

Chapter One

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From: *Life-Affirming Acts*  
(Vila, Heinemann, 2000)

Shedding Skins

*The characters of nature are legible it is true; but they are not plain enough to enable those who run, to read them. We must make use of a cautious, I had almost said, a timorous method of proceeding. We must not attempt to fly, when we can scarcely pretend to creep.*

Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*

*There is one very beautiful proof, that people, when asked questions, if they are properly asked, say of themselves everything correctly; yet if there were not knowledge in them, and right reason, they would not be able to do this. You see, if you show someone a diagram or anything like that, he proves most clearly that this is true.*

Plato, *Phaedo*

Her face is round and delicate, framed by thick, black hair. Her lips are full; her coal eyes sparkle: they say something. Sometimes, even on a sunny day, a blissful day, sad music reaches the heart and becomes overwhelming and reminds one of burdens. Her eyes remind me of this; they remind me of how deep melancholy can be when troubles are many.

She's involved in a pantomime, turning away when she knows I'm looking at her. Behind her ebony hair she's letting me know that getting to her will be hard. It's a resistance built on suffering, I'm sure.

Among the other women in the class she looks out of place, disoriented, unsure of what a student is, or how a student acts. Her actions say she believes there is *a student way*, so she looks for it, needing to add it to her *many ways*, her *many other roles*: *Here I am*, she's calling out. *I am here. I belong here.*

She is silent, fidgety, nervous.

She's a child wanting attention—yet in this adult world of the college classroom in an inner-city community college, she's competing for survival, she's struggling for her life. Her resistance is despair in disguise.

"Let's get to know each other," I say to my new writing class. "Let's get out a fresh piece of paper."

She labors with her hefty L. L. Bean backpack and pulls out a large, three-ringed binder, so big it makes her look even tinier than she is. Slowly, she pulls it open and dates her page in round, muscular lettering. These are her defining artifacts: *I go to school, to college*, these say. She gives importance to her public self, the sense of status or identity that only artifacts, when displayed, can produce. This is our culture's fixation, using artifacts to import significance, played out in her innocence, her naiveté, and her willingness to submit to *any means necessary* to survive—and *make it*, we like to say.

All of us, but teachers especially, have to pierce through this veneer of artificiality to get to the heart, where the voice resides, forgotten and deferred, yet still trying to emerge. Teachers struggle with L. L. Bean backpacks and other such things because students—all of us, really—have been silenced, accustomed to keeping our voices deep within recesses of our hearts, so we look to objects, or even to commercialized "messages," for our fantasies and respond only when spoken to, hopefully with the *right* answer.

Walter Ong (1982) suggests that, "literacy . . . is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself" (15). The survival of a culture is directly related to its promotion of orality which, in turn, produces "powerful and beautiful verbal performances of high artistic and human worth" (14).

No voice, no performance; no performance, no culture. Then there's only deprivation, anger, and ultimately death.

"Tell me something interesting about yourselves, introduce yourselves," I repeat to the class several times, and in different ways: *what makes you unique, tell me; what separates you from everyone else, come on; tell me something you're into that separates you from others; what ideas do you value, what ideas or goals do you have that you find most important and which then say something about you that's unique? Tell me.*

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This is basic writing: cajoling, urging, pleading; scraping and scratching at tough skins to create avenues for voices to emerge and be heard. It's not neat; it can be messy; it doesn't always work out.

*Come on! Yes! Speak!*

William Faulkner said, in his soft, Southern voice, that all writers must be concerned with matters of the heart; these are the only things worth writing about. I imagine he said this because the heart is so difficult to get to know and understand; however, the journey there is exhilarating; the pain, drama, and passion enlightening. Faulkner always spoke fast, maybe because he needed to return to his writing, his heart.

