every* day? Doc, please: There *are* moments when I do lose it, whatever “it” is. I own up to that. But there are always *more* moments when I *find* it. Don’t we *all* lose it now and then?

Granted, I beamed with *wholly healthy* excitement when Zelda agreed to have me invite my student to our cottage, but the initiative was *mine*. I saw no reason to dispute her claim to credit for it. I may even have misheard or misconstrued what she did claim. Of sole importance was my certainty that my student knew “the truth” regardless, complex as “truth” never ceases to be. I also hoped he’d feel as welcomed as his hearing Zelda’s warm distortion might make him feel. Surely you know—I did tell you?—how much I hoped Zelda and I would manifest, as hosts, the vitality that my student would *refuse* to let slip through his fingers as his age and independence set in.

To her credit, Zelda was determined to have my student hear straight from her horse’s mouth that he had been his teacher’s priceless anchor, but that he should not feel bound by his awareness of such nonsense. As I stayed prostrate under my student’s swaying weight, I think I faintly heard her speak to that effect. His reply to her, loud and clear, pierced my heart. He declared he had *not* felt bound, only lost. If my face had not been hidden inside my armpit, he might have glimpsed my tears of release and connection: He and I, *both of us*, lost. He quickly clarified that he did not need to be found, but to find himself. Will his teacher let him do so? Zelda offered her hope that a person who is lost is generally faster at spotting a second who is lost. Each, she argued, is more adept at assisting and nurturing the other. That’s when she pronounced his teacher lost, too, and I could hear my

student burst into tears.

She kept speaking in low, soothing tones not reliably audible to me. I think she told my student that his teacher was in need of overcoming a difficult recurrent fear that, no matter how that teacher surrounds himself with those he comes to care about as they come to care about him, what he dreads will prove to be prophetic: his dread that at any moment, with little or no warning, isolation can strike.

I imagine she kept her eyes on me as she talked about him. She must have seen him struggle less and less to catch his breath under his student's soothing rump. His shriek of panic, as she termed it, was slowly coming under control. What was less visible to her was how she was spurring me to reflect. I could have thwarted my student, could have bound and injured his mind and soul, could have *over-appealed*, not only to my student but also to each responsive student in each of my classes. Done that year after year! Are these reflections accurate? Did I damage my student so badly that his future nearly did get swallowed up whole by me?

Zelda posed this very question to his student. His student, my student, *the* student took some time before he replied. In that silence of his hesitation, Zelda spoke up so I could hear her crisply. She saw proof, she said, that the teacher did not. That I did not. Proof that the student was his own person and no other. Is *she* correct about that? Should I be let off the hook or kept on it?

She invited the student to lift off from my back, to let *me* lift off from the floor, once I felt ready. She was sure, she said, that his preventing me from rushing from their home, his tackling and then landing on me, had not damaged me, neither physically nor mentally. "Before I go to bed with him tonight," she predicted, "he and I will check on every bone in his body. And each bone will need to salute us and call out, 'Present!' before we retire. Likewise with every bone in his mind." I honestly didn't know what she had in store, but I liked the sound of it.. "When morning comes," she told *her* student, as he was already coming to be, "we'll look out our window and behold the sun and the moon together in the sky before the moon departs. It will be a wondrous sight."

I lifted my head and saw her future student sit at her feet and take another cookie from the tray my panic had caused all of us to abandon so near to my head on the floor. Softly, Zelda said to him, her eyes on each of us as she became aware that I had leaned toward them, the

better to heed her next thought, “And now,” to her student she said, “I can finally ask you your name.”

I’ll end here, Doc. Your clock has struck midnight, so to speak, and I’m off on my pumpkin. I’m overwhelmed, but in a good way. I can’t tell how you’re reacting. Still. I have to run. I’m sorry. Just in talking to you, I’ve realized something. I have to dash home to tell it all to Zelda. I promise: If you do tape our sessions, I’ll take this evening’s with me and play it for her when *she* gets home. You’ve helped me more than you may realize. I’ll pump you for your goddamn fairy godfather insights our next session.

Don’t bother billing me for this month. Here’s your check.

LEN BERKMAN is the Anne Hesseltine Hoyt Professor of Theatre at Smith College, where he has taught since 1969.