

TEXAS MFA

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FOREWORD

From 1994 until graduating in 1997, I spent three rewarding years in the Master of Fine Arts program in fiction at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos. On September 1, 2003, the university name officially changed to Texas State University-San Marcos, commonly known as Texas State.

Much of the novel is centered in and around Texas State and San Marcos, which are located in southcentral Texas on the eastern edge of Hill Country, 30 miles south of Austin and 45 miles north of San Antonio, built around the San Marcos Springs and River, along the old Chisholm cattle trail, and the current route of Interstate 35.

TEXAS BY LAND

TEXAS TRAIL

Canocanayesatetlo – warm water – the name the indigenous Tonkawan people gave to the San Marcos Springs, now called, where emerald water flows rapidly year-round, at a temperature of 72 degrees Fahrenheit, forming the San Marcos River on the campus of Texas State University. Water vapor wafting over river, especially during cool months – warm water inviting swimmers and kayakers and tubers year-round. Any rare freeze of air temperature during cool months is not uncommonly followed by 70 or 80 degree days or warmer still.

Filter feeding fish hover downstream from toes of waders who kick up sand and sediment from river bottom as the fish nibble at bits on skin. Liquid crystal water clear to riverbed.

Alligators once roamed the San Marcos Springs, where the water has always flowed in known human history at the least.

Scientists suggest the Springs may be the oldest continuously inhabited site in all of North America – not a bad place to attend a Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing, as the group of us currently are – Rafael, Wendy, Loki, Jensen, myself (Mike Penner), and others. If it all comes back to the Springs – this journal, this time here in Texas – it might be nothing new in American letters. It might be well within a traditional, coursing vein – William Van O'Connor notes in his introduction to the anthology, *The Idea of an American Novel* –

As backdrop, and subject too, the American novelist tends to employ something vast, the sky, the prairie, the wilderness, the ocean, war, humanity, and even eternity.

And if the San Marcos Springs of the Edwards Aquifer are not as vast as can be – though the aquifer stretches from Austin south to San Antonio and curves west, running much of the way to the Rio Grande at a spot north of Eagle Pass – and if the river is too small upon which to float an entire novel, well, possibly the Springs and river and surrounds are major enough, especially as the site of ancient human habitation and current highly active, even volatile, migration. No matter that the great river novels of America were written over a century ago – Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – two tales of a nation divided – the river as fact and symbol of that divide, carrying slaves and slave products. Canocanayesatetlo – I get the feeling there is something of a vital story here yet to be told.

Texas once was Mexico, once indigenous land, part of Turtle Island – indigenous descriptor for the continent.

Still is.

Texas is Latin America, Anglo America, African America, Indigenous America, Asian America. Texas overlaps. Tejas, Teyas – meaning allies, or friends, or possibly "tough guys."

What cosmic forces might converge at this point on the old Chisholm cattle trail – where Central, South, and East Texas collide? Here is where Latin America meets Anglo America, meets the US South, US West and US Midwest – in and around the ancient grounds and waters of what is now called San Marcos, where more than 200 springs shoot out from three main fissures and other openings within a couple hundred yards of each other – now engulfed at the bottom of Spring Lake, the current visible source of the San Marcos River – the only home of a few unique plant and animal species, including the Texas blind salamander, fishes, and Texas wild rice. The only home. Here is where the spring-driven headwaters once spouted to air, until inundated by the flying V of Spring Lake, formed first by a dam built by German settlers in 1854. German free thinkers once settled in Central Texas, having cast off superstition – as they viewed faith. The progressive populist movement rose in the region and still lives in some, its spirit and power carried forth in the *Texas Observer* among other progressive journals and nodes. Early Europeans arrived more than a century and a half before the damming of the waters and used the springs as a stop on the Spanish Camino Real from Nacogdoches to Mexico.

For a couple decades, from the 1860s to the 1880s, before railroads gridded Texas, Spring Lake was a reliable stop on the Chisholm cattle trail running north from the Rio Grande to railheads in Kansas. Still today, the border region of South Texas – once farmed by famed Beat writer William S. Burroughs – the toe of Texas, remains the largest population center in the US not connected by the national interstate system, though interstate 35, after running over from Laredo, eventually picks up a stretch of the old Chisholm Trail at San Antonio, and arcs gently north, following the old route.

Today the hooped herd creatures who visit the Springs are not cattle but deer stepping to the lake from the west out of the low forest of oaks, cedar, mesquite, strolling down the ridges and knolls that form the very eastern edge of Hill Country and the Balcones Escarpment.

Scientists warn that easily within a century the San Marcos Springs could dry up and thus the river if there is continued development from Austin to San Antonio and westward, followed by years of drought. Treat the world like an infinite resource, as it is not, and it will collapse, as too much of the world has already. Smaller springs all across Central Texas have long since gone dry due to demand on the Edwards Aquifer. Cattle still roam near the Springs, on the rolls of prairie farmland east, north and south, as well as in the steadily drier, far more rocky and even precipitous scrub pasture of Hill Country to the west.

The Balcones Escarpment divides the sixty thousand residents and the town of San Marcos in half, into two zones of natural beauty and economic division. Canyon-wrinkled Hill Country rises and runs west with its more affluent homes tucked amid small scenic ridges and hills, green woods.

To the east and south in town off campus lie the flats of the barrios and other low-income neighborhoods, including student housing. Thousands of university students live in cramped quarters on the angular border of these two zones – on the very edge of the escarpment, on campus, and just off – terrain that transforms into wide open rolling fields and flats, savannah and blackland prairie, east and south of the aquifer.

Though by 2005 Texas State's MFA program was little more than a decade old, students sought it out from far and wide probably due to the faculty – accomplished, energetic, thoughtful – and the location – small town San Marcos tucked between nearby

Austin and San Antonio in the sunny and warm southcentral, southwestern part of the US. Four scenic little rivers – mostly rural and often swum, tubed, boated, fished – run within a couple dozen miles of each other in and around town – the Blanco, the Guadalupe, the San Marcos, and the tiny Comal, which nevertheless hosts a large water park. At two and a half miles in full, the Comal is one of the shortest rivers anywhere. A few hours drive gets a traveler east and southeast to the Gulf of Mexico or south and southwest to the busy border and the country of Mexico.

Texas – it has the reputation for being inhospitable if exciting, where you may get a big "Howdy!" and a shotgun blast all in the same gesture. A majority of white males has not voted for a Democrat for the US Presidency since the 1964 election, won by Texan Lyndon Johnson, destroyer of Vietnam, graduate of Texas State (back when the university went by Southwest Texas State Teachers' College) – maybe because Texas means "country" in many senses of the word and white males have been led to identify "country" with "good" – or, more intimately, themselves.

"The King of Country" – renowned singer George Strait is a graduate too, from back when the university went by Southwest Texas State. As of January 2006, George Strait has had 52 number one songs – the most of any recording artist ever. No doubt the state's symbolic meaning, its common perception, remains "country," in about every sense of the word – nation, land, culture. Nevermind that 3 of the nation's 10 largest cities are Dallas, San Antonio, Houston – and another Texas city is considered by many to be one of the most appealing anywhere – Austin. Texas still seems to mainly mean country, all those cities aside. Such is Texicana, such is Texas, by far the largest contiguous state – vast, vital, diverse, contradictory. Not unlike many a great novel? Or movie. Or life itself, writ large.