The writing teacher's responsibility is to reach for the student's heart so that the student can behold, *yes, this is me, this is what I want to say!* The business of writing is the business of empowerment—and it's a difficult road. This is empowerment with discipline, with a price, unlike the empowerment presumed by the liberalist tendency to include virtually every current ethnic group's favorite theme or personage in one fourteen-week course. To tread the road I'm suggesting, the teacher must first be willing to search and reach her own heart and re-create it for the class, thus creating a text of herself for the class and others to interpret. "Reliving and reconceptualizing our experiences isn't just narcissistic," argues Ruth Vinz in *Composing a Teaching Life* (1996), "it's a way to effect new connections in experience and to see that what we set out to do has some underlying pattern, which sometimes needs to be challenged" (7). Simultaneously, then, for the teacher and the student, this is a spiritual act of awakening, a psychoanalytic act of self-examination—a shedding of skins; a creation of fields of knowledge to draw from, to write from. It is freeing, but as with any move toward freedom, the road is fraught with curves, bumps, and holes. Empowerment comes with a price.

Repeating my request to the class of remedial writers—*what makes you unique*—makes the students restless. Awkward glances and nervous smiles shoot about the room. The students are resisting. They are accustomed to resisting; it is built into education, promoting learning by rote and standardization, which is not the case here, so they are frightened.

Terms like *rote* and *standardization* can be numbing. We know this. If, as Stephen D. Brookfield tells us in *The Skillful Teacher* (1990), "teaching is experienced as deeply emotive and bafflingly chaotic" (1), and, likewise, "teaching is the educational equivalent of white-water rafting" (2), then we, too, understand that part of our mission is to convey this magnificence to our students. It is in this creative environment that imaginations flare. Rote and standardization kill this off, introducing negativity to an otherwise creative process. Students learn to reject everything and anything teachers try in a classroom.

Overcoming students' resistance to learning is not an easy matter. Brookfield is instructive here as well:

Essentially, as most people realize, learning involves change. Since change is threatening, many people prefer to remain in situations that to outsiders seem wholly unsatisfactory, rather than to endure the psychological disruption represented by taking some kind of action. In all contexts of life we can see people for whom the threat of learning new behaviors or ideas is so unsettling that they remain in situations which will, in the long term, do them great harm. (147)

I knew that I was confronting this larger, more generalized—and dangerous—resistance. We were embarking on new terrain.

In some situations, though, tension is good. I want students to feel as if they are free-falling and there's no safety net. This is how to move toward the heart and through resistance. All varieties of subterfuge have kept students and teachers from their voices. We don't know who we are, or where we are going. Writing is a way out of this, an antidote to apathy. To students at Colgate University, on February 9, 1998, Kurt Vonnegut said acts of creation are "a way to make your soul grow" and a "spiritual adventure" (Park 1998). Writing and creating can bring this "spiritual adventure" back to the classroom but it's not easy, as I'm sure Vonnegut would agree.

A potential performance makes students nervous, bringing to the surface their collective thoughts about education's role in the subterfuge: *tell us what to know, what to do, how to be*. I've learned to interpret students' glances; this is what their nervous smiles say to me. They are not familiar with *let me find out for myself, guide me, but don't tell me; let me think, I'm entitled*.

"Mistah, watch u mean, *innerestin*? I donno *nothin innerestin* bout myself," a large black woman voices powerfully from the back of the classroom. She looks like she will swallow the desk beneath her. Her legs, her hands, her mass is overwhelming. She takes dominion of the room. *I am strong, black, and I'm beautiful*, she proudly speaks, demanding *notice me, here I am. A black princess*.

"Tell me something unique, what you like, what you're into. Or perhaps you have some interesting ambitions or goals. The only thing I ask is that you *don't* say, 'Hi, I'm a freshman, or sophomore, etc.' And please *don't* say, 'I attend Borough of Manhattan Community College.' These are interesting things, yes, but we want to learn what's unique about you. What got you here, to this place. Say something that shows the rest of us how different you *really* are."

"Oh, I see, yeah," the woman nods. Others nod too, smiling at each other, looking up at the lights, thinking; some turn immediately to their

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papers. The anxiety of performance has been supplanted by critical self-examination: *what's different about me? what should I say to show my uniqueness? what should I not say?*

They are editing and making choices about what they want to be today. They are writing—they are writing, beginning with what they know: themselves.

With her coal eyes sparkling, her round face beaming, the girl with the L. L. Bean backpack looks about the room, noticing the other women writing. She's still feeling out of place, wondering how she's going to belong, what she's going to use, what artifact to hide behind. She plays with the shoulder straps of her backpack. She then crosses her arms, shaking her head, *no*, and drops her gaze. Her long, black hair sweeps across her face like a curtain.

Fear, showing up as resistance, is a symptom of something larger, I think.

"Wait, wait, wait . . . Don't start yet," I say and grin diabolically. I want them to experience the play, the game, the fun in all of this. "Wait, there's one more thing before you start . . ."

"Ah, mistah, come on. I hates talkin bout myself." The princess in the back has somehow become the spokesperson of the class. We are in dialogue and the rest of the students are comfortable, nodding agreement. Sometimes this is how it happens: all speak through one: we're a culture accustomed to having our speech represented by hierarchies. Our media tells us this, too, so we have to work that much harder to become better readers of ourselves, the world around us, and of ourselves in the world around us.

"No, no, no. One more thing. It's simple. A couple of rules for this writing I want you to follow: first, I'm only giving you about three minutes to do this; second, I want you to make sure that each sentence you write is no longer than eight words. Eight words or less, that's all. Understand?"

"How we suppose to write—and count—together? It'll soun babyish, u know, we'll soun like little kids writin," says the princess spokesperson.

She is already talking about her writing. We have established the beginnings of a critical language, a way to dialogue about ourselves and our writing. It's a moment of enlightenment. These moments arrive unexpectedly, dropping like a bead of water that's been dangling from the edge of a leaf, and slowly, the weight becomes too much for the leaf and the drop releases, becoming something else. The climate changes: you must be ready for subtle changes. They happen all the time.

"No, don't worry. It'll be okay. You'll see," I urge. "All writers have limitations placed on them. Constraints enable the writer to produce.

You're just being introduced to one. You're working like writers now. You're going to sit in the writer's chair from now on. You *are* writers. Ready?"

"Yeah, wees ready," she says laconically—then laughs. "Can we start?"

"Everyone ready?"

Heads nod; swimmers take their mark; get set.

"Okay, begin."

\* \* \*

Predictably, students look away when time is up and I ask, "Who wants to read first? Who will share her thoughts first? Come on, be brave, we'll all have to speak sooner or later. We'll always share in this class. Who'll speak first?"

Our private selves have been trained to be silent when faced by the overwhelming public. Schools have educated us to be silent, so when faced by the public domain, *the public sphere*, we cower, turn away, hide. We have turned Habermas' notion of a public sphere—the place to excite dialogue about differences—on its head and made it into a punishing, hostile environment. Schools have done their share in creating our disproportionate society.

As Victor Villanueva Jr. (1993) notes about his scholastic experiences in East Compton, California: "School becomes more a preparation for prison than for industry: doin' time" (5); and Mike Rose (1989) agrees: "Students will float to the mark you set. I and the others in the vocational classes were bobbing in pretty shallow water" (26). This is what students have learned quite thoroughly. But students momentarily forget all this while writing. In writing, they release prejudices and expose the mind thinking, creating a blueprint of the soul—where reflection can take place. Writing, or creating as Vonnegut calls it, is an antidote to the oppression we find in some educational institutions.

Students already sense this; it is obvious in their nervousness. Something from their unconscious may have surfaced and, they believe, ridicule might ensue: students anticipate public ridicule; accustomed to it, they look to conceal this brief exercise on the road to the heart with humor, or self-effacement, or even complicity with the ridicule they imagine yet to come. Ridicule is one of the fundamental characteristics of subterfuge.

I know they worry that the teacher will say in an all-too-familiar, caustic tone, *No. That's not right. Wrong*. I have had these teachers, too. It's the worry that the teacher is judge and executioner. *Tell me what you want*, students are accustomed to pleading. Students have learned that this is safer; they will not be *wrong* if they can imitate or parody the

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teacher. So students succumb to the teacher's—and the institution's—directions, methods, and even thoughts, believing they are involved in something creative, that their investigations are unique.

Students become silent once they learn that they are merely following orders; that their schooling is spent affirming the ambitions of authority; that school, and the institutions in our society, are concerned with power, and power, as Michel Foucault (1979) tells us, "has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up" (202).

We've been stifled and we don't know it: we don't know we have trouble seeing. It's part of an education strategy: suppress the imagination while simultaneously getting the student to think she is actively engaged in creation. Directions and impositions supplant creativity. Our system of education believes this is easier, *more cost-effective*.