Anyway, Texas is where I traveled to for an MFA. That's where I wound up a couple years after my time as an undergrad at Penn State, in the northeast. Texas is where I tried to learn how to write libratory fiction, liberation lit. And Texas is where I came to know the place itself, along with more of the world.

Texas is a country unto itself.

Let me tell you Texas, about Texas, a bit of it. I'll tell you Texas though I was born and raised in Pennsylvania – the state with the largest rural population of any state in the US. Pennsylvania. More ghost towns than Colorado, one of the largest, most mature hardwood forests in the world, a state with cities that have played a major role in the history of the country, the state that Democratic Party partisan James Carville famously said is made up of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh with Alabama in between. I had gone from Penn State, the most applied to university in the country, to living 30 miles south of the University of Texas, which itself boasts the largest student body in any one place. Such facts give rise to the notion of "Americana," though I can't say it's a subject I'm much inclined to explore. Why think in light, in limit of the so-called nation state. It's true I haven't exactly lived anywhere else, but I've in no way lived in most of America either.

I think of this – a young guy who pulled up beside me at a gas station one day eager to sell his rap album – seemed like he had just created it a moment before – he was so excited, hopeful, open. I was pressed for time, my thoughts distracted, and stressed, little cash in my pocket – so I all but automatically declined. "No, thanks." He pulled away and

almost immediately I regretted it, very much. I've wished I've had that CD to listen to now over and over – the guy made such a deep press somehow, into the brain, between the eyes. Miles away from any media. I knew the guy all of a sudden, it felt, but did I? He offered his music and I too pressed, too stupidly pressed. He had – such a face – maybe worn weathered weary, for so young, but full of light – an open face – this one, maybe a few years younger than myself but a world removed could be, no world removed, and he reached out with his CD and I was too damned dim to come up with a few dollars or a swap of some sort. Some guy on the street like that offers you his CD, you go for it – you grab one of those over 30 from the store.

Penn State. Americana. University of Texas. Americana. UT. Not to be mistaken with the UT that is the University of Tennessee. Not to be mistaken with –

When I was a senior undergraduate at Penn State, I talked to the MFA director and other writers about choosing MFA programs to apply to, and they each encouraged me to apply out of state, because, as the director put it – "A big part of writing is living and it helps to travel and live in various places to build up experience of the world." Obviously good advice, if you can follow it. I had already set my mind to relocate but had no intention of doing so unless my way was paid. So I needed the teaching assistantship that Texas State offered.

I was put in my place almost immediately (basically unintentionally, I assume) at a pre-semester get-to-know-you party, when one of the professors asked me if I knew another applicant from Penn State who ultimately turned down Texas State. When I replied that I only knew about him from his comic and thoughtful columns in the local paper (columns that seemed worldly and knowing beyond my ability at the time – yet oddly nervous and I thought often weakly flip), the professor looked a bit crestfallen at having failed to land this regular columnist – credentials I did not come close to having. Welcome!

In Central Texas – the Midwest, South, Southwest, northern Mexico and more jut, jam, vaporize into something more than the sum of the parts. If San Marcos is not as much the heart of the Southwest as some places, you would be hard-pressed to tell that to the Texas State students wearing cowboy hats to class, to work, and hanging out on both formal and informal occasions. On Texas grounds.

"Ah, Mijo," said Reyna Maria Mendoza – the one and only word in Spanish she ever addressed to me. "Mijo," she called out from beside her car in the parking lot of the Restless Wind Tavern just off the square in San Marcos where she was leaving her shift as server, when we first met.

When I asked, she wrote it out, Mijo – "m-i-j-o" – no apostrophe, and said it meant "my friend."

Later, I researched and discovered mijo to be idiom, of a sort, meaning man, mate, love and son – derived from mi hijo, m'hijo, or m'ijo – my son. So it meant more than friend, but I took Reyna at her word then, a year and a half after arriving in San Marcos, and I do so now, a year and a half after that.

A sort of cosmopolitan local who had lived awhile in San Antonio after coming up from the border, Reyna was proud, savvy, intuitive, analytic, warm, cool, quite able to make herself who she was and would be. She worked at it – being Reyna – Reyna Whomever. Reyna Who Would Be Reyna. She and I entered a relationship of sorts, a friendship, one staunchly limited by Reyna, one in which I found it instructive often to think of Reyna as reyna.

At first we never spent more than a few minutes alone together, yet in the sporadic moments in which we did make one another's acquaintance, I felt I came to know her as well as people I've known for many months and years. In this way, I suppose, my time with Reyna was quintessentially novelistic. I see this upon reflection and sort of felt it at the time. If life is a novel-in-hiding, a novel diluted, a novel at sea, for awhile Reyna brought more to life than life itself.

"Mijo, do you know where I am going?"

We were walking arm-in-arm through the San Marcos city park on the trail by the San Marcos River in Central Texas. We walked past scattered children and picnicking families and friends. We walked beneath tall oaks and elms, past the broadleaf plants known as elephant ears on the far side, a great bank of green against woods along water.

"Mija – you're going away."

"I'm going to LA."

"I hear LA has suburbs that stretch to El Paso and Las Vegas and beyond."

"You won't find me in the suburbs."

"I won't find you at all. You won't keep in touch."

"I had to get to know a writer. In the bars we know everything. But I did not know a writer."

"That's not true," I guessed. She might have met another grad student or professor in The Restless Wind or another bar.

"I did not know you, Mijo."

"What about your family? You're leaving them?"

"People move. My own family picked up and moved from Mexico. I'm going only across the country. The rest of my family goes in all directions. Besides, I'm the bad girl. Of a type, I guess. My sister is the good one. She does health care, therapy. And my own life is wide open."

"Your sister's life sounds wide open too. Couldn't it be? What will you do in LA?"

"I will seduce young writers."

"You haven't even done that here."

"No? Well, try, try again. I'll get a job. Of course I'm past regular college age but people go to college all the time nowadays. I'll go to college in Cali."

"I know people who've moved from California to here in Texas and they like it well enough. Isn't one place as good as another, or almost? San Marcos is beautiful." The brother of my grandfather had moved from my home area in Pennsylvania to California, generations ago. I had never met him and always wished I had.

When I told this to Reyna, she replied, "It's like I said. But let's sit and watch the people."

And so we did, there on the cement retaining wall near the swimmers and tubers, canoers and kayakers, about a mile down from the San Marcos Springs, there along the

warm waters – Canocanayesatetlo – there in the middle of a second year in the Texas State MFA program, right there with Reyna, by the lively scene of splash at the Rio Vista dam.

Canocanayesatetlo. It didn't exactly roll off the tongue. Not to me, at least. Not yet.

THE TEXAS ROAD

After being pulled over three times by police – and let off each time without even a warning – another story for another day – by the time my friends and I from back home in Pennsylvania approached Texas it was daylight, we had been driving all night, and given the rough-and-tumble wild west reputation of the state of Texas, we figured the Texas police might spare themselves the trouble of pulling us over and instead level their guns and shoot us at the border.

You know, be upfront about it.

So we were peering hard, looking over our shoulders, glancing out the side windows when we entered the state and started passing through small Texas towns. Since this was about the first time any of the three of us had been much west of Pennsylvania, we had wanted to see some of the country and had been driving non-interstate roads. By the second day, we had tired of the long hot trip, were now driving at night, and so had been on the road for over 24 hours straight. Fierce heat, record-setting, and we drove an ancient boat with no air conditioning, a 1973 Ford Galaxie, the last week of July. And that's what had gotten us pulled over so often for nothing – the big old car, the long hair, our youth.