"It occurred to me," notes Jonathan Kozol (1991), "that we had not been listening much to children in these recent years of 'summit conferences' on education, of severe reports and ominous prescriptions" (5). So what are we left with?

#### *Industrial Education*

Mass training has standardized individuals both psychologically and in terms of individual qualifications and has produced the same phenomena as with other standardized masses: competition which creates the need for professional associations and leads to unemployment, over-production of qualified people by the education system, emigration, etc. (Gramsci 1988, 308)<sup>1</sup>

But writing—*creative writing*—challenges this stifling atmosphere. In *the act* of writing, the writer is compelled to experience herself as a part of the greater universe. The ego is released onto new terrain and thus awareness enters: the individual is present and active in her learning. Reflecting, the student notices interrelations between different forms of knowledge and begins to take command and makes choices. Learning is thus not imposed, but self-motivated and self-directed because *in the act* of writing the confines of the material world are released and the possibilities inherent in the imagination manifest themselves before the writer's very own eyes.

Creation *is* being—and you can't *be* unless you create. Writing, as an affirming, imaginative act, allows the writer to see her breath, feel her pulse, experience a connectedness to other things of which the self is only a cog. Anyone can do this.

Create an environment to release the student from her ego, and self-generated avenues for clear, honest perception will occur. Writing

is releasing, which, in turn, enables the creation of something from what is sensed, from what we intuit, from what we know; it is slow and arduous, but gratifying—and achievable through constraints that enable inquiry.

As Judith and Geoffrey Summerfield (1986) suggest,

*To involve one's students in a short bout of unhappiness, frustration, and tension is an effective way of bringing them to appreciate some of the crucial differences between constraints that they feel to be legitimate and those that they feel to be illegitimate. They come to recognize legitimate constraints as fruitful, as yielding good results (like playing tennis with a net). They come to recognize illegitimate constraints as merely arbitrary, as inexplicable impositions, rules that are not susceptible of rationalizations that they can endorse. (7–8)*

The composition classroom I am speaking about empowers the production of texts and promotes “an awareness not only of some of the crucial features of textuality but also of both the numerous options that at any moment the writer can see as available for choice, and of the constraints that inhere in any social act” (x). All writers are not identical.

*I can say this about myself, yes, thinks the student hearing my initial prompt, the initial constraint. Uhm, important, unique, what are these things?* she continues to wonder, searching beyond the physical restrictions represented by the classroom, editing herself and the world around her. *Eight words, no more. That's hard. How should I say this then?*

The teacher is saying, *Speak your thoughts*. Actually, I am *pleading*. I want them to *see* me struggle with *my work*; like theirs, it too comes from where the heart is. The teacher wants to expose this truth to create meaning: *this is important because it creates me . . . I will work with your work because it can define me . . . this is who I am!*

*This way, and only this way, I believe, can both teachers and students come to realize themselves together: the teacher creates her vision of herself and the class, and the students, inhaling the teacher's creation, experience themselves in the interpretive act and so recast themselves in new lights which simultaneously teach the teacher.*

So all of us must remember, and practice, that

*Who we are as teachers is constructed within a complex network of contradictory images from various sources . . . Every teacher needs to understand that the work of other teachers can become part of the dialectic on teaching, but it cannot essentialize each individual teacher's work. (Vinz 1996, 5–9)*

No exit from performance—for anyone! And no exit from assessment—the student's of us, the teachers—or from perhaps the most poignant gauge—the character, stability, and health of our culture!

The subterfuge of the writing class, the loose labels, and the removal of the student from the role of learner. The student is only a learner and talking a

“Be brave. Who? In class, again and again, speak once more. For me, they please. Head ever so slightly stand. Please.

“Oh, all right.”  
Everyone, momentary.  
“Hi. I'm Kisha.”  
Then she looks at . . .

“My life is messy in his school. Not dead either. So back soufflé to my face. I love the noise of

Kisha opens her mouth easier. Thank you, feeling safe, they writer. Kisha has her with her.

“How old is your?”  
“Eight.”

“Mines' five.”  
“I have four.”