But instead of being greeted by cops with guns that morning at the Texas border, it felt more like we were met with open range because the speed limit jumped ten miles per hour, we never saw a cop, the sun shone brighter than ever, and we just drove another five or six hours until we reached San Marcos where I intended to secure housing for the start of grad school come fall.

It was 107 degrees and we were dead tired. Try that kind of heat in a car without air conditioning on the roads of southcentral Texas, the windows rolled all the way down and it feels like a powered-up oven has been thrown open and is blasting full force into your face and chest.

The exit funneled us direct into the San Marcos square, the first town square I had ever seen that made me understand what a town square actually meant or even that they really existed, were something more than made up for Western films and books. We parked under a row of tall palm trees. The bank sign flashed the time as 12:08 in the afternoon and that temperature – 107. Heat waves wrinkled the air above the wide streets and sidewalks. I stared at the row of palms. We had arrived in San Marcos, Texas as outsiders.

More than a bit bleary, we staggered into a little Mexican restaurant between the square and the Texas State campus and ordered iced teas. The college student waitress came out with three of the largest glasses I had ever seen – granular plastic, giant – full of tea, and more ice than tea but for once I understood and was glad.

We were seeing things we had never seen before – little things, I suppose, and more police than we wanted, but it meant the world. We had hoped to glimpse a bit of the country and worried only that we might not. We did not count on being accosted by police four times in one day, or driving nonstop into record heat. My friends would return

to Pennsylvania – and I with them, only to come back to Texas within a month to stay for three years. It seemed the best story we could put together at the moment, the way life goes. Are all stories travelogues – international or domestic? When I clunked shut the heavy long door of the Ford Galaxie and stared up at the palms, I felt how far away was Pennsylvania anymore, I had fresh evidence of how I was not good with police, and I felt that life in San Marcos could be interesting and a challenge – if for no other reason than the overwhelming heat and sun.

Giant iced teas brought to us by the nice young woman were heaven. She was brilliant. She knew exactly what we needed like she had no business knowing. It did not then occur to me that these Texas-sized iced teas were typically served year round in this warm region. Surely the Mayans are not alone in emphasizing that the greater part of life lies in sheer maintenance. With chips, salsa, iced tea, and help from the waitress, we succeeded so well in our own maintenance that noontime in Texas that I'm hard pressed not to call it one of the high points of the entire trip. The ice cold plastic cups were barrels of relief and wonder both. Who could drink it all? We did, like nothing. And there were refills. It was difficult to say where the ice ended and the tea began, for which I was only thankful.

When the waitress set a basket of tortilla chips in front of us, we explained we were not going to order a meal. Fatigued, heat stricken, I felt a meal might kill us. She said it was okay, the chips were always free – typical of Mexican restaurants, who knew? This was the first time I could remember ever being offered anything complimentary in a restaurant. I looked at the chips suspiciously for awhile, then eventually ate a few without feeling too guilty.

This was Texas? No police with guns drawn everywhere, no cutthroat stinginess? So far.

I would learn. Texas feels more like open range compared to most states, with its excessive distances, speeds, and other freedoms – the freedom to be poor and uninsured in particular.

In Texas, more than 1 in 4 adults with a job lacks health insurance, and more than 3 out of 10 of all Texans have no insurance – both figures the highest in the US.

No personal income tax in Texas, but then education is paid for in part out of state gambling proceeds. Nothing like rolling the dice on education – on the backs of those of low income, at that.

What did Texas mainly give a person in major quantity? Space – if you had money, or if you happened to be cattle, or a mesquite tree, or a prickly pear cactus – and most of Texas gave a lot of heat too, but then that came straight from nature itself, not the state.

So the *state* of Texas I was not big on, to say the least, while the variations of the land itself were often awesome, if tedious where extremely flat and hot. The people? The peoples. The peoples, like most anywhere I knew, were people. Maybe a little more laid back – due in part to the climate, it seemed to me, especially that first year after coming over from the cold and long winters of elevated northern Pennsylvania – when I would stretch my phone cord onto an outdoor walkway in the sun, in my tee shirt or skin, outside my apartment and talk with family and friends in chilled Pennsylvania and hear all their voices similarly pushed down – depressed is not too strong a description – by the heavy weather I remembered. Wow, that was what I had grown up in, that was probably how I had sounded. Now here I found myself in the tough but sunny and warm state of

Texas, and there lived my family and friends in the cold, almost 2,000 miles across the country. Texas was another world.

The Texas legislature had passed a resolution proclaiming the tiny nearby town of Lockhart to be "the Barbecue Capital of Texas," but as it happened we spent no time there, even while staying a few nights in Lockhart State Park. There we camped between a small creek and a nine hole golf course in the middle of nowhere and hoped not to get bitten by the black widow spiders and lethal coral snakes that the brochure helpfully told us made their home in the park. Who had ever heard of golf courses in state parks? With lethal snakes? Parks to me, in Pennsylvania, meant rugged mountains, wild deer, black bears, and, yes, rattlesnakes in sprawling wild forest. In any event, as a vegetarian of two years, I had no bent for barbecue, and the only time I returned to Lockhart was so my girlfriend could visit its antique shops.

Within a couple days in San Marcos, I had found a second-floor efficiency in a little complex just off campus. The two story building had outdoor stairs and a walkway balcony before the entrance. About the only other such buildings I had seen were on an Atlantic Ocean beach in North Carolina. The Gulf of Mexico was hours away but given the hot and sandy steamy scent it felt to be nearby.

In San Marcos these few days, the guys and I mainly explored campus and town, ate plenty of Tex-Mex food, and walked through the parks along the San Marcos River. Then we drove north on the interstate this time, toward Austin. We didn't know where to go or what to do, or have the money. It just felt good to be back on the road again. It was what we knew to do at that point – drive.

A TEXAS HELLO

We drove right through Austin and by a slightly roundabout route returned home. So it wasn't until a month later, the day before classes began, when I rolled off the interstate during rush hour into the city of Austin for the first time, and near the bottom of the exit ramp, I hit a man selling roses in the intersection.

It was more like he hit me, but either way, a real impact.

His remaining unsold roses smeared red across the windshield, crushed between his chest and the glass, and he bounced off the side, back toward the lanes from which he had blindly spun and come running. Driving down the ramp, I had slowed cautiously almost to a stop, thinking the rose seller would see me. He never did. He made a final sale, spun and bolted oblivious for the median, struck my fender, hood, windshield – bounced out of sight onto the road.

As it turned out, he was okay, but it was like, welcome to Austin. It was like – to a person raised in the country – welcome to the city. I mean, it was ridiculous and frightening all at once.

Coming down the long ramp, I could see the man moving quickly, running between stopped cars in the rightmost lanes selling roses to guys leaving work to take home to their wives or sweethearts, I guess, and I figured he knew what he was doing – he looked like he did – he was really working it, making fast sales and bustling all over, and the left lane, my lane, was completely open, but his presence in the lanes of adjacent stopped traffic made me nervous and wary, so I slowed pretty good coming down the long lane, the rose seller moving around and then sort of working his way back toward my lane to get to the median as he felt the other lanes start to move at the change of light, and I could see it all, or thought I could, and I slowed down a little more, and the man stopped a lane over to make a quick last sale just as those right lanes began to creep and roll more quickly forward, and as those lanes really got going, I slowed down even more, and the rose seller is all of a sudden anxious to get out of the highway, so he spins without looking from his last sale and makes a break for the side of the road, except by that time I was approaching, however carefully, I thought, and he never looked, bam!