“Four! I don't want to venes someone else leave.”

Laughter. “Ah, room.”

Everyone is overwhelmed by the Writing and performance



The subterfuge usually existing between teacher and students in the writing class is a symptom of an atmosphere mired in rules, regulations, and restrictions associated with repressive forms of composition loosely labeled *standards*, and is the sign of an unhealthy culture. It is removed and supplanted by the realization—the epiphany—that *there are only learners*. No other distinction is necessary. This occurs by writing and talking and reading.

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"Be brave. Who'll be the first brave soul?" I urge the students in my class, again and again, then look languidly, beckoning the princess to speak once more, this time for all of us. My eyes tell her *I need you*. Read for me, they plead; they say, *teach, teach all of us through you*. I bow my head ever so slightly, like a genuflection I hope only she can understand. Please.

"Oh, all right," she speaks out, taking hold of the public sphere. Everyone, momentarily relieved, turns to her.

"Hi. I'm Kisha . . ."

Then she looks up from her paper to all of us, saying, "U all know dat . . ."

"My life is my son, Jason. He like his fatha, strong willed. I'm always in his school pushin his teachers. He ain't gonna end up in no jail. Not dead eitha. So I'm gettin an education to move away. Maybe go back souff to my family. But I needs noise. It's too quiet in the country. I love the noise of the streets."

Kisha opens doors for us to walk through. She is making my task easier. Thank you, I genuflect again. The class is immediately engaged; feeling safe, they gravitate to Kisha, princess and public persona. A writer. Kisha has begun to narrate the story of the class—and it begins with her.

"How old is your son?" someone asks, wanting more.

"Eight."

"Mines' five."

"I have four," says another woman.

"Four! I don't want no kids. No sir. They'd drive me crazy," intervenes someone else. "Besides mens don't wanna help. They do *it* an leave."

Laughter. "Ah-hum, dat's right. Yeah, no good," travels the classroom.

Everyone is speaking at once. The class—the silence—is overwhelmed by the wave of public speech. The spell has been broken. Writing and performance are linked. Orality is present. It's now safer.

We're in a different room, a less fragile room. Egos have been released. The first skin has been shed.

Someone else volunteers to speak. "I'll go. I'll do mines . . ."

Then another, and another . . . "Me. Let me go. I wanna try . . ."

We hear about wanting to be a teacher; African village life and traditions; "I wanna serve my community"; a hysterectomy: "they always do dat to us on welfare. We don need it, but they do it"; wanting a home, a family, a good career; riches; God; "I want a Ph.D., eventually," says one woman; a *good* man, wants another.

It's music: a symphony of singular voices uniting in an open public space they define. They draw me in. We are together. We're writing in key. It's intoxicating, they're intoxicating, alive, celebrating each other and their writings.

"I wanna do what I want. Nobody tellin me nothin"; "I want my sistah's killer to be caught. I want him killed". Another student says she wants to work to help people "see how alike we are. We want the same things. We can get along"; "I wanna be a lawyer and help people. Some people have no representation"; "to change my life" comes up a lot, as do insurmountable obstacles of daily lives; *Reality*, they say.

Students are a microcosm of the world outside the classroom. They bring it in; they want to *speak it, define it, characterize it*—then define themselves in it. This is their canvas; they've established the world they want to re-order by writing.

I see myself transforming and becoming inextricably linked to these students' voices as I try to create the atmosphere for their narratives to come to fruition. I see myself, the *teacher* who, in trying to demonstrate writing, will have to allow his vulnerabilities to emerge, exposing himself to the students' imaginings. And I see myself, the *student* who, having learned in other ways and in other, more *traditional* places, is seeking the guidance of not-so-traditional teachers.

I see myself as *their student*, which I find is the only way to be a teacher, and the only way to assess what we are collectively trying to create: identities compliant to our intimate visions of the contexts of our worlds.

"They thinks jus because we women and we black, and there ain't no man around, we stupid. They treat us like shit, like we don even exist. We have no feelings. We can't think," says another student, abruptly and without prompting, but evidently feeling the comfort of the enabling atmosphere of the classroom.

This darkens the atmosphere. Some cast their eyes downward.