I stomped the brakes and he slammed into the fender and hood and hit the windshield, got hit by the windshield, and the roses left a red smear on the glass, and I stopped immediately as he disappeared somewhere on the side up front out of sight below.

And I just sat there. You mean to tell me that just happened? Soon the guy staggered up, dazed, clutching his partially smashed roses and he slowly came around the front of the car to my side, and I lowered the window, and he said, "Are you all right?"

He was more shook up than broken up, it seemed clear. And maybe even more, he seemed embarrassed. He said, "Man, are you all right?" and he meant it and maybe he was worried I might cause a fuss and get officials after him and his livelihood or whatever.

It reminded me, not quite then, but it reminded me of a person I knew in high school driving his father's car and trying to take care of it one night because that was what you

did and maybe because his father was temperamental and might not let him take the car out again if anything happened so he was being especially watchful for deer since they outnumber the people three to one where we grew up (before hunting season, two to one after), and he told me he did not actually hit the deer that smashed into his father's car, the deer hit him. "It ran right into me," he protested. "I stopped the car and the deer hit me." He spoke with disbelief and anger. Apparently this herd of deer had raced in front of his car and around it and he had managed to get the car stopped safely and thought he had made it without a problem when, according to him, one of the deer in the woods on the edge of the road panicked and, confused, burst onto the road and slammed into the passenger side smashing and ruining two panels before bouncing off and running away. "I wasn't even moving at the time. The deer hit me." I don't know if his father believed him or not.

I could hardly believe I had simultaneously smashed into a man smashing into me on the streets of Austin days after moving to Texas.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Are *you*?"

"I'm okay, I'm okay. Sorry about that."

"No, me too."

"Okay."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm okay. Sorry."

"Okay. Me too."

And then, I made the decision, and on I drove, not knowing if it was the right thing to do. I guess it was what he wanted me to do. I guess it was what I wanted to do. And there was nowhere to pull off the road, in rush hour.

He was apologetic. I was totally uncertain what was best. I didn't know Austin. Didn't know cities. Barely knew interstates. Didn't know who to trust, or where to go. Heavy traffic. I think the guy wanted me to drive on. Asked if I was okay. He was apologetic from the start. What about any laws I should follow? What were they? Codes of decency? Where was my *Odyssey*, that literary handbook on civilized (and barbaric) behavior? Now I assume I would park the car right there in the middle of the road – damn the rush – and get out and talk with the guy a while longer to make sure he was okay and offer to drive him anywhere if not.

Did any handbook on civilized behavior open with the command – Never, ever get into a car? That lethal mode of transportation. Or never make your living as a vendor in a multi-lane intersection, during rush hour?

"You okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay. You?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too."

"Take care."

"You too."

The very next day the start of school, I sat in my TA office thinking about the crash, thinking about teaching for the first time and taking graduate courses, and wondering if I knew what the hell I was getting into here in school, in the MFA program, in Texas.

I hope that guy made a million bucks selling roses. He seemed to be great at it – the sales part. Apparently he had a ready market. Now, if only he would get away with his life. If only might we all. That was August 2002. Three years later, I've learned that according to government statistics, in 2005, nearly 6.5 million auto accidents in the United States injured almost 3 million people and killed over 43,000, including nearly 5,000 pedestrians and almost 800 bicyclists – figures little changed from previous years. Economic and safety measures degraded by corporate power. Mass transit criminally underfunded. Good luck to us all.

WORKSHOP

PROFESSOR X AND ZEUS

Every other year so much changed, and so little.

9/11/01 the horrific bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

3/20/03 the brutal launch of the US ground invasion of Iraq.

8/29/05 the catastrophic landfall of Hurricane Katrina.

Thursday evening, August 25, 2005 a scant few days before Hurricane Katrina smashed into New Orleans was the first class of my last workshop in the Master of Fine Arts program at Texas State, start of a third and final year. Workshop – the most exciting of all classes – putting up for critique your own stories and novel excerpts and considering the writing of others on their own merits and in light of the author, the person you knew, to the extent you did. It can be seriously nerve-wracking, to be critiqued, that is to have your story critiqued, though you want it so much, to be read and considered, that is to have your work read and considered. Not so easy to maintain a distinction between your work and yourself.

Workshop. This semester would prove to be different from previous workshops due to the three new graduate students who took seats at the table and helped make the class one for the ages, of the ages, by the ages. They were like literary divinities come to life, to me, at least. I thought of them as Zeus, the Saint, Loki.

"Divinity" – an exaggeration of course – the word that first made my mind. The three in presence and writing seemed to reach for an ideal, though their selves like their stories differed greatly. They were the kind of people you might take one look at most anywhere and think – *They're not from around here.*

Not from Texas, and maybe not from anywhere you knew.

Not that the Texas State program was full of Texas locals. In fact of the more than 50 students this year, as usual about 80 percent arrived from out of state, and while a handful commuted from Austin, and a few came from the rest of vast Texas, others had landed from all across the United States and countries abroad.

The trio of divinities came from another orbit altogether. So much so that I wondered if they had any intention of completing the program, all three years.

Actually, Zeus had been granted a rare (I had thought non-existent) exemption to take part in workshop without working toward the degree.

Exclusion of non-degree students I felt to be unfortunate. In addition to reading my fellow MFAer's work, I wanted very much to read the writings of others who simply had no interest in, need of, or time for the full three year program of MFA rules and regulations.

I wished the program, the workshop at least, would recruit such writers from surrounding areas – the rancher countryside, the city neighborhoods and beyond. I felt the MFA arena needed the views and voices of these outsider writers, call them, many of whom might be reluctant – especially at first – to come in on typical MFA terms, and many of whom were simply barred due to various societal problems – the vast inequality in the US and world, for one.

And if the program was lucky, some who might be admitted non-degree would then choose to enroll full time, having gotten a taste and found it exciting or satisfactory or tolerable. In my case, these MFA years felt to be among the best of my life – it was a chance to throw yourself into some great part of what you valued and loved, in a more or less fertile setting – years I would not give up for too little.

Maybe the presence of the three divinities in workshop this semester resulted from some new policy, recently implemented, or maybe we had gotten lucky. And so my skin blood brains bones came tingling more to life the moment the divinities, as I began to think of them in the instant, walked into class.

First came the man I immediately thought of as Zeus. He loomed ageless – like a god – of both Mayan and Norwegian ancestry, raised in Guatemala but lived most recently in Gallup, New Mexico – near the Arizona border, not far from Colorado and Utah. He looked like he might have stepped direct from the clouds onto the mesas around the Four Corners. Physically and mentally both he stood in epic proportion, big bold lines that played into his writing. His name was Rafael, but for my part, I thought of him as Zeus. His head like the rest of his physique was staggeringly oversized. His bronze mane gushed from his skull to his shoulders where it seemed chopped as if by a bronze hatchet. He wore earth colored clothes that appeared to have been bought in the stalls of bazaars and flea markets throughout the continents but apart from a bit of lively color and some unusual cuts and seams and fabric – his apparel had much in common with the worn utilitarian gray and blue work clothes of my grandfather – an old-time, small town, rural forest and field, coal country Pennsylvania plumber.

What's in a name? "Zeus" was the first one I associated with Rafael, and the first I recorded in my journal from which I take these notes. He was frequently only Zeus in my mind, and I guess he may always be.

The Saint was green.

Hard to say it any different.

Her name was Wendy Halo but I thought of her as the Saint, or Angel. She had long straight green hair, not dayglo green though not far off either. It looked natural enough, in its way, seemed high quality and real, given that it was not wig-bulky. Looked authentic blowing in the Texas wind. Still, I tried every time I saw her to gather evidence as to whether or not she wore a green wig, or dyed it. Her skin was as green as Zeus' head was large – it glowed with more than a greenish tinge – green luminescent especially under the fluorescent lights of workshop – and appeared so even outside at night under lamplight, when we took our break in the middle of the two and a half hour class.

Halloween come early, I thought the moment – following Zeus – Wendy Halo walked into workshop in her glowing wig and full body mascara – or so I guessed, wrongly.

No Goth look – the opposite, nothing dark at all – she wore dapper pastels over her greenness straight out of Dr. Seuss, if not zigzag zany. Side by side – the Saint and Zeus – the light and gravity of any room.

Occasionally we would glimpse the Saint, this green woman, with a bottle of pills everyone was too polite to ask about, and I wondered if she was sick. After spending time with her and reading her prose, I wondered also if she was the case of a person trying to live up to the accident of name – the kind of person I had come across from time to time, or thought I had – the Sunnys, the Christians, the Lances, the Merrys of the world – self

decreed, or, more commonly, stamped by parents. I guess every name is a stamp – some less obvious than others.

And then in walked the third divinity only a few years older than my 25 years – a she, too, not that she apparently wanted to be. Or not that she seemed to care one way or the other. Tomboy, it's called, sometimes, though she was an effeminate Tomboy – slender with flat brown hair of shoulder length. Brown eyes. Average height. When she stood next to Zeus she blocked little of him out.

The thing is, she had a look in her eyes – the look of Loki.

Brilliant – demented. Apathetic – electric. Enflamed.

– at –

Herself? Humanity? All Creation?

She seemed intent to be and do just about what the hell ever she wished to be and do, as who the hell ever she felt she was or might be – a pretty little smart person who thinks she can get away with almost everything, and almost can.

When I first saw her, "Loki" popped into my mind – the god of mischief.

Her real name – does it matter?

She seemed half divine, half damned, and proud of it.

You could hardly see her against the type of brown cushioned chair on wheels we sat in, or when she stood near Zeus or behind most anyone, and yet she could be so in your face it felt like she filled your socks with blood and your shoes gushed. She looked at you as if she could see within and from within your own eyes. You could scarcely tell what she herself thought, except it did not seem much at all approving.

She was pale – Anglo, as they say in Texas – and spackled, with more than a touch of, call it, bloodfire, skinburn.

Rafael Zeus was a mountain of a man compared to everyone I had known, including even our tall-of-stature visiting professor that semester, and whenever Zeus and Loki happened to approach one another it was like the immovable object and the unstoppable force. It was clear how against limits she chose to be, her mind akin to flowing lava.

The Saint was like the ocean. She could cause the personalities of Zeus and even Loki to melt into her. Toward others – it was as if she beatified us, insofar as we became part of her.

Zeus and the Saint – Super Couple. And yet they never did get together, as far as I know. In fact, to my knowledge, in the brief time of the workshop, at least, the divinities kept their own counsel.

Zeus was like extra iron in your back and blood and brains – he was the potent acid in your muscles – unearthly power, while the Saint poured over you like liquid jewels spilling from a cosmic forge. She drew you in. Impossibly pure ether.

I wasn't afraid of Loki.

Black cats don't scare me either. But I always note their presence and wonder at the way they move.

So that was the story lineup scorecard menu bill – Zeus, the Saint and Loki descending upon the world in my final semester of workshop. Every good workshop you remember like you remember a quality story – as a real experience. By the time they had each turned in a story, it was clear. The workshop was theirs. And we, poor mortals – barely

literate, if literary – we studied who they were, how they wrote, why it worked, to the great extent it did. The divinities' stories went on for 60 pages and longer, each – often three times as long as our own. We dared to imagine matching them, or at least meeting them on their own terms and grounds someday, in the process of finding our own soil fertile enough for sinking roots so deep and strong from which to burst then bloom so much.

We each had divine moments of a sort in workshop, I thought, but could not sustain much of anything at all in comparison to the Supreme Ones. Even professor X must have reviewed his work in their light. We honed in on their manners and thoughts, postures and styles, subjects and values, views and acts – and too the stuff they wrote about – maybe like vampires gathering blood.

The blood of other worlds for use in this one.

And why not?

It was not like we ever gave ourselves over entirely.

Our human egos were not exactly that flimsy.

We all were who we were. We aimed to be writers of this world in this time – and not to be creatures of some nether workshop world.

We aimed to find our own voice – our own voices – as is said.

We aimed and we tried.

Who could not help but want to imbibe the divinities. Not if you wanted to be a writer of note. Not if you wanted to be the writers many of us aimed to be.

Writers of the image. Writers of the imagination. Writers of the reality and the great possibilities of our lives and this world.

Workshop was. Stressful, intriguing, fun, tedious, even boring at times, but into this course had walked three of the most powerful writers I felt I could hope to know, the literary divinities who put up their stories first, if stories they could be called, more like epic prose songs from on high and earthquakes from below – stories that ran about three times as long as normal – stories so full of conviction, unstoppable revelation and driving purpose that for once we did not look at them in the pickiest of workshop ways – stories resisting narrow reductions, slight responses, hapless readings.

Our teacher, a visiting professor, entered the workshop that first day looking much like teachers often do upon entering a new classroom – a bit disoriented but purposeful, more than a little other-minded in a way that can both play your nerves and hint at a potent brew of experience, knowledge, purpose – and the unknown.

I did not see the professor walk in so much as sensed it, and what he walked in with. Maybe this was only in my own head but so be it.

Meanwhile, the divinities had already appeared in class before us.

The professor opened his roll book.

He cocked one eyebrow and looked to the person beside me and then the whole class. He hesitated, and said –

"Call me Professor X."

His mild manner now amused.

"I know others prefer it. As do I. And not just because my name can be difficult to pronounce."

Both first and last. His mother and father were Chinese and African, respectively. He had been raised in Los Angeles.

I won't give Loki's real name here, and I won't give the professor's either because they were so much Loki and X to me. I think it's something they would be okay with too. To be known as X was apparently the way X wanted it. To be known in the abstract. Not that there would be no flesh and blood knowledge too, not that there would be nothing concrete passed on.

"Call me Loki," said Loki.

"Call me Ishmael," said Jensen. (We continued to call him Jensen.)

Professor X was a novelist, dramatist, short story writer, poet, critic, general essayist – probably more. When it came to *écriture* – he did it all.

As it turned out Professor X was a considerable teacher too, a writer with high expectations yet one who got out of students' way for the purpose of letting us grow as only we might. Meanwhile, he had plenty to say – and he said it, and he meant what he said.

That first class, he talked about his relationship to writing and discussed some of his views. He said art is thought – art is an experience – and some of these experiences re-order our ways of looking at the world, heighten our senses and perceptions, convey vital information, and can otherwise re-order or re-affirm our thoughts and ways of being – art can involve great craft and skill and thought approaching that of science, just as much scientific thought and work approaches much that is art – it all comes out in the writing for real. I had looked up and read some of his work before the semester, as I did with all of my writing professors, and there I saw how warm was his sense of people, and how much he delighted in the comic and dissecting the ways of the world all in tangle with the wild and tame thickets of personality. Sometimes he wrote sheer satire. You laughed a lot at his plucky heroes and heroines or you looked elsewhere if you weren't interested in the creatures and worlds he conjured.