The melancholy hanging in the air brings me back to her coal-black, downcast eyes again, her black hair that she uses to hide behind. She becomes the foreground. I realize that throughout this exercise, as Kisha spoke, as everyone else chimed in, from the corner of my eye, in

the center of my mind, he struck a persistent tone. I connect with my imagination: *What's connecting with her? What are*

"What's your name?"

The class is silent, waiting for euphoria, the arena of public

"Yesenia."

"What a beautiful name."

In a mixture of accents, "New York," she says, "Portorican."

Questions and answers.

one word at a time. She talks had earlier: The two extremes and diminutive innocence.

"What have you written?"

"Notin."

"Nothing? You've written?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I have notin interestin," she says, smiling and blushing.

"You're unique. I know."

Right now. What you're saying.

"I'm not interestin, dat."

"That's not what you're saying."

Yesenia sits up. Fidgets with the round lettering of her pen.

"Then?"

"Yesenia," I say and mean it. I want her to transcend her self-fulfillment, as the other students in the classroom is like a giant sea of condemned.

Her eyes are two round fear lurks. "Yesenia. Don't make anyone in this class."

"No."

"Did you like what you wrote?"

"Uh-huh. It's nice. It's good."

"At first it was difficult to write; it wasn't too painful, not too hard."

Several in the class nod. "Right, Jesenia. He all right."

the center of my mind, her delicate, round face—her demeanor—struck a persistent tone. Like a siren's song, it was a voice consonant with my imagination: *Where is she? Why is she not with us? Why am I not connecting with her? What does she need?*

"What's your name?"

The class is silent, watching. It's too obvious, her place outside the euphoria, the arena of public speech, the writing.

"Yesenia."

"What a beautiful name. Where are you from?"

In a mixture of accents, a dialect specific to New York, "Nuewa-york," she says, "Portorico," then returns to her silence, looking away.

Questions and answers. Yesenia will tell her story one line at a time, one word at a time. She takes control of the class differently than Kisha had earlier: The two extremes, the two powers: overwhelming presence and diminutive innocence, yet both coming from where fear dwells.

"What have you written?"

"Notin."

"Nothing? You've written nothing about yourself?"

"No."

"Why?"

"*I hhave notin interestin. I don know,*" she shrugs. "Notin," she says smiling and blushing.

"You're unique. I *know* you're interesting. Just in your responses. Right now. What you're saying *is* interesting."

"I'm not interestin, *dat's* interestin?"

"That's not what you're saying. You're saying something else."

Yesenia sits up. Fidgets. Crosses and uncrosses her legs. Looks at the round lettering of her date, then the blank page. "Whatta I mean then?"

"Yesenia," I say and move closer to her, face-to-face, eyes-to-eyes. I want her to transcend her fears; I want her to begin the journey into self-fulfillment, as the others have done. I want her to realize that this classroom is like a giant safety net where she can take chances and not be condemned.

Her eyes are two round caverns, deep and solemn. This is where fear lurks. "Yesenia. Don't be afraid. Did I say anything that would make anyone in this class feel bad about themselves?"

"No."

"Did you like what you heard here today, what the others said?"

"Uh-huh. It's nice. It was good."

"At first it was difficult for everyone, like it is for you. But they did it; it wasn't too painful, not too much—at least I think it wasn't."

Several in the class help me out, help out Yesenia. "Yeah, he all right, Jesenia. He all right. U see. Yeah."

"I don't wanna talk about myself. I don't like to espeak about my private life."

"You don't have to say anything about your private life. Tell us something you value, something you *can* speak about."

"My daughter. She's beautiful. Look," she says reaching into her L. L. Bean backpack and pulling out a key chain with a picture of her daughter. A small, round-eyed little Yesenia looks out at me.

"She's beautiful. She looks just like her mother. I'm sure you're a wonderful mother and you want the best for her."

"Jes. She's two. Taisha keep me real beezee."

"Beautiful. See. You did it. You've told us something very significant and interesting about yourself. Wonderful."

The class applauds: *See*.

"But I ain gonna talk about myself. Joose ain gonna *h*have us always do dis, no? I'll die if joo do . . . I'll fail . . ."