At the start of every class, he wrote on the board: *What would be a perfect story? What would be a perfect novel?*

At any given lull in class, he might ask, *Where is this story most far from perfect? How? Why? Where is it close? In what ways? For how long?* Some of the most insightful discussions came when different people in class happened to see the most and least perfect passages or tendencies as being one in the same – and for nearly identical reasons. Made you think. Often Professor X himself would point out the hidden beauty and power of a perceived ugly and weak passage, and vice-versa. Plus he knew novels and other books we did not that he could relate to our own stories to help us understand the realities and possibilities of our work. And of course we knew some books he did not which we offered into discussion.

"What a lot of people don't get is that – except for gifts, and the gifts are important – writing finds shape ultimately from conscious purpose and concrete pools of material, experience. Why emphasize the role of reporting, the role of research in writing, the role of fact? Because it's so basic. Not that imagination means nothing. Far from it. The art demands it."

Professor X could run a class – possibly because he had a lot of provocative and considered material and got straight to it. That first day in those first moments, he seemed

to gather us all in with a glance, though I wondered if mainly he was taking in Loki, the Saint, and Zeus.

He sort of half smiled – in frankness, in reserve, in challenge. It flicked around his face – kind of circled his lips, darted from cheek to cheek, dotted both his chin and nose and then back to his cheeks, and he glanced again at the roll and the smile seemed to dab off his face, except in afterglow.

I got the idea he had planted the divinities in our midst for his own personal amusement, as well as our edification. But my mind is half the time going off on its own false trails. Or maybe Professor X was not directly responsible for their presence and had unwittingly attracted them in the way students commonly select writing programs or individual classes based on who is teaching. Regardless, they filled the room to a point where the rest of us scrambled to fill the stray nooks and niches between Professor X and the divine.

The workshop of the divine. To not be excited was to be lost, or dead.

Our second week of workshop, the week of Hurricane Katrina, our class of fifteen gathered on campus in San Marcos considerably less than a day's drive west from the smashed city and ravaged coast for our second MFA workshop that semester, to discuss the story by the new graduate student I thought of as Zeus.

In the early morning of Monday, August 29, 2005, a few days earlier, Hurricane Katrina had blasted out of the Gulf of Mexico to destroy New Orleans and much of the US Gulf Coast.

By the time of workshop that Thursday evening, tens of thousands of people at the New Orleans convention center were heading into their fifth day with virtually no contact let alone assistance from officials of any type – while tens of thousands more were trapped in and around the Superdome waiting to be bussed out – while thousands were scattered throughout the ravaged city on highways and bridges and with many abandoned in houses, schools, churches, hospitals, hotels, nursing homes – some still in the floodwaters themselves – with hundreds – perhaps thousands of New Orleans residents dead – along with hundreds more stranded and killed all along the Gulf Coast – four full days of horrific devastation – suffering – death – and ongoing abandonment. All the TV stations had switched away from steady coverage, except for a few news channels.

The hotels on the east side of San Marcos along Interstate 35, running from Laredo north to Dallas and beyond, had filled with displaced people, as did the hotels of even the crossroad towns of Texas Hill Country farther west, as did hotels farther north and south, plus everywhere east through Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and beyond. Some of the displaced people would eventually be flown to most states in the US, to bases where they were sheltered for awhile, where a number found jobs in nearby towns and settled.

The city of San Marcos prepared a few housing units for evacuees. Texas State University student groups set up hurricane victim donation cans in residence halls, the bookstore, the student center, the library, and all across campus, as well as in local restaurants. The university accepted late enrollment of students from the shutdown universities of New Orleans. Classes at Texas State carried on – both the ones we graduate students attended and the ones we taught.

Eventually the conversation turned from Hurricane Katrina more directly to the business at hand – the story of Zeus spotlighting another humanmade catastrophe, poverty in the Four Corners region of the American Southwest, a story about life in and around Gallup, New Mexico, a story that got me thinking again about injustice closer to home in South Texas and San Marcos and elsewhere, and about the people's history of Texas, the people's history of the United States, the people's history of the world – often very different from the tales typically written up in official history books.

I'm not going to say much about the part of the story that made everyone, I suppose, want to take the first and fastest way out of town to go experience the vivid history ongoing amid the unique presence and mix of people – along with the geographic beauty, the open expanse, the stark red sandstone and surprising pine forest highlands of the Southwest, around the Continental Divide and beyond.

Zeus made it sound like both the center and the end of Earth.

The way he wrote – it was like the voice of a Master God booming from thunder-clapped clouds of Mount Olympus – or Mount Taylor for that matter, one of the four sacred mountains of the Navajo – Spanish for Diné in their own language – pronounced, roughly, Din eh' – not dine, as Zeus noted some Navajo joke. Diné – the people.

I knew nothing about the Navajo – Diné – I was struck to realize.

The myths of the "cowboys" and "Indians" had been planted in my head about as shallow and deep as anything else, and I learned by reading the story of this man Rafael whom I thought of as Zeus that I knew virtually nothing in specific about any single tribe of indigenous Americans, aka Native Americans, aka Indians, aka –

And then I hesitated in thinking of Rafael as Zeus, thereby shifting cultures on him. Of course his given name reflected a mix of cultures too.

What if I adjusted my thinking of him to that of the much storied Archangel Rafael? I don't know the Bible much, but it's easy enough to find out that the Archangel Rafael is considered to be the Archangel of healing who cures the illnesses of humankind and provides healing for the earth.

Has the Archangel been on extended vacation? Maybe chopping brush with the President on his ranch a few hours north of here?

Rafael as Zeus? Rafael as Archangel? He would be Zeus to me for that was how he first and most deeply imprinted on my mind, but as I came to study and learn from Rafael, his person and life – his lands, his homelands, his migration, I came to think of Rafael Zeus as a representative too, or emissary, of Aztlan – less Christian and ancient Greek than indigenous to the Americas – to Turtle Island, as the vast land is also known.

The first line of the story by Rafael put up that second week, during the time of Hurricane Katrina –

What do you want to know?

It means nothing standing there alone except that he quickly follows it up with details coming at you with all the weight-force-gravity of a speeding quadruple locomotive with a one hundred and twenty car train of piled high coal cars, box cars, and double stacked tractor trailers. The train kills his main character – allows for his suicide.

Rafael renders this horrific moment outside of Gallup, New Mexico and its implications so much more powerful than I can convey here. The story is a lament and work of agitation both from a man of the Navajo Nation Reservation, one of the Diné (and I keep thinking, Navajo), mixed also with the sort of accusatory tone of a person aggrieved, a person who has been unjustly torn down by life and for whatever reason or lack thereof has stepped in front of a quadruple locomotive on the edge of town, an act horrifically all too common except that now in Rafael's story the man's voice is freed rather than smashed – Rafael frees the man's voice in a searing overarching paean, of all things, to life, though not to some great part of the life that the tragic man in particular has led, but to a bit of the good life the man envisions beyond himself and recounts regardless of whether he actually envisioned or lived it for real.

Rafael sings the story so well. And the odd thing too, now that I think about it – something I guess I tended to overlook at first, even though I was compelled despite the length of the story to read it twice, every word for every word – the story was loaded with facts. Facts that as I reflect now I can tease out of my mind, and others come springingly seemingly of their own accord – such as the fact that, as Rafael noted, Native Americans in the US today have an average life expectancy at 1940s levels and an infant mortality rate far worse than the rest of the US, which itself has the worst, dead last, infant mortality rate of industrialized countries.

And the fact that in northwestern New Mexico conditions among local Native Americans are problematic at best, where the Navajo, Pueblo, and Zuñi reservations have unemployment rates of over 50 percent, and meanwhile, the nearby city of Gallup which is virtually enclosed by these reservations boasts the highest per capita rate of millionaires of anyplace in the world in its Convention and Visitors Bureau guide to the city.

This is all part of the song that Rafael's dead character sings – that most of the approximately 200 millionaires, in a city of 20,000, made their fortunes in the commerce of Indian art, and that Gallup describes itself as "the Indian center of the Southwest" in its promotional brochure, and that the City of Gallup makes no comment in this brochure on the lack of justice in the fact that there is over 50 percent unemployment among the people responsible for the quality art that sustains 200 millionaires, mostly non-Native businessmen, in what is called "the Indian center."

And the man who stepped onto the tracks like quite a number of others in this area infamous for train suicides was dead broke.

And the facts were like locomotives that drove the story. The facts and imagination of Zeus made for the onrushing train that determined the story and fate of Dead Broke Man.

The facts and imagination of Zeus created a sort of storm of words sweeping everything before it not unlike Hurricane Katrina but transformed so that the story did not detonate and destruct. It engulfed your mind and helped to expand it.

There were other locomotives and storms in the story too, like the intense rush of drama was maybe another. "This man, this one of the Diné, he might as well have been Mayan." Rafael wove into his tale an accounting of the Mayan uprising on January 1, 1994, the very day the so-called North American Free Trade Agreement between Canada, Mexico, and the USA first went into effect, when the impoverished Mayan Indians in the southernmost Mexican state of Chiapas declared that for them, NAFTA was a "death sentence," and launched the Chiapas uprising, eventually reclaiming about 2,000 farms

and ranches, which they re-organized as village co-operatives – land long promised to them by the Mexican government as part of reform but never delivered. And then the Mayans formed thirty-one independent town councils that began to operate parallel to the Mexican local governments hostile to the Mayans and indifferent to their impoverished living conditions.

Rafael's dead man on the tracks sang the song of how the Mayans' relationship to the ranches and ranchers in Mexico is in some ways similar to most US citizens' relationship to corporations and corporate executives in the US – and to those parts of the government that do the bidding of wealth in ways that are hostile to the majority, at home and abroad, and are more or less indifferent to difficult or deadly living conditions. Yet unlike the Mayans of Chiapas, who had been organizing for years before NAFTA, US citizens have apparently not been as strongly self organizing under far less daunting odds. Powerful it sounded coming from the dead man's lips via new breath blown into them by our mighty Rafael Zeus.

And the dead man was not only Diné but had blood in him from peoples all over the world – by scratches from fights and sporting contests, by shared fluids of love-making, by medical transfusions, and by age old widespread mating across races. Rafael showed all of us in this man by references to power and injustice public and to private life intimate – going it seemed beyond the "tentacular vision" of the novel form described by scholarly critics, going deep into the raw fluid of being alive –

– awe with awe the forgotten animal of our mold – strip the human to reveal the blood-lovely beast of our lives – strip away consciousness and conditioning and culture until our cells our selves forget their memories and blink in the raw fluid of being alive – strip it down past the skull and bones of official lies – strip it down to an honest human guise –

And maybe there was a third engine that drove the story of the man killed on the tracks – there was anger, outrage, invective. Rafael's dead man went to the verbal hilt to point out that there was, in fact, no real Freedom, no real Trade, and no real Agreement in NAFTA, the so-called North American Free Trade Agreement that enabled corporations to obtain legal rights to patents even if public taxpayer funds were used to create them, and even if the rights prevented sick and hungry people from receiving affordable medicines and technologies – as was commonly the result. Nothing free and open about legalized theft and malice. When was freedom ever less free? sang the dead broke man on the tracks. When did freedom ever cost so much? – what price freedom? – where is my land of the free? Our land? Your land? Home to the dollar enslaved.

Rafael's dead broke man sang that there was no agreement in the North American Free Trade Agreement given the fact that, as far as was known, the majority of people in Canada, the US and Mexico actually opposed it. And the *New York Times*, Rafael wrote, reported accurately – but only the day before the congressional vote – that due to the economic impact of NAFTA the big gainers would be sectors "based in and around finance," especially "banks and wall street securities firms," also "a vast assortment of professional service firms, from management consultants and public relations to law and marketing," along with some manufacturers primarily in high tech and capital intensive industries (which push around a lot of money while offering relatively few jobs). And in

passing, the *Times* article also happened to mention who the NAFTA losers would be, and are now – "predominantly women, blacks and Hispanics" along with "semi-skilled production workers" (white, blue collar labor, in other words).

This stray newspaper article – as if it had been blowing around the world all these years – blew smack into the face of Rafael's narrator just before he was struck by the train. The newspaper exploded at the moment of impact, as did the dead broke man, his body flung like liquid sand burst of its sack along the tracks.

This was the song of the dead broke man. In singing he recalled the article and the facts of the article posthumously as if from eternal memory clairvoyant – he pitched it out into the night channeling it direct from Rafael Zeus, and vice versa, some of the galling vicious knowledge of the age, some of the outrageous official factors related to his death, and to the hardships, daily miseries, and killings of many on all sides of all borders. The *New York Times*, the leading corporate newspaper in the US and perhaps the world, had revealed in advance, barely, that the losers of NAFTA would include those representative of the vast majority of the US population, almost everyone except for the very rich and super rich, the high level corporate world, and yet the *Times*, like virtually all other corporate media, heavily supported NAFTA, which makes sense since most US media are themselves huge corporations – newspapers get about 75 percent of their money from advertisers – mainly other corporations – while network TV gets 100 percent of its money from advertisers. And the dead broke man called out all these bitter facts about life, and he threw them directly into the workshop by way of the story on the table in front of us.

A couple of famous short stories selected by our professor had also been assigned for discussion this week, along with Rafael's story, but after talking about Hurricane Katrina we set aside these two stories and discussed instead Rafael's story for almost the entire class.

"Dead Broke Song" was the simple title of the simple story. Scrawled in Rafael's own hand at the top of the first page, the title had been set down as an afterthought just before the story was copied for distribution to the class. The story went on for 75 pages, full of enough social facts and personal details, and hymn-like phrases to sink a ship, fill an epic, and dip into the lives of many peoples in many nations.

"I learned so much from this story," said Vivian, the first to speak. Nervous and talkative in previous years of workshop, Vivian was typically enthusiastic about most stories but even more so about this one. She threw out so much animated praise, arms flailing and wrists snapping, palms flapping, and with so many compliments that before long I wished she would just get up and throw her whole body across the table at Rafael in one enormous motion of homage so that we could all at once applaud the intensity of her appreciation. Rafael Zeus could maybe touch her tenderly on her head as she lay sprawled before him and she would be blessed and maybe we would share even more in the power of the moment.

Jensen, our class clown, clapped. "Bravo," he said.