We perceive fear and failure and vulnerabilities to be obstinate intruders to our creative inclinations, to our need to communicate and share—and imagine; we perceive them as festering, unwelcome partners in a classroom—or anywhere else for that matter. Obstacles. Seldom do we experience fear, failure, and vulnerabilities as motivations for creativity. We want to display security. It's the American way, security. We spend a lot of time talking about it.

I am left to wonder where Yesenia has learned to see failure as something to be avoided to such an extreme that she cannot see that she is actually voicing a desire to participate, though she doesn't know quite how to go about it. This fear of failure is paralyzing, blinding—so you can't write. You need to see to write, and vice versa.

In her reluctance, in her search for *a student way*, Yesenia is saying, *make it safe for me to try, and if I do, will I be all right, will you take care of me and no one laugh?* She doesn't see herself as having ever experienced success, though she is a proud mother. Her pride begins and ends with birthing and the beauty of *mi bebé*, not with what comes after. The affirming rewards of motherhood elude her. *Motherhood* is a metaphor for struggle and loneliness, the signs of survival; existing is surviving. In Spanish it's called *sobrevivir*. It's meager.

Yesenia *is* creation squandered, imagination lulled to sleep. This is the perspective I am compelled to take. We are born with capabilities, a desire to inquire and to learn, and imagination; however, sitting before me in this dull, gray room with plastic desks and barely a view of Greenwich Street bustling with financiers at lunch time is a portrait of despair; Yesenia is *etherized*, T. S. Eliot would say. She is a bird with clipped wings looking for a nest from which to begin to fly anew, except that the nests have been taken away. She has been done in. Crippled and handicapped by circumstances—and institutions—Yesenia can

only see herself as an adventurer manifested in the language pack. Whatever was *planted*

She is frightened that she, like her, must reenter herself, an imagination polluted by circumstances. Lost somewhere, she leaps creatively into the unknown, told what to do, and how to do it.

And she is only twenty years old, onto her daughter, Taisha, a costly, literally and figuratively expensive way.

There has to be a better way.

This was the first day of school, and I didn't know what was moving ahead cautiously. We were proceeding in a timorous fashion, aged to place our desks in a

1. There's plenty of evidence to look further than, say, education jobs for the slew of Ph.D.s going to higher education, but fueling that had much to do with moving forward technology, we did not forecast it, so here, too, we're looking for "big money made quickly." The ironic tragedy is that we don't have adequate space to assist students to be avid, overproducing and overqualified experience this as truth, a given

only see herself as an advertisement for the college student, a proposition manifested in the language of her large binder and L. L. Bean backpack. Whatever was *planted* in Yesenia is lost, rooted out.

She is frightened that she might be a forgery. Yesenia, and many like her, must reenter herself in order to begin to become familiar with an imagination polluted by advertisements, mass-media junk, and circumstances. Lost somewhere in her adolescence is her willingness to leap creatively into the unknown. She prefers the familiarity of being told what to do, and how to do it.

And she is only twenty-one, a mother who will pass these facts *onto her daughter, Taisha*. It is a cycle of despair and fear—and it is costly, literally and figuratively.

There has to be a better way, a less frustrating way, a less damaging way.

This was the first day of class; it wasn't neat. It got messy at times and I didn't know what would work; neither did the students. We were moving ahead cautiously. We were not yet flying; rather, we were proceeding in a timorous fashion, scarcely creeping. But we finally managed to place our desks in a circle.

### Note

1. There's plenty of evidence to support Gramsci's statement. We need not look further than, say, education's overproduction of Ph.D.s: we have too little jobs for the slew of Ph.D.s granted, not only feeding unemployment among higher education, but fueling the cruel adjunct system; in business, NAFTA has had much to do with moving "labor" offshore; and, in the growing world of technology, we did not forecast the needs for systems engineers and programmers, so here, too, we're looking offshore. The technology world is being pushed by "big money made quickly," rather than by insightful management and examination of what we've achieved and what this might mean for our future. The ironic tragedy is that we don't have enough teachers in grades K-12; we don't have adequate space to house a growing, and very different, student population; and we're slow, even reluctant to make the technology expenditures to assist students to be avid, creative contributors in the "information age." We're overproducing and overqualified, so we're standardizing along class lines. We experience this as truth, a given.