Professor X took the unusual step of directing us to speak in the order of a strict circle around the room. We began again with Vivian –

"I don't mean I learned so much by the facts of the story – although, I mean, I did – I mean I know I learned so much about telling stories from this story. I feel like I know now that you just say what's on your mind, and in your heart, and I mean almost whatever

it is if you can get it to hang together, and the only trick is that you have to find – to make it go, really go, really work as a story, you know – you have to find a character to give it voice, to give your own voice its voice. You know what I mean? Walt Whitman in his great poem 'Song of Myself' said something like 'Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, I contain multitudes,' but I mean it's not about, not necessarily, I mean you don't have to contradict yourself, I mean you can but it's like, if you've got it in you, Sing! – you know, just sing out one of your many voices. I mean we have so many gut wrenching stories to tell, so many lightning clap moments to show – I mean, I think – and it seems so hard but then you find the right character, and they tell it all themselves, and it's not even you. It's them. And they make it work. Like Dead Broke Man. And if it works for them – the character – then it works for the story, it is the story, character is story, fact is story, which works for the reader – almost no matter if the story goes like a story is not supposed to go – with too much information and everything. The character makes it work, the power of character. And it reorganizes your thinking. That's what I mean, I think, when I say I learned so much. It can reorganize your thinking if it works, if it's good, if it's a real experience that gets you. I mean I learned about the world, a lot, and I learned about the graphic human heart, as they say. And I learned about my own mind too, I think, and everyone's. But I'm just blown away because I think I learned how to tell a story. I mean it's like this story just opened up to me, opened me up. I feel like I looked inside. And I could see it all. The nuts and bolts. And the beating heart. It's just – you pop and go. And it's like – it's finding that little enormous character inside the beating heart, with the pulsing flashing brain, super brain, a fantastic magic mirrored ball bounding down the road into your guts, in your mind, that's its all, that's what makes it work, the story. You pop with a character and it goes. And the facts. And the character can be so much about the world and it can be so much larger than the world and all be the character and that's the – what is it? – that's the divine spark. You know? And it takes you in and gets you. And Rafael is writing about Gallup, New Mexico and all that but he may as well be writing about the disaster taking place in New Orleans right now where people are just being left to die and are dying right there on camera while the officials congratulate themselves on the split screen and here this man in the story died with the reports of NAFTA blowing into his face. I mean it's like TV, it can be, only more upfront, explicit, articulate. In depth. I mean it's homicidal – all this stuff. And this story shows how society homicides people and it shows how the people know in the core of their bones and their brains how this homicide is waged against them. It shows how a story can show. And tell. Just bam bam bam, one situation right after another sung from the voice of the slain. And the singing is a telling that shows. I mean you just tell it in a way that it sings, and that's how it shows. You know, it's always said show don't tell. But this story tells to show. You can see it, you can know it, you can feel it. And it has got a voice like most stories don't know the first thing about voice...."

"Amen," said Jensen.

And we all sort of sat there waiting for Vivian to catch her breath – and we gazed into the walls and glanced at Vivian and at Zeus and at the professor and each other.

"It's certainly *one* way to write a story," said Professor X.

"Dead Broke Man was my friend," said Rafael.

And none of us knew what to say to that.

"Here he lives on," said Vivian.

Professor X said, "That's how Dead Broke Man does his work in the world now. Through story – which is so much of how we live by, and know by in the world, so much of what we go by. If a story has got to be told, it has got to be told. And there's no way of getting out of the way."

Rafael said, "I see him almost every day. I close my eyes and he's there. I get up in the morning and I see him, and I try to think of how other people's days are starting and I think of him, alive."

What could anyone say to that? He sees Dead Broke Man every day? Every morning? What would that do to your life?

"But is it a problem that we don't know his real name?" another newcomer sitting next to Vivian asked. "I mean I've spent some time in the Four Corners region myself, enough to get to know some common Navajo names. Was Dead Broke Man, was he a Tsosie, a Begay? What would it mean if we gave him a name, a realistic one? Wouldn't it change the story? Shouldn't we do that?"

"Dead Broke Man," someone else pointed out. "That's his name."

"No one knew who he was at first," Rafael told us. "A lot of people end their lives on those tracks. I left town before they figured it out. Even when they put him in the paper, they still didn't know his original name. What if I gave him your name? What if I got the roll of this class, and changed his name every few paragraphs so that by the end he would have had the name of every person in this room – beginning with the professor, and ending with me? I didn't do that. Maybe I should have. Or maybe I should have named him Dinéson. Or Amerison. Smith or Jones or Tsosie or Begay. I didn't do that."

the trick to writing is simple as is gets / just flick out your metaphors and plunge ahead /
the trick of writing is nothing to speak / painted bright image of chin and cheek / the seed
of a story a tale well told / a splatter of video from the soul / writing is so easy if grammar
you forgive / if words you depict as colors that live / if song and plot carved strikes you
as hard / no / give words their head and cocoon and come out butterflies in charge /
images appear and rustle about / you pick the ones you've never seen / away you go /
paint your spirit / prop it on a plot / a causal thing / or float / with lines / of contingency /
you don't need words to sing / just draw / art will flesh out bold / as the moon / in halo

I talked to a friend from where I was raised in Pennsylvania, one of the guys I drove to Texas with originally, it was his big old Galaxie, and I told him how excited I was about writing and reading during these days, not least about reading the work of people I knew in the MFA program, and I told him about the many ideas floating around and my own new ideas on writing and story, and he heard me out and then said with a kind of cautionary note in his voice – "I think you'll write some good stuff when you leave the program."

Was he on to something?

I think he was. Had a sense of it. Maybe there was too much swirling too fast – all so new.

College had been better than high school – freer, more interesting. And graduate school was better than college as an undergraduate – you got more focused on your

interests. It could be plenty frustrating though. I wondered if the cycle would continue – with learning, with writing, with life. I wrote some good stuff before grad school, and I suspect I'll write some good stuff after it. And even if not nearly as coherently or as long as I would like, I think I've written some good stuff during. The trick – I've been told both by professors and visiting writers both – work through it, survive the MFA, get the most out of it, and then keep reading and writing, working and living through the years on the other side, see what comes. Write like heaven and hell, fight the powers that be.

Which muse was this I heard singing in my ear?

Near the end of the year during another warm December spell like the one I had spent with Reyna a year earlier, I retraced the steps along the river she and I had tread and tonight I walked the little ways up to Spring Lake, past a *Free the Springs!* sign pasted onto an old elm by a local environmental group. I sat on the bank and stared across the lake into the reeds of the marsh – full moon burning water, almost too bright.

The water breathed its marshy breath, while a lone otter-or-beaver-like nutria swam along the bank. I sat at the base of an elm in the wet air, as the nutria often did, crouched on elm tree roots, a short leap from the safety of lake and river. Some group or other, maybe the university, had been trying to get rid of the nutria. Couldn't remember why. I knew only that I knew very little about nutria and felt in no position to judge.

Free the Springs! A sign glinted in moonlight on an elm nearby. Should the Springs be freed? Would be a shame to lose the waters of the lake. Still, why not do both? Free the springs and move the lake – downstream if necessary. I could think of a beaten cow pasture or two along the river that might just as well be sacrificed for a rebirthed lake. Best of both worlds? Like a lot of things – easier said than done. Easier imagined than achieved. I tried to envision the ancient Springs more fully alive and pulsing from beneath the nearly still waters of the surface.

Canocanayesatetlo – the feeling continued to grow of a vital story thereabouts yet to be told.

I sat for a long time that night near the Springs, then stood to go.